DICKENS'S COMIC ART:

A STUDY OF THE COMIC ELEMENT IN

<u>DOMBEY AND SON</u>, <u>LITTLE DORRIT</u>, AND <u>GREAT EXPECTATIONS</u>

by

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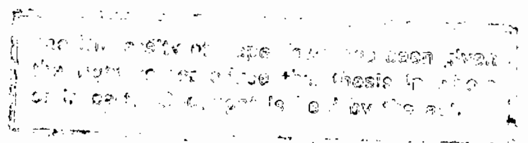

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The new Clarendon Dickens Edition (General Editors: John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson), was not available at the time of writing for all of the novels which are studied in this thesis. Considerations of consistency and availability, therefore, dictated my use of the New Oxford Illustrated Edition of Dickens's novels.

Details of the three main works referred to in this thesis are as follows:

Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son (1848; rpt. Oxford: O.U.P., 1950)

Little Dorrit (1857; rpt. Oxford: O.U.P., 1953)

Great Expectations (1861; rpt. Oxford: O.U.P., 1953)

All other quotations and references to Dickens's works also refer to the New Oxford Illustrated Edition, unless otherwise noted. I have consulted the Clarendon Dickens (Variorum) Edition where applicable, and the few pertinent textual variations have been duly footnoted.

All word-divisions at line endings are sanctioned by the Collins Gem Dictionary of Spelling and Word Division, compiled by S.B. Marshall (London: Collins, 1968).

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INTRODUCTION

It is my contention in this thesis that the comic nature of Dickens's mature fiction has not received the degree of attention that its importance warrants. In particular, the questions left unanswered, or to my mind not satisfactorily answered, by modern critics of Dickens are: why does Dickens consistently adopt modes of comedy in his mature works; what are the modes that he adopts; and what are the implications of these modes in terms of his later achievement? Finally, in what way can his vision be judged to be a comic vision?

Although Dickens's comic art is often mentioned by modern critics, it has seldom received sustained critical attention. The most important attempt to deal with Dickens as a comic writer that I have discovered is J.R. Kincaid's work, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter,[1] published in 1971. For reasons which I shall shortly advance, however, I found myself disagreeing with Kincaid's basic assumption about Dickens's comic outlook.

Apart from Kincaid, commentary on the comic element in Dickens tends to take the form either of generalisations within essays (Santayana and Orwell provide representative examples[2]),

[1] Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

[2] George Santayana, "Dickens", The Dial, 71 (1921), 537-49; rpt. in Selected Critical Writings of George Santayana, ed. Norman Henfrey (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1968), 1, pp. 188-202; George Orwell, "Charles Dickens", in Inside the Whale and Other Essays (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), pp. 9-85.

or of brief comments in passing in the course of the larger critical studies. The few short articles devoted to Dickens's comic art that I discovered were characteristically too generalised to be of real value or assistance. Any critic who has read at all widely in Dickensian criticism will be thoroughly familiar with such generalised phrases as "comic genius", "exuberant imagination", "wealth of comic detail", "fertility of comic detail", etc. It became my conviction, therefore, that a careful textual examination of the mature novels might contribute towards a better understanding of Dickens's comic achievement. Both the acceptance of this approach and the scope of a Master's thesis necessarily limited my attention to three novels: _Dombey and Son_, _Little Dorrit_, and _Great Expectations_. My motives for selecting these particular works will be advanced when I examine each in turn.

If insufficient attention has been paid to Dickens's comic art, few would now deny that a large corpus of criticism has thoroughly established Dickens's credentials as a serious writer who is capable of embodying his thematic concerns in the later novels with great subtlety and complexity. My concern in this thesis is to argue that Dickens's achievement in this regard is inextricably linked with his use of various comic elements. At the outset of my research, therefore, it appeared likely to me that Dickens's comic art might be both diverse in its techniques and complex in its effects. A re-reading of the Dickens canon, even before a detailed examination of any novels was attempted, seemed to confirm this postulate. Accordingly, the most promising approach seemed to me one that entailed a lithe and pragmatic attitude that would respect this diversity and complexity. I resolved to adopt an alert open-

ness that would bring to the text as few critical preconceptions as was humanly possible regarding the nature of comedy.

Here I found myself in agreement with L.C. Knights, who, in his well-known article "Notes on Comedy", points out that "Profitless generalisations are more frequent in criticism of Comedy than in criticism of other forms of literature".[3] Knights argues persuasively that specific contextual criticism is of far greater value than abstract generalisations about comedy, or theories on comedy. After an illustrative discussion of Henry IV Part 1, Knights concludes:

> No theory of comedy can explain the play; no theory of comedy will help us to read it more adequately. Only a morbid pedantry would be blind to the function of laughter in comedy, but concentration upon laughter leads to a double error: the dilettante critic falls before the hallucination of the Comic Spirit, the more scientifically-minded persuade themselves that the jokes collected by Bergson and Freud have something to do with the practice of literary criticism.[4]

It seemed at the same time important, however, to be at least familiar with the major critical thinking on comedy, and I have indeed had occasion to cite one or two of these theories when they do appear to illuminate a specific comic practice on the part of Dickens. But my research into theories of criticism has also led me to the inescapable conclusion that there is little common ground between the various theories. This conclusion is expressed by several of the theorists themselves: "We have never agreed about the motives, mechanism, or even the temper of laughter",

[3] L.C. Knights, "Notes on Comedy", Scrutiny, 1 (1933), 358.

[4] Knights, p. 367.

claims Wylie Sypher,[5] whilst D.H. Monro in his Argument of Laughter convincingly shows how theorists repeatedly distort evidence to fit their particular theories.[6] As Sypher states the problem:

> If we have no satisfactory definition of laughter, neither do we have any satisfactory definition of comedy. Indeed, most of the theories of laughter and comedy fail precisely because they oversimplify a situation and an art more complicated than the tragic situation and art. Comedy seems to be a more pervasive human condition than tragedy.[7]

My attitude has therefore been to accept that it is necessary and often instructive to read what others have to say on the problem of the comic, but to recognise also that no one theory has proved to be either watertight, or all-inclusive, or even able to cater for every aspect of what it claims to cover. I agree with D.H. Monro that theorists of comedy habitually appear to overreach themselves. Indeed, if one were to attempt a comprehensive definition of comedy, it would probably end up not unlike that proposed by Elder Olson in The Theory of Comedy--a definition so lengthy and convoluted (it spans a number of pages) as to seem an unwieldy parody of its subject, and consequently of very limited practical value or application.[8]

My difference with Kincaid emerges from this question of comic theory and critical preconceptions, and may be pinpointed by

[5] Wylie Sypher, Appendix to Comedy (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), pp. 201-2.

[6] D.H. Monro, Argument of Laughter (1951; rpt. Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1963).

[7] Sypher, p. 206.

[8] The Theory of Comedy (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968). See especially pp. 11-30.

means of this passage in Kincaid's Introduction:

> One unavoidable issue, however, appears in most theoretical analyses of laughter and must be dealt with before a more general discussion can be attempted: the degree to which laughter expresses (if it does at all) hostility, aggression, the vestiges of the jungle whoop of triumph after murder, and other unpleasant impulses. The corollary to this issue is the debate over whether laughter is incompatible with sympathy, geniality, or indeed with any emotion. Roughly speaking, the dark-laughter theorists spring from Thomas Hobbes; the genial-laughter theories from Jean Paul Richter. Without retracing the steps of this very tortuous, often confused, and usually truculent argument, one can, I think, accept the reasoning of Arthur Koestler, which is based on the simple fact that nearly all the important writers on the subject have, for hundreds of years, noted 'a component of malice, of debasement of the other fellow, and of aggressive-defensive self-assertion . . . in laughter--a tendency diametrically opposed to sympathy, helpfulness, and the identification of the self with others.' I find this argument and the evidence given by the theorists cited above . . . conclusive. The important point, though, is the relevance of Koestler's conclusions to our subject. Even if there _is_ genial or harmless laughter, I think it is very rare in Dickens.[9]

As the concluding sentence suggests, the Hobbesian theory of "dark laughter" that Kincaid adopts is one that informs his work. In his opening chapter, for example, Kincaid states categorically that in _Pickwick Papers_, "For the first and only time in Dickens's writings, the aggressive element in laughter is truly secondary".[10] This notion of an "aggressive element in [Dickens's] laughter" clearly seems a bias that must affect Kincaid's subsequent findings. But it is not, in fact, my concern in this thesis to argue an extended polemic against Kincaid, who as it happens deals in any event with only one of the three novels (_Little Dorrit_) that

[9] Kincaid, pp. 9-10. Kincaid quotes from p. 56 of Arthur Koestler's _Insight and Outlook_ (New York: 1949).

[10] Kincaid, p. 20.

I have chosen to examine.[11] My main concern here is to emphasise that in contrast to Kincaid I have tried as far as possible to approach Dickens's novels in an Arnoldian spirit of disinterestedness in an attempt to see how the comedy actually works in its context.

Nevertheless, I believe that what emerges from this approach are findings that in many instances contradict the "dark" or "aggressive" theory of laughter. I discover instead sustained evidence to suggest that Dickens uses comic elements in various important and central ways to elicit a sympathetic response from us which enables us to participate in the human plight of others. It is this evidence that helps lead me to my conclusion in the thesis that Dickens's comic art is intimately bound up with his greatness as a novelist: if Dickens _is_ a major novelist, it is because he is also a major comic artist.

In the course of the thesis I attempt to deal explicitly with the way that social themes are embodied in the three novels I have selected, and to pay careful attention to the role of Dickens's comic art in developing these themes, in the belief that this is the surest means of revealing Dickens's "criticism of life".[12] The thesis is divided into three chapters, each of which explores a single novel. Each chapter commences with a brief motivation for the chosen book. My examination of all three novels is limited to

[11] I deal briefly with my differences with Kincaid over the interpretation of _Little Dorrit_ in the appropriate chapter of this thesis.

[12] The phrase is Matthew Arnold's, from "Wordsworth" in _Essays in Criticism: Second Series_ (1888); rpt. in _Matthew Arnold: Selected Prose_, ed. P.J. Keating (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 376.

the fullest practical extent to the role played by the comic element. I have also endeavoured not to unnecessarily re-cover ground explored by other critics. Areas such as the origins of Comedy as an art form,[13] Dickens's comic antecedents,[14] and Dickens's connections with the theatre,[15] have all been competently dealt with by various critics, the most helpful of whom are noted below.

The general outline of the thesis is as follows: the first chapter, on Dombey and Son, aims at identifying the different comic techniques and examining their purpose and effect in the context of plot, theme, and structure. The second chapter, on Little Dorrit, extends my examination of these techniques into a later and more complex work, and connects them to Dickens's achievement in terms of a greater breadth of vision and depth of penetration in the characterisation of this novel. The third chapter, which deals with Great Expectations, explores the relationship between comic methods and a finely sustained first-person narrative.

[13] F.M. Cornford, The Origin of Attic Comedy (London: Edward Arnold, 1914); Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957).

[14] Northrop Frye, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors", in Experience in the Novel, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 49-81; J. Hillis Miller, "The Sources of Dickens's Comic Art", Nineteenth Century Fiction, 24 (1970), 467-76; B.N. Schilling, The Comic Spirit (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1965); S.M. Tave, The Amiable Humorist (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960).

[15] W.F. Axton, Circle of Fire (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1966); R.C. Churchill, "Dickens, Drama and Tradition", Scrutiny, 10 (1942), 358-75; R. Garis, The Dickens Theatre (Oxford: O.U.P., 1965); J.B. van Amerongen, The Actor in Dickens (London: Cecil Palmer, 1926).

CHAPTER 1

DOMBEY AND SON

The evidence which suggests that Dickens took special pains with the writing of Dombey and Son is to be found in Forster's biography of Dickens, for it was whilst Dickens was engaged with the early numbers of the novel that he wrote to Forster to describe the care and the control he was exercising. In this letter, he told Forster that, "I have avoided unnecessary dialogue so far, to avoid overwriting; and all I have written is point".[1] Several critics have felt that it is this careful control in the execution of the novel which distinguishes Dombey and Son from Dickens's earlier work.[2] Here I largely agree with Kathleen Tillotson's judgement, for instance, that "Dombey and Son stands out from among Dickens's novels as the earliest example of responsible and successful planning; it has unity not only of action, but of design and feeling".[3]

Dombey and Son therefore seems a logical departure point for a thesis that sets out to examine the comic nature of Dickens's mature fiction. With its comparative maturity of design

[1] John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens (1873; rpt. London: Dent, 1966), ll, p. 30.

[2] Most notably: Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (Oxford: O.U.P., 1954), pp. 157 ff.; and Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (Boston: Little, Brown, 1952), ll, pp. 626 ff.

[3] Tillotson, p. 157.

and execution, the novel displays many of the comic techniques to be found in Dickens's later work. This chapter is consequently exploratory in its aim: I propose to examine the various comic elements in Dombey and Son in order to demonstrate their connection with Dickens's thematic concerns and to provide a useful foundation for my later exploration of Little Dorrit and Great Expectations. I hope to show that if we ignore the comic tone that permeates the greater part of the novel, we are in danger of distorting our final assessment of Dickens's creative achievement.

Not all critics, however, see Dombey and Son as a successful unity. One important dissenting voice belongs to F.R. Leavis, whose chapter on the novel in his Dickens the Novelist is indeed entitled "The First Major Novel: Dombey and Son", but who nevertheless goes on to suggest that Dickens vitiated his energies in breaking off his work on the book to write a Christmas story:

> If, however, we are to do justice to what impresses us most in Dombey and Son, we have to judge that the book is not as a whole conceived in any unified or unifying imagination--and that it is certainly not, in its specious totality, the work of that genius which compels our homage in the strong parts. The creative afflatus goes in other, characteristic and large parts of the book with a moral élan that favours neither moral perception nor a grasp of the real.[4]

Whilst neither of the Leavises deal with Dickens's comic techniques at any length, it is interesting to discover that in his chapter on Dombey and Son, F.R. Leavis's brief comments on this subject reinforce his sense of critical dissatisfaction with the lack of unity in the book:

[4] F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (1970; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 34.

> And so much of the play of Dickens's humorous and comic abundance, even when it issues in the sinister-grotesque, serves the ends of implicit reassurance: reassurance that works by implicitly discounting the seriousness of the drama--by intimating that what we have to do with does not, at bottom, make any claim to be the world where the sanctions, conditions and inexorabilities of real life hold without remission. Personally, I find Captain Cuttle--and not only Captain Cuttle--boring. But there is an immense deal of Dickens's comic creation that, in its genial and self-justifying liveliness and force, gives us what we acclaim as the expression of his genius, and yet, in the respect referred to, belongs with Captain Cuttle--with Captain Cuttle rather than with the Toodles. The Toodles represent what we have in the strongest part of Dombey and Son, and it is this strength that I have been intent on distinguishing. The Toodles have their essential part--and it is performed with what might strike us as an un-Dickensian economy--in an art that offers an astringent and wholly serious 'criticism of life'. 5

I will also be suggesting that there is, to some extent, a lack of unity in the novel, but my emphasis will be very different from Leavis's. I shall argue that the main weakness in the novel is to be found in those sections which deal with Edith Dombey in her different relationships, where Dickens adopts a mode of writing that almost entirely abandons any use of comic elements, but which instead is frequently melodramatic or formulaic in its effect. And contrary to Leavis, it will be part of my purpose to show that Dickens's use of comedy in the case of Captain Cuttle and related minor characters serves a more serious function than mere "self-justifying liveliness": that this humorous treatment is, in fact, intimately connected with Dickens's "wholly serious 'criticism of life'".

My first step is to explicate Dickens's comic strategies as he characterises the protagonist, Mr. Dombey, and the characters

[5] F.R. Leavis, pp. 49-50.

who surround him. Here I will be examining Dickens's technique of alternating the serious with the comic in the opening chapter of the book. Later in my chapter I intend to examine also the careful organisation of plot and sub-plot on the wider scale through which Dickens is able to counterpoint, modulate, and prefigure developments in the main plot.

In both cases, Dickens's practice may be traced back to his earliest work. As Butt and Tillotson point out in Dickens at Work, Dickens's success with Sketches by Boz can in some measure be attributed to the popularity of his "mingling of the exquisitely ridiculous and the grim".[6] A seminal passage at the beginning of chapter xvii in Oliver Twist also attests that this technique was from an early period a conscious one on Dickens's part. In this passage, Dickens intrudes in propria persona to comment upon the theatrical origins of his procedure:

> It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song. We behold, with throbbing bosoms, the heroine in the grasp of a proud and ruthless baron: her virtue and her life alike in danger, drawing forth her dagger to preserve the one at the cost of the other; and just as our expectations are wrought up to the highest pitch, a whistle is heard, and we are straightway transported to the great hall of the castle: where a grey-headed seneschal sings a funny chorus with a funnier body of vassals, who are free of all sorts of places, from church vaults to palaces, and roam about in company, carolling perpetually.
>
> Such changes appear absurd; but they are not so unnatural as they would seem at first sight. The transitions in real life from well-spread boards to death-beds, and from mourning weeds to holiday garments, are not a

[6] John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 37.

> whit less startling; only, there, we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on, which makes a vast difference. The actors in the mimic life of the theatre, are blind to violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion or feeling, which, presented before the eyes of mere spectators, are at once condemned as outrageous and preposterous.[7]

This is a passage which effectively illuminates Dickens's practice on both the levels that I have mentioned. It outlines firstly Dickens's custom of alternating serious and comic elements within the confines of a single chapter, and secondly, his technique of alternating serious plot with comic sub-plot, and of counterpointing serious chapter with comic chapter in terms of the larger structure of the novel. I will commence by examining the first technique in the opening chapter of Dombey and Son, not only because this chapter is one of the finest stretches of writing in the novel, but also because it illustrates brilliantly Dickens's achievement in this regard.

The chapter is firstly and properly concerned with the necessary basic exposition of place and character. The opening phrase: "Dombey sat in the corner of the darkened room" (p. 1), introduces Dombey in an image of physical darkness which is also to be his spiritual condition for most of the book. The second paragraph proceeds, through sentences which make use of carefully balanced antithesis, to contrast Dombey with his new-born son:

> Dombey was about eight-and-forty years of age. Son about eight-and-forty minutes. Dombey was rather bald, rather red, and though a handsome well-made man, too stern and pompous in appearance, to be prepossessing. Son was very bald, and very red, and though (of course) an undeniably fine infant, somewhat crushed and spotty

[7] Oliver Twist (1838; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 168. This passage does not appear in the New Oxford Illustrated Edition (1949).

> in his general effect, as yet. On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, as on a tree that was to come down in good time--remorseless twins they are for striding through their human forests, notching as they go--while the countenance of Son was crossed and recrossed with a thousand little creases, which the same deceitful Time would take delight in smoothing out and wearing away with the flat part of his scythe, as a preparation of the surface for his deeper operations.
>
> Dombey, exulting in the long-looked-for event, jingled and jingled the heavy gold watch-chain that depended from below his trim blue coat, whereof the buttons sparkled phosphorescently in the feeble rays of the distant fire. Son, with his little fists curled up and clenched, seemed, in his feeble way, to be squaring at existence for having come upon him so unexpectedly.
>
> 'The house will once again, Mrs. Dombey', said Mr. Dombey, 'be not only in name but in fact Dombey and Son; Dom-bey and Son!' (p. 1)

This antithesis captures excellently the stolid pompousness of the man in juxtaposition to the frail and tenuous existence of his child, who appears already to be at odds with his father's fixed purpose, as if they are instant adversaries. In the image of Paul arriving with his "little fists curled up and clenched", there is the sense, like the infant in Blake's "Infant Sorrow", of him springing into the world defensively prepared against the grey Dombeyan assault that is to threaten his very existence.

The passage also provides an example of the pompous formality of Dombey's speech with its weighty cadences, characteristic of his utterance in the scene as a whole. We note how his tone of complacent self-satisfaction marks the sense of Dombey's fundamental obtuseness to the other reality in front of him: the suffering condition of his dying wife. Indeed, this obtuseness is heightened by the idiom which Dickens imputes to Dombey as he contemplates his wife's good fortune:

> Mr. Dombey would have reasoned: That a matrimonial alliance with himself _must_, in the nature of things, be

> gratifying and honourable to any woman of common sense. That the hope of giving birth to a new partner in such a house, could not fail to awaken a glorious and stirring ambition in the breast of the least ambitious of her sex. That Mrs. Dombey had entered on that social contract of matrimony: almost necessarily part of a genteel and wealthy station, even without reference to the perpetuation of family firms: with her eyes fully open to these advantages. That Mrs. Dombey had had daily practical knowledge of his position in society. That Mrs. Dombey had always sat at the head of his table, and done the honours of his house in a remarkably lady-like and becoming manner. That Mrs. Dombey must have been happy. That she couldn't help it. (p. 2)

This style, with its repeated "That" at the beginning of each sentence, parodies the clausal idiom of a legal contract, and thereby enacts for the reader the ponderously itemising perspective of Dombey's self-congratulatory consciousness. It also exposes the insensitive reductiveness of his thought processes that are content to envision the relationship between himself and his wife in the form of a mercantile contract.

But modulating the gravity of this picture are the figures of the two doctors, who, like Dombey, but to a lesser degree, appear more concerned with their own feelings of self-esteem (measured by the social importance of their clients), than with the survival of their patient. By their obsequious deference towards Dombey and their professional distance, they manage to throw into comic relief Dombey's own overwhelming mixture of self-importance and indifference:

> 'We must not disguise from you, Sir,' said Doctor Parker Peps, 'that there is a want of power in Her Grace the Duchess--I beg your pardon; I confound names; I should say, in your amiable lady. That there is a certain degree of languor, and a general absence of elasticity, which we would rather--not--'
>
> 'See,' interposed the family practitioner with another inclination of the head.
>
> 'Quite so,' said Doctor Parker Peps, 'which we would rather not see. It would appear that the system of Lady

> Cankaby--excuse me: I should say of Mrs. Dombey: I confuse the names of cases--'
> 'So very numerous,' murmured the family practitioner--'can't be expected I'm sure--quite wonderful if otherwise--Doctor Parker Peps's West-End practice--'
> 'Thank you,' said the Doctor, 'quite so. It would appear, I was observing, that the system of our patient has sustained a shock, from which it can only hope to rally by a great and strong--'
> 'And vigorous,' murmured the family practitioner.
> 'Quite so,' assented the Doctor--'and vigorous effort. Mr. Pilkins here, who from his position of medical adviser in this family--no one better qualified to fill that position, I am sure.'
> 'Oh!' murmured the family practitioner. '"Praise from Sir Hubert Stanley!"'
> 'You are good enough,' returned Doctor Parker Peps, 'to say so. Mr. Pilkins who, from his position, is best acquainted with the patient's constitution in its normal state (an acquaintance very valuable to us in forming our opinions on these occasions), is of opinion, with me, that Nature must be called upon to make a vigorous effort in this instance; and that if our interesting friend the Countess of Dombey--I _beg_ your pardon; Mrs. Dombey--should not be--'
> 'Able,' said the family practitioner.
> 'To make that effort successfully,' said Doctor Parker Peps, 'then a crisis might arise, which we should both sincerely deplore.'[8] (pp. 4-5)

Whilst it is true that both later seem to display a genuine compassion towards their patient, at this point Dr. Parker Peps's comic confusion of names both undermines and serves as its own ironic comment upon the medical rhetoric he trots out with such laborious verbosity. The humour of their performance is meant to reveal to the reader also that their stock medical advice, stripped of the self-aggrandising periphrasis, consists of nothing more than that empty platitudinous phrase "make an effort" which is so eagerly adopted by Mrs. Chick.

[8] The Penguin edition uses a textual variant which, by splitting the last sentence of this passage between the two doctors, increases the humorous effect, by making the two men appear co-operators in medical ignorance. The variation is recorded also in the Clarendon (Variorum) Edition.

Even this short discussion of the chapter will have made it clear to the reader that Dickens engages in a comic undermining of Mr. Dombey right from the start of the novel. We have already seen two different ways in which this attack is expressed. Firstly, there is Dickens's parody, in the form of a ponderous syntax, of Mr. Dombey's pompous mind, and secondly, as in the case of the two doctors, there is a comic treatment of the surrounding minor characters which serves to highlight Mr. Dombey's own failings.

The reader who is unaccustomed to Dickens's methods might well reflect at this point that it is rather strange that Dickens should indulge in these comic techniques in a chapter which, after all, deals with the death of Mrs. Dombey. But as I pointed out on p. 12 of this chapter, Dickens's practice of mingling the comic with the serious is both deliberate and conscious. Furthermore, it is my contention that this technique constitutes, in fact, one of Dickens's greatest strengths, <u>especially</u> when Dickens applies this alternation of the comic with the serious to an extreme human situation such as death. Indeed, in my next chapter on <u>Little Dorrit</u>, I shall be arguing in a much fuller discussion that this technique reaches its highest point of achievement in Dickens's treatment of Mr. Dorrit's decline.

The strength of this technique, however, can already be seen in this first chapter of <u>Dombey and Son</u>, which deals with the death of a character whom we encounter only fleetingly. For even under these conditions it is possible to see that when the actual death of Mrs. Dombey is presented against this background of fatuity and self-interest, it is the very tension between the comedy and the death that controls our response and prevents any

tendency towards sentimentality. It is the conflict between the comedy of the gushing Mrs. Chick and the cries of the child Florence over her mother that gives such a sharply controlled quality of poignancy to Mrs. Dombey's death, a death which is itself beautifully understated at the very end of the chapter in that image of the sea that is to be sustained through the novel: "Thus, clinging fast to that slight spar within her arms, the mother drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world" (p. 10).

Dickens's fine sense of control here in the writing is clearly demonstrated again in the deliberate juxtaposition to this sentence of the opening words of the second chapter, where we are abruptly returned to the egotistical world of Mrs. Chick: "'I shall never cease to congratulate myself,' said Mrs. Chick, 'on having said, when I little thought what was in store for us,--really as if I was inspired by something,--that I forgave poor dear Fanny everything. Whatever happens, that must always be a comfort to me!'" (p. 11).

The first chapter also illustrates some of Dickens's problems in regard to the characterisation of Mr. Dombey. It begins to be apparent that in the novel, Dombey is always in danger of becoming something of a one-dimensional figure. He may almost be summed up by the word "pride". His other features: his stiffness, emotional frigidity, aloofness and asceticism of behaviour are all by-products of his monstrous, self-enclosing pride. It is Dombey's struggles with his own failings that form the central core of the book, and these struggles are embodied in his relationship with those around him.

Notwithstanding Dombey's tendency to become a Jonsonian type

Humour, it is evident that we are required to take him very seriously, since it is through Dombey that Dickens exemplifies his major theme in the novel. This I take to be the demonstration that proper human values may ultimately triumph over the destructive world of materialism and self-interest epitomised by Mr. Dombey before his final regeneration.

More specifically, we are further required to take Mr. Dombey seriously because he has power, and having power he is a direct threat to those who depend upon him. Dickens therefore faces a dilemma in his portrayal of Dombey. Whilst, as the first chapter has begun to reveal, Mr. Dombey must on the one hand be taken seriously since he poses a very real threat to the welfare of Paul, Florence and others, and accordingly can by no means be termed a comic character, yet, by virtue of his egotistical pride, his character exhibits manifest weaknesses which render him vulnerable to the ridiculous. Indeed, Mr. Dombey's self-centredness implies that we may define him more by what he lacks than what he possesses. And as the novel unfolds, it becomes evident that Mr. Dombey lacks perception, judgement, emotional maturity, and self-knowledge: all of which render his character open to satire and ridicule.

I believe that Dickens does manage to overcome this dilemma in such a way that Mr. Dombey is maintained in the foreground of our attention as a serious character whilst we also become increasingly aware of his personal limitations. Dickens achieves this by means of a number of comic strategies which I shall be detailing in the course of this chapter. Some of these strategies have already been encountered in the course of chapter i, as, for example, Dickens's practice of exposing Mr. Dombey's limitations through his interaction with the characters who surround him. This

range of characters broadens as the novel progresses until it encompasses a spectrum that includes relatives, servants, employees and sycophants, as well as the characters I shall shortly be discussing to whom Mr. Dombey entrusts the education of his son Paul. And as this range of characters widens, so accordingly does our understanding of Mr. Dombey deepen.

But before I continue with my examination of the characters who surround Mr. Dombey, I wish to deal fairly briefly with a different strategy. This concerns that process of metonymy which is aptly defined by Wellek and Warren in a chapter of their Theory of Literature entitled "The Nature and Modes of Narrative Fiction". They describe metonymy in general terms as that process whereby "Setting is environment; and environments, especially domestic interiors, may be viewed as metonymic, or metaphoric, expressions of character. A man's house is an extension of himself".[9] Their description fits Dickens's particular method with some accuracy, for in a process of metonymy that is characteristically a comic metonymy, Dombey's environment becomes a moral environment. This kind of metonymy is indeed one of Dickens's favourite methods. By extending Mr. Dombey's qualities into the description of his immediate surroundings, Dickens is able to expand considerably the vocabulary of description pertaining to the figure of Mr. Dombey himself. Dickens escapes thereby the inevitable limitations of merely personal description, and, since character largely determines environment, Dickens is able to demonstrate Mr. Dombey's values becoming the pervasive operating force in his setting; a moral force

[9] René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 221.

that directly affects a wide range of people.

A striking example of this metonymic process operating through the comic mode is provided in the description of Paul's christening party:

> There they found Mr. Pitt turning up his nose at a cold collation, set forth in a cold pomp of glass and silver, and looking more like a dead dinner lying in state than a social refreshment. On their arrival Miss Tox produced a mug for her godson, and Mr. Chick a knife and fork and spoon in a case. Mr. Dombey also produced a bracelet for Miss Tox; and, on the receipt of this token, Miss Tox was tenderly affected.
>
> 'Mr. John,' said Mr. Dombey, 'will you take the bottom of the table, if you please? What have you got there, Mr. John?'
>
> 'I have got a cold fillet of veal here, Sir,' replied Mr. Chick, rubbing his numbed hands hard together. 'What have _you_ got there, Sir?'
>
> 'This,' returned Mr. Dombey, 'is some cold preparation of calf's head, I think. I see cold fowls--ham--patties --salad--lobster. Miss Tox will do me the honour of taking some wine? Champagne to Miss Tox.'
>
> There was a toothache in everything. The wine was so bitter cold that it forced a little scream from Miss Tox, which she had great difficulty in turning into a 'Hem!' The veal had come from such an airy pantry, that the first taste of it had struck a sensation as of cold lead to Mr. Chick's extremities. Mr. Dombey alone remained unmoved. He might have been hung up for sale at a Russian fair as a specimen of a frozen gentleman. (p. 57)

The narrative tone here is one of sustained humour of presentation, with Dickens typically working through a process of accumulation: the word "cold", for example, is repeated no fewer than seven times in this brief excerpt. The coldness of the food extends our sense of Dombey's emotional frigidity, but it also connects with the earlier imagery of autumnal bleakness that hints at Paul's fate. Indeed, the meal is explicitly compared to a funeral "collation",[10] whilst Dombey's immobility of spirit

[10] Steven Marcus makes a similar point on p. 359 of his _Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey_ (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965).

increases the sense of deadness.

In marked contrast to the normal Dickensian relish in feasting, a relish that usually denotes a harmonious, life-quickening spirit among the participants, the very food here resists the eating of it as Dombey's iciness is extended metonymically into his table. His terse listing of the contents: "I see cold fowls--ham--patties --salad--lobster", captures both his awareness of his wealth on display and his ascetic indifference to the convivial pleasures it offers. The comic tone in the passage, as, for instance in Miss Tox's reaction: "The wine was so bitter cold that it forced a little scream from Miss Tox, which she had great difficulty in turning into a 'Hem!'" exposes the extent to which Mr. Dombey's guests are forced to suppress their own human emotions, marginal as these might be, in their obliging attendance upon him. In sitting down to the meal, the guests are, in fact, being forced to partake of the very essence of Dombey himself, and most uncongenial it proves to be. A more direct statement of what Dickens presents dramatically here would be to say that Dombeyism simply cannot be stomached.

I wish to make of this passage a test case, and this requires that the tone be defined with some precision, for it raises an important point of principle. If the humour which the passage generates is at all satirical, it is but mildly so. There is far more weight given to raising a genially humorous response; to directing the reader's attention towards the comicality of the presented situation. This might seem strange at first, remembering Dickens's overall purpose in this section of the novel, which is wholly serious in its demonstration of the destruction wrought by Mr. Dombey's world on his son. I would argue, however, that

Dickens adopts this genially humorous tone as a deliberate rhetorical strategy. This enables him to contract a special relationship with the reader. The process might be likened to the contract to be found between narrator and reader where irony is employed. In the case of irony, though, this contract is in the form of an appeal to the reader's intelligence to discern a discrepancy between what is asserted and what is actually the case, whereas Dickens's comic tone appeals directly to the reader, inviting him to participate in a special response towards the presented situation.

This special response may be elucidated as follows. Perception of the humour involves a genial reaction; this geniality alerts us to the presence of an humane counterpoint to the depicted situation. The humour in itself, therefore, represents a counterpoint to the very situation it describes. The humorous tone provides a warm-hearted perspective, enabling us through the geniality of our response to liberate ourselves from the constriction felt by the participants at the christening party. Dombey's world of sterile frigidity is imprisoning, whilst we are to a certain extent distanced by our warm-hearted response to the humorous tone of presentation. The tone therefore in its very approach involves a moral viewpoint, since it juxtaposes humane, life-enhancing values against the depicted inhuman, life-denying values.

The scene continues with Mr. Dombey replying to Mr. Chick's toast to little Paul:

> 'Mr. John,' said Mr. Dombey, with severe gravity, 'my son would feel and express himself obliged to you, I have no doubt, if he could appreciate the favour you have done him. He will prove, in time to come, I trust,

> equal to any responsibility that the obliging disposition of his relations and friends, in private, or the onerous nature of our position, in public, may impose upon him.'
> The tone in which this was said admitting of nothing more, Mr. Chick relapsed into low spirits and silence. Not so Miss Tox, who, having listened to Mr. Dombey with even a more emphatic attention than usual, and with a more expressive tendency of her head to one side, now leant across the table, and said to Mrs. Chick softly:
> 'Louisa!'
> 'My dear,' said Mrs. Chick.
> 'Onerous nature of our position in public may--I have forgotten the exact term.'
> 'Expose him to,' said Mrs. Chick.
> 'Pardon me, my dear,' returned Miss Tox, 'I think not. It was more rounded and flowing. Obliging disposition of relations and friends in private, or onerous nature of position in public--may--impose upon him!'
> 'Impose upon him, to be sure,' said Mrs. Chick.
> Miss Tox struck her delicate hands together lightly, in triumph; and added, casting up her eyes, 'eloquence indeed!' (p. 58)

Dickens is concerned to expose in Dombey's weighty idiom (as indigestible as the food itself), the disturbing gap between his conception of his son's role: "onerous nature of our position", and the actual reality of the frail child. The point in Miss Tox's picking up this same phrase and repeating it serves two purposes. Firstly, it exposes Miss Tox's comically uncritical adoration of all Mr. Dombey's utterances, the import of which neither she nor Mrs. Chick is capable of fully comprehending, but are content to savour on the level of impressively "rounded and flowing" sonority. Secondly, the repetition helps to reinforce our sense that Paul's fate is pre-ordained in his father's pretentious vision. The pomposity of Dombey's idiom is self-evidently ludicrous, and here the humour serves as a means of proportioning Dombey. As Dombey exposes himself through speech, so it becomes evident that this kind of inflated rhetoric is disproportionately pompous in one who is merely a merchant, not the "absolute

monarch"[11] that the loftiness of the language suggests. And here also a parallel is established between the presented situation and future development, since Dombey's lofty conceptions will prove as inappropriate when "imposed upon" Paul as this christening assembly is unpalatable to the guests. The present uncongeniality prefigures Paul's fate.

The response to Dombey on the part of his attendant guests illustrates the second important Dickensian strategy. As the passage reveals, the grandiose pretension of Dombey's speech is inherently ridiculous; likewise Mr. Dombey himself, by virtue of the inhuman and grotesquely one-sided aspects of his character, is potentially a ludicrous figure. I suggest, however, that Dickens is able to retain Dombey as a serious figure of destructive power in the novel by displacing much of Dombey's inherent absurdity onto those around him. An instructive example of this method in operation is to be found in chapter i at that point where Mr. Dombey is contemplating the possible loss of one of his possessions --his wife:

> His meditations on the subject were soon interrupted, first by the rustling of garments on the staircase, and then by the sudden whisking into the room of a lady rather past the middle age than otherwise, but dressed in a very juvenile manner, particularly as to the tightness of her bodice, who, running up to him with a kind of screw in her face and carriage, expressive of suppressed emotion, flung her arms round his neck, and said in a choking voice,
>
> 'My dear Paul! He's quite a Dombey!'
>
> 'Well, well!' returned her brother--for Mr. Dombey was her brother--'I think he is like the family. Don't agitate yourself, Louisa.'
>
> 'It's very foolish of me,' said Louisa, sitting down,

[11] Philip Hobsbaum uses this phrase on p. 105 of A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972).

> and taking out her pocket-handkerchief, 'but he's--he's such a perfect Dombey! I never saw anything like it in my life!'
>
> 'But what is this about Fanny, herself?' said Mr. Dombey. 'How is Fanny?'
>
> 'My dear Paul,' returned Louisa, 'it's nothing whatever. Take my word, it's nothing whatever. There is exhaustion, certainly, but nothing like what I underwent myself, either with George or Frederick. An effort is necessary. That's all. If dear Fanny were a Dombey!--But I daresay she'll make it; I have no doubt she'll make it. Knowing it to be required of her, as a duty, of course she'll make it. My dear Paul, it's very weak and silly of me, I know, to be so trembly and shaky from head to foot; but I am so very queer that I must ask you for a glass of wine and a morsel of that cake.'
>
> (pp. 5-6)

Mrs. Chick is presented in the extract as an overtly ludicrous character, in her artificial juvenility (shades of Mrs. Skewton), and it is her own explicit deficiencies of character, revealed through gesture and speech, that intensify our sense of Mr. Dombey's shortcomings. For we perceive that some transparently simple and foolish flattery, combined with that characteristic selfishness with which the extract ends, is sufficient to win Dombey's approbation, and that this approbation is the surest measure of his gross insensitivity towards his dying wife.

A more important feature also emerges from the passage. As A.E. Dyson points out,[12] it becomes clear from this kind of exchange just how defective Dombey's judgement is in regard to others. Here this lack of judgement is comically presented, but it is a deficiency which will shortly have grave consequences for Mr. Dombey and his grandiose plans for his son. Mr. Dombey's comic lack of discernment in the face of the obvious excesses of Mrs. Chick's dramatic posturing: "a kind of screw in her face and

[12] A.E. Dyson, _The Inimitable Dickens_ (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 106.

carriage, expressive of suppressed emotion", helps to reveal at this early stage in the novel, how his self-absorbing pride has rendered him as easily taken in as a child; that, in fact, the one ironic result of his pride is that it has left him with an emotional capacity as inappropriately juvenile as Mrs. Chick's dress.

Dickens extends our sense of Dombey's limitations by demonstrating his further imperturbability in the face of various highly comic situations. These absurdities throw into relief further vulnerable aspects of Mr. Dombey's character. A representative example may be found just a little further on in the same chapter in the introduction of Miss Tox to Mr. Dombey:

> The lady thus specially presented, was a long lean figure, wearing such a faded air that she seemed not to have been made in what linen-drapers call 'fast colours' originally, and to have, by little and little, washed out. But for this she might have been described as the very pink of general propitiation and politeness. From a long habit of listening admirably to everything that was said in her presence, and looking at the speakers as if she were mentally engaged in taking off impressions of their images upon her soul, never to part with the same but with life, her head had quite settled on one side. Her hands had contracted a spasmodic habit of raising themselves of their own accord as in involuntary admiration. Her eyes were liable to a similar affection. She had the softest voice that ever was heard; and her nose, stupendously aquiline, had a little knob in the very centre or key-stone of the bridge, whence it tended downwards towards her face, as in an invincible determination never to turn up at anything. (pp. 6-7)

In our sheer enjoyment here of the comic presentation, it is quite possible to miss Dickens's point. This is best kept in focus if we visualise the occasion as a dramatic scene in which Miss Tox is received and treated by Mr. Dombey with that same imperturbable gravity which he offers with such mechanical condescension to all

his dependants. Dombey's failure to penetrate or to discriminate in his relationships with others emphasises how his enclosed world of self-importance excludes the balance that humour affords. Here again, it is the rhetorical narrative tone that offers the humane counterpoint to Dombey's limited outlook. The very geniality aroused in the reader is part of the indictment against the Dombeyan world.

It is this quality of unseeing on the part of Dombey that is reinforced by Dickens throughout the book. Numerous other examples come to mind: there is in the same chapter, for instance, Miss Tox's pincushion gift with its diplomatically expedient inscription, "Welcome, little Dombey", which Mrs. Chick rapturously describes as "Poetry" (pp. 7-8). It is the accumulation of these comic incidents as they impinge, or fail to impinge upon Dombey's stolid consciousness that builds up our perspective of the limitations of his self-enclosed character.

This comic perspective on Dombey's limitations assumes a more serious dimension in the matter of Paul's education. As Dyson observes, this is the one area where we might expect Dombey to hold the firmest convictions, but ironically, we are shown that this is not the case.[13] Paul's schooling, and accordingly his fate to a certain extent, are determined for him by the combined representations of the family doctor (recommending the sea air for his frail constitution--itself an outward token of his inner delicacy), and the advice of Miss Tox, who is a living witness to her own sagacity. In the relevant interchange on the subject, it becomes clear how the formal portentousness of Dombey's speech is

[13] Dyson, p. 106.

at comic odds with his unmistakeable ignorance on matters of education:

> 'Do I understand that this respectable matron keeps an establishment, Miss Tox?' inquired Mr. Dombey, condescendingly.
> 'Why, I really don't know,' rejoined that lady, 'whether I am justified in calling it so. It is not a Preparatory School by any means. Should I express my meaning,' said Miss Tox, with peculiar sweetness, 'if I designated it an infantine Boarding-House of a very select description?'
> 'On an exceedingly limited and particular scale,' suggested Mrs. Chick, with a glance at her brother.
> 'Oh! Exclusion itself!' said Miss Tox.
> There was something in this. Mrs. Pipchin's husband having broken his heart of the Peruvian mines was good. It had a rich sound. (pp. 97-98)

The description immediately preceding this passage of Mrs. Pipchin's husband[14] and his death over his Peruvian mining venture--"pumping water out" (p. 97) as Miss Tox dramatises it--is made comically bizarre by Dickens to reinforce our sense of Dombey's imperturbable lack of proportion and judgement. Instead, the "rich sound" of Mr. Pipchin's speculations, together with the principle of "exclusion" so tellingly invoked by Miss Tox, both show how readily Mr. Dombey is taken in by those sounding the right chords of language. This weakness is to make him vulnerable to all in the novel who manipulate words with the correct facility.

The introduction of Mrs. Pipchin leads us into that portion of the novel which deals with Paul's education; a section of the novel that sees the emergence of Dickens's familiar theme of the

[14] A gentleman who enjoys a mythical status rather similar to Mrs. Gamp's Mrs. Harris, in Martin Chuzzlewit (1844).

violation of the child's world by adults.[15] This theme affords Dickens an important further means of extending our sense of Mr. Dombey's imperception and lack of judgement. In Paul's educational fate at the hands of Mrs. Pipchin and Dr. Blimber, Dickens shows us the direct results of Mr. Dombey's values, thereby allowing us to witness the life-denying effects wrought upon Mr. Dombey's son and heir.

Dickens's presentation of Mrs. Pipchin and Dr. Blimber, as well as of their establishments, makes use of a characteristically comic tone which again acts as an humane counterpoint to what is being presented. An additional perspective to the comic presentation is also provided in the serious and premature intelligence of the child Paul himself, whose viewpoint comes increasingly to dominate this section of the novel as his life fades away under the pressures of Dombeyism.

To commence with Mrs. Pipchin, the initial description of the "child-queller" as a "marvellous ill-favoured, ill-conditioned old lady, of a stooping figure, with a mottled face, like bad marble, a hook nose, and a hard grey eye" (p. 99), is extended in terms that underscore Dickens's thesis, first advanced in <u>Nicholas Nickleby</u> (1839), that children are customarily entrusted into the care of adult educators least suited to this task.[16] In parallel to the technique of suggesting Paul's inner sensitivity through his

[15] I should acknowledge an indebtedness to the following critics, who all comment helpfully on this theme: Stephen Marcus, p. 319; Kathleen Tillotson, pp. 192-3; Angus Wilson, <u>The World of Charles Dickens</u> (London: Secker and Warburg, 1970), p. 206.

[16] In a letter to Forster quoted by Edgar Johnson, p. 605, Dickens commented that "'We should be devilish sharp in what we do to children'".

physical frailty, Mrs. Pipchin's outer repulsiveness becomes here a token of her grotesque unsuitability for her task of nurturing the young.

Mrs. Pipchin's establishment in a by-street at Brighton, is shown to be one of a series of deprivations starting with the death of Paul's mother, and continued in the sacking of Polly Toodles, whereby little Paul is inexorably isolated in a process which sees the replacement of natural love by the attentions of those incapable of perceiving the child's true nature or needs. Here, as elsewhere in Dickens's work, the idea is presented that certain adults set about systematically and deliberately violating the tender world of childhood.

The exaggeratedly bizarre details of Mrs. Pipchin's appearance are enhanced by such explicitly fairy-tale elements as Dickens's description of her as an "ogress" who inhabits a "Castle" (p. 99). These elements help the reader to understand Mrs. Pipchin through the perspective of Paul's eyes as a dauntingly grotesque figure who must seem hardly real to the child's viewpoint. Miss Tox's euphemism "Exclusion itself!" comes now to bear an ironically literal value as we discover that this principle is applied in Mrs. Pipchin's school mainly to the food "of the farinaceous and vegetable kind" (p. 101) which the pupils are forced to eat, in contrast to her own indulgences at the table.

Angus Wilson has commented that it was a masterstroke on the part of Dickens to make Paul an <u>enfant savant</u>, since this frees Dickens from that limiting passivity which characterises his earlier child heroes (Oliver Twist is the obvious example who comes to

mind).[17] Paul's startling "old-fashioned" wisdom (the label "old-fashioned" being ironically bestowed upon him by those who are themselves rigidified anachronisms), enables him to offer a characteristically forthright critical commentary on his own childhood ordeal. His encounter with Mrs. Pipchin, in line with Dickens's frequent rhetorical underscoring, allows an explicit statement of what has previously been presented through comic detail:

> 'Well, Sir,' said Mrs. Pipchin to Paul, 'how do you think you shall like me?'
> 'I don't think I shall like you at all,' replied Paul. 'I want to go away. This isn't my house.'
> 'No. It's mine,' retorted Mrs. Pipchin.
> 'It's a very nasty one,' said Paul. (p. 100)

When Paul passes on to Dr. Blimber's establishment, this forthrightness is more subtly used:

> 'Ha!' said the Doctor, leaning back in his chair with his hand in his breast. 'Now I see my little friend. How do you do, my little friend?'
> The clock in the hall wouldn't subscribe to this alteration in the form of words, but continued to repeat, 'how, is, my, lit, tle, friend? how, is, my, lit, tle, friend?'
> 'Very well, I thank you, Sir,' returned Paul, answering the clock quite as much as the Doctor.
> 'Ha!' said Dr. Blimber. 'Shall we make a man of him?'
> 'Do you hear, Paul?' added Mr. Dombey; Paul being silent.
> 'Shall we make a man of him?' repeated the Doctor.
> 'I had rather be a child,' replied Paul. (p. 145)

The struggles of the Doctor actually to see Paul expresses his mental obtuseness rendered as a literal, physical difficulty. As the repetition by the clock emphasises, Dickens intends the phrase "'my little friend'" to be a key one in the passage. The generic

[17] Wilson, p. 206.

term "'friend'" captures Dr. Blimber's unawareness and his concomitant lack of interest in Paul's individuality, whilst there is also the sense of a forced attempt at bonhomie, implying a partnership in scholastic endeavour; a sense undermined, however, by the condescension evident in "'little'". The repetition here of this same phrase by the clock is highly effective because it is precisely this focus on a seemingly peripheral detail that serves to deepen our awareness of Paul's viewpoint in the encounter. What the child perceives to be of greatest interest in the scene is ironically just that inanimate instrument which defines so sharply the essence of Blimberism. As it ticks out the Doctor's words, the monotonous reiterative quality suggests the underlying lifelessly mechanical quality in the Doctor's approach. This unchanging quality of repetition is just what the reader feels to be more truthful to Dr. Blimber's spirit than the actual slight human variation on the Doctor's part: "it wouldn't subscribe to this alteration in the form of words".

Dr. Blimber himself represents a significant advance on the type of schoolmaster represented in previous Dickensian novels--Wackford Squeers being the example who springs most prominently to mind. Whilst there is the residue of an element of violence in Mrs. Pipchin, as, for instance in her consciously waspish aggression, and her denial of proper sustenance to the children--both of which carry echoes of Squeers and Dotheboys Hall--in the case of Dr. Blimber the previous physical assaults and general brutality of a Wackford Squeers are replaced by a different kind of assault against the mind and spirit. Dr. Blimber is neither a physical bully nor a mountebank; he is a genuine pedant who

believes most firmly in his system. His "violence" is of a more subtle variety, and inheres in that systematic deprivation of the natural needs of a child and its replacement by an order based on a system two thousand years behind the times. Dickens seizes on the classical world here as an appropriate metaphor to convey the immense and unbridgeable gap between the Doctor's mind, so firmly rooted in this past, and the vital, living needs of the child.

Dr. Blimber's occluded mind serves ultimately to sharpen our awareness of Dombey's blindness towards the special world of the child, for it is Dombey who is ultimately responsible for this complacent delivery of his heir into Blimber's system:

> 'You would still wish my little friend to acquire--'
> 'Everything, if you please, Doctor,' returned Mr. Dombey firmly. (pp. 145-6)

Mr. Dombey's answer betrays, in this one word, both his unmistakeable ignorance as to what exactly that "'Everything'" ought to comprise, as well as his impatient proud forcefulness of will that would truncate the process of childhood in the interests of creating an instant merchant on the model of Dombey himself. The actual condition of childhood is of as little interest or importance to Dombey as the girl Florence, or indeed any of the females who rate so low on his scale of things--however much they might ironically influence his behaviour in reality.

The introduction of Mrs. Blimber forces a leap back into the adult viewpoint, with Dombey's limitations of perception again betrayed through his immobility in the face of a comic jargon that combines both circumlocution and euphemism, and which is first encountered in the Doctor's description of Paul as "'our young Pilgrim to Parnassus'" (p. 146), and "'addition to our little Portico'"

(p. 147). This jargon is continued in the same vein by Mrs. Blimber: "'If Mr. Dombey will walk up stairs', said Mrs. Blimber, 'I shall be more than proud to show him the dominions of the drowsy god'" (p. 148).

As elsewhere in Dickens, the reader feels at this point Dickens's enormous relish and fascination with those characters who, through their specialised brands of oratory are able to persuade others of the importance of their own artificially constructed worlds. With the Blimbers, the deception appears unconscious rather than direct; here are characters who have so confidently deluded themselves about the actual worth of their activities that they are fully capable of transporting other people with them into this deception. Mrs. Blimber's "sky-blue" (p. 148) cap becomes an emblem of the idealised and unrealistic world which they inhabit with its apex in visions of Cicero: "'beautiful Tusculum!'" (p. 147).

The introduction of Toots is specifically linked to Paul, since to be told it is a coincidence is to be quite sure that it is deliberate: "'Who is that?' said the Doctor. 'Oh! Come in, Toots: come in. Mr. Dombey, Sir'. Toots bowed. 'Quite a coincidence!' said Doctor Blimber. 'Here we have the beginning and the end. Alpha and Omega. Our head boy, Mr. Dombey'" (p. 147). As the head boy, Toots exemplifies the pinnacle of the Doctor's achievement; as "'Omega'" he also represents a living example of what Paul might potentially become if he is exposed for a sufficient period to the satirically described "hot-house" (p. 141) forcing system. Toots has a more complex role to fulfil than merely providing comic relief in the form of the amiable school idiot. His addled intelligence does indeed bear witness to the absurd efficiency of

the Doctor's system, but in retaining his essential kind-heartedness he can, in a sense, be said to have triumphed over the mental buffeting he has endured. It is instructive to compare him to Smike in Nicholas Nickleby--perhaps he may be seen as a permutation of this original--for his infinite good nature attests to the lack of that vicious element in Blimber's school which is the stamp of Dotheboys Hall. The difference is that Smike is broken in both body and mind by the blows and starvation of Wackford Squeers, whilst Toots retains a certain measure of independence, even if this consists mainly of writing imaginary letters to himself from eminent people.

The juxtaposition of Paul with Toots as Alpha and Omega suggests that Dickens has a serious purpose in mind, and this purpose may best be discovered in that scene where Toots visits Paul in his bedroom:

> One evening Mr. Toots was sitting at his desk, oppressed by correspondence, when a great purpose seemed to flash upon him. He laid down his pen, and went off to seek Paul, whom he found at last, after a long search, looking through the window of his little bedroom.
>
> 'I say!' cried Toots, speaking the moment he entered the room, lest he should forget it; 'what do you think about?'
>
> 'Oh! I think about a great many things,' replied Paul.
>
> 'Do you, though?' said Toots, appearing to consider that fact in itself surprising.
>
> 'If you had to die,' said Paul, looking up into his face--
>
> Mr. Toots started, and seemed much disturbed.
>
> '--Don't you think you would rather die on a moonlight night when the sky was quite clear, and the wind blowing, as it did last night?'
>
> Mr. Toots said, looking doubtfully at Paul, and shaking his head, that he didn't know about that.
>
> 'Not blowing, at least,' said Paul, 'but sounding in the air like the sea sounds in the shells. It was a beautiful night. When I had listened to the water for a long time, I got up and looked out. There was a boat over there, in the full light of the moon; a boat with a sail.'
>
> The child looked at him so steadfastly, and spoke so

> earnestly, that Mr. Toots, feeling himself called upon to say something about this boat, said, 'Smugglers.' But with an impartial remembrance of there being two sides to every question, he added, 'or Preventive.'
> 'A boat with a sail,' repeated Paul, 'in the full light of the moon. The sail like an arm, all silver. It went away into the distance, and what do you think it seemed to do as it moved with the waves?'
> 'Pitch,' said Mr. Toots. (pp. 167-8)

As so often in Dickens, we get the sense here of two people talking past each other, albeit with the best of intentions.[18] Toots is not altogether without his own unpredictable form of spontaneous outbursts (which help to make him the delightful comic figure that he is), but compared to Paul in this conversation he has about him a stultified literalness that struggles in vain to comprehend Paul's flights of the imagination--a world that Toots plainly finds disturbingly fascinating, without having the least idea of what Paul is talking about, since Paul's fancy lies entirely beyond the narrow limits of the Blimberian syllabus that has so efficiently violated the mind of Toots. In his comic efforts to follow Paul's thoughts, it becomes clear how Toots has suffered a kind of death at the hands of the worthy Doctor; a mental death that prepares us to some degree for the actual, physical death of Paul.

This gulf, therefore, between the high world of Paul's imagination and the result of Blimber's treatment points to the main thematic concern here: that the destruction wrought by Mr. Dombey (and Blimber is only his logical agent in this respect),

[18] I am indebted here to Dorothy Van Ghent's discussion of this phenomenon in her chapter, "On Great Expectations", in The English Novel: Form and Function (1953; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 125-38.

lies in denying the validity of the child's imaginative world--a world that is non-utilitarian and apparently aimless compared to the starkly purposive world of Mr. Dombey. It is a mode of being that also stands as an irritating impediment to Mr. Dombey's sense of property in his child, and his ambitions for him. But it is just this world of imagination and fancy that constitutes the basic requisite for the normal, healthy growth of the child, a world which is so vividly evoked for us by Dickens as he increasingly encourages the reader to view Blimber's strange house transformed through the eyes of Paul as he ranges about, investing the contents of it--the clock in the Doctor's study, the portraits on the walls and the very wallpaper itself--with his own special significances; meanings that have validity and logic alone in the child's life.

I will not comment on the description of Paul's death, since the writing in these pages is wholly serious and therefore falls outside of my purpose in this chapter. But the decline and death of little Paul marks the end of what might be termed the first section or movement of the novel; a movement which follows inexorably the destructive logic of Dombey's aspirations.

In this preliminary exploration of comic technique in the novel, I have attempted to outline the methods through which Dickens is able so successfully to characterise Mr. Dombey despite certain problems that we glanced at which seem inherent in Dickens's conception of Mr. Dombey. We have seen that although Mr. Dombey's one-sidedness potentially places him in danger of becoming some kind of absurd Humour, Dickens does manage to establish Dombey as a figure of power and of threatening depth far beyond the shallow limits of mere caricature, and that Dickens achieves this by the subtle and varied use of different comic techniques. We saw that

these techniques included firstly a process of comic metonymy, whereby the cold uncongeniality of Mr. Dombey's nature is successfully given resonance in his environment. I argued in this regard that the comic narrative tone functions as a deliberate rhetorical strategy which offers us an humane counterpoint to the values being depicted.

Secondly, I discussed the manner in which Dickens displaces much of Dombey's inherent absurdity onto those around him. This comic displacement, whether shown in the doctors attending the dying Mrs. Dombey, or in Miss Tox, or Mrs. Chick, serves effectively to deepen our awareness of the deficiencies of Mr. Dombey's values. Further, it is Mr. Dombey's imperturbable response to the absurd or comic behaviour of those around him that clarifies for us his undiscriminating lack of discernment and judgement.

Lastly, I examined how Dickens exemplifies the crude effects of Dombey's lack of judgement and humane values in the fate of Paul at the hands of his educators. We saw here that the comic description of the bizarre Mrs. Pipchin, the satire of Dr. Blimber's anachronistic hot-house forcing system, and the ludicrous classical jargon of Mrs. Blimber, help to extend our awareness of how Mr. Dombey's destructive values result in a grotesque violation of the childhood world and sensitive identity of his son Paul.

In summary, the important and pervasive role played by the comic element in Dickens's art has begun to emerge. It is this role which I wish to continue exploring in my next section through a more detailed discussion of certain of the subsidiary characters who surround Mr. Dombey.

ii

The death of Paul, and with it Dombey's immediate hopes for a successor, allows Dickens to develop Dombey's relationship with Florence, a relationship that increasingly becomes one of hate. The development accords very closely with the proposed outline Dickens had sent to John Forster.[19] This change in direction has been prepared for by two hints: firstly, there is Walter's toast to Florence, and secondly, the comic truth uttered by Miss Tox at the close of chapter xvi dealing with Paul's decline and death: "'Dear me, dear me! To think,' said Miss Tox, bursting out afresh that night, as if her heart were broken, 'that Dombey and Son should be a Daughter after all!'"[20] Because this is said by the ludicrous Miss Tox, the reader does not take the hint as seriously as he might otherwise; this allows Dickens to foreshadow the future development of the novel without being too explicit.

With this change in direction comes the introduction of new characters and the development of some previously encountered. I have already discussed to some extent in my previous section the manner in which certain subsidiary characters give depth to our understanding of Mr. Dombey. I intend now to concentrate on Dickens's characterisation of Major Bagstock, Mrs. Skewton, and, to a lesser degree, Miss Tox. My aim in this section, therefore, is to explore more thoroughly the role played by the comic element in their characterisations as well as the different ways in which

[19] Cited by Butt and Tillotson, p. 95.

[20] In a footnote to p. 101 of Dickens at Work, Butt and Tillotson comment that this sentence was dropped from all editions after 1858. Consequently it does not appear in the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens Edition.

these characterisations further the novel's thematic concerns.

Major Bagstock (in spite of his protestations to the contrary), has already entered Mr. Dombey's circle through his spying on Miss Tox's activities. We know to some extent how the Major was conceived of, because Dickens's instructions to his illustrator, Hablôt Browne, have survived. Dickens wrote to Browne asking him to draw Major Bagstock as the "'incarnation of selfishness and small revenge'".[21] Dickens requested that Major Bagstock should be portrayed in the scene where he introduces Mr. Dombey to Mrs. Skewton and Edith as "'gloating in his apoplectico-mephistophelian observation of the scene'".[22] The interesting word here is small revenge, since this proportions Bagstock's role, which, in terms of plot, is chiefly to function as Dombey's intermediary in seeking a wife from the upper classes.

But in terms of theme, Bagstock becomes one of the figures who attach themselves parasitically to Dombey and influence his fate far more than he can be aware of. As Julian Moynahan has suggested, Dombey becomes increasingly surrounded by figures who mirror his own faults.[23] Major Bagstock's own self-complacency as a debauched kind of Machiavellian manipulator and grotesque Lothario is defined by his endless emphasis and play upon his own name. Thus, for instance, Major Bagstock to Mr. Carker:

[21] These instructions are quoted by G.H. Ford, Dickens and his Readers (1955; rpt. New York: Gordian Press, 1974), p. 139.

[22] Ford, p. 139.

[23] Julian Moynahan, "Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Firmness versus Wetness", in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (1962; rpt. London: Routledge, 1963), p. 123.

> 'But when my friend Dombey, Sir,' added the Major, 'talks to you of Major Bagstock, I must crave leave to set him and you right. He means plain Joe, Sir--Joey B. --Josh. Bagstock--Joseph--rough and tough Old J., Sir. At your service.' (p. 363)

This is a self-involvement that never tires, and which conveys to the reader the ready variety of faces that Major Bagstock is prepared to adopt in his social manoeuvrings, as he instantly adjusts to Dombey's prevailing moods. Likewise it is evident that these faces--like his name-play--are all transparently minor variations of the same motivation: a consistently self-seeking opportunism. The irony of Major Bagstock's insistence, "'At your service'", emerges from the juxtaposition with his preoccupation with his own name. Major Bagstock repeats his name-play with such energetic and sonorous self-satisfaction (reminiscent of several Dickensian characters), as if he expects that by sheer weight of rotund rhetorical display he can magically render himself of greater depth and importance. It is in this way that Bagstock's concern with himself helps to throw into sharper relief Dombey's own self-preoccupations.

As a toady, Major Bagstock exposes Dombey's inability to form genuine friendships: on p. 47, for example, we are told that "in all his life [Mr. Dombey] had never made a friend". This may be seen as the inevitable result of Dombey's refusal to countenance equals, but to accept as his companions only those who pander to his failings.[24] It is but logical that Bagstock as a moral pander should also play the role of a literal pander as he assists Mrs.

[24] On p. 103 of The Inimitable Dickens, Dyson makes the useful point that "No-one is richer than Dombey because he takes care to mix with no-one richer, and recognises no order of privilege or excellence superior to his own".

Skewton to vend her daughter.

There is a different aspect to Bagstock's relationship to Dombey that is not so readily perceived, and this may be inferred from that description of the dwelling area that he shares with Miss Tox:

> Miss Tox inhabited a dark little house that had been squeezed, at some remote period of English History, into a fashionable neighbourhood at the west end of the town, where it stood in the shade like a poor relation of the great street round the corner, coldly looked down upon by mighty mansions. It was not exactly in a court, and it was not exactly in a yard; but it was in the dullest of No-Thoroughfares, rendered anxious and haggard by distant double knocks. The name of this retirement, where grass grew between the chinks in the stone pavement, was Princess's Place; and in Princess's Place was Princess's Chapel, with a tinkling bell, where sometimes as many as five-and-twenty people attended service on a Sunday. The Princess's Arms was also there, and much resorted to by splendid footmen. A sedan chair was kept inside the railing before the Princess's Arms, but it had never come out within the memory of man; and on fine mornings, the top of every rail (there were eight-and-forty, as Miss Tox had often counted) was decorated with a pewter-pot.
>
> There was another private house besides Miss Tox's in Princess's Place; not to mention an immense pair of gates, with an immense pair of lion-headed knockers on them, which were never opened by any chance, and were supposed to constitute a disused entrance to somebody's stables. Indeed, there was a smack of stabling in the air of Princess's Place; and Miss Tox's bedroom (which was at the back) commanded a vista of Mews, where hostlers, at whatever sort of work engaged, were continually accompanying themselves with effervescent noises; and where the most domestic and confidential garments of coachmen and their wives and families, usually hung, like Macbeth's banners, on the outward walls. (p. 83)

The details here, far from being merely gratuitous in their comic effect, are designed metonymically to demonstrate that Miss Tox and her neighbour Major Bagstock are both appendages to the mainstream of society, relics of the past. As the description indicates, they are tucked away at the back of the fashionable to whom they cling with some desperation, living vicariously through the lives of

their more aristocratic neighbours, serenaded, in a comic euphemism, by the "effervescent noises" of servants and tradesmen. They both represent to varying degrees the decaying remnants of the old aristocratic order, and have only a peripheral role to play in the new Victorian world of the rising merchant class. This helps to explain the eagerness with which they cling to Dombey's household and bask in his reflected glory. Each of them, in turn, has something to sell: Mrs. Skewton, her daughter; Miss Tox, her sagacious child-raising advice and general attentions; Major Bagstock, his ready toadying and his access to the upper classes. Major Bagstock's comment to Mr. Carker that Mr. Dombey is "'the Colossus of commerce'" (p. 363), or Mrs. Skewton's remark that "'No one can be a stranger . . . to Mr. Dombey's immense influence'" (p. 288), establish the function of their roles: they are courtiers to the house of Dombey.[25]

The feeling of anachronism surrounding these three figures is linked to Dickens's main theme in depicting the overweening rise to power of the Dombey class of merchants. If we compare _Dombey and Son_ with, say Jane Austen's _Pride and Prejudice_, it becomes immediately evident that the landowning class of gentry and aristocrats comprising the central focus of Jane Austen's novels are now very much on the wane as a social force in Victorian England. Supplanting them are the powerful and energetic class of industrialists, engineers, and merchants like Dombey, busy creating for England her pre-eminent position of power and influence. In

[25] It is interesting that on p. 9 Miss Tox describes Mr. Dombey as a "'pecuniary Duke of York'", because Major Bagstock also invokes the Duke of York on a number of occasions in his toadying to Dombey. These references combinatively reinforce Mr. Dombey's aura of pseudo-nobility.

Pride and Prejudice, the merchant uncle of the heroine Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Gardiner, is portrayed, for all his goodness, as a decided social skeleton who initially stands in the way as an impediment to Elizabeth's union with Darcy. Yet only thirty three years later, we find the merchant figure of Mr. Dombey very firmly occupying the central role, whilst the gentry fill the secondary and attendant positions. Bagstock's characterisation of Dombey as a "'Colossus'" is supported, as we have seen, by Dombey's own almost monarchical conception of his role, betrayed so surely in his idiom.

The language used by Major Bagstock and Mrs. Skewton, by contrast, reinforces our sense of their anachronism, for it seems to place them in a different era, one that in their case smacks of the more dissolute Regency period.[26] Bagstock attempts to behave like an old Regency rake in the idiom of his oaths and social banter, whilst Mrs. Skewton likewise exhibits a coy Regency flirtatiousness that is noticeably at variance with the more sombre Victorian world of Dombey:

> 'Mrs. Skewton, Dombey,' said the Major, 'makes havoc in the heart of old Josh.'
> Mr. Dombey signified that he didn't wonder at it.
> 'You perfidious goblin,' said the lady in the chair, 'have done! How long have you been here, bad man?'
> 'One day,' replied the Major.
> 'And can you be a day, or even a minute,' returned the lady, slightly settling her false curls and false eyebrows with her fan, and showing her false teeth, set off by her false complexion, 'in the garden of what's-its-name--'
> 'Eden, I suppose, Mamma,' interrupted the younger lady, scornfully.
> 'My dear Edith,' said the other, 'I cannot help it. I never can remember those frightful names--without having your whole Soul and Being inspired by the sight of Nature; by the perfume,' said Mrs. Skewton, rustling a

[26] Here I found John Lucas's comments helpful, particularly his discussion of Mrs. Skewton and Miss Tox on pp. 145-8 of The Melancholy Man (London: Methuen, 1970).

> handkerchief that was faint and sickly with essences, 'of her artless breath, you creature!' (p. 287)

This sense of anachronism links them back to Mrs. Pipchin--that fossilised relic of the Peruvian mining disaster--and Dr. Blimber, inhabiting his remote world of ancient glories. The illustration facing p. 289 by Hablôt Browne, who worked from Dickens's careful instructions, captures something of this discrepancy between the maliciously gloating Major and affectedly simpering Mrs. Skewton on the one side, opposed to the upright puritanical austerity of Dombey's dress and posture.

One of Mrs. Skewton's functions in the novel lies in extending our sense of Dombey's blindness. Just as earlier he was unable to penetrate the essential ridiculousness of his sister, Mrs. Chick, or the farcical performances of Miss Tox, so here his lack of perception is evident in his dealings with Mrs. Skewton. The word "dealings" suggests quite accurately the nature of Dombey's relationship with Mrs. Skewton; for he views his courtship of Edith as a transaction.[27] Dombey is quite unable to understand the mercenary way in which Mrs. Skewton vends her daughter to him for the simple reason that the main drive of his life is based upon just such mercantile interests and transactions. Dickens wishes the reader here to see that Dombey makes no distinction between the business of his Firm and his private relationships. To make the point even clearer, Dickens also interweaves that sub-plot involving Alice Marwood and Good Mrs. Brown to mirror the activities of Edith and Mrs. Skewton on a more debased level. This parallelism

[27] I intend a deliberate echo here to Dickens's full title for the novel: Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son.

of intention he makes explicitly clear to the reader at the end of chapter xxxiv, which is entitled "Another Mother and Daughter":

> Were this miserable mother, and this miserable daughter, only the reduction to their lowest grade, of certain social vices sometimes prevailing higher up? In this round world of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting-place? Allowing for great difference of stuff and texture, was the pattern of this woof repeated among gentle blood at all?
>
> Say, Edith Dombey! And Cleopatra, best of mothers, let us have your testimony! (pp. 495-6)

The introductory description of Mrs. Skewton on p. 287 delineates a further concern:

> The discrepancy between Mrs. Skewton's fresh enthusiasm of words, and forlornly faded manner, was hardly less observable than that between her age, which was about seventy, and her dress, which would have been youthful for twenty-seven. Her attitude in the wheeled chair (which she never varied) was one in which she had been taken in a barouche, some fifty years before, by a then fashionable artist who had appended to his published sketch the name of Cleopatra: in consequence of a discovery made by the critics of the time, that it bore an exact resemblance to that Princess as she reclined on board her galley. Mrs. Skewton was a beauty then, and bucks threw wine-glasses over their heads by dozens in her honour. The beauty and the barouche had both passed away, but she still preserved the attitude, and for this reason expressly, maintained the wheeled chair and the butting page: there being nothing whatever, except the attitude, to prevent her from walking. (pp. 287-8)

The manner in which Dickens satirically depicts her attitude in the chair, "which she never varied", underlines her feebly determined attempts to "maintain" her youthful glamour, as if time can be fooled by this artifice of posture. The very circumlocution of her idiom enacts another attempt on her part to deny reality; a periphrasis rendered all the more ludicrous by her insistence on "'heart'" and "'Nature'", both of which in the real world are so

inexorably under the dominion of time:

> 'Why are we not more natural? Dear me! With all those yearnings, and gushings, and impulsive throbbings that we have implanted in our souls, and which are so very charming, why are we not more natural?'
> Mr. Dombey said that it was very true, very true.
> (p. 293)

The reiteration in Mr. Dombey's reply conveys, on a primary level, his incomprehension of the sentiment, and thus comically suggests the emptiness of her speech. But it also helps secondarily to underscore an ironic subtext: it _is_ very true, in the real world we _are_ more natural. Mrs. Skewton's sense of the term is limited to the notion of the natural versus the artificial, whilst we are to be shown that in the literal sense of the term it is precisely nature and nature's ineluctable time that will shortly destroy Mrs. Skewton and her amazing vanity.

Mrs. Skewton's static efforts at preserving her juvenility seem deliberately to reverse Dickens's theme in regard to Paul. Whereas Paul is deprived unnaturally of his childhood in the attempt to make him an instant adult, Mrs. Skewton tries to preserve the naturally transient in the attempt to remain eternally the youthful fascinator. Both cases result in an unnatural distortion which is destructive, and both cases are pursued to the consequent death.

The account of the decline and death of Mrs. Skewton forms an instructively powerful stretch of writing. One of the reasons for its interest is that it provides a rare example of Dickens abandoning his customary genial tone of humour for a satiric mode more astringent in its impact. Dickens, for example, prepares the reader for her eventual stroke in that disturbingly macabre passage where Mrs. Skewton is shown dressing in her room:

> They were assembled in Cleopatra's room. The Serpent of the old Nile (not to mention her disrespectfully) was reposing on her sofa, sipping her morning chocolate at three o'clock in the afternoon, and Flowers the Maid was fastening on her youthful cuffs and frills, and performing a kind of private coronation ceremony on her, with a peach-coloured velvet bonnet; the artificial roses in which nodded to uncommon advantage, as the palsy trifled with them, like a breeze. (p. 521)

It is possible to detect in this passage something of a Swiftian revulsion at her affectation, combined with a motif encountered elsewhere in Dickens: his distaste for the idle lives of the upper classes. The humour here becomes incisively sardonic and unsparing:

> 'I think I am a little nervous this morning, Flowers,' said Mrs. Skewton. 'My hand quite shakes.'
> 'You were the life of the party last night, Ma'am, you know,' returned Flowers, 'and you suffer for it, to-day, you see.' (p. 521)

Naturally--and perhaps only Dickens could get away with it--the Arcadian Mrs. Skewton possesses two servants named Withers and Flowers, and just as naturally they dissimulate to her in precise imitation of her own dissembling in society. Dickens's portrayal at this juncture of the transparently feeble strategies by which she evades the truth of her approaching death, creeping ever closer, is as relentless as her own self-deception.

Later in the day, the onset of her stroke is announced to Edith by the maid Flowers, who, with unwitting irony, breathlessly bursts out:

> 'If you please, Ma'am, I beg your pardon, but I can't do nothing with missis!'
> 'What do you mean?' asked Edith.
> 'Well, Ma'am,' replied the frightened maid, 'I hardly know. She's making faces!' (p. 528)

Just as Mrs. Skewton has behaved all her life in assuming her

multiple social masks (her hypocrisy is also suggested by the simple expedient of giving her both a private and public language), so now the disease that strikes her down manages, in its physical symptoms, to mimic grotesquely her social mannerisms:

> Edith hurried with her to her mother's room. Cleopatra was arrayed in full dress, with the diamonds, short sleeves, rouge, curls, teeth, and other juvenility all complete; but Paralysis was not to be deceived, had known her for the object of its errand, and had struck her at her glass, where she lay like a horrible doll that had tumbled down.
>
> They took her to pieces in very shame, and put the little of her that was real on a bed. Doctors were sent for, and soon came. Powerful remedies were resorted to; opinions given that she would rally from this shock, but would not survive another; and there she lay speechless, and staring at the ceiling for days; sometimes making inarticulate sounds in answer to such questions as did she know who were present, and the like: sometimes giving no reply either by sign or gesture, or in her unwinking eyes.
>
> At length she began to recover consciousness, and in some degree the power of motion, though not yet of speech. One day the use of her right hand returned; and showing it to her maid who was in attendance on her, and appearing very uneasy in her mind, she made signs for a pencil and some paper. This the maid immediately provided, thinking she was going to make a will, or write some last request; and Mrs. Dombey being from home, the maid awaited the result with solemn feelings.
>
> After much painful scrawling and erasing, and putting in of wrong characters, which seemed to tumble out of the pencil of their own accord, the old woman produced this document:
>
> 'Rose-coloured curtains.'
>
> The maid being perfectly transfixed, and with tolerable reason, Cleopatra amended the manuscript by adding two words more, when it stood thus:
>
> 'Rose-coloured curtains for doctors.' (pp. 528-9)

I have quoted the passage in full since it provides an illuminating example of how the initial satirical approach to the vanity of Mrs. Skewton's affectations is now blended with elements of pathos that, by opposing the distance entailed in the satiric mode, demand from the reader a more complex response. John Lucas makes the useful point that the satire here is initially directed against a class

rather than an individual, against the aristocracy which Dickens found so reprehensible: "Dickens's savage contempt is not so much directed against Mrs. Skewton as any sort of life-like individual as against her as the embodiment of a class that tries to deny the ineluctable processes of time through which social change occurs".[28] The pathos at this point, therefore, suggests that there is increasing concern with the pitiful and self-deceiving decline of Mrs. Skewton as an individual suffering human. At the same time, it is the lingering strain of satire that lends the passage its fine control, and prevents any slide towards the sentimental.

The depiction is consistent in all levels: the disease first strips her ruthlessly of all her stage trappings to expose the very core of her being--or what remains of it. She lies immobile on the bed, "speechless and staring at the ceiling", making "inarticulate sounds" like some ghastly parody of a new-born infant, as indeed "infantile" is the correct epithet to apply to her wheel-chair posturings. Then follows the cumulative irony whereby, in the ravages of her disease we are led to expect perhaps some final insight into her own condition, some faint glimmering of self-awareness that might at least assuage for her what she herself has previously referred to as the "'curiosity to find out what it's all about, and what it means'" (p. 296). Instead of any attempt, however feeble, to come to such terms with herself, the passage culminates in a pitifully changeless testament to her monstrous vanity, produced at such a cost in effort: "'rose-coloured curtains for the doctor'".

It is worthwhile considering why Dickens concerns himself to

[28] Lucas, p. 146.

this extent with the death of Mrs. Skewton, and why he chooses to adopt in places a penetratingly satiric tone in the writing. The problem resolves itself when the positioning of this account of Mrs. Skewton's death is examined in the novel as a whole. It becomes evident then that the account is not simply a gratuitous outworking of Dickens's disgust at affectation, but that the passages dealing with her decline are, on the contrary, very carefully integrated into the larger account of the dissolution of Dombey's marriage with Edith. In this light, Mrs. Skewton's decline forms an accompanying commentary on the breakdown of their misalliance. Indeed (and I will deal with this more fully later), when we compare the stilted and formulaic rendering of the angry clashes between Dombey and Edith, it is difficult not to conclude that the grotesque description of Mrs. Skewton's collapse and death, in all its complexity, is far more successful artistically in conveying to the reader the ugly reality beneath their marriage. As Mrs. Skewton is reduced through her illness to that point where she is no longer able to conceal her withered ugliness of body and spirit beneath the simpering postures, so the reader becomes increasingly aware of the squalid and mercenary falseness that surfaces in the marriage of Edith and Dombey, celebrated though it has been with due outward Christian form. In both instances, the result bears out strikingly the Biblical injunction: "As ye sow, so shall ye reap".

Mrs. Skewton does, however, make a temporary recovery before her final death, but it is as if the figure of Death merely sports more gruesomely with her during this partial rally, for all her failings are merely exacerbated. She now displays a truly infant-like need to be the centre of attention, and whimpers for affection

from the daughter she has taught to be affectionless.[29] She comes to suffer from a degree of speech confusion, calling Mr. Dombey "'Domber'" and "'Grangeby'", a speech disorder that ironically reveals the truth of her undiscriminating mental identification of the two catches she has snared for her daughter. Lastly, she exhibits an arbitrary speech habit of cutting words short as if she now is mocking her own former gushing prolixity. Although her prolonged dissolution dramatically prefigures the downfall of Dombey's marriage and fortunes, the prospect of her death, as Marcus has noted, is viewed with remarkable complacency by Major Bagstock, who is able to distance himself as comfortably from the event as if he himself were untouchable:[30]

> 'I'll tell you what, Sir,' said the Major, with his hands behind him, and his legs very wide asunder, 'a fair friend of ours has removed to Queer Street.'
> 'What do you mean, Major?' inquired Mr. Dombey.
> 'I mean to say, Dombey,' returned the Major, 'that you'll soon be an orphan-in-law.'
> Mr. Dombey appeared to relish this waggish description of himself so very little, that the Major wound up with the horse's cough, as an expression of gravity. (p. 572)

It is wholly characteristic here that Dombey's objection to the joke lies in its reflection upon himself, not the levity it makes of Mrs. Skewton's suffering.[31] The distance in both cases that they are able to display towards human suffering results directly

[29] There is a parallel irony in Great Expectations in the relationship of Miss Havisham to Estella.

[30] Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey, p. 316. Marcus notes "the irony of Bagstock's self-exclusion from [Mrs. Skewton's] destiny". I would add here that Mr. Dombey fully shares the Major's complacency.

[31] One is reminded here of the parallel scene in chapter i of the novel, where Mr. Dombey's self-regard separates him from the suffering of his dying wife.

from the impoverishment of their hearts. The Major in this case reflects Dombey's own earlier insensitivity towards his wife that we witnessed in the first chapter.

To sum up, I have discussed in this section the manner whereby Dickens's comic treatment of Major Bagstock's self-involvement mirrors Mr. Dombey's own egotism. I noted how the comic description of Major Bagstock's and Miss Tox's dwelling place establishes their anachronistic and peripheral role in a society dominated by the kind of aggressive new merchant class represented by Mr. Dombey himself.

It is the sense of anachronism that links Major Bagstock to Mrs. Skewton, and I examined the expression of this link in Dickens's parody of their Regency banter; an idiom that contrasts markedly with Mr. Dombey's cold austerity. Major Bagstock and Mrs. Skewton are linked also by their expediency and hypocrisy, and we saw how Mr. Dombey's vulnerability to their manipulative blandishments reinforces our sense of his lack of judgement and his consequent inability to establish sincere relationships.

Finally, I noted that Dickens's powerfully satirical treatment of Mrs. Skewton and her decline operates on at least two levels. Firstly, the satire functions as an effective means of exposing her social affectation and hypocrisy, so that in Mr. Dombey's tacit acceptance of Mrs. Skewton's mercenary values we are made aware of the extent to which his commercial outlook dominates his private as well as his business life. Secondly, the finely controlled portrayal of Mrs. Skewton's decline and death,integrated as it is into Dickens's treatment of Dombey's relationship to Edith, deepens our awareness of the false values involved in their marriage and prepares us for its disintegration. And it is with this topic of

Dombey's marriage to Edith that I shall largely be concerned in my next section.

iii

In my previous section I examined three specific subsidiary characters in their relationships to Mr. Dombey. But Dickens also adds resonance to Mr. Dombey and the themes of the novel by his ability successfully to establish Dombey in a broad social setting. I now intend to examine the comic element in two chapters which offer the reader valuable additional perspectives on Mr. Dombey.

The first, chapter xxxi, is entitled simply "The Wedding", and deals with Dombey's marriage to Edith. This marriage, as with the account of Paul's death that I have already discussed, offers Dickens new ways of illuminating the bankruptcy of Mr. Dombey's values. I believe that chapter xxxi, like the opening chapter of the book, is outstanding in terms of Dickens's artistic accomplishment. I intend to demonstrate by means of a detailed scrutiny of the chapter how the various comic modes succeed in placing Dombey's wedding against a comprehensive perspective of place and character; a perspective that offers an accompanying criticism of Dombey's actions and values.

The second, chapter xxix, is entitled "The Opening of the Eyes of Mrs. Chick". The comic irony of the title signals the major comic <u>peripeteia</u> of the novel, and I shall argue that as in the case of Mrs. Skewton's decline, this comic <u>peripeteia</u> constitutes an important preparation for the breakdown of Dombey's marriage to Edith.

My examination of both chapters then forms the basis for a

comparison with Dickens's treatment of certain other characters in the novel. I indicated earlier (see p. 10 of this chapter), that I would be arguing a deleterious change in those sections of the novel where Dickens abandons his use of the comic element. I propose, therefore, to take up this argument in the third part of this section, where I will be exploring some of the problems raised by Dickens's treatment of Edith, Carker, and Florence.

Chapter xxxi, the wedding chapter, commences with a carefully evoked atmosphere:

> Dawn, with its passionless blank face, steals shivering to the church beneath which lies the dust of little Paul and his mother, and looks in at the windows. It is cold and dark. Night crouches yet, upon the pavement, and broods, sombre and heavy, in nooks and corners of the building. The steeple-clock, perched up above the houses, emerging from beneath another of the countless ripples in the tide of time that regularly roll and break on the eternal shore, is greyly visible, like a stone beacon, recording how the sea flows on; but within doors, dawn, at first, can only peep at night, and see that it is there.
>
> Hovering feebly round the church, and looking in, dawn moans and weeps for its short reign, and its tears trickle on the window-glass, and the trees against the church-wall bow their heads, and wring their many hands in sympathy. Night, growing pale before it, gradually fades out of the church, but lingers in the vaults below, and sits upon the coffins. (p. 436)

The details here strike various echoes in the reader's mind, and even transpose themselves readily onto the chief participants. There are reminders, direct and implicit, of Paul's death and Dombey's responsibility for it. The personified figure of Dawn is ironically inverted from the customary associations of freshness and rebirth into a figure of bleakness and suffering, foreshadowing the future change in Dombey's marriage. "Passionless blank face" could well describe Dombey himself in his attitude to this "transaction", whilst "cold and dark" are both images that have

been associated with him throughout. As Dawn "moans and weeps", we are reminded of the suffering behind the marriage: little Paul's suffering, the cruelty of Florence's rejection, and the more recent night vigil of the bride herself; whilst this imagery again serves as an augury for the future.

Focusing next on the church, that bleak custodian for Dickens of Christian form, the perspective continues with the lowest orders:

> And now, the mice, who have been busier with the prayer-books than their proper owners, and with the hassocks, more worn by their little teeth than by human knees, hide their bright eyes in their holes, and gather close together in affright at the resounding clashing of the church-door. For the beadle, that man of power, comes early this morning with the sexton; and Mrs. Miff, the wheezy little pew-opener--a mighty dry old lady, sparely dressed, with not an inch of fulness anywhere about her--is also here, and has been waiting at the church-gate half-an-hour, as her place is, for the beadle. (p. 436)

The passage helps to reveal how Dombey's decisions and actions will resonate through the ranks of society, from the highest, Dombey himself, to, at the other end of the scale, the tiniest, the mice, who are themselves distrubed by the appropriately named beadle, Mr. Sownds, whose "sound and fury" of action is proportionately of as much importance to the mice as Dombey's power in the eyes of the Beadle. The Beadle's sense of self-importance in his portentous duties, as he suns his portly figure on the church steps, reflects in a distant and lowly form the mighty self-regard of Dombey himself. The way in which the marriage begins to be presented here in this oblique detail is a favourite technique of Dickens. It is a method which is peculiarly suited to the expansiveness of the novel form, achieving in its context a remarkable dimensional depth. Our sense of the social

perspective of Dombey's actions is greatly enhanced by Dickens's method of commenting on the main action from these various angles which cumulatively enable us to comprehend more fully how Dombey's actions reverberate down the "pecking order" of society.

But if the Beadle reflects Dombey, there is a counterbalance in the mice, whose parasitic actions, described with light irony: "busier with the prayerbooks than their proper owners", are developed in the figure of Mrs. Miff, with her "vinegary face . . . and a mortified bonnet, and eke a thirsty soul for sixpences and shillings" (p. 436). Religion, for Mrs. Miff (and she is typical in this respect of many attached to the Church in Dickens's novels), has degenerated into a matter of the right money for the softest seat. Here again is a scaled-down reflection of the motives of Mrs. Skewton retailing her daughter to Dombey in return for the comforts of his house. What Mrs. Miff pursues in terms of sixpences and shillings, others pursue for higher stakes; the levels of opportunism increase according to the rank in society—the common denominator being the corruption by money values.

The focus broadens with the coming of day to include the below-stairs activity in Dombey's house. We know from Dickens's work-notes for the novel that he wished to "'carry on the servants as a sort of odd chorus to the story'".[32] The minor domestic squabbles, the feasting and the comic oratory of Towlinson below stairs is used to echo the weighty perorations upstairs: what is comically inflated in the one suggests a like inflation in the other.[33] But

[32] Butt and Tillotson, footnote to p. 110.

[33] The servant's "swarry", which Sam Weller attends in chapter xxxvii of Pickwick Papers (1837), comes to mind as a source for the comedy here.

through the comedy here may be perceived an important intention on the part of Dickens; this being to demonstrate the close inter-connectedness of society: to show the reader that Mr. Dombey, in spite of his proud seclusion, does not, and in fact cannot, exist in isolation. His life and actions are inextricably bound up with the lives of others, and it is this revelation that strikes at the heart of the self-interested individualism upon which nineteenth century laissez-faire capitalism was based. Even a peripheral and uninvited guest to the marriage, Mr. Toots, has his attendant parasite in the form of the Chicken, who "dips his beak into a tankard of strong beer, in Mr. Toots's kitchen, and pecks up two pounds of beefsteaks" (p. 438).

Having so subtly yet thoroughly established this pervasive ambience of exploitation and opportunism, Dickens is able to explore his major theme during the actual wedding itself, which is to show the use of Christian form without substance. It is the very sacrament of Christian marriage which is being violated by the attitudes and values that both Dombey and Edith bring to the wedding; everything else builds up to and underscores this theme. Again, this hollowness of substance is revealed to us from several divergent viewpoints. There is, for instance, the entrance of Mr. Carker, at perhaps his most effective here, as he satirises the threadbare hypocrisy of the proceedings in the very exaggeration of his own toothy response to events:

> Now enters Mr. Carker, gorgeous likewise, and smiling like a wedding-guest indeed. He can scarcely let Mr. Dombey's hand go, he is so congratulatory; and he shakes the Major's hand so heartily at the same time, that his voice shakes too, in accord with his arms, as it comes sliding from between his teeth.
> 'The very day is auspicious,' says Mr. Carker. 'The brightest and most genial weather! I hope I am not a

> moment late?'
> 'Punctual to your time, Sir,' says the Major.
> 'I am rejoiced, I am sure,' says Mr. Carker. 'I was afraid I might be a few seconds after the appointed time, for I was delayed by a procession of waggons; and I took the liberty of riding round to Brook Street'--this to Mr. Dombey--'to leave a few poor rarities of flowers for Mrs. Dombey. A man in my position, and so distinguished as to be invited here, is proud to offer some homage in acknowledgment of his vassalage: and as I have no doubt Mrs. Dombey is overwhelmed with what is costly and magnificent;'--with a strange glance at his patron; 'I hope the very poverty of my offering, may find favour for it.' (p. 441)

By its very extremity, Carker's deliberately satirical behaviour in front of his chief exposes the obtuse enclosure of Mr. Dombey. But the most effective enacted commentary on Dombey's marriage to Edith is provided by Cousin Feenix, who is introduced as follows:

> Cousin Feenix has come over from abroad, expressly to attend the marriage. Cousin Feenix was a man about town, forty years ago; but he is still so juvenile in figure and in manner, and so well got up, that strangers are amazed when they discover latent wrinkles in his lordship's face, and crows' feet in his eyes; and first observe him, not exactly certain when he walks across a room, of going quite straight to where he wants to go. (p. 439)

His "juvenility" links him with Mrs. Skewton, but in his case it helps to characterise his general self-indulgent irresponsibility. A most effective point in the chapter is achieved when, during the actual marriage ceremony itself, Dickens juxtaposes the striking dignity of the marriage service's sacramental language with the slapdash idiom and erratic behaviour of Cousin Feenix:

> '"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"'
> Cousin Feenix does that. He has come from Baden-Baden on purpose. 'Confound it,' Cousin Feenix says--good-natured creature, Cousin Feenix--'when we _do_ get a rich City fellow into the family, let us show _him_ some attention; let us do something for him.'
> '_I_ give this woman to be married to this man,' saith Cousin Feenix therefore. Cousin Feenix, meaning to go in

> a straight line, but turning off sideways by reason of his wilful legs, gives the wrong woman to be married to this man, at first--to wit, a bridesmaid of some condition, distantly connected with the family, and ten years Mrs. Skewton's junior--but Mrs. Miff, interposing her mortified bonnet, dexterously turns him back, and runs him, as on castors, full at the 'good lady:' whom Cousin Feenix giveth to be married to this man accordingly.
>
> And will they in the sight of heaven--?
>
> Aye, that they will: Mr. Dombey says he will. And what says Edith? She will.
>
> So, from that day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do them part, they plight their troth to one another, and are married. (p. 443)

His performance provides an incisive criticism of Dombey and Edith's behaviour, as the conflict between the simple dignity of the sacrament being administered to them and the infantilism of Cousin Feenix's wanderings alerts us to the grotesque distortion of a serious sacrament that is taking place.

At the wedding breakfast, we are treated to another kind of performance on the part of Cousin Feenix:

> Cousin Feenix rises, when the company have breakfasted, and the servants have left the room; and wonderfully young he looks, with his white wristbands almost covering his hands (otherwise rather bony), and the bloom of the champagne in his cheeks.
>
> 'Upon my honour,' says Cousin Feenix, 'although it's an unusual sort of thing in a private gentleman's house, I must beg leave to call upon you to drink what is usually called a--in fact a toast.'
>
> The Major very hoarsely indicates his approval. Mr. Carker, bending his head forward over the table in the direction of Cousin Feenix, smiles and nods a great many times.
>
> 'A--in fact, it's not a--' Cousin Feenix beginning again, thus, comes to a dead stop.
>
> 'Hear, hear!' says the Major, in a tone of conviction.
>
> Mr. Carker softly claps his hands, and bending forward over the table again, smiles and nods a great many more times than before, as if he were particularly struck by this last observation, and desired personally to express his sense of the good it has done him. (pp. 446-7)

Laughter by its very nature is often critical, and the criticism

operates here on several different levels. The most important level is clearly to deepen the already established sense of the emptiness and hypocrisy of the wedding itself, since Cousin Feenix's speech offers words without substance, and becomes, therefore, a comic metaphor for the marriage. This level is again underscored by Carker's satirical behaviour as he responds with the most enthusiastic acclaim at the most vacuous moments. But Cousin Feenix's speech becomes also an extended parody of Parliamentary verbiage:

> 'It is,' says Cousin Feenix, 'an occasion in fact, when the general usages of life may be a little departed from, without impropriety; and although I never was an orator in my life, and when I was in the House of Commons, and had the honour of seconding the address, was --in fact, was laid up for a fortnight with the consciousness of failure--'
>
> The Major and Mr. Carker are so much delighted by this fragment of personal history, that Cousin Feenix laughs, and addressing them individually, goes on to say:
>
> 'And in point of fact, when I was devilish ill--still, you know, I feel that a duty devolves upon me. And when a duty devolves upon an Englishman, he is bound to get out of it, in my opinion, in the best way he can. Well! our family has had the gratification, to-day, of connecting itself, in the person of my lovely and accomplished relative, whom I now see--in point of fact, present--'
>
> Here there is general applause.
>
> 'Present,' repeats Cousin Feenix, feeling that it is a neat point which will bear repetition--'with one who--that is to say, with a man, at whom the finger of scorn can never--in fact, with my honourable friend Dombey, if he will allow me to call him so.'
>
> Cousin Feenix bows to Mr. Dombey; Mr. Dombey solemnly returns the bow; everybody is more or less gratified and affected by this extraordinary, and perhaps unprecedented, appeal to the feelings. (p. 447)

Here Dickens has progressed to another theme, in the way that the repetition of the meaningless ejaculation "'in point of fact'" conveys how corrupted Cousin Feenix is by the facile rhetoric of political debate, whilst the burden of his speech wanders as

aimlessly as his legs. His joke about an Englishman's duty brings out this new theme: as a Peer of the Realm, Cousin Feenix helps to reflect the notorious abrogation of noblesse oblige on the part of the nobility.[34] Dickens has already suggested this theme in a more minor way with Mrs. Skewton, but here Cousin Feenix's speech becomes a more general indictment of the English aristocracy's failure to exercise responsible rule. The corollary to this is that Dombey exists and wields his power in a new order of affairs that has a vacuum at its value-centre, for abused as the principle of noblesse oblige had been by the ruling establishment, it constituted at least a kind of principle by which men might govern their relations with each other. What the novel as a whole proceeds to demonstrate is that men like Dombey appear to recognise no principles at all in dealing with their fellow men beyond self-interest and the power of money.

I have examined sufficient of the wedding chapter to reveal how Mr. Dombey's marriage is accompanied by a wide-ranging choric commentary whose comic nature so efficiently clarifies for the reader the moral bankruptcy of the Dombey-Edith alliance. Throughout chapter xxxi there is this close relationship between the comic action and the central issue of the marriage itself. However, in

[34] On pp. 102-3 of The Inimitable Dickens, Dyson notes Disraeli's perception in Sybil (1845), that "the capitalist ascendancy is more careless of its dependants than the old feudal society, more heartless in the kind of society it creates. There is no bond between master and servant any longer, only naked exploitation of the poor by the rich". I also found Edgar Johnson's comments relevant on p. 630 of Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph: "Now [Dickens] sees the broad group of businessmen as selfish, smug, and cold-hearted in their professional dealings, and realises that they are as venally indifferent to the consequences of their behaviour on social welfare and as harshly unsympathetic toward the poor as the most idly irresponsible of the aristocracy with whom they are beginning to intermingle and marry".

the second chapter that I wish to discuss, the connection between the comic action and Mr. Dombey's wedding is not so readily evident. I argued at the beginning of this section that chapter xxix forms the major comic <u>peripeteia</u> of the novel; a turn which foreshadows the breakdown of the marriage I have just been scrutinising. My purpose now, therefore, is to demonstrate that Dickens's apparently oblique comic technique in this chapter actually serves to prepare the reader for Dombey's change of fortune.

Entitled with mock-portentous solemnity "The Opening of the Eyes of Mrs. Chick", the chapter deals with the abandonment of Miss Tox by the malicious Mrs. Chick. The consequent upheaval in Miss Tox's life and aspirations serves as a comic preparation for the domestic upheavals and violent clashes in the Dombey marriage and Dombey's subsequent abandonment by Edith. The whole chapter is written with a taut economy that results in a comic masterpiece, and it is strategically placed by Dickens just after the chapter ambiguously entitled "Alterations" (itself a hint of future development), but before the actual marriage.

The chapter commences with a superbly written description of Miss Tox in her scaled-down domestic harmony, busy with little rituals of teapot and harpsichord (p. 408). Dickens manages, in various metonymic images, to suggest both her genteel shabbiness and a faded sense of time having passed her by--that sense of anachronism which has already been discussed, and that is now represented in her "pair of ancient gloves, like dead leaves" (p. 408), and "very high-shouldered canary, stricken in years, and much rumpled, but a piercing singer, as Princess's Place well knew" (p. 408). Into Miss Tox's dwelling area, named with such quiet irony, a faint pastorality is infused. The warm scents of summer are

suggested in an image proportioned with wonderful precision to her tucked away existence:

> There was a tiny blink of sun peeping in from the great street round the corner, and the smoky sparrows hopped over it and back again, brightening as they passed: or bathed in it, like a stream, and became glorified sparrows, unconnected with chimneys. (pp. 408-9)

The languorous odours of summer, "whispering of Nature and her wholesome air" (p. 409), build up warm remembrances in Miss Tox to that point where she blushingly dreams of her possible connection with Mr. Dombey, little guessing at reality.

Miss Tox, after all, in spite of her failings, is an innocent. In her blushes and in her miniature housekeeping is the suggestion that for all her sycophancy, she is without the capacity for malice or even that "small revenge" which characterises Major Bagstock. What is to happen to her shortly is faintly hinted at. There is, firstly, the potboy, who "had come out with a can and trickled water, in a flowering pattern, all over Princess's Place" (p. 408); and secondly, an image foreshadowing the violence to be done to the carefully evoked sense of Miss Tox's complacent domestic innocence, in the depiction of "a man with bulgy legs, and a rough voice, and a heavy basket on his head that crushed his hat into a mere black muffin, [who] came crying flowers down Princess's Place, making his timid little roots of daisies shudder in the vibration of every yell he gave" (p. 409).

At this point, Mrs. Chick invades Miss Tox's cosy life with the intention of announcing Mr. Dombey's marriage. This shock she delays, however, through a cunningly contrived mixture of circumlocution, innuendo, and theatrical performance designed to test Miss Tox's reaction and place that lady in the wrong. Miss

Tox, meanwhile, in a superb image displacing her emotions from speech into action, as well as simultaneously conveying with dexterous economy the miniature perimeters of her mind, begins to "snip and clip among the leaves with microscopic industry" (p. 411).

As the truth of Dombey's intentions breaks on Miss Tox, so the turbulence of her mind finds a comic expression in her plant care, until she is "clipping among the stems and leaves, with as little favour as a barber working with so many pauper heads of hair" (p. 413). Miss Tox's subsequent reaction, as she insensibly waters the shoe of the major's servant, into whose arms she faints, provides one of the high points of comedy in the novel.

We only have to imagine the passage written without the leavening of humour to realise the controlling perspective that the comic treatment affords over Mrs. Chick's brand of melodrama and the delightful excesses of Miss Tox's reaction. It is because the sentimental excesses are purged through laughter that we are assisted towards a genuine sympathy for Miss Tox. This sympathy for her plight arises from our sense, through the laughter, of her abandonment by the unfeeling Mrs. Chick, whose hysterical brand of self-dramatisation enables her to cast herself as the injured party. The pitiless moral expediency that helps Mrs. Chick rid herself of Miss Tox's now socially redundant friendship is latent in the other companions of Dombey, and prefigures their later treatment of him. However different the scale of things, it is that carefully wrought sense of complacency, with its concomitant vulnerability, that links Miss Tox to Mr. Dombey.

But for all her faults (and they are proportionately minor ones), Miss Tox is ultimately redeemed by her essential innocence, and more especially by the constancy of her allegiance to Mr.

Dombey that endures through all vicissitudes to the bitter end--in marked constrast to the other characters who surround him. It is interesting too that circumstances now force her to turn to the working-class, but sincerely warm-hearted world of the Toodles family, because--in another link--it is Polly Toodles who will nurse Dombey through the crisis of his isolated downfall; Polly who returns, as her husband states with unconscious irony (although they do not need the money), because of "favours past", which it is only "right and dutiful" to repay (p. 836).

I have been arguing that chapters xxxi and xxix are both especially successful in enacting Dickens's intentions because of his strong reliance upon the comic techniques that I have detailed. The success of these chapters offers an instructive contrast to what we encounter in Dickens's treatment of those characters, notably Edith, Carker, and Florence, who are presented without any accompanying humour.

If, to start with, we compare the sense of real engagement that we obtain from Dickens's patent relish in his portrayal of Mrs. Chick's self-dramatisation with his treatment of Edith's response to her marriage, it becomes obvious that there is a whole change in the mode of writing.[35] It is the nature and effect of this change that I now propose to explore. We should note here, however, that Dickens's treatment of Florence at least met with the approval of Forster, who enjoyed the rather simple morality involved in her conception. Forster largely concurred with

[35] Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, p. 175. Tillotson argues that "The presence of different modes in a narrative is something we must accept in [Dickens's] novels, as in poetic drama". As my discussion shows, however, I cannot accept her justification for the modes which Dickens adopts in the case of Edith and Carker.

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Jeffrey's view of this section of the novel, quoting him as follows:

> Jeffrey said . . . that of all his writings it was perhaps the most finished in diction, and that it equalled the best in the delicacy and fineness of its touches, "while it rises to higher and deeper passions, not resting, like most of the former [sections of the novel], in sweet thoughtfulness and thrilling and attractive tenderness, but boldly wielding all the lofty and terrible elements of tragedy, and bringing before us the appalling struggles of a proud, scornful, and repentant spirit". Not that she was exactly this. Edith's worst qualities are but the perversion of what should have been her best. A false education in her, and a tyrant passion in her husband, make them other than nature meant; and both show how life may run its evil course against the higher dispensations.[36]

The modern reader, on the other hand, is likely to feel that there is a relative flatness of treatment where Edith is concerned. Edith, like several of Dickens's heroines (one thinks, for instance, of Estella in Great Expectations, or Bella Wilfer in Our Mutual Friend), can virtually be characterised in one word: she is "haughty". And Dickens seems to get stuck within the limitations of that one word; the characters never appear to progress very far beyond it in terms of depth. It is the whole paraphernalia of heaving bosoms and scornful curls of the lip that suggests a breakdown of the imagination. It appears as if the details are presented to us, but are not felt. The formulaic language suggests that Dickens as creator is watching and commenting, but not participating imaginatively through the action.[37] A notable example is the obvious melodrama of Edith's meeting with Carker in France, complete

[36] Forster, p. 33.

[37] Tillotson, p. 179, also notes these defects, but comments that "This mode of treatment is perhaps rather wasteful than damaging. It does not distort the other characters by contact".

with stage directions:"The time, an hour short of midnight; the place, a French apartment . . ." (p. 755). Another example is provided in the passage describing Edith's confrontation on the stairs of Dombey's house with Florence, after she has been plotting with Carker to flee:

> What was Florence's affright and wonder when, at sight of her, with her tearful face, and outstretched arms, Edith recoiled and shrieked!
> 'Don't come near me!' she cried. 'Keep away! Let me go by!'
> 'Mama!' said Florence.
> 'Don't call me by that name! Don't speak to me! Don't look at me!--Florence!' shrinking back, as Florence moved a step towards her, 'don't touch me!'
> As Florence stood transfixed before the haggard face and staring eyes, she noted, as in a dream, that Edith spread her hands over them, and shuddering through all her form, and crouching down against the wall, crawled by her like some lower animal, sprang up, and fled away.
> Florence dropped upon the stairs in a swoon; and was found there by Mrs. Pipchin, she supposed. (p. 662)

"As in a dream" indeed; a particularly theatrical dream. The manner in which Edith's contamination by Carker's plotting is depicted relies almost entirely upon convention. There is nothing in the language given to her here--or elsewhere for that matter--that stamps Edith with any of that idiosyncratic force that distinguishes lesser characters. The lurid lighting effects are simply not sufficient to conceal this drab conventionality of conception. This comparative impoverishment which is so plainly in evidence in the weakness of the language has been succinctly summarised by F.R. Leavis in his discussion of this "Bought Bride" theme:

> This takes Dickens into a realm where he knows nothing. What he takes for knowledge is wholly external and conventional; determined, therefore, unresistingly by all the theatrical clichés and sentimental banalities of the high-life novelette and the equivalent drama. It lends

> itself congenially to the elaboration of the plot to which he is committed--villainies of the flashing-toothed villain, coincidences, sensations, reversals and melodramatic _dénouement_.[38]

By comparing these two different modes of writing--the treatment of Edith and Carker versus the depiction of Miss Tox and Mrs. Chick, we begin to realise that the infusion of the comic element represents Dickens's great imaginative redeeming force. We begin to suspect that it is the comic elements in the language that often signal to the reader that Dickens's creative energies are most fully engaged. This may help to explain why readers tend to carry away sharper memories of the delineation of the minor characters rather than the central ones. When Dickens is not attempting to produce haughty heroines, when the women are slightly off the centre of the stage, as it were, then his characterisations of women are far more successful, as the unforgettable comic scene between Miss Tox and Mrs. Chick attests. It is the comedy that supplies here that extra dimensional quality to his characters, their sharply realised individuality. And as Angus Wilson has aptly commented of Florence and Edith:

> If only they were treated with that mixture of compassion and ridicule that Mr. Dombey is given, they would have life. . . . Edith Dombey is a beautiful woman, she can therefore not be exposed to the full compassion that may be given to ordinary humanity, the dignity of being occasionally ridiculed, the charm of being absurd.[39]

Wilson goes on to note that "it was very late in his career, if ever, that [Dickens] could do his heroines the justice of bestowing

[38] _Dickens the Novelist_, p. 48.

[39] _The World of Charles Dickens_, p. 211.

upon them his greatest gift, his mockery".[40]

An additional problem arises out of Dickens's tendency to idealise Edith. Although she is portrayed on the one hand as a most determined and wilful woman, we are yet required to believe that she is irrevocably under the domination of her mother. When, in their private scenes the mother is shown cringing from her daughter's sharp reproofs, this becomes strained indeed. Because of this discrepancy, her motivation for her marriage to Dombey becomes highly suspect. In the final analysis, however, we must remember that the important motivation comes from the central character, Dombey, for Edith is in the novel because of him. Through their encounter and marriage, Dickens wishes to show how self-destructive Dombey's values are in practice. It is logical in terms of his values that Dombey is attracted by Edith's aloof pride; it is ironically just that he chooses his own destroyer.

With the depiction of Carker, different problems present themselves. It is easy to dismiss Carker as the all-too-conventional Victorian stage-villain with his feline graces and "signature" of predatorily gleaming teeth (Rigaud is his distant cousin here). Yet, as Northrop Frye has pointed out (the term "signature" is one that he uses):

> Repetition which is excessive even by Dickensian standards, like the emphasis on Carker's teeth in Dombey and Son, is appropriate for a villain, as its effect is to dehumanise and cut off sympathy. We cannot feel much concern over the fate of a character who is presented to us mainly as a set of teeth. . . .[41]

[40] Wilson, p. 211.

[41] Northrop Frye, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors", in Experience in the Novel, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), p. 58.

Other critics profess to see a more important role for Carker, W.J. Harvey, for example, claiming that he has a "heart of darkness" that remains ultimately concealed from the reader.[42] I have suggested that the depiction of Carker seems most satisfactory where he is shown interacting with Dombey or his immediate circle, for it is then that Dickens is able to use Carker's speech and "signatures" as an effective satirical comment that exposes the effects of the servility demanded by Mr. Dombey--a servility which works itself out in Carker's revenge plotting. But it is also necessary to point out that Carker is as fully responsible for his own downfall as Dombey is for his, because in choosing the position of power next to Dombey, he chooses too the concomitant subservience. Mr. Morfin's position in the novel demonstrates that a man can fulfil a role of responsibility without destroying himself through the acid of resentment.

When Carker is isolated from the Dombeyan circle, however, I feel that he does tend to relapse into the formula that Leavis felicitously labels the "flashing-toothed-villain";[43] yet it is again most profitable to consider Carker primarily in relation to Dombey as protagonist, for Carker helps to expose other weaknesses in Dombey's character. As we saw in the wedding chapter, Dombey is quite incapable of penetrating Carker, and it is interesting therefore that Stephen Marcus sees Carker as representing what has been repressed in Dombey: "the half of Dombey that is missing",[44] for this helps explain the blindness. Marcus sees Carker as

[42] Character and the Novel (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965), p. 71.

[43] Leavis, p. 48.

[44] Marcus, p. 346.

representing not the positive aspects of Dombey's repression--proper human feelings and warmth of heart, but negative repressions. He suggests accordingly that whilst Dombey is arid and impotent, Carker is lubricious and seductive; he is supple and devious to compensate for Dombey's hard and unbending qualities. Carker too, Marcus points out, wishes to bend other people to his will and reduce them to objects.[45] Therefore, to develop Marcus's point, it becomes clearer how ironic are Carker's representations to Edith that they both liberate themselves from Dombey's domination when his intention is to substitute his own form of dominion over her. This at least makes sense of Edith's cold rejection of his suave advances in the French apartment scene.

To examine the positive aspects of Dombey's repression, it is necessary to turn to the "good" characters in the novel. Dickens clearly intends Florence as an enduring counterpoint to Dombey in the book, and it is by the steadfast nature of her loving-kindness that we are able to measure Dombey's human aridity of heart and feeling.[46] She embodies an Imogen-like heroic endurance of spirit that marks her as one of the archetypal English heroines. And the quality of love that she displays is most notably without any sense of that self-interest or self-regard that so marks her father. But this very quality raises problems of characterisation for Dickens, since it is just because she lacks in her love and dutiful respect for her father a firm sense of the self that she seems to lack a centre to her being. Nothing is perhaps more difficult for an

[45] Marcus, pp. 346-50.

[46] Both the comments of Marcus, pp. 351-5; and Tillotson, pp. 171-2; helped to sharpen my views on Florence here.

artist to embody convincingly than an almost abstract quality of selfless loving-kindness untempered by any of those frailties that give a sharp human edge to a character.[47] The problem is compounded by Dickens's strategy of maintaining Florence at a relatively childish level of thought and expression as if deliberately to retard her maturation. This is most clearly evident in Florence's clinging "Dear Mama" approach towards Edith, delivered always in the tone of a child addressing her mother, although chronologically they are apparently only separated by ten or twelve years at their first meeting. Partly, this may be attributed simply to Victorian convention, but there is also a strong sense that Dickens cannot allow Florence to grow up fully and exhibit that adult hardness of feeling and attitude so marked in Edith. To give to Florence the appropriate language of a maturing adult would be to destroy the carefully wrought picture of her childlike goodness. She has to retain the essential purity of the child's response to the world, and in this she contrasts interestingly with Dickens's policy, which I have already examined, of depicting little Paul with his peculiar type of premature adult wisdom.

On p. 11 of this chapter, I discussed how the juxtaposition of the serious and the comic assists the process of character dimensioning. In the case of Mr. Dombey, we saw early on in the novel how many of the absurdities inherent in his own character and outlook are re-directed onto those who surround him. G.H. Ford is another critic who has noted in this regard that Dickens was consciously aware of his method: "His letters indicate that he

[47] Tillotson, p. 172, discusses this same problem. I again found her comments helpful.

considered the juxtaposition of serious and comic necessary not only to the reality of the comic character but of the serious character as well. Lear without his fool is not Lear".[48]

We know also from Dickens's letters to Forster that he intended a similar procedure in the case of Florence, where he conceived of Susan Nipper as a counterpoint to Florence's monochromatic goodness. The problem here seems to be that goodness cannot be too decided in its actions or opinions, especially in relation to a father-figure, or it may run the risk of ceasing to be goodness and slide into insubordination or impertinence. The difficulty is exacerbated by Florence's prominence in the novel (it is interesting to compare the characterisation of Cordelia in King Lear, whom Shakespeare is wise enough to keep off-stage for most of the play). Hence the importance of Miss Nipper, who is able to work herself up into those righteous rages that necessarily must be denied to the ever-loving Florence. It is Susan Nipper's acerbic tongue and sharp response that provide some outlet for the frustration the reader tends to feel at Florence's unending passivity in the face of her father's cumulative disregard and cruelty towards her. But whilst there is some release in her astringent criticism, the method does not succeed as fully as it does in the case of Dombey, where his rigid reaction to the farce around him assists us to penetrate to his centre.

The most notable example of Susan Nipper acting as this kind of outlet comes in that scene where she attacks Dombey, who is recovering from his horsefall. In the scene she is licensed to voice those "home truths" which have no other means of expression

[48] Dickens and his Readers, p. 138.

in the novel except direct authorial intrusion. This does not particularly help us, however, to understand Florence more deeply, for rather than reflecting aspects of Florence's character, she seems to be the antithesis of Florence in her sharp assertiveness towards the world.

In this section, then, I firstly scrutinised Dickens's comic art in the wedding chapter, through which he is able to convey to us the full resonance of Dombey's actions in a broad social setting. We saw how Dickens commences the chapter with a distanced choric setting that is permeated by a spirit of opportunism and exploitation, and then proceeds to focus more directly on Dombey's actual wedding party. Here I explored in particular the way in which the speech and comic antics of Cousin Feenix undermines the dignity of the Christian marriage sacrament, and accordingly alerts us to the distorted nature of Dombey's values. I secondly examined in chapter xxix Dickens's masterful and subtle prefigurement of Dombey's reversal of fortune in the comic encounter between Miss Tox and Mrs. Chick. In both chapters, I was concerned to argue a close connection between Dickens's artistic achievement and his pervasive use of a complex and varied comic art.

Thirdly, in order to exemplify a less successful order of achievement on Dickens's part, I contrasted these chapters with Dickens's treatment of three characters depicted without accompanying humour. In the case of Edith, I argued that Dickens's formulaic rendering of her response to emotional crises suggested that his imaginative powers were not fully engaged in his portrayal of her. We saw likewise that when Carker is isolated from the Dombeyan circle, he appears to relapse into a conventional villain

figure. By contrast, my discussion of Carker in the wedding chapter revealed that he functions far more effectively when Dickens permits him to offer a satirical commentary upon Dombey's behaviour.

Finally, I discussed the difficulties generated by Dickens's characterisation of Florence. I suggested that the humorous creation of Susan Nipper as a compensating force offers Dickens only a partial solution to the problem of Florence's blandness.

iv

I argued in the previous section that Florence's colourlessness as a character--the sense we derive that she lacks a firm centre or a well-defined identity--is the result of Dickens's attempt to embody in her the quality of goodness without any qualifying humour. In contrast to Florence, there is a group of characters in the novel whose goodness is indisputable, yet whose separate identities emerge firmly and distinctly. The reason for Dickens's success with this group is again bound up with the comic quality of their characterisations. But in this regard the group also offers an instructive contrast with the other characters who surround Mr. Dombey that I examined earlier. I argued then that it was Dickens's comic methods which enabled us to penetrate the absurdity or the hypocrisy or the affectation of these characters. I propose in this section, however, to illustrate the remarkable diversity and flexibility of Dickens's comic art by showing how his comic treatment enhances rather than diminishes the humanity of this second group of characters.

The group of characters I refer to comes into contact with

Mr. Dombey only intermittently, if at all. The group includes Old Sol, Captain Cuttle, Walter Gay and his "rival" Mr. Toots (and, to a lesser extent, Captain Dunsby and Mrs. MacStinger), and centres on Old Sol's shop, the Wooden Midshipman. The main sub-plot in the novel revolves around this group, and it seems clear that the chapters dealing with their activities are carefully interwoven with the main plot by Dickens in such a way as to juxtapose their values to those of Mr. Dombey and his circle. On p. 11 of this chapter, I quoted an excerpt from <u>Oliver Twist</u> to illustrate my contention that Dickens deliberately alternates the serious with the comic. And having already examined the effects of this alternation within the confines of different chapters, I intend now to explore the effects of the alternation of main plot with sub-plot. I will commence by outlining the values displayed by the group associated with the Wooden Midshipman in order to contrast these values with what we already know of Mr. Dombey's outlook.

Perhaps the most suitable way to start the discussion of the values displayed by this sub-group is to examine the comic metonymy in the description of Old Sol's shop:

> The stock-in-trade of this old gentleman comprised chronometers, barometers, telescopes, compasses, charts, maps, sextants, quadrants, and specimens of every kind of instrument used in the working of a ship's course, or the keeping of a ship's reckoning, or the prosecuting of a ship's discoveries. Objects in brass and glass were in his drawers and on his shelves, which none but the initiated could have found the top of, or guessed the use of, or having once examined, could have ever got back again into their mahogany nests without assistance. Everything was jammed into the tightest cases, fitted into the narrowest corners, fenced up behind the most impertinent cushions, and screwed into the acutest angles, to prevent its philosophical composure from being disturbed by the rolling of the sea. Such extraordinary precautions were taken in every instance to save room, and keep the thing compact; and so much practical navigation was fitted, and cushioned, and

> screwed into every box (whether the box was a mere slab, as some were, or something between a cocked hat and a star-fish, as others were, and those quite mild and modest boxes as compared with others); that the shop itself, partaking of the general infection, seemed almost to become a snug, sea-going, ship-shape concern, wanting only good sea-room, in the event of an unexpected launch, to work its way securely to any desert island in the world. (pp. 32-3)

The leisurely expansion of the description generates its own ironies, since the overriding trope is of Old Sol's shop as a vessel at sea, yet it is soon evident that in spite of all his elaborate ship-shape precautions, the comic compactness of his goods, and the multitude of navigational instruments that he sells, this man who is "'chockfull of science'" (p. 42) as Captain Cuttle puts it, is quite unable to navigate his own course through life. His unshakeable faith in his chronometer and his meticulous observations of the weather are in ironic conflict with the misfortunes that will befall him in the rolling uncertain sea of life. He is connected to Major Bagstock and Mrs. Skewton through our sense of the anachronistic nature of his stock and ideas: "little timber midshipmen in obsolete naval uniforms" (p. 32) suggest the ethos that permeates his shop. But in contrast to these predatory Regency figures, Old Sol remains "a slow, quiet-spoken thoughtful old fellow" (p. 34); an innocent who is incapable of coming to terms with the passage of time by that calculating sense of self-preservation that so conspicuously marks the Major and Mrs. Skewton. His innocence links him more closely to Toots and Captain Cuttle, for he has few defences against the new world dominated by the values of Dombeyism. As he laments, "'But competition, competition--new invention, new invention--alteration, alteration--the world's gone past me. I hardly know where I am

myself; much less where my customers are'"(p. 38).

These three characters, Old Sol, Toots and Captain Cuttle, carry an important weighting in the novel which is discharged mainly in terms of their comic activity. That weighting is to establish the goodness of the human heart as the major counter-balancing force to Dombey and the figures who surround him. It might at first seem strange that Dickens should present in Captain Cuttle and Mr. Toots these valuable qualities of the heart largely divorced from the intelligence--particularly so in the case of the addled Mr. Toots. Dickens's intention here, however, is not to present an anti-rational argument, but rather to show that there is a natural quality in man, the simple heart, which is impervious to corruption. It is the essential innocence of these comic characters that enables us to assess the contrasting guile, calculation and affectation of the other characters. Their innocence forms part of their integrity, and it is their integrity and reliability of response to the world around them that make them valuable to us as touchstones of true human feeling and behaviour.

Three scenes illustrate this in the case of Captain Cuttle. The first is that occasion at Brighton where he appears before Dombey to assist Walter in procuring a loan, and solemnly hauls out his trifle of spoon and other detritus from his pocket. Miss Tox interposes as Captain Cuttle is about to withdraw, leaving his treasure behind him:

> 'My dear Sir,' she said, addressing Mr. Dombey, at whose munificence both she and Mrs. Chick were shedding tears copiously; 'I think you have overlooked something. Pardon me, Mr. Dombey, I think, in the nobility of your character, and its exalted scope, you have omitted a matter of detail.'
>
> 'Indeed, Miss Tox!' said Mr. Dombey.
>
> 'The gentleman with the--Instrument,' pursued Miss Tox,

> glancing at Captain Cuttle, 'has left upon the table, at your elbow--'
> 'Good Heaven!' said Mr. Dombey, sweeping the Captain's property from him, as if it were so much crumb indeed. 'Take these things away. I am obliged to you, Miss Tox; it is like your usual discretion. Have the goodness to take these things away, Sir!'
> Captain Cuttle felt he had no alternative but to comply. But he was so much struck by the magnanimity of Mr. Dombey, in refusing treasures lying heaped up to his hand, that when he had deposited the teaspoons and sugar-tongs in one pocket, and the ready money in another, and had lowered the great watch down slowly into its proper vault, he could not refrain from seizing that gentleman's right hand in his own solitary left, and while he held it open with his powerful fingers, bringing the hook down upon its palm in a transport of admiration. At this touch of warm feeling and cold iron, Mr. Dombey shivered all over. (pp. 133-4)

The passage delineates the different ranges of sensibility and response with masterful precision. Firstly, Miss Tox's courtier-like deferential address to Dombey, with its comic evasions and excesses: "'nobility of your character and its exalted scope'", alerts us to the arrogant boorishness of Dombey's dismissive response. Likewise, Dombey's "'Indeed, Miss Tox!'" captures all of his surprised blindness to his inferiors. But Captain Cuttle's invulnerability to Dombey's lofty disdain is what heightens our appreciation of the difference between the two characters. Captain Cuttle's wholeness cannot be touched because he is divorced from money values as his simplicity regarding his "plate" demonstrates. Since Dombey's contempt is the logical expression of his overwhelming concern with material power, it cannot affect the Captain's mind which operates on a different plane of human values altogether. Captain Cuttle's faith in the like-minded warmth of his fellow man is what provides him with impenetrable armour against Dombey's scorn. But there is also a solidity underlying the Captain's ingenuousness which is subtly conveyed in the final

sentence of the extract: "At this touch of warm feeling and cold iron Mr. Dombey shivered all over". It is the combination of the two that so disconcerts Dombey.

The second scene, Captain Cuttle's interview with Carker (pp. 232-7), has a similar purpose. Carker flashes his teeth in a fashion that appears to echo the Captain's words and reinforce his belief that Walter's prospects are splendid. Again, Captain Cuttle's naivety sharpens our awareness of Carker's devious manipulation. This naivety is merely underscored by Dickens's use of chapter titles such as "The Amazing Artfulness of Captain Cuttle" (chapter xv). Captain Cuttle's "artfulness" in his plan to further Walter's fortunes, or his avoidance of Mrs. MacStinger is such that the destructive scheming of other characters is highlighted by the delightful simplicity of his transparent manoeuvres. In both scenes, our respect for Captain Cuttle is a direct function of his naivety. Both display facets of the dismissive manner in which the wealthy and powerful exploit innocents for their own purposes, re-stating, therefore, in a different key the destruction of Paul's childhood by these same forces.

The third incident is integrated into the wedding chapter that I have already discussed, which Captain Cuttle (along with Miss Tox and Mr. Toots) attends as an uninvited observer. After the main party of invited guests has departed from the church, we are left with Captain Cuttle, who "having joined in all the amens and responses, with a devout growl, feels much improved by his religious exercises; and in a peaceful frame of mind pervades the body of the church, glazed hat in hand, and reads the tablet to the memory of little Paul" (p. 445). It is not by accident that Dickens keeps these three characters distinct from the invited

guests, since they are the custodians of innocence in the book, and reflect accordingly in their feelings the true spirit of the marriage ceremony; "pervades the body of the church" is a key phrase in this respect.[49] The purity of Captain Cuttle's response to the service underlines from a fresh angle how thoroughly the marriage sacrament has been degraded by Dombey and Edith, whilst the quiet reference to little Paul reminds us of the human waste behind the marriage.

Northrop Frye makes the claim that "within Dombey and Son itself the 'bad' major is paired against a 'good' navy man, Captain Cuttle".[50] The idea of the pairing is illuminating, except that it is highly unlikely that Cuttle has been a captain in the navy, since this rank was traditionally reserved for members of the upper classes, to which he patently does not belong. Bunsby's "The Cautious Clara" is far more in his line of command. Cuttle's salty idiom places his level in society, whilst his profoundly uncomprehending awe for books (especially Prayer Book and Bible), establishes his lack of education and artless respect for knowledge. The Captain's deep faith in people is reinforced by those ludicrous interludes involving Captain Bunsby who, with his cryptically nonsensical utterances, functions as a kind of comic oracle of Delphi. And it is entirely appropriate that Captain Cuttle's faith in Bunsby is comically rewarded when that intrepid philosopher relieves him permanently of Mrs. MacStinger.

This lack of education and opportunity has a serious point.

[49] Johnson, p. 633, aptly comments that both Captain Cuttle and Mr. Toots are "possessed of a true dignity shining through all their absurdity".

[50] "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors", p. 60.

As Q.D. Leavis cogently notes in her Appendix to F.R. Leavis's chapter on Dombey and Son in Dickens the Novelist, "Captain Cuttle is not a mere grotesque".[51] She argues instead that "As part of the theme of the novel Dickens is showing that the poor man can put forth such flowers of the spirit as generosity and a delicacy of feeling not known to the successful merchant, a delicacy which is not the product of education or contacts with social superiors".[52] Captain Cuttle's natural sensitivity of treatment towards Florence when she runs away from home is but one instance of this delicacy of feeling.

To summarise, then, the absurdity of Captain Cuttle and Mr. Toots, in its marvellous comic diversity, gives added value to those special human qualities of heart and feeling when we compare them to the bleak purposiveness of Mr. Dombey. It is possible indeed to see for Mr. Toots a role analogous to the Fool in a Shakespearean drama. As Kathleen Tillotson comments, "Speech after speech of Toots could be selected for its ludicrous but unerring penetration to the heart of the situation; 'children and fools speak the truth'".[53] Toots differs from a Shakespearean Fool, in that he utters his truths unconsciously rather than consciously. And by embodying life-enhancing values, both Mr. Toots and Captain Cuttle help to counterbalance Mr. Dombey's emotional coldness.

[51] Q.D. Leavis, "Dickens and Smollett", in Dickens the Novelist, p. 58. Her comments in this Appendix clearly tend to counteract F.R. Leavis's criticism which I quoted on p. 10 of this chapter.

[52] Q.D. Leavis, p. 59.

[53] Tillotson, p. 192.

As Dombey's fortunes decline, so do the fortunes associated with the Wooden Midshipman rise, reversing what occurred in the first half of the book. Our sense of Dombey's downfall and humiliation is heightened by the deliberate contrast with the good fortunes of reappearances, reunions, and marriages. The resurgence of Old Sol's business interests might well be unlikely in the real world, but since his shop, as I have suggested, is primarily a metonymic expression of himself, the resurgence metaphorically expresses Dickens's faith in the values embraced by the Wooden Midshipman.

I have attempted to demonstrate in this section, therefore, that the successful depiction by Dickens of the various characters who are associated with the values of the Wooden Midshipman is inseparable from their comic treatment. Old Sol's befuddled anachronism, Captain Cuttle's ingenuous lack of calculation, and Toot's simple innocence are given value and credibility through a comic art that renders them largely invulnerable to the corruption and false values associated with the Dombeyan axis of the novel. Through their invulnerability, as custodians of innocence, they offer an important alternative to Dombey's world.

V

In his essay entitled "The Argument of Comedy", Northrop Frye points to the significance of marriage as a conclusion to a comic cycle of action. Marriage is the appropriate conclusion since it signifies reconciliation and regeneration, thereby suggesting the perpetuation of the action beyond the restricting framework of the play or novel in a manner that is entirely in harmony with the

essentially life-enhancing comic spirit.[54] In the light of Frye's argument, it comes as no surprise to find the marriage of Walter to Florence towards the end of Dombey and Son. But this is, in fact, only one of five marriages in the novel that all reflect in some way upon one another. I wish to round off my discussion of comic technique in Dombey and Son, therefore, with a brief glance at the connections between the various marriages in the novel.

Dombey's alliance with Edith establishes one extreme of the marriage spectrum: in its sterility it constitutes a perversion and reversal of this convention of marriage as a resolution. Their marriage has its humorous reflection afterwards, however, in Bunsby's forced union with Mrs. MacStinger, whose heavy-handed methods are deliberately meant to remind us of a naval press-gang. This kind of marriage draws its comic strength from the different but equally ancient convention which views marriage as the entrapment and enslavement of the man by the woman:

> 'Come!' said the Captain, nudging him with his elbow, 'now's your time! Sheer off! I'll cover your retreat. The time's a-flying. Bunsby! It's for liberty. Will you once?'
> Bunsby was immovable.
> 'Bunsby!' whispered the Captain, 'will you twice?'
> Bunsby wouldn't twice.
> 'Bunsby!' urged the Captain, 'it's for liberty; will you three times? Now or never!'
> Bunsby didn't then, or didn't ever; for Mrs. MacStinger immediately afterwards married him. (p. 857)

The humour here has echoes of the repeated image Dickens uses of Dombey and Edith "manacled" to each other. When Mr. Feeder, B.A.,

[54] Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy", English Institute Essays (1948); rpt. in Theories of Comedy, ed. Paul Lauter (New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1964), pp. 450-60.

marries Cornelia, there is, in the calculations he makes about Dr. Blimber leaving him the school and putting it into good repair, also an echo, fainter this time, of Dombey's alliance with Edith. However, both the petty scale of Mr. Feeder's aspirations and the considerable humour involved in Mr. Toots's attendance at the wedding soften any impression we may gain here of Mr. Feeder as an opportunist.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Walter's marriage to Florence, which is in the spirit of the traditional romantic happy ending. Tempering the idealism of their union just very slightly is the marriage of Mr. Toots to Susan Nipper, where we are aware, for all Toots's chuckles over his good fortune, that his wife is the dominant partner. It can be appreciated now how valuable a role Toots has previously played as the farcical Romantic pursuer of Florence. The high ridiculousness of his timid and bumbling courtship means that Walter's later, serious avowals can be depicted with greater realism and less spurious passion, since the worst excesses inherent in the romantic approach have been absorbed in our laughter at Toots's comic anguish.

vi

In terms of Northrop Frye's argument (which I noted on p. 84 of this chapter), a comic action, whether in a play or a novel, is signalled by marriage, reconciliation and regeneration at its conclusion. Because Dombey and Son ends with the various marriages that I have just been discussing, as well as with Mr. Dombey's personal regeneration and his reconciliation with his daughter, the novel may indeed be defined as a comic work.

But I have been arguing that _Dombey and Son_ is an important comic work of art for more fundamental reasons as well. I have been exploring throughout this chapter the pervasive nature of Dickens's various comic techniques in his narrative and descriptive art. I have also been concerned to argue the close interconnection between these comic techniques and Dickens's most successful achievement.

I began by outlining Dickens's problem in portraying his protagonist, Mr. Dombey, whose one-sidedness, as we saw in my first section, tends towards the shallow and the absurd. I then explored the various ways in which Dickens overcomes this problem. I concluded that Dickens's solutions are characteristically comic solutions. In the opening chapter of the novel it is by means of a careful alternation of the comic with the serious that Dickens is able so finely to control the emotion surrounding Mrs. Dombey's death whilst simultaneously exposing Dombey's heartlessness towards his wife. Dickens then uses a comic metonymy which, by extending Mr. Dombey's qualities into his environment, gives added depth to our awareness of his character. Our knowledge of Mr. Dombey is also increased through Dickens's treatment of Paul's education, where the comic descriptions and satirical depictions of Mrs. Pipchin and Dr. Blimber and their respective establishments exemplify for us the destructive logic of Mr. Dombey's values and aspirations; a logic that is shown to lead inexorably to his son Paul's death.

I also briefly examined Dickens's mode of comic displacement in my first section, whereby much of the inherent absurdity of Mr. Dombey is displaced onto those around him, notably, Miss Tox and Mrs. Chick. In my second section, I was concerned to explore this technique in greater depth through a more detailed scrutiny of

three of the characters surrounding Mr. Dombey. I examined the ways in which Major Bagstock's egotism mirrors Mr. Dombey's own self-preoccupation, and Mrs. Skewton's calculating expediency helps to expose Mr. Dombey's mercantile outlook. I concluded from this scrutiny that it is these comic characterisations strictly subordinated by Dickens to a new wholeness of purpose and design that enable us better to understand the complicated figure of Mr. Dombey. We learn about Mr. Dombey through his reactions to those around him, whether these reactions are implicit or explicit. As Kathleen Tillotson notes, "In Mr. Dombey Dickens achieves the remarkable feat of making us aware of the hidden depths of a character whilst keeping them largely hidden; his method respects Mr. Dombey's own proud reserves".[55]

At the end of my second section I discussed Dickens's treatment of Mrs. Skewton's decline, and I noted how carefully this account of her decline with its superb balance between satire and pathos is incorporated into Dickens's portrayal of the collapse of Dombey's marriage to Edith. I commenced my third section by examining the means through which Dickens establishes Mr. Dombey in a broader social setting. My exploration of chapter xxxi revealed the wide social resonance that Dickens is able to give to Mr. Dombey's actions, whilst my discussion of the comic peripeteia in chapter xxix was aimed at revealing how Miss Tox's abandonment functions as an important prefigurement of the reversal in Mr. Dombey's own fortunes.

Both these chapters then formed the basis for a comparison as I proceeded to examine the very different narrative modes which we

[55] Tillotson, p. 167.

encounter in those sections of the novel which deal with Edith, Carker, and Florence. This comparison led me to conclude that Dickens's abandonment of the comic element in his portrayal of these three characters results in a significantly less successful order of achievement.

By contrast, my discussion in the fourth section of this chapter focused on the group of characters associated with Old Sol's "Wooden Midshipman" in order to demonstrate that their value and function in the novel relate directly to Dickens's comic conception and comic treatment of them. I concluded that it is his use of this comic mode that enables him so effectively to oppose their warm-hearted and life-enhancing values to Mr. Dombey's cold sterility.

In my fifth section, I briefly examined the various marriages in the novel and the manner whereby a comic marriage reflects upon a serious one. Bunsby's entrapment by Mrs. MacStinger adds to our sense of Dombey "manacled" to Edith, whilst, on the other hand, the high ridiculousness of Mr. Toots's farcical courtships purges romantic excess through laughter and leaves us free to appreciate the sober proportions of Walter's relationship with Florence.

To summarise, I have consistently attempted in the course of this chapter to pay tribute to the wide spectrum of comedy in Dombey and Son, which ranges from a "robust ironic comedy"[56] through satire, parody and ridicule, to the farcical and the absurd. My overall conclusion is that Dickens's comic art in Dombey and Son is both diverse in its techniques and comprehensive in its scope,

[56] Dickens the Novelist, p. 24. F.R. Leavis employs this apposite phrase in his discussion of Dr. Parker Peps and Mrs. Chick in the first chapter of Dombey and Son.

and that it is organically bound up with Dickens's serious thematic intentions. If, therefore, we are to value Dombey and Son highly as a work of art, we must give due credit in our valuation to the role played by the comic element. My next chapter, on a later and more complex work than Dombey and Son, goes on to argue that in spite of Little Dorrit's reputation as a humourless and "dark" novel, this same conclusion holds true.

CHAPTER 2

LITTLE DORRIT

In my first chapter, I identified and explored some of the diverse forms of Dickens's comic art and attempted thereby to show how closely the success of the novel as a whole is bound up with its comic nature. With the foundation of what I have established in Dombey and Son, I propose to move on now to a later and more complex novel.

Little Dorrit does not lend itself to easy valuation, for the novel's very complexity defies efforts to categorise it neatly as a comic or tragic work. Likewise, the traditional categories of comedy as, for instance, high comedy or low comedy, are seldom useful for defining the reader's fullest experience when confronted with the swiftly changing diversity of Dickens's comic art. Nevertheless, one valuation that I will argue in this chapter is that Little Dorrit is Dickens's most complex and wide-ranging novel, as well as his greatest achievement. Once again, I will attempt to show how this achievement is intimately bound up with Dickens's comic art. This chapter will therefore be organised both to display something of the complexity of Little Dorrit, and to focus in depth on Dickens's important comic strategies in the work.

My first step is to compare Little Dorrit to Dombey and Son. My purpose here is to clarify the essential differences between the opening structures of the two novels. In so doing, I will also be countering criticism of the opening section of Little Dorrit. My

defense of this opening section then leads into an examination of chapters ii and iii of the novel. Here my purpose is firstly to point to the complex comic textures to be found in a supposedly "humourless" portion of the book, including a kind of grim or black humour not previously encountered in Dombey and Son. Secondly, I wish to demonstrate that the opening section of the novel is vital to our grasp of Dickens's thematic intentions in the work as a whole. This preliminary discussion clears the way for an examination of the important Marshalsea chapters that follow thereafter.

A reading of the first hundred pages or so of Little Dorrit reveals that the novel is indeed organised on a different and more complex basis than Dombey and Son. In Dombey and Son, Dickens concentrates on the figure of Mr. Dombey himself, in his relationship with his son, his daughter, and with the various other characters around him. Dickens is able to trace in this manner Mr. Dombey's painful growth from moral obtuseness to a kind of regeneration at the end of the book. There is no corresponding single focal point, however, in Little Dorrit. Indeed, the difference may immediately be established by comparing the first chapters of each novel.

I have argued that chapter i of Dombey and Son represents an artistic tour-de-force, with the narrator confidently embodying the motifs which are to be sustained through the first third of the book to the death of Paul. The tempo of Little Dorrit appears quite different, for the novel only seems to attain the same confident artistic stride when the first Marshalsea chapter is reached. The opening chapter is organised on different principles which suggest that Dickens is aiming at a more comprehensive view of society. In contrast to the particular, focused enactment of

the first few pages of Dombey and Son, the opening of Little Dorrit offers a broad and somewhat distanced prelude to the structural themes that are to be developed in the remainder of the novel.

The distance, in fact, is such that the critic Robert Garis, for one, is unable to perceive any significant relationship between the opening scene in Marseilles and the rest of the book. In Garis's view (and he makes something of a test case of the opening pages of Little Dorrit), what the reader is mainly required to do here is to applaud the self-justifying virtuosity of a typically theatrical Dickensian performance.[1] That Dickens was not altogether happy with the opening chapters is evident from his correspondence with Forster (a point I shall return to presently),[2] but there is nevertheless a clear relationship perceivable between the opening and the rest of the novel. As John Wain points out:

> One of the things that makes a prison prison-like is precisely that the sun never shines into it. The whole novel is organised to show what this means in detail. It is no accident, for instance, that the next scene of the book should echo this initial contrast between the fierce, uncompromising sunshine and the vaporous dungeon; for the switch of scene is to London . . . on a rainy Sunday evening.[3]

Wain's summary, therefore, is that,

> Altogether, the opening scene is an essential induction to the main body of the novel, since it introduces not

[1] The Dickens Theatre (Oxford: O.U.P., 1965), pp. 12 ff.

[2] The Life of Charles Dickens, 11, pp. 179 and 182. I quote Dickens's letter on p. 95 below.

[3] John Wain, "Little Dorrit", in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (1962; rpt. London: Routledge, 1963), p. 183. Wain's reference to the "next scene" is not strictly accurate (he means, of course, chapter iii), but the main thrust of his point is taken.

> only the physical contrast between prison and the world outside, but also the disfiguring social relationships that create such prisons, embodied in the difference between the food the gaoler brings to the two men in the same cell. The gaoler's daughter, with her gentle pity for the 'poor birds' is, so to speak, a miniature preliminary emblem of Little Dorrit herself.[4]

The first chapter begins in this light to assume the proportions of a carefully prepared foreshadowing for what is to come in the balance of the novel. Even such an apparently artless scene as the gaoler's daughter feeding the prisoners extends in significance beyond the moment. As H.P. Sucksmith comments:

> The effect has some structural relevance for it focuses the child's compassionate view of the prisoner and so prepares a suitable emotive climate for Little Dorrit's vision of her father in the Marshalsea; but, in addition, the irony enables the mind to escape to a more distanced view, to see one world in terms of another, a view which finds its ultimate expression in the vision of society as a kind of prison.[5]

Dickens was not only attempting a complex process of artistic foreshadowing, but was also, as he explained to Forster, intending to delineate a tight pattern of causality and interconnectedness amongst events and characters, and it was in this regard that he expressed uncertainty as to whether he had achieved the best effects in the opening chapter. It appeared also to some contemporary critics, amongst them Forster, that the first hundred pages of the novel were conspicuous for a general lack of humour.[6] This sort of comment can, in part, be ascribed to the dominant strain of

[4] Wain, pp. 183-4.

[5] H.P. Sucksmith, The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 68.

[6] Forster, pp. 179-82.

contemporary criticism which was hamstrung by a nostalgia for the style of Pickwick Papers. Rather than applauding Dickens's attempts to break new ground with each successive novel, all too many of his critics continued to plead for a return to the relatively simple and uncomplicated mirth that seemed to them to characterise Pickwick Papers. E.B. Hamley's review of Little Dorrit in Blackwood's Magazine is representative of this approach in his comment that "as humourist we prefer Dickens to all living men--as artist, moralist, politician, philosopher, and ultra-philanthropist, we prefer many living men, women and children to Dickens".[7] Forster's comments are as follows (he quotes from Dickens's letter to him dated 19th August, 1855):

> The humouring was a little difficult, however; and such indications of a droop in his invention as presented themselves in portions of Bleak House, were noticeable again. "As to the story I am in the second number, and last night and this morning had half a mind to begin again, and work in what I have done, afterwards" . . . It had occurred to him, that, by making the fellow-travellers at once known to each other, as the opening of the story stands, he had missed an effect. "It struck me that it would be a new thing to show people coming together, in a chance way, as fellow-travellers, and being in the same place, ignorant of one another, as happens in life; and to connect them afterwards, and to make the waiting for that connection a part of the interest." The change was not made. . . .[8]

Dickens's concentration on the structural problems of meshing together the wide diversity of characters that we encounter in the opening pages may have resulted in what some modern critics

[7] E.B. Hamley, "Remonstrance with Dickens", Blackwood's Magazine, 81 (1857), 490-503. The above excerpt is quoted in Dickens: The Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 358.

[8] Forster, pp. 179 and 182.

interpret as the humourless, sombre tone of the opening section (a tone which they misleadingly represent as the dominant tone of the novel.[9] Furthermore, Forster himself, apparently because of this breadth of scale, was unable (mistakenly, I hope to show show), to perceive any unifying force: "The defect in the book was less the absence of excellent character or keen observation, than the want of ease and coherence among the figures of the story, and of a central interest in the plan of it".[10]

Forster's criticism probably stems from his knowledge of previous intentions which he imagined as not realised: "The book took its origin from the notion he had of a leading man for a story who should bring about all the mischief in it, lay it all on Providence, and say at every fresh calamity, 'Well, it's a mercy, however, nobody was to blame you know!'".[11] That the book soon took a different path is traced out by Butt and Tillotson, who note, "Indeed, such personal responsibility for evil seems foreign to the whole book as we have it".[12] It became instead Dickens's main concern to show that a general refusal to accept responsibility on behalf of both ruler and ruled resulted in England's misery.

[9] In Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), Hillis Miller claims, for instance, that "Little Dorrit is without doubt Dickens's darkest novel. No other of his novels has such a sombre unity of tone" (p. 227); whilst in The Melancholy Man, John Lucas comments that "The novel is a deeply pondered statement about the human condition, and it has a heavy, almost oppressive brooding quality" (p. 246); J.R. Kincaid's chapter on Little Dorrit in Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter is significantly entitled "The Attack on Comedy", for Kincaid proceeds to argue in this chapter that "Dickens's great novel of imprisonment is not just dark and gloomy; it is specifically anti-comic" (p. 192).

[10] Forster, p. 184.

[11] Forster, p. 179.

[12] Butt and Tillotson, p. 224.

In their admirable but brief notes on the genesis and planning of the novel, Butt and Tillotson proceed to trace Dickens's obsession with the evils of 1854-55 in England and the Crimea, as recorded in his articles, speeches and letters in the months before he commenced work on the novel. They comment that "it is clear from the cover-design that chapter x, 'Containing the Whole Science of Government' was foreseen from the start, and that its satire was a fundamental part of Dickens's conception of the novel--more so, perhaps, than the working-out of the story suggests, since the Barnacles remain rather episodic in the plot".[13] Whilst I would query the phrase "rather episodic" as conveying a misleading picture of the end result (as I hope to show in my discussion of the importance of the Circumlocution Office), the reason for the diminished role afforded the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office undoubtedly, and most fortunately, appears to be Dickens's growing awareness of the limitations of what might have been a novel of political propaganda or castigation. With this new awareness, as Butt and Tillotson show, comes a change in title from Nobody's Fault to Little Dorrit.[14] The change is in itself indicative of Dickens's desire to humanise his potentially didactic theme by focusing on the counterbalancing qualities primarily--but not solely--embodied in the character of Little Dorrit herself, whose role in the novel grows proportionately more important. Butt and Tillotson comment aptly that "Dickens's decision was surely a wise one. He was writing a novel of individuals, not preaching a sermon or making a political speech".[15]

[13] Butt and Tillotson, p. 225.

[14] Butt and Tillotson, pp. 223-33. [15] Butt and Tillotson, p. 232.

This new emphasis is reflected in the book's characteristically Dickensian comic structure--the technique is similar to the one I traced in Dombey and Son--where chapters of strong satire or humour counterpoint the travails of the human protagonists, notably, Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam. Within the various chapters also, as I hope to explicate, a complex comic texture gives energy and depth to the characterisation.

The second chapter of Little Dorrit, entitled "Fellow Travellers", deserves careful attention because of its seminal importance to our grasp of the rest of the novel. The subtlety and irony are such that it is easy for the inattentive reader to overlook the evidence of Dickens's very careful structural planning. The chapter introduces a number of characters: notably, Mr. and Mrs. Meagles, Pet, Arthur Clennam, Tattycoram, and Miss Wage; but one of the main concerns in the chapter is to develop the characterisations of Arthur and Mr. Meagles. In particular, the finer sensibility of Arthur Clennam begins to emerge for the reader through his dialogue with the more limited Mr. Meagles. And in spite of his limitations, it is noticeable also that Mr. Meagles is depicted with a complexity not to be found in the subsidiary characters of Dombey and Son.

Described as a "whimsical good humoured" man, the ironies generated by Mr. Meagles's repeated use of the word "practical" will assume a far wider resonance in the working-out of the novel:

> 'May I ask you,' he said, 'what is the name of--'
> 'Tattycoram?' Mr. Meagles struck in. 'I have not the least idea.'
> 'I thought,' said the other, 'that--'
> 'Tattycoram?' suggested Mr. Meagles again.
> 'Thank you--that Tattycoram was a name; and I have several times wondered at the oddity of it.'

> 'Why, the fact is,' said Mr. Meagles, 'Mrs. Meagles and myself are, you see, practical people.' (p. 17)

"'Practical'", as used by Mr. Meagles, can be seen as ironical on a number of levels, and more are stored up for future development. Dickens is firstly, in the wider context from which this passage is drawn, pointing to the direct evidence that the Meagleses are not "practical" in the strictly utilitarian sense that Dickens had so effectively satirised in Hard Times (1854), the novel preceding Little Dorrit. On the contrary, the Meagleses appear to be moved by very different values. Their adopting Tattycoram, their whimsical naming of her, and their taking Pet to hear the orphan children sing, are actions which together suggest compassionate and humane values. All of these actions, according to Mr. Meagles, fall under the one word "'practical'".

It is this general use of the word "'practical'" as a kind of catch-all that soon begins to define some of Mr. Meagles's limitations. Mere repetition of the phrase "'we are practical people'" alone suggests, as so often with a Dickens character, a certain inflexibility in Mr. Meagles; that his mind is accustomed to run along fixed mental grooves. The word provides at least one key to both his history and his preoccupation: 'practical' is what a retired banker, busy with the "'scales and scoop'" (p. 199) department all his life, should be. It becomes in this way a covering phrase for many of his activities which, as we have just seen, are by no means "'practical'" in the narrowly utilitarian, commercial sense, but belong instead to the humane sphere of human life. This discrepancy has a humorous aspect too. Mr. Meagles's efforts to cover the compassionate side of his activity through this word movingly reveals how his working life has distorted his

language to the point where he is hardly capable of naming his real emotions, but must resort instead to the catch-phrase. This passage, for instance, reveals his response as he relates his wife's sincerely wrought emotion:

> "'O dear, dear!' cried Mother, breaking out again, "when I saw all those children ranged tier above tier, and appealing from the father none of them has ever known on earth, to the great Father of us all in Heaven, I thought, does any wretched mother ever come here, and look among those young faces, wondering which is the poor child she brought into this forlorn world, never through all its life to know her love, her kiss, her face, her voice, even her name!" Now that was practical in Mother, and I told her so. I said "Mother, that's what I call practical in you, my dear.'" (p. 18)

Whilst it is clear that Mr. Meagles does respond to the emotion, the irony resides in the obvious limitation of his powers of articulation; a limitation that a lifetime of accumulating wealth forces on one who is essentially generous and kind-hearted in his actions. A few pages further on, we find Arthur Clennam trying to point out the real meaning of the word which Mr. Meagles either will not acknowledge, or comprehend:

> 'If the people who are usually called practical, were practical in your direction--'
> 'Why, so they are!' said Mr. Meagles.
> 'Are they indeed?'
> 'Well, I suppose so,' returned Mr. Meagles, thinking about it. 'Eh? One can but be practical, and Mrs. Meagles and myself are nothing else.' (p. 21)

But there is another aspect to Mr. Meagles's "'practical'" outlook on life, the irony of which will only be fully realised later, in the chapters dealing with the Circumlocution Office. In his attitude to foreigners, Mr. Meagles is intended to stand for the typical middle-class Englishman, embodying the national prejudice towards alien cultures, as, for example, in his refusal to learn the

language of the country he is in. At the beginning of the chapter, he addresses Clennam as follows: "'No more of yesterday's howling, over yonder, to-day, sir; is there?'" (p. 15), and we recognise the by now familiar model of the Englishman abroad, complacent in his chauvinism. Mr. Meagles's typicality is important, and, I think, deliberate. Dickens wishes to establish him "rattling his money" (p. 15) at the"'allonging and marshonging'"(p. 15) of the French, in the image of the superior, complacently prosperous middle-class Englishman, secure in his personal sense of freedom. It is this sense of freedom that Dickens is shortly to reveal as a myth in his rich satire of the ramifications of the Circumlocution Office.

The irony is made clearer by Mr. Meagles's criticism of English Bumbledom: "'Whenever I see a beadle in full fig, coming down a street on a Sunday at the head of a charity school, I am obliged to turn and run away, or I should hit him'" (pp. 18-19). Later, his critical sharpness on this level will merely underscore his inability to penetrate the higher, far more destructive levels of pretension in the English system of government of which the beadle is only a lowly reflection. Mr. Meagles's belief in his freedom and superiority, so seemingly complete when he talks of the French "'variety of humbugs, in cocked hats'" (p. 16), constitutes an irony that will only be fully developed when we come to see how undiscerning he is of the Barnacles and their huge clan. It is through his typicality that Dickens is able to convey how the middle-class Mr. Meagleses of Britain, who pride themselves on their freedom-loving and"'practical'" lives, are in reality most impractical (in both the humane and utilitarian senses) in harbouring the stifling bureaucratic structure of the Circumlocution Office. The irony of Mr. Meagles's claim in his foreign quarantine

quarters that "'I am like a sane man shut up in a madhouse'" (p. 15) will be worked out in his home environment.

Chapter ii, therefore, sees Dickens outlining, in embryonic form, some of the major concerns of the rest of the novel. The chapter also begins to establish Arthur Clennam's character through his conversation with Mr. Meagles. In particular, we start to see his greater balance and insight, his unprejudiced openness to foreign ways, and a quiet sensitivity of manner which will find a later echo in the way that Little Dorrit responds to her brother and sister. What begins to emerge through Arthur's response to those around him, therefore, is the nucleus of what will develop, in Arthur and Amy, into a normative centre of consciousness in the novel.[16]

The third chapter builds immediately upon our awareness of Arthur's sensibility, for it is largely (but not only) through his eyes that we view his return to London. There seems to be a significant tonal change at this point in the novel, resulting in the bleak vision of the joyless city that we are offered. It is important for Dickens's intentions that the depression experienced by Arthur should reach its climax in the Clennam household with its bizarre inhabitants, and to this end there is a careful and sustained preparation in the mordant images of London on the dreary Sabbath that makes a mockery of the labourers' one "free" day. A sense of disgust on the part of the narrator breaks through Arthur's viewpoint in various places. In the passage below, for instance, the rhetorical idiom and the pretended off-handed use of statistics

[16] I am indebted here to F.R. Leavis's discussion of Arthur and Amy, on pp. 288 and 311 respectively, of his chapter on <u>Little Dorrit</u> in <u>Dickens the Novelist</u>.

provide a grim satire upon the complacent indifference of the lawmakers to the fate of those to whom they are theoretically responsible in their legislation:

> What secular want could the million or so of human beings whose daily labour, six days in the week, lay among these Arcadian objects, from the sweet sameness of which they had no escape between the cradle and the grave--what secular want could they possibly have upon their seventh day? Clearly they could want nothing but a stringent policeman. (p. 29)

But it is just this grim humour on the part of the narrator that helps to control a picture which otherwise might well prove unbearable in its cumulative horror. The humour offers a perspective which functions as a sane counterpoint to the hardly comprehensible (because deeply stupid) and inhumane attitude of both church and state towards the citizen and, worse, the growing child:

> There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to Perdition?--a piece of curiosity that he really in a frock and drawers was not in a condition to satisfy--and which, for the further attraction of his infant mind, had a parenthesis in every other line with some such hiccupping reference as 2 Ep. Thess. c. iii. v. 6 & 7. (p. 29)

The tone and viewpoint of the extract look forward to what Dickens will most successfully accomplish in Great Expectations, where the mature Pip casts back with wry humour upon his youthful experiences and sufferings at the hands of adults. The distance in both cases lent by the mature, adult consciousness adds to the absurdity of what is being depicted, whilst the absurdity in turn diminishes the immediacy of the pain of the experience for the reader.

But there is a different, albeit more momentary escape for the reader from these mordant memories to be discovered in the living present. This escape inheres in the comic qualities of some of the minor characters whom Arthur encounters. This passage is characteristic:

> 'Beg pardon, sir,' said a brisk waiter, rubbing the table. 'Wish see bed-room?'
> 'Yes. I have just made up my mind to do it.'
> 'Chaymaid!' cried the waiter. 'Gelen box num seven wish see room!'
> 'Stay!' said Clennam, rousing himself. 'I was not thinking of what I said; I answered mechanically. I am not going to sleep here. I am going home.'
> 'Deed, sir?' Chaymaid! Gelen box num seven, not go sleep here, gome.' (p. 30)

Slight though it is, the incident is perhaps typical of many such brief interludes in Dickens, nor should it merely be regarded, in Orwell's phrase, as the "unnecessary detail"[17] imposed upon the main narrative direction of the chapter. Its purpose instead is to remind us, amidst the generalised depiction of human misery, that the human spirit, surfacing eccentrically in particular human beings, has the vigour to resist the pervasive deadening drabness. Indeed, it is remarkable how often Dickens is able to lend an indelible individuality to a minor character through the comic action of a brief incident.

From this, however, we return to Dickens's and Arthur's revulsion at the filth of the city, filth which pollutes even nature's rain and wonderful workings. In the following passage, the city is viewed with an almost Swiftian disgust: "Mr. Arthur

[17] "Charles Dickens" in Inside the Whale, p. 69 (Orwell's emphasis). In this essay, Orwell argues that Dickens could not resist the "florid little squiggle on the edge of the page" (p. 70).

Clennam took up his hat and buttoned his coat, and walked out. In the country, the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents, and every drop would have had its bright association with some beautiful form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul stale smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, dirt-stained, wretched addition to the gutters" (pp. 30-31). The tone here is strongly reminiscent of Swift's "A City Shower". And the passage's carefully accreted picture of gloom and depression, of death and decay, and of man's seemingly unfailing capacity to thwart the joyful and the pleasant, fittingly prepares the reader for Dickens's introduction of Mrs. Clennam and Flintwich.

It is in this section of the novel that we do encounter a rare instance in Dickens of a genuinely black humour in the description of the rotten house juxtaposed so significantly with Mrs. Clennam's religious outlook. This humour is designed to take effect against the excremental background setting of decay, gloom, and filth which form such appropriate correlatives to the diseased and static mind of Mrs. Clennam, locked in her corrosive circles of Old Testament beliefs:

> She then put on the spectacles and read certain passages aloud from a book--sternly, fiercely, wrathfully--praying that her enemies (she made them by her tone and manner expressly hers) might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust, and that they might be utterly exterminated. (p. 35)

In the case of Flintwich, there is a quite literal gallows humour:

> His neck was so twisted, that the knotted ends of his white cravat usually dangled under one ear; his natural acerbity and energy, always contending with a second nature of habitual repression, gave his features a

> swollen and suffused look; and altogether, he had a weird appearance of having hanged himself at one time or other, and of having gone about ever since, halter and all, exactly as some timely hand had cut him down. (p. 37)

Variations of this "hanging" joke accompany Flintwich's further appearances in the novel. Its effect is to assist the reader to penetrate directly and economically to an understanding of the psychic distortion that, over a lifetime, produces a human grotesque such as Flintwich. It is specifically the comic mode that offers this short-cut to a realisation of what Flintwich has made of himself, for the simile of the hanged man expresses with admirable comic precision his emotional death: how the vital forces of Flintwich's psyche have been twisted, dessicated, turned off. The very violence of the hanging image expresses most appropriately the violence he has done to the human side of his nature. In the realm of human emotions, Flintwich has long since committed a grotesque suicide. In this regard, he is the suitable companion to the unbending Mrs. Clennam, whose self-imprisoned immobility of body and spirit reflects with such accuracy her emotional paralysis, and her consequent inability to offer her foster child Arthur any of the warmth of a normal mother.[18]

I commenced my exploration of Little Dorrit by discussing the differences between the opening sections of Little Dorrit and Dombey and Son. I noted especially how the rather distanced opening chapter of Little Dorrit contrasts with the way that

[18] The dénouement revealing Arthur as the child of another woman is, of course, reserved for the end of the novel, but it does help to cast a restrospective light on Mrs. Clennam's behaviour towards Arthur. It helps to account for some part, at least, of her harshness towards him.

Dickens plunges the reader in medias res in chapter i of Dombey and Son. I defended the opening of Little Dorrit against charges of irrelevancy by pointing to the wider scope of action that Dickens is aiming for; to the tight pattern of causality and interconnectness amongst events and characters that he initiates; and to the careful foreshadowing of themes that are to be developed in the rest of the novel.

I then went on to look at the evidence of Dickens's careful structural planning in chapter ii of the novel. In particular, I examined the manner in which Dickens establishes Arthur's superior sensibility through his dialogue with Mr. Meagles; a sensibility that is to develop into a normative centre of consciousness in the novel. We saw, on the other hand, how Mr. Meagles's limitations as well as the irony of his belief in his own freedom emerge from his use of the word "'practical'".

In the third chapter I discussed the significant changes in tone that result in the dark satire surrounding the descriptions of London which lead up to Dickens's portrayal of Mrs. Clennam and Flintwich. I argued, however, that the grim humour in these passages serves to control an otherwise unbearable picture and offers at the same time a sane counterpoint to the depicted bleakness.

In discussing the theme of imprisonment versus freedom in all three chapters, I was concerned to demonstrate that charges of a dark sameness about the novel, or of a lack of humour in the writing

are unjustified,[19] and that the humour, even when it assumes the form of the black humour associated with the characterisations of Mrs. Clennam and Flintwich, invariably also supports and clarifies Dickens's thematic concerns. My next section follows Dickens's comic art into those chapters of the novel that deal with the Marshalsea prison.

ii

The first Marshalsea chapter, in an abrupt change of scene, follows closely upon the description of Arthur's return home and his bleak negotiations with his mother and Flintwich. But although the scene changes, the same theme of imprisonment is continued and developed. In this section I shall be discussing both the Marshalsea and the Circumlocution Office. I intend firstly to show how the Marshalsea chapters form an important part of a thematic development that leads up to the Circumlocution Office; I will try secondly to demonstrate how the ramifications of the Circumlocution Office extend through the novel.

Dickens himself seemed to attach a special importance to the Marshalsea chapters. In a letter that Forster quotes dated 16th September, 1855, we have the record of the considerable care and

[19] In fairness to Kincaid, I should note that he does point out that "the tone of the novel is richly various" (p. 196). Nevertheless, he also goes on to argue that "the nature of the humour is highly deceptive, in the sense that it is almost never pure, almost never presented without either accompanying blackness or staccato reversals" (p. 196). Furthermore, the whole thrust of Kincaid's chapter on Little Dorrit stresses his view that there is "no question of comic relief" (p. 204) in the novel, and that "Comic joy is seen as callous escape" (p. 205). His position is thus very different from my own argument in the course of this chapter.

attention that went into this portion of the novel. Dickens wrote that, "'I am just now getting to work on number three. . . . There is an enormous outlay in the Father of the Marshalsea chapter, in the way of getting a great lot of matter into a small space'".[20] I shall argue that this "'enormous outlay'" results in the superb control that characterises the various chapters dealing with the Marshalsea; a control that excludes any possibilities of sentiment, but which offers instead a sharp precision in the rendering of intricate human relations and emotions.

It is not difficult to discern the centrality of Mr. Dorrit to the Marshalsea chapters. His characterisation is both complex and important in terms of Dickens's comic practice, and I therefore intend to reserve a full discussion of his role in the novel for a later section of this chapter. For the moment, however, I wish to examine the depiction of the Marshalsea largely as a preparation for the satire of the Circumlocution Office.

The introduction to the Marshalsea comes, in fact, in the form of a deceptively light satire upon the governance of England (foreshadowing the strong attack on the Circumlocution Office to follow), encapsulated here in a microcosmic incident within the Marshalsea. This involves the smugglers who, in theory, are supposed to be incarcerated in a special inner gaol, with less freedom even than the debtors. As the narrator ironically notes of the occasional inspections:

> On those truly British occasions, the smugglers, if any, made a feint of walking into the strong cells and the blind alley, while this somebody pretended to do his something; and made a reality of walking out again as

[20] Forster, p. 182.

> soon as he hadn't done it--neatly epitomising the administration of most of the public affairs, in our right little, tight little, island. (p. 57)

The apparent light-heartedness of tone conceals both the deeper disgust, and the main motif of pretended work which will surface only later in the chapter dealing with the Circumlocution Office.

As we proceed into the chapter, it becomes increasingly evident that the Marshalsea provides in a more degenerate form, a faithful reflection of the filth and decay already established in the macrocosm of London outside the prison.[21] Within its walls, a variety of seedy and decrepit debtors display a more prominent (because more extreme), form of the same values more discreetly held on the outside. A good example of this is provided in the description of Amy's birth, which offers a dramatised opportunity for contrasting the fragility of the child's new life with the coarse hopelessness of the inhabitants, broken by their imprisonment. The scene also offers an interesting contrast to the birth of little Paul, if we compare the two pompous society doctors in the opening chapter of Dombey and Son with the "ghastly medical scarecrow" who attends Mrs. Dorrit:

> The turnkey opening the door, disclosed in a wretched, ill-smelling little room, two hoarse, puffy, red-faced personages seated at a rickety table, playing at all-fours, smoking pipes, and drinking brandy.
> 'Doctor,' said the turnkey, 'here's a gentleman's wife in want of you without a minute's loss of time!'
> The doctor's friend was in the positive degree of hoarseness, puffiness, red-facedness, all-fours, tobacco, dirt, and brandy; the doctor in the comparative--hoarser, puffier, more red-faced, more all-fourey, tobaccoer, dirtier, and brandier. The doctor was amazingly shabby,

[21] Kincaid, p. 193, offers some useful comments on the notion of the Marshalsea as a microcosm.

> in a torn and darned rough-weather sea-jacket, out at elbows and eminently short of buttons (he had been in his time the experienced surgeon carried by a passenger ship), the dirtiest white trousers conceivable by mortal man, carpet slippers, and no visible linen. 'Childbed?' said the doctor. 'I'm the boy!' (p. 60)

The passage is instructive in the way that it reveals forces against which Mr. Dorrit will have to struggle, for the degenerate figure of the sodden doctor shows how efficiently the hopelessness of prison life reduces the man to a squalid shadow of his former self. And here Mrs. Bangham, the gin-soaked amateur midwife, is a suitably grotesque companion to this broken relic of a doctor. When she embarks on one of those idiosyncratic rhetorical flights that so distinguish many of the otherwise minor characters in Dickens, it is the bizarre comicality of her utterance that helps to place and control the desperate pathos of the situation:

> 'The flies trouble you don't they, my dear?' said Mrs. Bangham. 'But p'raps they'll take your mind off it, and do you good. What between the buryin ground, the grocer's, the waggon-stables, and the paunch trade, the Marshalsea flies gets very large. P'raps they're sent as a consolation, if we only know'd it. How are you now, my dear? No better? No, my dear, it ain't to be expected; you'll be worse before you're better, and you know it, don't you? Yes. That's right! And to think of a sweet little cherub being born inside the lock! Now ain't it pretty, ain't that something to carry you through it pleasant? Why, we ain't had such a thing happen here, my dear, not for I couldn't name the time when. And you a crying too?' said Mrs. Bangham, to rally the patient more and more. 'You! Making yourself so famous! With the flies a falling into the gallipots by fifties! And everything a going on so well! And here if there ain't,' said Mrs. Bangham as the door opened, 'if there ain't your dear gentleman along with Dr. Haggage! And now indeed we are complete, I think!' (p. 61)

As a character, Mrs. Bangham obviously recalls that other and more famous midwife, Mrs. Gamp. In both cases, though, it is interesting to note Dickens's lack of condescension in the characterisation,

and his recognition (celebration, almost), of the strong individuality, the "otherness" of the character.

The passage works in two complementary ways: it reveals the ineluctably filthy reality of the prison, so inimical to the prospects of a new life, yet the expression of this reality is undoubtedly comic. As in the case of little Paul's birth, there is an inherent potential in the scene for an overwrought emotional effect, yet it is just this fine balance between the comic and the serious that enables the episode to be so remarkably controlled.

The effect of the absurd, self-centred flight of Mrs. Bangham is heightened by a further encounter between her and the doctor in which the correctness of their speech and the decorum they attempt to maintain is at comic odds with their advanced alcoholic degeneracy:

> 'Mrs. Bangham,' said the doctor, before he had been there twenty minutes, 'go outside and fetch a little brandy, or we shall have you giving in.'
> 'Thank you, sir. But none on my accounts,' said Mrs. Bangham.
> 'Mrs. Bangham,' returned the doctor, 'I am in professional attendance on this lady, and don't choose to allow any discussion on your part. Go outside and fetch a little brandy, or I foresee that you'll break down.'
> 'You're to be obeyed, sir,' said Mrs. Bangham, rising. 'If you was to put your own lips to it, I think you wouldn't be the worse, for you look but poorly, Sir.'
> 'Mrs. Bangham,' returned the doctor, 'I am not your business, thank you, but you are mine. Never you mind <u>me</u>, if you please. What you have got to do, is, to do as you are told, and to go and get what I bid you.'
> (p. 62)

The overall effect of the humour within the passage is to increase the pathos felt by the reader at Amy's inauspicious entry into the world, a pathos that can be genuinely and imaginatively experienced since it is not thrust upon the reader, but left for him to recreate through the circumstantial detail. There is no sense, as,

say, in the death of Little Nell, that our feelings are being openly and directly manipulated;[22] the comedy instead helps to convince us of the genuine brutality against which she must struggle. It is the very bleakness of this beginning that makes her later achievement in the novel so impressive as a record of transcendence.

In his drunken state, the Doctor plays the one further role of perverse advocate for the Marshalsea prison:

> 'A little more elbow-room is all we want here. We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here; there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by creditors and bring a man's heart into his mouth. Nobody comes here to ask if a man's at home, and to say he'll stand on the door mat till he is. Nobody writes threatening letters about money to this place. It's freedom, sir, it's freedom! I have had to-day's practice at home and abroad, on a march, and aboard ship, and I'll tell you this: I don't know that I have ever pursued it under such quiet circumstances, as here this day. Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We have done all that--we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace. That's the word for it. Peace.' (p. 63)

As we will also discover later in the case of Mr. Dorrit's idiom, the weak of will are often the most pretentious of speech, since their pretension is all that is left to them to serve as a convenient veil, covering the disastrous collapse of their world. The parallel between the value-system of the Marshalsea microcosm and the outer world will force us to question whether there is intended to be any great discrepancy between the mental willessness of those physically imprisoned through misfortune or incompetence, and those in the outer world who are imprisoned by their failure to

[22] I am indebted here to F.R. Leavis's comparison of Little Nell with Little Dorrit on pp. 297-8 of Dickens the Novelist.

demand reform in the administration of their society. Sophistry in thought and periphrasis in expression are here shown not to be limited to what we will discover in the Circumlocution Office. The doctor in the Marshalsea sounds remarkably like Mr. Meagles extolling the virtues of his English home to Arthur Clennam in chapter xvi (p. 192). Ironically, both of these characters share the capacity to perceive "'freedom'" in different realities of imprisonment.

The description above of the Marshalsea and the bleak picture of London on a Sunday which I discussed earlier (see above p. 105), together prepare the reader for what now follows: Dickens's attack upon the administration of England. This takes the form, in a chapter ironically entitled "The Whole Science of Government", of Dickens's well-known satire on the Circumlocution Office.

An instructive means of clarifying Dickens's satiric method and purpose in the Circumlocution Office chapters is to begin by examining the comments of a critic who has misinterpreted Dickens in this respect. Discussing the first ten paragraphs of chapter x, C.P. Snow comments that "It seems to me . . . obvious that . . . Dickens was writing in one of those moods of manic incantatory rhetoric which came upon him when he had something simple to say upon a public issue".[23] Snow continues:

> In fact, he was doing just what many people do when they make a public speech. He had become convinced of, or obsessed with, or had acquired a simple black-and-white conception. He didn't wish to qualify the conception, but he did want to rub it in. Many of us have done the

[23] "Dickens and the Public Service", in <u>Dickens 1970: Centenary Essays</u>, ed. Michael Slater (London: Chapman and Hall, 1970), pp. 131-2.

> same thing in a public speech, and have fallen into the same tricks of reiteration.[24]

The misconstruction is illuminating. In his overriding concern in his essay to defend the nineteenth century Civil Service from what he sees as an unfair attack, Snow misses Dickens's purpose. Leaving aside for the moment the accusation of "simplicity", it is clear that in talking of Dickens's "standard oratorical repetition", Snow fails completely to penetrate the more comprehensive parodic intention.

Snow quite correctly apprehends the more obvious parody in the seventh paragraph, which assumes the form of "the repetitive rhetoric of a parliamentary spokesman"[25] (there is a parallel here with the technique used in Cousin Feenix's speech at the Dombey wedding),[26] but he does not see that this parody might be extended throughout the chapter in the very nature of the prose itself aping the official prolixity. He therefore is in the ironic position of criticising Dickens for achieving what is actually a most appropriate fusion of form and content. A sample paragraph from among those that Snow attacks should make his error clear:

> It is true that How not to do it was the great study and object of all public departments and professional politicians all round the Circumlocution Office. It is true that every new premier and every new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their utmost faculties to discovering How not to do it. It is true that from the moment when a general election was over, every returned man who had been raving on hustings because it hadn't been done, and who had been asking the friends of the honourable gentlemen in the opposite interest on pain of impeachment to tell

[24] Snow, pp. 131-2.

[25] Snow, p. 132.

[26] See p. 60 of my first chapter.

> him why it hadn't been done, and who had been asserting that it must be done, and who had been pledging himself that it should be done, began to devise, How it was not to be done. It is true that the debates of both Houses of Parliament the whole session through, uniformly tended to the protracted deliberation, How not to do it. It is true that the royal speech at the opening of such session virtually said, My lords and gentlemen, you have a considerable stroke of work to do, and you will please to retire to your respective chambers, and discuss, How not to do it. It is true that the royal speech, at the close of such session, virtually said, My lords and gentlemen, you have through several laborious months been considering with great loyalty and patriotism, How not to do it, and you have found out; and with the blessing of Providence upon the harvest (natural, not political), I now dismiss you. All this is true, but the Circumlocution Office went beyond it. (pp. 104-5)

In satirising circumlocution, it is surely suitable that Dickens should depend upon length for his effect in order to parody the orotund world of the Circumlocution Office. When Snow criticises the various rhetorical devices that we find in the passage--the anaphora and parallelism, the balance and antithesis--as tiresome weaknesses, he appears to little realise to what extent he is ironically praising Dickens's art. These various schemes are the chief means by which Dickens suggests, in the dreary repetitiveness, the very immobility of the institution under attack, and the consequent manner in which it revolves in elaborate linguistic circles without perceptible progress. By interpreting the repetition as Dickens's "simplicity", Snow misses the thrust of the satiric attack and the effectiveness of Dickens's parody.

The chapter as a whole, in fact, ranges through many of the standard rhetorical devices by which those in power are able to mask their incompetence through irresponsible rhetoric. As so often in Dickens, it is the very nature of oratory itself that is under attack here, for the reader soon apprehends that the Circumlocution Office comes to stand for the general quality of British rule, thus

continuing on a more comprehensive scale the kind of attack which in Bleak House was limited, in the Chancery Court, to the administration of justice.

The satire reveals Dickens's deep revulsion at the frivolous complacency of contemporary rule that could with such facility cover its inertia with words. It is possible, in fact, to trace a general history of disenchantment and distrust of oratory in Dickens (principally political and religious oratory), back to his days as a Parliamentary reporter, where he conceived a measure of contempt for the endless speechifying. The Eatanswill chapter in Pickwick Papers (chapter xiii), provides an early example of Dickens's comic treatment of fraudulency in the local political process. The parodic prose here in the Circumlocution Office chapter, as evidenced in the passage cited above, can truly be described as tortuous in its lack of progression, a formal quality that quickly finds a physical correlative. As Hillis Miller comments:

> The most striking appearance in Little Dorrit of the symbolic labyrinth is the Circumlocution Office, with its inextricably tangled halls, offices, passageways, and levels of authority through which Arthur Clennam and Daniel Doyce meander hopelessly, filling out reams of forms and making appeal after appeal without coming any closer to a satisfactory answer to their question.[27]

It begins to be evident that Dickens's attack, far from being "simple", is the culmination of a careful and complex preparation in the earlier chapters that have already been scrutinised. Snow again misses the point when he charges that the chapter does not fairly reflect the contemporary state of the civil service. The

[27] Hillis Miller, p. 253.

burden of his criticism here is that Dickens did not possess an intimate knowledge of the real structure of the English Civil Service, or how it operated. Snow quotes House's claim in this connection that "'It was, of course, the Crimean campaign that made the Circumlocution Office parts of Little Dorrit peculiarly topical, and they were substantially fair'".[28] In reaction to this, Snow comments that House "doesn't seem to have had much basis for his 'substantially fair' except for the military mess in the Crimea. In fact, military administration was unspeakably bad in every country in Europe throughout the nineteenth century with the single exception of Prussia".[29] It should hardly be necessary to comment on the extraordinary misdirection of Snow's argument. It is necessary, however, to point to the peculiar quality of Snow's language, and to note how the linguistic cleansing in a phrase such as "military mess" manages to obfuscate the real human tragedy of the Crimea in a manner that is worthy of the Circumlocution Office itself. The phrase reveals nothing so clearly as the fact that Snow is himself contaminated here by a civil servant's outlook that all too characteristically desires to downgrade the important. The result is that Snow prevents himself from seeing the satire of the Circumlocution Office within its wider context in the novel, or from perceiving that Dickens's satire performs a real critical function.

To compare Dickens's Circumlocution Office with an actual nineteenth century Civil Service Department (Snow suggests that

[28] Snow, p. 138. Butt and Tillotson's comments regarding Dickens's interest in the Crimea have already been recorded on p. 97 of this chapter.

[29] Snow, p. 138.

Dickens's model was the Treasury), is to take literally, on a strictly factual, historical level, an imaginative conception which, as the name itself suggests, does not operate on this level. The Circumlocution Office should rather be taken as a synthesis of contemporary English administration; a synthesis that is based on truth and which is therefore able to satirise convincingly the nature of bureaucracy. As F.R. Leavis points out, "even if we don't accept it as exhaustively representative of the way the country was administered, [the Circumlocution Office] conveys so unanswerably what we know to have been a large measure of the essential truth".[30]

As its multiplicity of tentacles spread through the book, the sheer satirical force behind Dickens's conception of the Circumlocution Office helps to give coherence and direction to his vision of a redundant and blundering bureaucracy. It is because of this diversity in the Circumlocution Office's ramifications that I take issue with Butt and Tillotson's comments about the "episodic" nature of the Barnacle involvement in the plot.[31] And it is also important to note here that the satire gains its strength and effectiveness through two aspects which make it characteristically Dickensian.

The diversity of satire arises firstly from the fact that the satire is primarily embodied in the multiple facets of the Barnacle clan, who permeate the novel to a far greater degree than Butt and Tillotson allow. This is a way of insisting that it is never Dickens's practice to pursue for any length a generalised, or

[30] Leavis, p. 336.

[31] Their comments are recorded on p. 97 of this chapter.

descriptively satirical attack without embodying its tensions within particular characters.[32]

Secondly, Dickens is careful not merely to particularise his attack, but also to temper its satiric force with other comic elements. Here I can only endorse Sucksmith's comment that "Satire in Dickens's fiction appears more satisfying when it is successfully mixed with true comedy; when it occurs alone or is too dominant, the critical note is apt to appear strident and the irony cold and calculating. Comedy proper contributes an element of sympathy".[33] I would add that it is precisely this element of sympathy that lends complexity to Dickens's satiric art.

In the case of the Circumlocution Office, the narrator's sardonic tone in his generalised attack is subsequently softened by the comic satire that deals with the specific inhabitants of the Office, as we move through the peripheral characters such as the Wobblers to engage with the great Barnacle family itself. Even in these peripheral characters though, as in the case of Mrs. Bangham, it is Dickens's interest in the individuality, the "otherness" of the characters that prevents the satire from being too reductive. And although there is intended to be an obvious allegorical element to the Barnacle name, this also is lessened as the Barnacles are discretely characterised.

Clennam's first encounter is with Mr. Barnacle Junior, who,

[32] This is a practice by no means peculiar to Little Dorrit--indeed, it can be regarded as a general principle of Dickens's satirical art. The opening chapter of Bleak House (1853) is a case in point, where the initial attack upon the Chancery Court shades rapidly into a portrayal of the different lawyers joking about the Jarndyce case.

[33] Sucksmith, p. 318.

like his relative Mr. Sparkler, is a brainless excrescence upon the public body. In an emblematic instance of his redundant parasitism, he is discovered by Arthur "supporting his spine against the mantel-shelf" (p. 108). He displays a farcical inability to articulate a simple sentence, a failure that contrasts ironically with the sonorous rhetorical powers of Lord Decimus in the House:

> 'Oh, I say. Look here! My father's not in the way, and won't be in the way to-day,' said Barnacle Junior. 'Is this anything that I can do?'
> (Click! Eye-glass down. Barnacle Junior quite frightened and feeling all round himself, but not able to find it.)
> 'You are very good,' said Arthur Clennam. 'I wish however to see Mr. Barnacle.'
> 'But I say. Look here! You haven't got any appointment, you know,' said Barnacle Junior.
> (By this time he had found the eye-glass, and put it up again.)
> 'No,' said Arthur Clennam. 'That is what I wish to have.'
> 'But I say. Look here! Is this public business?' asked Barnacle Junior.
> (Click! Eye-glass down again. Barnacle Junior in that state of search after it, that Mr. Clennam felt it useless to reply at present.)
> 'Is it,' said Barnacle Junior, taking heed of his visitor's brown face, 'anything about--Tonnage--or that sort of thing?'
> (Pausing for a reply, he opened his right eye with his hand, and stuck his glass in it, in that inflammatory manner that his eye began watering dreadfully.)
> (p. 108)

Being incapable of coherent utterance, Barnacle Junior relies upon class mannerisms and patronisations: "'Oh, I say, Look here!'" With only the vaguest conception of his own orbit of action, as his "'Tonnage--or that sort of thing?'" indicates, he substitutes instead a farcical series of eye-glass postures, in parody of his own class; postures which, to further emphasise his utter uselessness, he is quite incapable of controlling. Indeed, the farcical manoeuvres merely add to his weak-mindedness by preventing him from seeing anything.

This sense of an absurd facade is continued in the description of Tite Barnacle's odorous "hutch" (p. 111) of a house to which Arthur is directed. In order to cling to the ship of state and effectively impede its progress through their proliferating spread, Barnacles must needs suffer the most inconvenient and uncomfortable positions. Here the inconvenience is reminiscent of the mews dwelling of Miss Tox and Major Bagstock; the "right" address at the cost of great discomfort:

> Arthur Clennam came to a squeezed house, with a ramshackle bowed front, little dingy windows, and a little dark area like a damp waistcoat-pocket, which he found to be number twenty-four, Mews Street, Grosvenor Square. To the sense of smell, the house was like a sort of bottle filled with a strong distillation of mews; and when the footman opened the door, he seemed to take the stopper out. (p. 110)

From another angle, the description of the Barnacle household seems to suggest the state of Britain itself, where the maintenance of an impressive Barnacle class is achieved only at the cost of considerable internal squalor and discomfort. "Front" is to be maintained at all costs, an idea sustained throughout the novel whenever the Barnacles or their extensive connection are encountered, no matter how nearly reality threatens to break through in the form of unpleasant odours, or, as with Mrs. Gowan's "grace and favour" matchbox apartment at Hampton Court, the squabbling of servants behind thin partitions.

I have suggested that the comic approach lends complexity to Dickens's attack on the Circumlocution Office. But on p. 22 of my previous chapter on Dombey and Son, I also postulated that Dickens

adopts the comic approach as an humane counterpoint.[34] By this latter term I meant that the comedy constitutes in itself a sane alternative to the disorder under attack. As Wylie Sypher cogently notes:

> To be able to laugh at evil and error means that we have surmounted them. Comedy may be a philosophic, as well as a psychological compensation. Whenever we become aware that this is not the best of possible worlds, we need the help of the comedian to meet the "insuperable defects of actuality." We escape with him into a logical order by laughing at the imperfections of the world about us; the comic artist releases us from the limitations in things as they are.[35]

Further, Sypher proceeds to contend that the comic mode often refuses to compromise with the defects it exposes:

> Chafed by the deficiencies in reality the comedian may be more intransigent than the tragedian. . . . the comedian refuses to make . . . concessions to actuality and serves, instead, as chief tactician in a permanent resistance movement, or rebellion, within the frontiers of human experience. By temperament the comedian is often a fifth columnist in social life.[36]

This insight accords closely with the actual experience of reading <u>Little Dorrit</u>, for we repeatedly encounter, in the metamorphosis of different characters and situations, the ethos of the Circumlocution Office coming under consistent and relentless attack by Dickens. The combined thrust of these comic attacks may be stated as the consistent undermining of various false notions of gentility, and especially the use of facades of one type or another to disguise an

[34] My discussion of the humour in the London passages on p. 103 of this chapter is also pertinent.

[35] "The Meanings of Comedy", in <u>Comedy</u>, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p. 246. Sypher quotes from James Feibleman's <u>In Praise of Comedy</u> (1939).

[36] Sypher, pp. 246-7.

underlying sterility or bankruptcy of outlook.

Although the various comic strategies to undermine these postures obviously differ widely (I will presently examine some of the variant forms), Dickens's overall attitude appears close to the sardonic indignation which Carlyle vents in those chapters of Past and Present dealing with the "Unworking Aristocracy". This passage may be regarded as seminal:

> Again and again, What shall we say of the Idle Aristocracy, the Owners of the Soil of England; whose recognised function is that of handsomely consuming the rents of England, shooting the partridges of England, and as an agreeable amusement (if the purchase-money and other conveniences serve), dilettante-ing in Parliament. . . . That a class of men entitled to live sumptuously on the marrow of the earth; permitted simply, nay entreated, and as yet entreated in vain, to do nothing at all in return, was never heretofore seen on the face of this Planet.[37]

To which may be added this further Carlylean text:

> I say, you did not make the Land of England; and, by the possession of it, you are bound to furnish guidance and governance to England! That is the law of your position on this God's-Earth; an everlasting act of Heaven's Parliament not repealable in St. Stephen's or elsewhere! True government and guidance; not no-government and Laissez-faire. . . .[38]

It is the "no-government" which is depicted by Dickens as being at the heart of the Circumlocution Office--that great emptiness captured in the emblematically satirical image of the Young Barnacle discovered by Arthur "gaping his weary way on to four o'clock" (p. 113). But doing nothing is apparently, in the strictest

[37] Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (1843; rpt. London: Dent, 1960), p. 171.

[38] Carlyle, p. 170.

sense of the word, the true role of a gentleman;[39] seen in this traditional light the "logical" result is, therefore, the farcical amateurism of the Circumlocution Office, in the refusal to be professional, to know or acknowledge one's scope of action, or to assume the proper responsibility of the office.[40] One thinks here too of Clarence's absurd performance at the Meagles dinner, commencing in his conversation with Henry Gowan:

> 'I want to speak to you, Gowan. I say. Look here. Who is that fellow?'
> 'A friend of our host's. None of mine.'
> 'He's a most ferocious Radical, you know,' said Young Barnacle.
> 'Is he? How do you know?'
> 'Egod, sir, he was Pitching into our people the other day, in the most tremendous manner. Went up to our place and Pitched into my father to that extent that it was necessary to order him out. Came back to our department, and Pitched into me. Look here. You never saw such a fellow.'
> 'What did he want?'
> 'Egod, sir,' returned Young Barnacle, 'He said he wanted to know, you know! Pervaded our department--without an appointment--and said he wanted to know!'
> (p. 207)

Any work would compromise the treasured amateurism of the gentlemanly caste, so the "activity" of the Department consists in passing memoranda internally amongst each other, and ignoring the outside world. In this way the Circumlocution Office comes close to being a perfect haven for these negative notions of gentility; it represents also a vastly successful scheme for getting paid for

[39] The whole notion of what constitutes a gentleman is to be extensively examined by Dickens in Great Expectations, and is a subject I shall be returning to in my next chapter.

[40] The farcical presentation should not blind the reader to the tragic potential of irresponsibility: on p. 118 of this chapter, I noted the connection between the tragic waste of life in the Crimea and Dickens's conception of the Circumlocution Office.

doing nothing whilst simultaneously maintaining a suitable posture of indispensability and service to the country.

By a further ironic twist, this massive impertinence manifests itself in a characteristic resentment against the public. There is a definite sense, for instance, in Arthur's visit to Tite Barnacle's house, that he unforgiveably intrudes upon the privacy of a gentleman: "Mr. Barnacle made him a severe bow, as a wounded man of family, a wounded man of place, and a wounded man of a gentlemanly residence, all rolled into one; and he made Mr. Barnacle a bow, and was shut out into Mews Street by the flabby footman" (p. 112). The scale of the impertinence in the Circumlocution Office can only be paralleled by the massive swindles of a Merdle in the business world.

This same resentment and desire to "shut out" the despised public is pervasively evident in all the Circumlocution Office's dealings. Arthur encounters it back at the Office where Mr. Wobbler and his fellow worker continue an anecdote oblivious of Arthur's presence:

> 'Mr. Wobbler?' inquired the suitor.
> Both gentlemen glanced at him, and seemed surprised at his assurance.
> 'So he went,' said the gentleman with the gun-barrel, who was an extremely deliberate speaker, 'down to his cousin's place, and took the Dog with him by rail. Inestimable Dog. Flew at the porter fellow when he was put into the dog-box, and flew at the guard when he was taken out. He got half-a-dozen fellows into a Barn, and a good supply of Rats, and timed the Dog. Finding the Dog able to do it immensely, made the match, and heavily backed the Dog. When the match came off, some devil of a fellow was bought over, Sir, Dog was made drunk. Dog's master was cleaned out.'
> 'Mr. Wobbler?' inquired the suitor.
> The gentleman who was spreading the marmalade returned, without looking up from that occupation, 'What did he call the Dog?'
> 'Called him Lovely,' said the other gentleman. 'Said the Dog was the perfect picture of the old aunt from whom he had expectations. Found him particularly like

> her when hocussed.'
> 'Mr. Wobbler?' said the suitor.
> Both gentlemen laughed for some time. The gentleman with the gun-barrel, considering it on inspection in a satisfactory state, referred it to the other; receiving confirmation of his views, he fitted it into its place in the case before him, and took out the stock and polished that, softly whistling.
> 'Mr. Wobbler?' said the suitor.
> 'What's the matter?' then said Mr. Wobbler, with his mouth full.
> 'I want to know--' and Arthur Clennam again mechanically set forth what he wanted to know.
> 'Can't inform you,' observed Mr. Wobbler, apparently to his lunch. 'Never heard of it. Nothing at all to do with it. Better try Mr. Clive, second door on the left in the next passage.' (p. 114)

It is not difficult to recognise in both these characters the prototypal minor civil servant, in the arrogance towards outsiders and dandyism of speech. There is, too, in the cleaning of the gun, a residual attempt to follow the traditional pursuits of a gentleman--a title that is so ironically insisted upon in the passage since it is so much at variance with the discourteous attitude towards Arthur. And Mr. Wobbler's very name sums up with droll precision the unprincipled flaccidity of the civil servant in his equivocation towards his job and responsibilities.

The arrogance and resentment displayed towards intruders into what they appear to regard as their private domain assumes diverse forms in the novel. At a higher level, these features appear to manifest themselves in a typical pomposity of demeanour and language, as, for example in Lord Decimus's address at Pet's wedding to Henry Gowan, where he "turned out to be the windiest creature here . . . trotting, with the complacency of an idiotic elephant, among howling labyrinths of sentences which he seemed to take for high roads, and never so much as wanted to get out of" (pp. 407-8).

Characteristically too, the resentment takes the distinct feeling among the Barnacle clan that their true worth has never been properly remunerated by their country. The sentiments of the Hampton Court hangers-on are typical:

> Some of these Bohemians were of an irritable temperament, as constantly soured and vexed by two mental trials: the first, the consciousness that they had never got enough out of the public; the second, the consciousness that the public were admitted into the building. Under the latter great wrong, a few suffered dreadfully--particularly on Sundays, when they had for some time expected the earth to open and swallow the public up; but which desirable event had not yet occurred, in consequence of some reprehensible laxity in the arrangements of the Universe. (p. 312)

The light satire on their impudence has its more serious level: that Dickens saw not merely an unscrupulous, but an inherently criminal aspect to this attitude is revealed by his characterisation of Rigaud, for only now does the latent irony of that "gentleman's" swaggering imposture in the first chapter begin to gain a wider resonance:

> 'Cavalletto,' said Monsieur Rigaud, suddenly withdrawing his gaze from this funnel to which they had both involuntarily turned their eyes, 'you know me for a gentleman?'
> 'Surely, surely!'
> 'How long have we been here?'
> 'I, eleven weeks, to-morrow night at midnight. You, nine weeks and three days, at five this afternoon.'
> 'Have I ever done anything here? Ever touched the broom, or spread the mats, or rolled them up, or found the draughts, or collected the dominoes, or put my hand to any kind of work?'
> 'Never!'
> 'Have you ever thought of looking to me to do any kind of work?'
> John Baptist answered with that peculiar back-handed shake of the right forefinger which is the most expressive negative in the Italian language.
> 'No! You knew from the first moment when you saw me here, that I was a gentleman?'
> 'ALTRO!' returned John Baptist, closing his eyes and giving his head a most vehement toss. . . .

> 'Haha! You are right! A gentleman I am, a gentleman I'll live, and a gentleman I'll die! It's my intent to be a gentleman. It's my game. Death of my soul, I play it out wherever I go!' (pp. 8-9)

In parodic form, the debased Rigaud mimics the later antics of all those who belong to the Barnacle clan, for his use of the word "play" aptly captures their pretence, whilst his exclamation "Death of my soul" carries an ironic burden beyond the mere convenience of a transliterated French oath. The oath comments with some precision, in fact, upon the moral implications of Barnacle philistinism. It is difficult to guage how fully Dickens himself appreciated the subversive element in Rigaud,[41] whose stage swagger represents in an extreme form the more discreet posturings of the Barnacles, and whose moral outlook--although he lacks their impregnable air of respectability--approximates closely to the Barnacle vision of things. However, the nature of Dickens's attack on the parasitical irresponsibility and nepotism of the Barnacles (an example of the latter quality being the political jobbery between Merdle and Lord Decimus Barnacle resulting in a sinecure for the moronic Edmund Sparkler), suggests that he was well-aware that the logical outcome of the Barnacle values is a form of exploitation which, though perhaps not strictly illegal, certainly has links with Rigaud's criminality.

Like the Barnacles, Rigaud also, as Lionel Trilling has pointed out, tends to contaminate those with whom he comes into contact. Speaking in particular of Henry Gowan, Mrs. Gowan and Fanny Dorrit, Trilling comments that "Around Blandois are grouped certain charac-

[41] Though his close connection with Henry Gowan, which I discuss on p. 130 of this chapter, seems both significant and suggestive.

ters of the novel of whose manner of life he is the pure principle. . . . they are confirmed in their lives by self-pity, they rely on the great modern strategy of being the insulted and injured".[42]

I take this process of contamination by association to be Blandois's main function in the novel;[43] it is difficult otherwise to justify artistically his contrived melodramatic appearances at odd intervals, or the manner in which he is improbably linked to various portions of the improbable plot (his fortuitous connection with Miss Wade and the Clennam papers seems especially preposterous), or the rather crude mechanical mannerism concerning his nose and moustache, which is really the kind of instant identificatory tag more suited to stage melodrama than the resources of the novel.

The crudity of Blandois is all the more obtrusive when it is compared with the complexity of characterisation that is encountered elsewhere in Little Dorrit; none of the other characters is presented in such simple black and white terms. Gowan himself, for instance, with whom Blandois is most prominently associated, is by no means a simple character; there are several instances in the novel that establish his awareness of the finer possibilities of human behaviour. But Gowan's attitude, in his sense of resentment and his dilettantism, reveals him as a man thoroughly corrupted by his nurture amongst his extensive Barnacle connection, with the distinction (which he shares with that exceptional young Barnacle

[42] Introduction to the New Oxford Illustrated Edition of Little Dorrit (Oxford: O.U.P., 1953), p. x.

[43] A link with the Barnacles is also provided in the rapid and facile manner in which Blandois successively becomes Lignier and Rigaud, with no corresponding change of character. This reminds one of the allotropic Barnacles, or of the Coodles and Doodles of Bleak House.

who later pays a surprise visit to Arthur in the Marshalsea), that he has sufficient intelligence to penetrate the fraudulence of the Barnacle value-system. At the same time, however, he has evolved for himself a suave but transparently self-serving rationale to justify his own submission to the prevailing ethos:

> 'Give almost any man I know, ten pounds, and he will impose upon you to a corresponding extent; a thousand pounds--to a corresponding extent; ten thousand pounds --to a corresponding extent. So great the success, so great the imposition. But what a capital world it is!' cried Gowan with warm enthusiasm. 'What a jolly, excellent, lovable world it is!' (p. 310)

Revealing what Leavis terms his "essential nihilism",[44] Gowan's self-justification operates, as Angus Wilson succinctly points out, by a simple smear process: "Henry Gowan [is] the failed, spoiled gentleman, playing at art to bring all artists into discredit, playing with life to bring all decent men of earnest good will down to his level".[45]

When Gowan claims that "there is much less difference than you are inclined to suppose between an honest man and a scoundrel" (p. 205), we become swiftly aware of the ironic sub-text whereby he projects his own moral squalor, and, by extension, that of the whole Barnacle clan, into his general judgement of the world.

If Gowan, therefore, is a man teetering on the verge of being an outright scoundrel, it is his choice of companion in Blandois that helps tip the balance towards the sinister and the cruel, emphasising those latent elements in Gowan's character that Arthur's first impression of Gowan spurning stones with his foot has alerted

[44] Leavis, p. 308.

[45] _The World of Charles Dickens_, pp. 241-2.

us to (p. 201).

It becomes evident, too, that Gowan's marriage to Pet represents, in a sense, an ironic punishment for Mr. Meagles, who disapproves of the match yet whose captivation by the false glamour of the Barnacle lineage appears to prevent him from taking firm enough steps to prevent the union: "'Nephew--to--Lord--Decimus,' Mr. Meagles luxuriously repeated with his eyes shut, that he might have nothing to distract him from the full flavour of the genealogical tree. "'By George you are right, Gowan. So he is'" (p. 204).

It is true that Mr. Meagles, when he wishes to assist his friend Doyce, does show considerable anger in the face of the obstructiveness of the Circumlocution Office. But Dickens's purpose in this satire is also to display Mr. Meagles's marked ambivalence towards the Barnacles; an ambivalence which, as John Lucas suggests, is perhaps meant to be representative of the average good-hearted Englishman, whose confused response helps to support the whole rotten bureaucratic structure of Barnaclism.[46]

On a simpler level, Plornish's admiration for Mr. Dorrit's refusal to acknowledge that his children are forced to work makes a similar point.[47] It is no surprise in the light of this admiration that Plornish is unable to make any sense of his world (p. 143), for here again his incoherence can be taken on the wider scale to represent the common man's bafflement in the face of an impressive facade of gentility that keeps him in a position of

[46] I found Lucas's comments on pp. 264-5 of The Melancholy Man useful here.

[47] Lucas, p. 264, makes this point, the implications of which I discuss more fully on p. 141 of this chapter, in the section that deals with Mr. Dorrit.

abject poverty. Likewise, in paying Gowan's bad debts, and in subsequently continuing to subsidise the marriage, Mr. Meagles makes a small, but significant, contribution towards maintaining the pervasive system of genteel parasitism.

To sum up, we saw in this section how Dickens's interfusion of humour into the description of Amy's birth, in the form of the bizarre comicality of Mrs. Bangham and the sodden doctor, leads to a more convincing description both of the pathos of Amy's entry into the world, and the bleakness of the prison. As in the opening chapter of Dombey and Son, the blend of the comic and the serious results here in a moving and precisely controlled narrative art.

I also examined the way in which the microcosm of the Marshalsea developed the depiction of filth and decay outside the prison that Dickens had already established in previous chapters. These deeply unsatisfactory conditions--the squalor of the prison and the gloomy filth of London--together with a pervasive sense of imprisonment both inside and outside of the prison walls, suitably prepare the reader for Dickens's satire of the Circumlocution Office that follows.

In defending Dickens against Snow's attack on his portrayal of the Circumlocution Office, I showed how effectively the comic prolixity of the prose Dickens adopts, ranging as it does through various rhetorical schemes, parodies the labyrinthine bureaucracy under attack. Moreover, the depiction of form without content developes a theme of surface impressiveness concealing an inner emptiness which we briefly encountered in the rhetorical flights of Mrs. Bangham and the prison doctor. This theme is extensively developed in Dickens's treatment of the various Barnacles and their adherents, and I noted in this regard the success of Dickens's

satire when it is embodied in particular characters. We saw that this allows Dickens to soften or to humanise the force of his satire through his formidable skill at comic characterisation. One of the paradoxes of Dickens's art that emerges from this is his ability to attack sharply the attitudes and values of those who people the rigidified bureaucratic institutions that Dickens clearly despises, whilst at the same time celebrating their idiosyncratic individuality. Here Dickens's fascination with people's behaviour, in spite of--or perhaps because of--their attitudes, is what helps to control the reductive element that lurks in all satire.[48]

I next went on to discuss how the comic depiction itself operates on another level as a sane counterpoint to the evils which it exposes. This strategy I examined in relation to Dickens's attack upon the dilettantism and parasitism of the Barnacle class. Finally, I looked briefly at the attitudes of admiration or acquiescence in other characters that help to support the Barnacles in their dominance of England's administration.

iii

Having discussed the manner in which Dickens's treatment of the Marshalsea leads into his satire of the Circumlocution Office, I wish to return now to an examination of the central character in the

[48] It is extraordinarily difficult to explicate this effect adequately. I find myself returning to the figure of Sairey Gamp (Mrs. Bangham, as I suggested, is her descendant), as one of the most potent examples of the ambivalence that Dickens's comic art arouses in the reader. It is clear that we should really regard her as a thoroughly disreputable character and a disgustingly bad nurse--yet we can hardly help being delighted by her wonderfully comic utterance. In a curious way, Dickens's depiction of her seems to go "beyond good and evil" (to borrow Nietsche's phrase), to become instead a celebration of the life-force itself bursting indelibly through her unprepossessing exterior.

Marshalsea, Mr. Dorrit, for he is made one of the important pivots upon which the novel's search for integrity turns. I shall argue that a careful and subtle use of the comic element in Dickens's delineation of William Dorrit in his relations to his family, his fellow prisoners, and especially to his daughter Amy, makes this characterisation unsurpassed in all Dickens's work for depth, complexity of accomplishment, and for the fine balance of a critical yet sympathetic engagement which is engendered in the reader. Indeed, it is difficult to fault the artistic achievement here, so soundly does it ring.

As I noted on p. 109 above, the first Marshalsea chapter commences with a deceptively light satire upon the governance of England.

The lightness of tone is an appropriate preparation for the introduction of the ingenuous Mr. Dorrit, whose tremulous response to the shock of his imprisonment is presented with a wry humour:

> He was a shy, retiring man; well-looking, though in an effeminate style; with a mild voice, curling hair, and irresolute hands--rings upon the fingers in those days--which nervously wandered to his trembling lip a hundred times, in the first half-hour of his acquaintance with the jail. His principal anxiety was about his wife.
>
> 'Do you think, sir,' he asked the turnkey, 'that she will be very much shocked, if she should come to the gate to-morrow morning?'
>
> The turnkey gave it as the result of his experience that some of 'em was and some of 'em wasn't. In general, more no than yes. 'What like is she, you see?' he philosophically asked: 'that's what it hinges on.'
>
> 'She is very delicate and inexperienced indeed.'
>
> 'That,' said the turnkey, 'is agen her.'
>
> 'She is so little used to go out alone,' said the debtor, 'that I am at a loss to think how she will ever make her way here, if she walks.'
>
> 'P'raps,' quoth the turnkey, 'she'll take a ackney coach.'
>
> 'Perhaps.' The irresolute fingers went to the trembling lip. 'I hope she will. She may not think of it.' (p. 58)

It is important to note the salient features of this initial characterisation: Mr. Dorrit is depicted as being shy, amiable, "with a mild voice", and "irresolute"; very much, in fact, the bewildered gentleman who appears comically to have misplaced himself, and, by some unaccountable turn of fortune, finds himself in prison.[49] The humorous tone here helps to control the lurking pathos of his situation, a pathos that at this stage would be out of proportion to our limited knowledge of Mr. Dorrit. But what I want to stress as most important for my later discussion of Mr. Dorrit is that on his arrival at the Marshalsea he is fluent in his speech; specifically, he is free of that throat-clearing mannerism which will later lend a certain comic quality to his speech.

It is also revealing to compare, at this point, the brisk practicality of the turnkey's speech as opposed to the formality of Mr. Dorrit's reply:

> 'Got a room now; haven't you?' the turnkey asked the debtor after a week or two.
> 'Yes, I have got a very good room.'
> 'Any little sticks a coming, to furnish it?' said the turnkey.
> 'I expect a few necessary articles of furniture to be delivered by the carrier, this afternoon.'
> 'Missis and little 'uns a coming, to keep you company?' asked the turnkey.
> 'Why, yes, we think it better that we should not be scattered, even for a few weeks.'
> 'Even for a few weeks, *of* course,' replied the turnkey. (p. 59)

Even at this early stage, the discrepancy between the two promises

[49] It is interesting that a prototype for Mr. Dorrit's behaviour can be found in the "middle-aged man" whom Mr. Pickwick encounters in chapter xi of *Pickwick Papers*, at the house of the sheriff's deputy, Namby, on his way to the Fleet. The similarities of irresolute behaviour and naive belief in a speedy release are very marked (New Oxford Illustrated Dickens Edition, p. 564).

much, for the turnkey functions here as a kind of linguistic yardstick enabling us to measure more prominently the difference between his bare directness (that is not, of course, without an underlying kindness), and a verbal command that establishes Mr. Dorrit not only as a gentleman of some education, but also as a cousin of Mr. Micawber's. This is evident in the euphemism of his replies: "'few necessary articles of furniture'", and "'think it better we should not be scattered even for a few weeks'", where his struggles to shape his world more agreeably through speech mark the connection between them. Yet the differences between the two characters are even more illuminating, for what is absent in Mr. Dorrit is the easy blandness of Mr. Micawber's charming confidence of utterance, as well as his resilient and resourceful periphrastic remoulding of calamities. It is precisely the absence of these features which makes the irresolute Mr. Dorrit a more complex figure, because, for one thing, we come to feel a pathos for him that emerges through the humour, whereas Mr. Micawber, because of his confident command of the situation, illusory though this might be, is distanced for us to a position where we may wholly enjoy his performance as a comic figure. Our enjoyment of Mr. Micawber is related to his predictability and consistency of approach within, of course, the wonderful diversity of experience that Dickens provides for him. But it is just this predictability and consistency that also links him to the traditional or Jonsonian Humour. As D.H. Monro points out, the Jonsonian Humour is characterised by the fact that he reacts to a situation; "we do not expect to see the situation moulding him".[50] This marks a crucial

[50] The Argument of Laughter, p. 56.

difference between Mr. Micawber and Mr. Dorrit.

It is true that Mr. Micawber suffers his moments of depression, but whenever there is this approach to the tragic in his situation, his optimism irrepressibly bursts through in a comic flourish. As B.N. Schilling puts it, "He utters his misery so well that he ceases to be miserable in the delight that his literary creation gives him--the catharsis of a satisfying utterance".[51] Mr. Dorrit, by contrast, is a man patently not in command of his life or even his misfortunes:

> To question him in detail, and endeavour to reconcile his answers; to closet him with accountants and sharp practitioners, learned in the wiles of insolvency and bankruptcy; was only to put the case out at compound interest of incomprehensibility. The irresolute fingers fluttered more and more ineffectually about the trembling lip on every such occasion, and the sharpest practitioners gave him up as a hopeless job. (p. 59)

As his term in prison continues, Mr. Dorrit does indeed on the surface appear better able to transmute his sufferings to his own satisfaction through his powers of language, but there is an unmistakeable price to pay for this. Through the linguistic pretension there begins to appear a speech disturbance that seems to reveal a psychic uneasiness with the difficult moral postures that he tries to adopt; a disturbance that constitutes a kind of subliminal self-criticism welling up in his speech; an uncontrollable self-admission of moral hollowness in the face of an ever increasing pretension. Many strategies for facing the world contain

[51] The Comic Spirit, p. 108. I differ radically from Schilling, however, in my interpretation of Mr. Dorrit, seeing development and complexity where Schilling merely concludes that "Dorrit is a spectacle of whining, degenerate self-pity; together with Harold Skimpole he suggests in Dickens an attitude of unrelieved contempt" (p. 129).

inherent comic possibilities simply because they <u>are</u> masks, hiding the real self. The function, therefore, of introducing a comic perspective is to help reveal the transparency of the pose, so that here also we find that the comic element assists us swiftly to penetrate to the core in, as it were, the straightest imaginative line. The effect is usually, by a curious amalgam, both comic and pathetic. This can be seen on the very first occasion where Mr. Dorrit's speech defect surfaces, which significantly occurs at the very moment when he explains to Arthur Clennam his rationalisation concerning "Testimonials":

> 'Ha! Tush! The name has quite escaped me. Mr. Clennam, as I have happened to mention handsome and delicate action, you may like, perhaps, to know what it was.'
>
> 'Very much,' said Arthur, withdrawing his eyes from the delicate head beginning to droop, and the pale face with a new solicitude stealing over it.
>
> 'It is so generous, and shows so much fine feeling, that it is almost a duty to mention it. I said at the time that I always would mention it on every suitable occasion, without regard to personal sensitiveness. A--well--a--it's of no use to disguise the fact--you must know, Mr. Clennam, that it does sometimes occur that people who come here, desire to offer some little--Testimonial--to the Father of the place.'
>
> To see her hand upon his arm in mute entreaty half-repressed, and her timid little shrinking figure turning away, was to see a sad, sad sight.
>
> 'Sometimes,' he went on in a low, soft voice, agitated, and clearing his throat every now and then; 'sometimes----hem--it takes one shape and sometimes another; but it is generally--ha--Money. And it is, I cannot but confess it, it is too often--hem--acceptable. This gentleman that I refer to, was presented to me, Mr. Clennam, in a manner highly gratifying to my feelings, and conversed not only with great politeness, but with great--ahem--information.' All this time, though he had finished his supper, he was nervously going about his plate with his knife and fork, as if some of it were still before him. 'It appeared from his conversation that he had a garden, though he was delicate of mentioning it at first, as gardens are--hem--are not accessible to me. But it came out, through my admiring a very fine cluster of geranium --beautiful cluster of geranium to be sure--which he had brought from his conservatory. On my taking notice of its rich colour, he showed me a piece of paper round it,

> on which was written, "For the Father of the Marshalsea," and presented it to me. But this was--hem--not all. He made a particular request, on taking leave, that I would remove the paper in half an hour. I--ha--I did so; and I found that it contained--ahem--two guineas. I assure you, Mr. Clennam, I have received--hem--Testimonials in many ways, and of many degrees of value, and they have always been--ha--unfortunately acceptable; but I never was more pleased than with this--ahem--this particular Testimonial.' (pp. 83-4)

The episode in its entirety superbly renders the complex ironies of the situation; these being increased by the reader's awareness of Little Dorrit's humiliation, an awareness filtered through Arthur Clennam. There is Mr. Dorrit's idiom, with its concern for feelings and delicacy of action so ironically at variance with the realities of his beggar's role; the pathetic contrast between the sensibility, capable of appreciating the beauty of conservatory geraniums and the contortion needed to transmute alms into a "'Testimonial'", with its own false resonance of tribute and appreciation. There is the pathos too of the transparent direction of the anecdote in hinting at Arthur's obligations, whilst the stumble of the throat clearing as well as the automatic action of eating from an empty plate suggest a man driven to be deeply at odds with himself.

It is this refusal to face the reality of being a beggar that results in this image of false gentility, an image that will be found, and satirised, in other permutations in the book. Here these "'feelings'" surface in a parodic form in Mr. Dorrit's son Tip, who acts as a kind of debased gentleman in his refusal to stick at any of his jobs, as well as in his attitude of careless irresponsibility towards society:

> 'Dear Bob,' said [Amy], 'what is to become of poor Tip?' His name was Edward, and Ted had been transformed

> into Tip, within the walls.
> The turnkey had strong private opinions as to what would become of poor Tip, and had even gone so far with a view of averting their fulfilment, as to sound Tip in reference to the expediency of running away and going to serve his country. But Tip had thanked him, and said he didn't seem to care for his country. (p. 75)

In his small way, Tip thus suitably maintains in the Marshalsea the grand British tradition of amateurism amongst the upper classes, that dilettantism so scathingly attacked by Carlyle.[52] "But whatever Tip went into, he came out tired, announcing that he had cut it" (p. 76).

In the microcosm of the Marshalsea, this satirised "virtue" prepares us for the far greater amateurism that I have already examined in the Barnacles of the Circumlocution Office. Work, after all, stains the very concept of gentlemanhood, since, in the original sense of the word, as I noted on pp. 124-5 above, a gentleman is one who lives by the work of those who are apparently quite happy to accept this state of affairs:

> 'Ah! And there's manners! There's polish! There's a gentleman to have run to seed in the Marshalsea Jail! Why, perhaps you are not aware,' said Plornish, lowering his voice, and speaking with a perverse admiration of what he ought to have pitied or despised, 'not aware that Miss Dorrit and her sister dursn't let him know that they work for a living. No!' said Plornish, looking with a ridiculous triumph first at his wife, and then all round the room. 'Dursn't let him know it, they dursn't!' (p. 139)

Lucas makes the irony of this passage clear by commenting that "Plornish himself is desperately unhappy because he cannot get work. Dickens shows that Plornish does not suffer from the ulcer of envy

[52] Chapter iii, entitled "Gospel of Dilettantism", and chapter viii, "Unworking Aristocracy", of Carlyle's Past and Present, Book 111, are particularly pertinent in this regard.

but from that much more vicious malaise of the identification of class with worth, the belief that the class-system is good because it exists".[53]

It begins to be apparent that Mr. Dorrit is connected to the Barnacle ethos by more than one link. To begin with (and here his similarity to a number of other characters may be noted, particularly Mr. Casby, Mrs. Gowan and Mrs. Merdle), he maintains the standard genteel posture, which in his case is what he imagines to be the correct sensibility of a wounded gentleman in difficult circumstances. This brief passage is characteristic of Mr. Dorrit's stance: "'Extremely civil person, Chivery; very attentive man and very respectful. Young Chivery, too; really almost with a delicate perception of one's position here. A very well conducted family indeed, the Chiveries. Their behaviour gratifies me'" (p. 214).

Beyond the irony of his self-centred appraisal of those around him--as if the Chiveries were his personal servants and not his gaolers (but the condescension of gentility demands this approach) --it is because of this "gentlemanly" pose that he must refuse to admit that his children are forced to work in order to keep him alive. The ironic connection with the Barnacles is even closer if we think of his sentiments on learning of his new-found wealth that liberates him from the Marshalsea. Speaking of Fanny, Tip and his brother, he says, "'We owe it as a duty to them, and to ourselves, from this moment, not to let them--hum--not to let them do anything'" (p. 420).

As in the case of the Barnacles, Mr. Dorrit's imprisonment in this facade of gentility blocks him from achieving anything, either

[53] Lucas, p. 264.

in the way of supporting himself or acting as a responsible parent to his children. It becomes evident that gentility is in reality the strategy which best suits his irresolute nature, and that his failure as a father partially determines the flaws of Tip and Fanny. Partially, because the example of Amy, who, through her goodness, her strength of character surfacing through a deceptive meekness, manages to transcend her upbringing, shows that Dickens very positively believed that human courage may triumph over adverse circumstances.[54]

In his fraudulent paternalism (chapter xxxvi of Book 1 is ironically entitled "The Marshalsea Becomes an Orphan"), Mr. Dorrit is also linked directly to Casby. Mr. Dorrit, walking in full regalia as Father of the Marshalsea, is described as follows:

> The brothers William and Frederick Dorrit, walking up and down the College-yard--of course on the aristocratic or Pump side, for the Father made it a point of his state to be chary of going among his children on the Poor side, except on Sunday mornings, Christmas Days, and other occasions of ceremony, in the observance whereof he was very punctual, and at which times he laid his hand upon the heads of their infants, and blessed those young Insolvents with a benignity that was highly edifying--the brothers, walking up and down the College-yard together, were a memorable sight. Frederick the free, was so humbled, bowed, withered, and faded; William the bond, was so courtly, condescending, and benevolently conscious of a position; that in this regard only, if in no other, the brothers were a spectacle to wonder at. (p. 221)

To this may be compared our initial introduction to Mr. Casby, where the explicit connection with the Barnacle value-axis is evident:

[54] W.F. Axton, Circle of Fire (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1966), pp. 92-93, provides an illuminating discussion of how Oliver Twist functions as Dickens's refutation of environmental determinism and Benthamic social and moral principles. In this regard at least, Oliver may be viewed as Amy's prototype.

> Patriarch was the name which many people delighted to give him. Various old ladies in the neighbourhood spoke of him as The Last of the Patriarchs. So grey, so slow, so quiet, so impassionate, so very bumpy in the head, Patriarch was the word for him. He had been accosted in the streets, and respectfully solicited to become a Patriarch for painters and for sculptors; with so much importunity, in sooth, that it would appear to be beyond the Fine Arts to remember the points of a Patriarch, or to invent one. Philanthropists of both sexes had asked who he was, and on being informed, 'Old Christopher Casby, formerly Town-agent to Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle,' had cried in a rapture of disappointment, 'Oh! why, with that head, is he not a benefactor to his species! Oh! why, with that head, is he not a father to the orphan and a friend to the friendless!' With that head, however, he remained old Christopher Casby, proclaimed by common report rich in house property; and with that head, he now sat in his silent parlour. Indeed it would be the height of unreason to expect him to be sitting there without that head.
> (p. 146)

Although the parallel seems close, there is also, I think, a profound difference in the manner we are asked to respond to the two men, a difference that I wish to explore more closely because I believe it will reveal with greater precision the crucially different comic languages of which Dickens is capable, ranging from pure satire to a humour which entices a sympathetic participation.

To commence with Casby, I would suggest that we are dealing with a figure whose comic absurdity is relatively simple:

> His smooth face had a bloom upon it, like a ripe wall-fruit. What with his blooming face, and that head, and his blue eyes, he seemed to be delivering sentiments of rare wisdom and virtue. In like manner, his physiognomical expression seemed to teem with benignity. Nobody could have said where the wisdom was, or where the virtue was, or where the benignity was; but they all seemed to be somewhere about him.
>
> 'Those times, however,' pursued Mr. Casby, 'are past and gone, past and gone. I do myself the pleasure of making a visit to your respected mother occasionally, and of admiring the fortitude and strength of mind with which she bears her trials, bears her trials.'
>
> When he made one of these little repetitions, sitting with his hands crossed before him, he did it with his head on one side, and a gentle smile, as if he had something in his thoughts too sweetly profound to be put into

> words. As if he denied himself the pleasure of uttering it, lest he should soar too high; and his meekness therefore preferred to be unmeaning. (p. 147)

Here--or elsewhere--where he is similarly depicted as functioning in his speech rather like a comic automaton, there is no suggestion of depth in the portrait of Mr. Casby. Appropriately therefore, our response is a relatively uncomplicated enjoyment of his fatuity. It is safe to enjoy the comic success by which Dickens, in seizing on the device of Casby's habitually repeating his last few words, is able to reveal the underlying hollowness of the man. We apprehend that the comedy is generated by the relatively simple tension between Mr. Casby's impressive appearance and his inner vacuity.

He is repeatedly established in this role as an empty figure of ridicule. There is, for instance, his lack of response in the face of Flora's desperate comic attempt to renew the old terms of her courtship with Arthur, where he is the uncomprehending spectator, imprisoned in the obtuseness of his self-enclosed world: "The Patriarch, apparently not yet understanding his own part in the drama under representation, glowed with vacant serenity" (p. 151).

In addition, his characteristic complacency, so neatly captured in the inane habit of repeating the last phrase of every sentence, also helps to distance him from our sympathy, and this all the more strongly when we soon realise that Casby is a figure of real power: his complacency bought at the cost of real extortion. Furthermore, he is a man who is cheerfully capable of diverting his greed through his clerk, Pancks (a phenomenon which I will shortly discuss). These are the factors that encourage us to enjoy the satire against Mr. Casby without qualm.

In his work The Act of Creation, Arthur Koestler offers a suggestive distinction between what he terms primitive and participative humour.[55] Primitive humour encompasses the aggression of the practical joker and satirist and tends towards the exclusive and the cruel: we laugh at the outsider because he differs from us. Koestler offers the example of the dwarf, who is ridiculous to the degree in which he tries to attain the status of a normal man.[56] In its effects, therefore, primitive humour tends to exclude, and, by virtue of our feelings of superiority, to separate us from the object of our laughter. Our enjoyment of Mr. Casby is rather "primitive" in the Koestlerian sense.[57]

The humour of participation, on the other hand, transcends these limitations and reverses their effects. It is this type of humour which Dickens practises in the case of Mr. Dorrit. The laughter generated helps unite us to the comic object, because of the wry realisation on our part that in the very comic fallibility of the character there is a potential extension of ourselves: we participate through our own secret fears and misgivings about life. I will attempt to demonstrate in greater detail how this operates in the case of Mr. Dorrit.

[55] The Act of Creation (1964; rpt. London: Pan, 1970), pp. 27-88, but especially pp. 73 ff.

[56] Koestler, p. 76.

[57] Koestler's definition of primitive humour appears to me to be essentially the same as the Hobbesian view of dark laughter which, as I noted on p. 5 of my Introduction, Kincaid accepts as the norm in Dickens's comic art. Indeed, the reader will recall that Kincaid cites Koestler's earlier work, Insight and Outlook (1949). Koestler's later work, The Act of Creation (1964), offers the distinction between primitive and participative humour which I am drawing upon here. The rest of my discussion in this section should help to clarify for the reader how radically my findings differ from Kincaid's assumption.

As I have shown, a character such as Mr. Casby is patently incapable of affecting our deeper emotions in the manner in which these become engaged in our response to Mr. Dorrit's plight; this in itself argues for a more complexly wrought art. Mr. Dorrit, depicted with a subtle ambivalence, is a figure of greater complexity for several reasons. To start with, it is clear that Dickens lavishes considerable artistic care and energy upon his characterisation, with the result that several of the scenes in which Mr. Dorrit figures are arguably the most moving in the whole novel.

The very opening sentence where we are introduced to Mr. Dorrit (which I discussed on p. 135 above), alerts us to the complexity and foreshadows the ambivalence in narrative attitude: "He was, at that time, a very amiable and very helpless middle-aged gentleman who was going out again directly" (p. 58). As we have seen, this introduction establishes that Mr. Dorrit is largely a victim of circumstance, enmeshed by the Circumlocution Office for reasons which he cannot begin to understand. It is true that his own weakness of character is partially responsible for his condition, but the notion of the Circumlocution Office as a somewhat mysterious force controlling his destiny seems to override this (p. 59). There are, in fact, a number of other characters in Dickens's canon who, like Mr. Dorrit, are destroyed by more or less impersonal and arbitrary forces. The Chancery victims in Bleak House come most readily to mind, whilst the cobbler imprisoned in the Fleet in Pickwick Papers provides a more direct prototype for

Mr. Dorrit's case.[58]

Unlike Casby, then, Mr. Dorrit is powerless, and in these circumstances the Circumlocution Office assumes a deterministic force analogous to the notions of fate controlling the hero's destiny in classical Greek tragedy. Mr. Dorrit's fate, once imprisoned, is out of his hands, and his twenty-five year incarceration (to be ended as arbitrarily as it is begun), needs a real act of the imagination on the reader's part for its full tragic import to be comprehended.

It is his tremulous response to the fate that has embraced him and his family with such devastation that initially arouses our compassion, when we realise that here is no hardened debtor, but a man of some learning and sensibility.[59] It is true that Mr. Dorrit's sensibility does develop in highly ironic directions. One irony that Lionel Trilling points out is his firm commitment to those very values that are responsible for his imprisonment,[60] most pitifully in evidence, perhaps, in the tea-party episode where he condescends to old Nandy (pp. 371-4). Then, too, there is the complacency with which he increasingly accepts his role as Father of the Marshalsea. But unlike Mr. Casby's imperturbable complacency, Mr. Dorrit's pose is fragile enough to be shattered in an

[58] The cobbler's account is given in chapter xliv of Pickwick Papers (pp. 618-21 in the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition). I have already noted Mr. Dorrit's resemblance in respect of his initial behaviour in the Marshalsea to another character in Pickwick Papers: the "middle-aged man" whom Mr. Pickwick encounters at Namby's.

[59] The gaoler's "laudatory" testimony on p. 64 confirms this, even if we make allowances for an ironic margin.

[60] Introduction to Little Dorrit, p. ix: "Mr. Dorrit's suffering and the injustice done to him are not denied or mitigated by his passionate commitment to some of the worst aspects of the society which deals with him so badly".

instant, as that brilliant scene demonstrates where Plornish, on leaving, offers him coppers instead of the accustomed silver:

> 'It an't much,' said the Plasterer, putting a little pile of halfpence in his hand, 'but it's well meant.'
> The Father of the Marshalsea had never been offered tribute in copper yet. His children often had, and with his perfect acquiescence it had gone into the common purse, to buy meat that he had eaten, and drink that he had drunk; but fustian splashed with white lime, bestowing halfpence on him, front to front, was new.
> 'How dare you!' he said to the man, and feebly burst into tears.
> The Plasterer turned him towards the wall, that his face might not be seen; and the action was so delicate, and the man was so penetrated with repentance, and asked pardon so honestly, that he could make him no less acknowledgment than, 'I know you meant it kindly. Say no more.'
> 'Bless your soul, sir,' urged the Plasterer, 'I did indeed. I'd do more by you than the rest of 'em do, I fancy.'
> 'What would you do?' he asked.
> 'I'd come back to see you, after I was let out.'
> 'Give me the money again,' said the other, eagerly, 'and I'll keep it, and never spend it. Thank you for it, thank you! I shall see you again?'
> 'If I live a week you shall.'
> They shook hands and parted. The collegians, assembled in Symposium in the Snuggery that night, marvelled what had happened to their Father; he walked so late in the shadows of the yard, and seemed so downcast. (pp. 66-7)

The scene marks a crucial distinction between Casby and Dorrit, by underlining the fact that there is a deep vulnerability to Mr. Dorrit. Whatever defects of character he may display, this vulnerability helps to engage our sympathy and to qualify the judgements which the ironic perspective offers. Even Mr. Dorrit's apparently proud acceptance of his role as Father of the Marshalsea illustrates the problematical nature of the reader's response, for Dickens often presents fresh perspectives on Mr. Dorrit with a wry irony:

> In course of time . . . the Father of the Marshalsea gradually developed a new flower of character. The more

> Fatherly he grew as to the Marshalsea, and the more dependent he became on the contributions of his changing family, the greater stand he made by his forlorn gentility. With the same hand that he pocketed a collegian's half-crown half an hour ago, he would wipe away the tears that streamed over his cheeks if any reference were made to his daughters' earning their bread. (pp. 73-4)

Hobsbaum succinctly sums up the ironies involved in Mr. Dorrit's contorted pride as follows:

> Nowhere before had Dickens achieved such delicacy of irony--the use of words such as 'title' and 'rights' to describe what in fact is a mark only of deprivation of liberty and the ascription of vanity to what, in a common being, ought to be a sense of degradation--these are two indications chosen at random of the reversal of values operating through the whole [Marshalsea] Chapter, indeed, the whole of the Dorrit strand of action.[61]

The ironies from this perspective may seem to encourage us to judge a man who is so egotistically concerned with his own image as to ignore the welfare of his children, with some disgust. But there is a completely different way to regard his course of action, and that is, to see it as the desperate strategy for psychic survival on the part of a weak man who has been struck an almost self-obliterating blow by fate. In this light, the reversal of values becomes a pitiable but understandable attempt to retain his sense of identity; an identity admittedly flawed from the start by reason of Mr. Dorrit's false notions of gentility, but which remains nevertheless his life centre. Mr. Dorrit's strategy only mirrors in an exaggerated form the similar pretensions noticeable in many of the other prisoners as they strive to maintain a sense of dignity amidst their downfall. If, too, we take Mr. Dorrit's brother Frederick as a kind of _alter ego_ for Mr. Dorrit, then

[61] _A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens_, pp. 194-5.

Frederick's broken-down response to the world must surely increase our tolerance of Mr. Dorrit's reaction, for whatever its flaws, his reaction does seem to offer a more vital response to the darkness--a vitality we may sympathise with, whilst still being able to penetrate its weaknesses. In his nightmare, Mr. Dorrit at least avoids the more passive varieties of self-enclosure.

Furthermore, the breakdown of Mr. Dorrit's pose as Father of the Marshalsea on several painful occasions does show that the pose is not accepted and integrated into his being in the same way as Casby's Patriarchal attitudinising; rather, it begins to be evident instead that it is essentially a strategy to keep at bay the tragic darkness of his condition. Moreover, as I have already mentioned, there is the constant manifestation of the uncomfortable self-criticism of his speech: that comic throat-clearing which suggests the shame and goodness of his original "very amiable" nature breaking through his posture, and which gives the reader the sense of a man struggling against himself. This we see in that scene where he stammeringly attempts to reproach Amy for rejecting Young Chivery's advances:

> As she stood behind him, leaning over his chair so lovingly, he looked with downcast eyes at the fire. An uneasiness stole over him that was like a touch of shame; and when he spoke, as he presently did, it was in an unconnected and embarrassed manner.
>
> 'Something, I--hem!--I don't know what, has gone wrong with Chivery. He is not--ha!--not nearly so obliging and attentive as usual to-night. It--hem!--it's a little thing, but it puts me out, my love. It's impossible to forget,' turning his hands over and over, and looking closely at them, 'that--hem!--that in such a life as mine, I am unfortunately dependent on these men for something, every hour in the day.'
>
> Her arm was on his shoulder, but she did not look in his face while he spoke. Bending her head she looked another way.
>
> 'I--hem!--I can't think, Amy, what has given Chivery offence. He is generally so--so very attentive and

> respectful. And to-night he was quite--quite short with me. Other people there too! Why, good Heaven! if I was to lose the support and recognition of Chivery and his brother officers, I might starve to death here.' While he spoke, he was opening and shutting his hands like valves; so conscious all the time of that touch of shame, that he shrunk before his own knowledge of his meaning.
> (pp. 225-6)

The scene, in its entirety (which fills several pages), with its moving tensions as we see Amy both humiliated and hurt, yet loving and understanding, and Mr. Dorrit oscillating between tears of shame and boastful pride, offers the high kind of artistic achievement that precludes the reader from pronouncing facile judgement. In Amy's response, which is the response of a kind and loving sensibility (in a sense, therefore, she is offered to us as the "ideal" spectator), we are made to feel the emotional complexity of the situation.

There are complicated tensions between the ironies of Mr. Dorrit's self-centred vanity on the one hand, and on the other, our sympathetic knowledge of the human suffering that has reduced this weak man to his present juncture of moral degradation. We feel both his weaknesses, and the arbitrary terror of the social forces that have cast him into prison for a quarter of a century. Our response remains poised between participation in Mr. Dorrit's fate, an involvement increased by the pitiful nature of his comic utterance (in which, as I have suggested, his psychic conscience may be seen as surfacing), and the detachment engendered by the counter-balancing distance which the multiple ironies afford.[62]

[62] My position at this point is closely analogous to Sucksmith's well-argued and suggestive case for a complex "rhetoric of sympathy and irony" in Dickens which he advances on pp. 173-95 of <u>The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens</u>.

The second half of Little Dorrit sees the collapse of various carefully constructed facades: there is the death of Mr. Dorrit, the great Merdle disaster, and the fall of the Clennam house. By the masterstroke of arranging the novel into two great contrapuntal sections: "Poverty" and "Riches", Dickens gains new and diverse opportunities for extending his ironic vision of society. The idea behind this juxtaposition is essentially quite simple, for it revolves around the notion of allowing to Mr. Dorrit his most improbable fantasy: that he is liberated from prison as a rich and respected gentleman. The working out of this idea is analogous to the discovery of a new metaphor that allows the artist a fresh range of language to develop many novel permutations of the themes established in the first half of the novel.

Since Mr. Dorrit's collapse is the first--prefiguring the others--and, I believe, the most important and artistically successful, I shall examine it in some detail. The motif for Mr. Dorrit's experience in the second half of the book is struck soon after the opening in his response to the convent on the Great St. Bernard Pass:

> He weightily communicated his opinion to their host, that his life must be a very dreary life here in the winter.
>
> The host allowed to Monsieur that it was a little monotonous. The air was difficult to breathe for a length of time consecutively. The cold was very severe. One needed youth and strength to bear it. However, having them and the blessing of Heaven--
>
> Yes, that was very good. 'But the confinement,' said the grey-haired gentleman.
>
> There were many days, even in bad weather, when it was possible to walk about outside. It was the custom to beat a little track, and take exercise there.
>
> 'But the space,' urged the grey-haired gentleman. 'So small. So--ha--very limited.'
>
> Monsieur would recall to himself that there were the refuges to visit, and that tracks had to be made to them also.

> Monsieur still urged, on the other hand, that the space was so--ha--hum--so very contracted. More than that, it was always the same, always the same.
>
> With a deprecating smile, the host gently raised and gently lowered his shoulders. That was true, he remarked, but permit him to say that almost all objects had their various points of view. Monsieur and he did not see this poor life of his from the same point of view. Monsieur was not used to confinement.
>
> 'I--ha--yes, very true,' said the grey-haired gentleman. He seemed to receive quite a shock from the force of the argument. (pp. 440-1)

The seminal ironies underlying Mr. Dorrit's new riches become swiftly apparent from the passage, for the reader quickly apprehends that his perspective has not been altered in any significant way by his freedom; his mind instead continues uncontrollably to seek out parallels to his own imprisonment in the conditions surrounding him. His response in the passage suggests that he is travelling to seek the space denied him in the Marshalsea, but that, carrying the burden of his past life inescapably with him, he will be unable to buy his way to real liberation. The "shock" that he receives at the end of the passage is again one of those pointers indicating a sudden self-recognition, an insight soon concealed in the return to his customary pose.

It becomes apparent that the ironies extend beyond Mr. Dorrit to Fanny and Tip, the two children contaminated by his attitude. For all the change that riches bring them, they might never have left the Marshalsea; like their father, they carry its mental baggage with them always. For Fanny, the new wealth offers little more than the sterility of a self-destructive revenge upon Mrs. Merdle--a revenge that belongs to the past--the futility of which she will only too late realise in condemning herself to Mr.

Sparkler's company.[63] For Tip, the riches mean a momentous change to "Edward", and, in keeping with this revolution, a chance to pursue his dissipated life on a different level: "For, this gentleman, when his fortunes changed, had stood at the great advantage of being prepared for the highest associates, and having little to learn: so much was he indebted to the happy accidents which had made him acquainted with horse-dealing and billiard-marking" (p. 481). The sardonic irony in the phrase "happy accidents", covering his real moral aimlessness helps to show how his activities differ little from the other fraudulencies of his new circle: the jobbery that obtains Sparkler a sinecure, Gowan's irresponsible dilettantism, or the parasitism of the Barnacles. The passage also serves as a reminder that parasitism operates on all levels; the rich are distinguished from the poor only by the increased pretension of the most superficial kind--Tip becomes Edward.

This alerts us to an irony central to Mr. Dorrit's new fortune; that the old tensions inherent in his need to preserve his facade of respectability have not diminished, but have sharply increased. Mr. Dorrit now speaks "weightily", and the word is both indicative of the new pomposity discernible in his demeanour and idiom commensurate with his new position and desire to efface the past, and of the new burdens on him. Mr. Dorrit's past constantly threatens to break through the thin fabric of his new-found splendour; like Mrs. Clennam's house he has increasing need of an assortment of crutches to support his position, and like those

[63] Her sense of futility is dealt with in chapter xxiv of Book 11, entitled "The Evening of a Long Day".

supporting the tottering house, his own props threaten imminently to crumble.

These new tensions in their diverse forms all contribute to Mr. Dorrit's ultimate breakdown. There is, for instance, his omnipresent fear that his fragile pose as a respectable and wealthy gentleman is penetrated by those around him, as is evident at the Inn where Mrs. Merdle has temporarily appropriated the Dorrit apartments, or in his periodic skirmishes with his servant:

> 'Mrs. General.'
> Mr. Tinkler, unused to receive such short orders in connection with the fair varnisher, paused. Mr. Dorrit, seeing the whole Marshalsea and all its Testimonials in the pause, instantly flew at him with, 'How dare you, sir? What do you mean?'
> 'I beg your pardon, sir,' pleaded Mr. Tinkler, 'I was wishful to know--'
> 'You wished to know nothing, sir,' cried Mr. Dorrit, highly flushed. 'Don't tell me you did. Ha. You didn't. You are guilty of mockery, sir.'
> 'I assure you, sir--' Mr. Tinkler began.
> 'Don't assure me!' said Mr. Dorrit. 'I will not be assured by a domestic. You are guilty of mockery. You shall leave me--hum--the whole establishment shall leave me. What are you waiting for?'
> 'Only for my orders, sir.'
> 'It's false,' said Mr. Dorrit, 'you have your orders. Ha--hum. My compliments to Mrs. General, and I beg the favour of her coming to me, if quite convenient, for a few minutes. Those are your orders.' (pp. 601-2)

In his terror of being laughed at, Mr. Dorrit's speech defect now serves increasingly to undermine comically the new pomposity in his manner as we see how much of his declining energies have to be expended in defence of his increased pretensions. A logical extension of his new and grandiose image of himself and his family is his employment of Mrs. General, who, representing as she does Mr. Dorrit's notions of gentility pushed to their furthermost point of absurdity, offers fresh possibilities for satiric comment by Dickens on the fatuity of upper-class manners and aspirations:

> Mrs. General had no opinions. Her way of forming a mind was to prevent it from forming opinions. She had a little circular set of mental grooves or rails on which she started little trains of other people's opinions, which never overtook one another, and never got anywhere. Even her propriety could not dispute that there was impropriety in the world; but Mrs. General's way of getting rid of it was to put it out of sight, and make believe that there was no such thing. This was another of her ways of forming a mind--to cram all articles of difficulty into cupboards, lock them up, and say they had no existence. It was the easiest way, and, beyond all comparison, the properest.
> Mrs. General was not to be told of anything shocking. Accidents, miseries, and offences, were never to be mentioned before her. Passion was to go to sleep in the presence of Mrs. General, and blood was to change to milk and water. The little that was left in the world, when all these deductions were made, it was Mrs. General's province to varnish. In that formation process of hers, she dipped the smallest of brushes into the largest of pots, and varnished the surface of every object that came under consideration. The more cracked it was, the more Mrs. General varnished it. (pp. 450-1)

Mrs. General's very name carries with it connotations of authoritarianism and rigidity, it is "symptomatic of discipline, ushering, rank and ceremony".[64] The passage establishes her as the static, emotionally eviscerated paradigm of upper-class society. The absurd mnemonic which she uses to compose her lifeless features: "'Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism'" (p. 603), contains as much meaning as the labyrinthine oratory of Lord Decimus Barnacle. Both preserve the perfect form-without-content so admired by the Establishment, and both in their separate ways help to explain the paralysis of inaction gripping the country.

The remainder of Mr. Dorrit's brief life with his wealth is narrated with a sustained intensity of achievement for which it would be difficult to find a parallel elsewhere in Dickens. Amidst the tensions that work towards his disintegration, there are also

[64] Hobsbaum, p. 201.

his moments of imagined triumph, as on the occasion when he is unexpectedly visited in his hotel room by the exalted Merdle:

> Mr. Dorrit, dressing-gowned and newspapered, was at his breakfast. The Courier, with agitation in his voice, announced 'Miss' Mairdale!' Mr. Dorrit's overwrought heart bounded as he leaped up.
>
> 'Mr. Merdle, this is--ha--indeed an honour. Permit me to express the--hum--sense, the high sense, I entertain of this--ha hum--highly gratifying act of attention. I am well aware, sir, of the many demands upon your time, and its--ha--enormous value.' Mr. Dorrit could not say enormous roundly enough for his own satisfaction. 'That you should--ha--at this early hour, bestow any of your priceless time upon me, is--ha--a compliment that I acknowledge with the greatest esteem.' Mr. Dorrit positively trembled in addressing the great man.
>
> (pp. 614-5)

His deference to one whom, in common with the rest of society, he regards as more illustrious than himself, is in comic tension with Mr. Merdle's unprepossessing appearance and mumbled speech. The irony of Mr. Dorrit's obsequious attentions will only gain its full significance after the death of "that illustrious man, and great national ornament, Mr. Merdle" (p. 692). In his inability to penetrate the transfiguring glamourous aura that wealth lends to Mr. Merdle, Mr. Dorrit is in the excellent synecdochic company of Bar, Bishop, and Physician. It requires Mr. Merdle's suicide before society is able suddenly to see him in the ironic light of actuality: "There was a bath in that corner, from which the water had been hastily drained off. Lying in it, as in a grave or sarcophagus, with a hurried drapery of sheet and blanket thrown across it, was the body of a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features" (p. 705). In death, Mr. Merdle's appearance finally accords with his behaviour throughout the novel.

Mr. Dorrit's deference connects him as well with Mr. Meagles,

a relationship reinforced when Mr. Dorrit also helps to subsidise the dilettante Gowan through commissioning a self-portrait (a clever manner of exhibiting both vanity and lack of discrimination on the part of Dickens). Both Gowan and Merdle are happy to plunder their natural prey, but it is important to note that it is again the comicality in Mr. Dorrit's speech that provides the thread, however slender, by which Dickens is able to retain a portion of our sympathy for him.

In contrast to his social triumphs are those poignant moments when Mr. Dorrit appears to regress to his Marshalsea condition, as in that scene where he criticises Amy for not having more rapidly adopted a suitable new surface. The episode reminds the reader of the broken-down old debtor remonstrating with his daughter for rejecting John Chivery:[65]

> 'I said I was hurt. So I am. So I--ha--am determined to be, whatever is advanced to the contrary. I am hurt, that my daughter, seated in the--hum--lap of fortune, should mope and retire, and proclaim herself unequal to her destiny. I am hurt that she should--ha--systematically reproduce what the rest of us blot out; and seem--hum--I had almost said positively anxious--to announce to wealthy and distinguished society, that she was born and bred in--ha hum--a place that I, myself, decline to name. But there is no inconsistency--ha--not the least, in my feeling hurt, and yet complaining principally for your sake, Amy. I do; I say again, I do. It is for your sake, that I wish you, under the auspices of Mrs. General, to form a--hum--a surface. It is for your sake, that I wish you to have a--ha--truly refined mind, and (in the striking words of Mrs. General) to be ignorant of everything that is not perfectly proper, placid, and pleasant.'
>
> He had been running down by jerks, during his last speech, like a sort of ill-adjusted alarum. The touch was still upon his arm. He fell silent; and after looking about the ceiling again, for a little while,

[65] This scene was discussed on pp. 151-2 of this chapter.

> looked down at her. Her head drooped, and he could not see her face; but her touch was tender and quiet, and in the expression of her dejected figure there was no blame --nothing but love. He began to whimper, just as he had done that night in the prison when she afterwards sat at his bedside till morning; exclaimed that he was a poor ruin and a poor wretch in the midst of his wealth; and clasped her in his arms. 'Hush, hush, my own dear! Kiss me!' was all she said to him. His tears were soon dried, much sooner than on the former occasion; and he was presently afterwards very high with his valet, as a way of righting himself for having shed any. (p. 480)

The evidence of his internal struggle is familiarly captured in the rapid emotional fluctuation between whimpering self-pity and haughtiness, but the new element in the episode is the sense that Mr. Dorrit is no longer fully in control of his processes; that the tension between twenty-five fearful years of guarding bankrupt pretensions, and his better nature, has begun to manifest itself in symptoms that degrade him to something approaching an automaton: "He had been running down by jerks, during his last speech, like a sort of ill-adjusted alarum".

Mr. Dorrit's collapse and death, emblematic of the great breakdown and exposure of all false facades in the second half of the novel, is thus prepared for with Dickens's customary thoroughness. Amy's increasing sense of unreality in her new life amongst the "objective correlatives" of the Italian ruins is echoed in the parallel sense of the "fragments of ruinous enclosure . . . where everything was crumbling away" (p. 637), which strike Mr. Dorrit on his nightmarish late return to his Roman villa. The short dozes into which he relapses on his return betray his general exhaustion and perilous proximity to collapse; an exhaustion which he characteristically projects onto his brother Frederick in a way

that I will examine more fully in due course.[66] But it is worth noting at this juncture how this projection increases the pathos of his situation at this point, for Mr. Dorrit is shown to possess, in this very displacement, all the self-knowledge needed for his own regeneration; a self-knowledge that is typically and tragically misdirected.

All these factors in sum give a cumulative force to Mr. Dorrit's famous last speech at Mrs. Merdle's dinner party; a speech characterised by all the florid oratory of his Marshalsea days, directed at an audience that epitomises, with an international flavour, all the superficial distinction and grandeur Mr. Dorrit has always yearned to impress:

> He looked confusedly about him, and, becoming conscious of the number of faces by which he was surrounded, addressed them:
> 'Ladies and gentlemen, the duty--ha--devolves upon me of--hum--welcoming you to the Marshalsea. Welcome to the Marshalsea! The space is--ha--limited--limited--the parade might be wider; but you will find it apparently grow larger after a time--a time, ladies and gentlemen--and the air is, all things considered, very good. It blows over the--ha--Surrey hills. Blows over the Surrey hills. This is the Snuggery. Hum. Supported by a small subscription of the--ha--Collegiate body. In return for which--hot water--general kitchen--and little domestic advantages. Those who are habituated to the--ha--Marshalsea, are pleased to call me its Father. I am accustomed to be complimented by strangers as the--ha--Father of the Marshalsea. Certainly, if years of residence may establish a claim to so--ha--honourable a title, I may accept the--hum--conferred distinction. My child, ladies and gentlemen. My daughter. Born here!'
> (pp. 647-8)

The art here is so irreproachably lucid in its ironies of rhetorical posture, the notions of decorum and "tone", the squire-like pastoral

[66] I reserve a fuller discussion of this phenomenon for a later section of this chapter (see pp. 76-7), where I deal with the various displacement techniques in the novel.

pretensions imposed upon the dingy Marshalsea, that explication seems superfluous. I wish rather to comment upon the strategy whereby the reader, without any trace of false sentiment being involved, is deeply moved by Mr. Dorrit's performance.

What is portrayed here is the mental collapse of Mr. Dorrit, in which the inescapable burden of his concealment is exposed in the form of a type of psychic stroke that obliterates time. It has the tragic effect, therefore, of effacing all his life since leaving the Marshalsea and conveying through this the truth that he has never managed to transcend his prison life. The comic distortions in Mr. Dorrit's speech are the psychic manifestations of his imprisonment, as he jerks on like a machine. Yet our expectations of comedy are juxtaposed with the undeniable pathos of the situation, and out of this tension is generated a finely balanced control that sharply brakes any slide towards the maudlin, for the humorous element tends to distance us at the same time as the pathetic element draws us closer. It is perhaps the most effective demonstration in the whole novel of the structural importance of humour in controlling sentiment, and its close parallel lies in the death of Paul's mother in chapter i of Dombey and Son. It surpasses by far the latter scene, however, simply because our knowledge of Mr. Dorrit's complexity is built up over the whole novel, in contrast to the briefly introduced Mrs. Dombey.[67]

The strength of this scene is demonstrated by comparing what happens when Dickens temporarily abandons the control that humour exerts over his art. In the last page and a half of the same

[67] My distance from Kincaid's viewpoint may again be gauged from his comment on p. 213 that in Mr. Dorrit's breakdown scene, "the humour is the blackest in the novel".

chapter, which portrays Mr. Dorrit's actual death, there is a conspicuous lapse into a sentimental Victorian melodramatic tableau, with a strong admixture of conventional religious pieties. Two brief extracts will suffice for illustration of this:

> 'O God,' he cried, before they left the room, with his wrinkled hands clasped over her. 'Thou seest this daughter of my dear dead brother! All that I have looked upon, with my half-blind and sinful eyes, Thou hast discerned clearly, brightly. Not a hair of her head shall be harmed before Thee. Thou wilt uphold her here, to her last hour. And I know Thou wilt reward her hereafter!' (p. 651)

Perhaps even worse than these orthodox pieties coming from a character who has exhibited not the least interest in religious expression up to this point, is the throbbing intrusion of the author: "Sleep, good Little Dorrit. Sleep through the night!" (p. 651). As Sucksmith notes, "when Dickens tries to arouse an extreme degree of sympathy while his effect and vision remain simple, the result may well be the demand for a naive identification, a crude and total involvement which is sure to be resisted by the sophisticated reader".[68]

In summary, the success of Mr. Dorrit as a character may be directly linked to Dickens's use of humour in his portrayal of Mr. Dorrit. I have tried to explicate in this section the subtle and complex effects that Dickens is capable of evoking from an apparently simple comic device such as Mr. Dorrit's speech disturbance.

I have also tried to reveal how our response to Mr. Dorrit is governed by our awareness of his nature. We come to realise that he is a man of some learning and sensibility, and also that he is

[68] Sucksmith, p. 196.

at least to some extent a victim of circumstance, moulded by a cruel and arbitrary fate. Our desire to condemn Mr. Dorrit's weakness of character, therefore, is always held in check by our participative empathy in the horrifying circumstances of his twenty-five year incarceration. We saw that Dickens achieves this delicate balance largely through a complex humorous treatment of Mr. Dorrit; a treatment that differs from the more straightforward comic depictions of Mr. Micawber and Mr. Casby. By contrast, both these characters remain relatively unchanged by the circumstances in which they find themselves.

In the second half of the novel, I noted how Dickens, by according Mr. Dorrit freedom and wealth, is effectively able to add new depths to our understanding of Mr. Dorrit's character. Here again it is the comic mannerism of his speech disturbance that conveys to us Mr. Dorrit's internal struggle between his better nature and his drive towards respectability and social pretension; the respectable "front" that is given comic resonance in the absurdities of Mrs. General.

Finally, it is this same comic stutter that heralds Mr. Dorrit's approaching breakdown and which, in his last public speech, so surely achieves the controlled pathos that constitutes the moving climax to Mr. Dorrit's life. The formulaic rendering of Frederick's death offers an illuminating comparison that once again underscores the importance of the comic element to Dickens's best art.

iv

Having explored the intricacies of Dickens's comic technique

in regard to Mr. Dorrit, I intend to devote this section to an examination of Dickens's comic purpose in regard to some of the more significant subsidiary characters in Little Dorrit.

My concern is initially to explore Dickens's use of humour in his depiction of Pancks, where I will be discussing the relevance of Bergson's theory of Comedy. I then proceed to examine Pancks from a different angle as Casby's employee. This discussion is designed to serve as a point of departure for my explication in the rest of this section of the diversity and effectiveness of the various modes of comic displacement that the reader encounters in Little Dorrit.

An appropriate opening for my discussion of Pancks as a character is Dorothy Van Ghent's observation that one of the main-springs of Dickens's humour seems to lie in his ability to focus on the unusual and the bizarre:

> To his friend and biographer, Forster, he said that he was always losing sight of a man in his diversion by the mechanical play of some part of the man's face, which "would acquire a sudden ludicrous life of its own." Many of what we call the "signatures" of Dickens's people--that special exaggerated feature or gesture or mannerism which comes to stand for the whole person--are such dissociated parts of the body. . . .[69]

The notion of automatism has already been introduced briefly on p. 66 of this chapter, where I discussed the manner in which the jerkiness of Mr. Dorrit's speech betrays his moral degradation. Considered historically, the nineteenth century was a time of intensive industrialisation, as well as being indubitably the golden era of British engineering prowess. It is not difficult to see

[69] The English Novel: Form and Function, p. 130.

these processes reflected in Dickens's work on a literal level: the railways in Dombey and Son and the iron bridge in Little Dorrit are the two examples which spring most obviously to mind. But the mechanism of the age seemed of vital concern to certain artists in a different sense; it became a means of expressing their concern about the human consequences of life in an urbanised and industrialised environment.[70]

This concern manifests itself in several of Dickens's characters. I will be discussing in some detail the case of Wemmick, for example, in my next chapter on Great Expectations. In Little Dorrit itself, we encounter the concern most notably in the characterisation of Pancks, whom Arthur first meets at Casby's house. At this meeting, Pancks is described as follows:

> He was dressed in black and rusty iron grey; had jet black beads of eyes; a scrubby little black chin; wiry black hair striking out from his head in prongs, like forks or hair-pins; and a complexion that was very dingy by nature, or very dirty by art, or a compound of nature and art. He had dirty hands and dirty broken nails, and looked as if he had been in the coals; he was in a perspiration, and snorted and sniffed and puffed and blew, like a little labouring steam-engine. (p. 148)

The depiction is designed to convey the sense of the man obscured as a type of machine, in this case an industrious coal-powered steam-tug for towing the Patriarch. This effect is expansively inculcated by the customary Dickensian technique of the repetition of select words and phrases: his puffing and snorting and abrupt, jerky movements. The tone of Dickens's characterisation of Pancks

[70] David Lodge, in an illuminating essay entitled "The Rhetoric of Hard Times", in his Language of Fiction (London: Routledge, 1966), suggests that the concept of the mechanical became a key metaphor by which people's experiences in the nineteenth century were articulated (pp. 156-9).

is undoubtedly affectionate, yet I shall argue that there is much more to Dickens's metaphorical characterisation of Pancks than mere affection.

Bergson's theory of the Comic provides a useful starting point to our grasp of Dickens's intention with regard to Pancks, since it was Bergson who provided the theoretical insight that everything in a living person that makes one think of an inanimate mechanism has a comic effect. Bergson coined the phrase _mécanisation de la vie_ to explain the effect of the mechanical encrusted on the living.[71]

Bergson's articulation of this concept does help us to understand why we find Pancks a comic figure. But it is also interesting to note that Bergson is re-interpreting an older notion of the comic in terms of a pervasive nineteenth-century metaphor, since his philosophic theory of the mechanical as a source of comic effects derives ultimately, as D.H. Monro notes, from Molière. Monro comments that "it was largely from Molière that Bergson got his notion of the _idée fixe_ as the clue to all comedy".[72] Like Ben Jonson in England, Molière populated his stage with Humours, characters dominated by an _idée fixe_. Bergson turned to this concept for the foundation of his theory of the cause of laughter. Likewise, we can see that Dickens's artistic practice re-creates in the idiom of his own time a tradition that stretches back to the Jonsonian Humour, although it must immediately be added that Dickens transmuted a relatively simple stage device into a flexible and

[71] The French phrase is quoted and discussed on pp. 208-9 of Sigmund Freud's _Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious_, trans. and ed. J. Strachey (1908; rpt. London: Routledge, 1960).

[72] _The Argument of Laughter_, p. 55.

complex method of characterisation.

It is because of this complexity that we must register an important objection against Bergson's theory, for helpful though it is in increasing our understanding of Dickens's art in the case of Pancks, it contains one serious limitation: Bergson refuses to acknowledge that laughter may be anything but separative and one-sided. Here I am in agreement with Monro, who comments:

> We may think . . . that Bergson goes too far in excluding sympathy altogether. He regards the comic spirit as a stern parent or magistrate ceaselessly curbing all the faults which society finds harmful. "Unsociability in the performer and insensibility in the spectator are two essential conditions of comedy." And again: "Laughter is above all a corrective . . . intended to humiliate. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness."[73]

It should be clear that I have been arguing the opposite: that sympathy is often an integral part of Dickens's comedy.[74] We may view Pancks's characterisation as a kind of steam-engine as an expression of the manner in which he has been forced to behave in order to meet the demands of the situation in which he finds himself. It represents his method of disciplining himself to perform, with the least expenditure of energy, the actions and duties which are at fundamental variance with his true nature. The humorous portrayal of him therefore subserves Dickens's criticism of a

[73] Monro, pp. 115-6.

[74] My whole argument in my previous section regarding Mr. Dorrit's "mechanical" speech defect perhaps makes the limited usefulness of Bergson's theory of Comedy even clearer. It is worth endorsing once more L.C. Knights's standpoint (which I quoted on p. 3 of my Introduction), that there are no theoretical substitutes for an alert and open-minded scrutiny of the text itself.

system that forces on a man this mechanical carapace, and, most importantly, the paradoxical effect of depicting Pancks with these idiosyncratic flaws and aberrations tends both to individualise and to humanise him. As in the case of Mr. Dorrit, we are drawn towards his plight by the realisation of the victim lurking beneath the comic portrayal. In his naive attempt to come to terms with the pressures of living in a great commercial centre (the split is made even more distinct in the case of the later, related character Wemmick in Great Expectations), an existence whose competitive pressures seem inimical to many humane values, we recognise a ludicrous distortion of the type of strategy that all of us must perforce adopt to face these familiar pressures. As Edmund Bergler notes in his work Laughter and the Sense of Humor:

> Freud declared that the pleasure which we obtain from the "comic situation" is based on our realization that we would have done the same thing in the same situation. The protagonists are the all--too--powerful external setting, and our helplessness in the face of it. "Thus every person is really defenceless against being made comical".[75]

It is this participatory recognition that unites us with the plight of Pancks, and enables us to enter sympathetically into his regeneration through human action; and to approve the final crisis when, in shearing the Patriarch's locks, we recognise a real liberation as Pancks the machine is freed by Pancks the man.

I have so far dealt with Pancks in his own right; there is, however, another side to Pancks which serves to lead us into the notion of comic displacement in the novel. As a spokesman for his

[75] Laughter and the Sense of Humor (Intercontinental Medical Book Corporation, 1956), p. 158. Bergler quotes from Freud's article in the Int. Zeitschrift fuer Psychoanalyse (1933).

employer Mr. Casby, Pancks fulfils a different role:

> 'Bleeding Heart Yard?' said Pancks, with a puff and a snort. 'It's a troublesome property. Don't pay you badly, but rents are very hard to get there. You have more trouble with that one place, than with all the places belonging to you.'
> Just as the big ship in tow gets the credit, with most spectators, of being the powerful object, so the Patriarch usually seemed to have said himself whatever Pancks said for him. (p. 156)

Here the comic method exhibits the ability of the Patriarch to appropriate the remarks of others. It expresses Casby's general parasitic dependance on the labours of others, as befits his position as rack-renter and former employee of Lord Decimus Barnacle, from whom he presumably learnt his trade. It exposes as well Casby's specific ability to displace the unpleasantly greedy, extortionate aspects of his nature onto the scapegoat Pancks, whilst retaining for himself a public air of benevolence untainted by sordid motives. Pancks in turn behaves rather like a ventriloquist's dummy: simply because he utters the statements, the heartless greed that results from a Bleeding Heart Yard is successfully displaced from the innocent Casby. The humour derives from this comic displacement from master onto employee:[76]

> 'You're not going to keep open house for all the poor of London,' pursued Pancks. 'You're not going to lodge 'em for nothing. You're not going to open your gates wide and let 'em come free. Not if you know it, you ain't.'
> Mr. Casby shook his head, in placid and benignant generality. (p. 156)

[76] It is worth noting the difference between this technique and the displacement which I discussed in my previous chapter. I argued that in Dombey and Son, Dickens is able to retain Mr. Dombey as a character to be taken seriously by deliberately displacing much of his inherent absurdity onto the surrounding characters. Here, by contrast, we are led to feel that it is the character himself, Mr. Casby, who has managed to displace his unpleasant qualities onto his employee, Pancks.

Amongst those who are ground into poverty by Casby within Bleeding Heart Yard itself we find a similar technique that typifies Dickens's fascination with mimicry. This is discernible in Plornish, who echoes his wife's sentiments "as if he were making responses at church" (p. 140):

> 'Me and Plornish says, No, Miss Dorrit, no ill-conwenience, (Plornish repeated, no ill-conwenience,) 'and she wrote it in, according. Which then me and Plornish says, Ho Miss Dorrit!' (Plornish repeated, Ho Miss Dorrit.) 'Have you thought of copying it three or four times, as the way to make it known in more places than one? No, says Miss Dorrit, I have not, but I will. She copied it out according, on this table, in a sweet writing, and Plornish, he took it where he worked, having a job just then,' (Plornish repeated, job just then,) 'and likewise to the landlord of the Yard; through which it was that Mrs. Clennam first happened to employ Miss Dorrit.' Plornish repeated, employ Miss Dorrit: and Mrs. Plornish having come to an end, feigned to bite the fingers of the little hand as she kissed it. (p. 140)

The effect of this technique on the reader, however, is rather different to Dickens's strategy with Casby and Pancks. In this instance, Dickens wishes to illustrate the simple openness and limited intelligence of Plornish. There is an interesting parallel in Mr. Bagnet of Bleak House, whose wife expresses his opinions for him.[77] In both cases the male voice is displaced into the female. This establishes the superior intelligence of the wife, but in both examples there is also, in the husband deferring to the wife, a certain comic charm which successfully captures for the reader the marital closeness of the couples concerned.

Another variation of the displacement technique is to be found in Mr. Dorrit's attitude to his brother Frederick. We find that Mr.

[77] P. 386 of the New Oxford Illustrated Edition of Bleak House provides an illustrative example.

Dorrit habitually displaces his own failings and failures onto Frederick, as this passage illustrates:

> 'Be so kind as to keep the door open a moment, Chivery, that I may see him go along the passage and down the steps. Take care, Frederick! (He is very infirm.) Mind the steps! (He is so very absent.) Be careful how you cross, Frederick. (I really don't like the notion of his going wandering at large, he is so extremely liable to be run over.)' (p. 224)

Here, the way in which Mr. Dorrit condescends to his brother's frailties reveals nothing more sharply than his own degenerating condition. The ironies of this self-projection--particularly the sentiment expressing imprisonment as preferable to freedom for his brother--become more forceful in Book 11, where his criticism of Frederick directly foreshadows his own fate:

> He took very little supper, but was a long time over it, and often reverted to his brother's declining state. Though he expressed the greatest pity for him, he was almost bitter upon him. He said that poor Frederick--ha hum--drivelled. There was no other word to express it; drivelled. Poor fellow! It was melancholy to reflect what Amy must have undergone from the excessive tediousness of his society--wandering and babbling on, poor dear estimable creature, wandering and babbling on. . . . (p. 642)

The passage is especially rich in ironies, since all of it can be directed against Mr. Dorrit himself: the repetition nicely conveying his own "wandering". The preparation is for Mr. Dorrit's own impending stroke, whilst the criticism implicit in "babbling" can be directed, as the chapter heading hints, against the unreality of his own "Castles in the Air". That memorable tea-party incident also, where the impoverished Mr. Dorrit magnificently patronises Old Nandy (pp. 372-4), demonstrates with what subtlety of self-revelation Mr. Dorrit's displacement of his own situation

and failings can work; and work purely through the dramatic mode without any need for the narrator to intervene.

The temptation for authorial intrusion is perhaps stronger still in the case of Mrs. Merdle, where the reader is back at the satirical end of the comedy spectrum, for satire seems especially to lend itself to direct authorial intrusion. Dickens employs a technique of criticising Mrs. Merdle, however, which may be included as a mode of displacement since it shifts the satirical attack on Mrs. Merdle from a direct to an unusual and oblique viewpoint.[78] The invention of Mrs. Merdle's parrot offers Dickens an original and strikingly effective means of punctuating the fatuously opportunistic and artificial exchanges between Mrs. Merdle and Mrs. Gowan, as the parrot's derisive shrieks and physical contortions within the confines of his cage echo her socially determined postures:

> 'And then, my dear,' said Mrs. Gowan not quite so sweetly as before, 'I should be glad to hear what you have to say to it.'
> Here the parrot, who had been standing on one leg since he screamed last, burst into a fit of laughter, bobbed himself derisively up and down on both legs, and finished by standing on one leg again, and pausing for a reply, with his head as much awry as he could possibly twist it.
> 'Sounds mercenary, to ask what the gentleman is to get with the lady,' said Mrs. Merdle; 'but Society _is_ perhaps a little mercenary, you know, my dear.' (p. 392)

With the creation of the parrot, Dickens approaches very closely to the later Theatre of the Absurd, particularly to the degree in which the impression is conveyed that the parrot's

[78] This kind of displacement is closer to Dickens's practice in _Dombey and Son_, in the sense that it is no longer the character here who appears to be doing the displacing, but Dickens himself.

comments make the parrot more real (certainly more vital), than the human occupants of the room, with their transparently false sentiments concealing the hidden fencing match. The whole exchange between Mrs. Gowan and Mrs. Merdle can be seen as an elaborate social ritual, designed to preserve the necessary facade. The parrot's gaudy plumage and tropical exoticism therefore help to highlight Mrs. Merdle's artifice, which is also emphasised, as with Mrs. Skewton, in her claims to be enthralled by the natural: "'I am pastoral to a degree, by nature'" (p. 391).

It is evident at this point how Mrs. Merdle's contortions link with Mr. Dorrit's behaviour in the Marshalsea, in, for instance, his attitude to Nandy (pp. 371-4). And there is a closer connection in the authorial insistence on her "Bosom", a frontage that parallels Mr. Dorrit's "Father" and Casby's "Patriarchal" poses. The conventional motherly emblem of nurture and affection is inverted to become an imposingly cold display case for Merdle's wealth; one can therefore see how comically appropriate is the joke of her son's name, "Sparkler", suggesting that he is merely another of her adornments--the joke residing mainly in his egregious mental dimness.

The type of distorted perspective offered by the parrot in this episode is analogous to that tableau which depicts Little Dorrit visiting Fanny at her work, where the reader is provided with such an oblique viewpoint that the only indication of its nature as a theatre is the ludicrous, jack-in-the-box appearance of the "monotonous boy", whose words are echoed by the man who follows him:

> Just as the sisters arrived here, a monotonous boy in a Scotch cap put his head round a beam on the left, and said, 'Less noise there, ladies!' and disappeared. Immediately after which, a sprightly gentleman with a

> quantity of long black hair looked round a beam on the right, and said, 'Less noise there, darlings!' and also disappeared. (p. 234)

Dickens's tone in the passage is one of comic enjoyment at the fatuities of the theatrical world. Indeed, it is a tone that is reminiscent, for instance, of Dickens's enjoyment of Mr. Vincent Crummles and his entourage in Nicholas Nickleby. I do not wish, therefore, to impose upon the passage a disproportionately moralistic interpretation, for to do so would obviously violate this basic tone of comic enjoyment. Nevertheless, it is possible to discover, if we pause to inspect the depiction more closely, that the seemingly bizarre point of reference, in conjunction with the atmosphere of disjointed and confused action, actually serves as an effective, economical and self-contained comment on the nature of Fanny's work. If we examine the scene in its entirety, we find that the displaced perspective does help to expose, before we fully realise it, the manner whereby these young women are exploited for mass amusement. Beyond the comic qualities of the scene, we are perhaps enabled to appreciate something of the preposterous hollowness of the way of life in a London dance theatre of this nature.

Turning from Fanny back to her sister Amy, we find a mode of displacement in the case of both Amy and Arthur which is similar to that technique briefly mentioned on p. 86 of my chapter on Dombey and Son. This is the discovery by Dickens that a love-relationship may be rendered relatively irony-proof and free from sentimentality by displacing the worst excesses of the romantic element onto subsidiary characters. The antics of these "alternative" lovers help, in a process of comic counterpointing, to cleanse the

relationship of Amy and Arthur, as it develops through its difficulties and misapprehensions to the final understanding.

In John Chivery's sartorial flamboyance, it is difficult not to be reminded of Toots, for at the back of both there undoubtedly lies the stock comic figure of the foolish lover.[79] Both are honourable and unswervingly faithful to their respective heroines, and both are characterised by endearing idiosyncrasies. Unlike the wholly enjoyable splendour of Toots, however, there is, by virtue of his working-class origin, a slightly pitiful tinge to the comic excesses of Chivery's dress, for we sense that his finery is inappropriate both to his income and his rank, and that these are the consequences of aspiring beyond his proper station in society. He differs, too, in the lugubrious turn of his mind, with its genius for transmuting romanticised self-pity into stirring mental tombstones:

> 'Here lie the mortal remains of JOHN CHIVERY, Never anything worth mentioning, Who died about the end of the year one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six, Of a broken heart, Requesting with his last breath that the word AMY might be inscribed over his ashes, Which was accordingly directed to be done, By his afflicted Parents.' (p. 220)

The elements of comic pretension in his address and imagination, exhibiting the stereotype of the declining lover, are designed to mesh with the theme of attitudinising in the novel, whilst the absurdities of his inflated epitaphian constructions connect with the abuses of language elsewhere--in the Barnacles and in Mr. Dorrit,

[79] As George Orwell points out on p. 50 of his essay, "Charles Dickens", "Dickens's usual tendency is to treat a man in love with a woman who is 'above' him as a joke. It is one of the stock jokes of English literature, from Malvolio onwards. Guppy in Bleak House is an example, John Chivery is another. . . ."

for instance.

In his ludicrous notions of the romantic, Chivery is linked to Flora. Writing to the Duke of Devonshire, Dickens claimed that "we have all had our Floras (mine is living and extremely fat)", whilst in a separate letter to Forster he noted, "There are some things in Flora . . . that seem to me to be extraordinarily droll, with something serious at the bottom of them after all".[80]

Flora is generally acknowledged to be one of Dickens's great comic figures, and indeed, it is difficult to do her full justice without lengthy scrutiny of her outpourings. For the purposes of my present analysis, I will confine myself instead to defining the main principles of her place and operation in the novel. Flora belongs, of course, to that same technique of displacing romantic excess that I have just discussed in the case of John Chivery. But there is more to Flora than there is to Chivery.

As the first letter acknowledges, there is a measure of autobiographical "revenge" in Dickens's initial portrait of Flora, in the shock of that initial comic _peripeteia_ so ably commented on by Sucksmith,[81] but it is remarkable how rapidly this initial derisive element is mitigated by new perspectives that evoke our sympathy. Here it is necessary to turn to an example of Flora in action, for consideration of her is inseparable from her unique speech pattern that strikes off so many resonances[82] for the attentive reader:

[80] Both letters are recorded by Edgar Johnson, in _Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph_, 11, p. 860.

[81] Sucksmith, p. 193.

[82] One of these must surely be Joyce's debt in Molly Bloom's final interior monologue in _Ulysses_.

> 'Romance, however,' Flora went on, busily arranging Mr. F's Aunt's toast, 'as I openly said to Mr. F when he proposed to me and you will be surprised to hear that he proposed seven times once in a hackney-coach once in a boat once in a pew once on a donkey at Tunbridge Wells and the rest on his knees, Romance was fled with the early days of Arthur Clennam, our parents tore us asunder we became marble and stern reality usurped the throne, Mr. F said very much to his credit that he was perfectly aware of it and even preferred that state of things accordingly the word was spoken the fiat went forth and such is life you see my dear and yet we do not break but bend, pray make a good breakfast while I go in with the tray.' (p. 283)

Critics such as F.R. Leavis have usefully commented on Flora's "poetic compressions and feats of imaginative linkage",[83] and the relationship of these to plot and theme, whilst H.P. Sucksmith has noted how, through Flora's rhetoric, "Dickens focuses an ironic vision of romantic love, the early infatuation between Arthur Clennam and Flora which collapses into farce and is so aptly burlesqued in the courtship and marriage of Flora and Mr. F".[84] This is a typical passage of Flora's reminiscences:

> 'I will draw a veil over that dreamy life, Mr. F was in good spirits his appetite was good he liked the cookery he considered the wine weak but palatable and all was well, we returned to the immediate neighbourhood of Number Thirty Little Gosling Street London Docks and settled down, ere we had yet fully detected the housemaid in selling the feathers out of the spare bed Gout flying upwards soared with Mr. F to another sphere.'
>
> His relict, with a glance at his portrait, shook her head and wiped her eyes.
>
> 'I revere the memory of Mr. F as an estimable man and most indulgent husband, only necessary to mention Asparagus and it appeared or to hint at any little delicate thing to drink and it came like magic in a pint bottle it was not ecstasy but it was comfort. I returned to papa's roof and lived secluded if not happy during some years until one day papa came smoothly blundering in and said that Arthur Clennam awaited me below, I went below and found him ask me not what I found him except that he was still unmarried and still unchanged!' (p. 285)

[83] Leavis, p. 317.

[84] Sucksmith, p. 69.

What also needs to be stressed, however, is how fittingly the monologic stream of her speech captures the fluttery rush of her emotions, and reflects so comically her retarded and undifferentiating mental life. The great achievement of this comic mimesis lies in capturing so accurately how Flora manages to inhabit the unregenerate world of the perpetual adolescent in combination with the physical world and gross appetites of a fat, middle-aged woman with a propensity for mixing "a great deal of sherry with sentiment" (p. 158). Even her name, with its classical associations with the goddess of flowers and springtime[85] adds to the picture of her delightful comic absurdity.

By infusing such fertility of humour into her monologues, Dickens helps to ensure the participatory response of the reader. Flora is thereby humanised for us, so that the channels of our sympathy are kept open alongside our awareness of her anachronistic ridiculousness. This sympathy deepens with the reader's growing sense, despite her immense foolishness, of the basic kindliness of Flora's nature, exemplified in her care both of Little Dorrit and the unstable and semi-anonymous Mr. F's aunt.

If Flora bears any resentment towards Arthur for the past, this in turn, by a curious process, seems to be comically displaced onto the abruptly cryptic utterances of Mr. F's aunt, with her "'I'll chuck him out o' winder!'" (p. 820) interjections. As John Lucas notes of this lady:

> She is of course funny, but she is also part of Dickens's disturbed and disturbing enquiry into failures of communication. The enquiry shows itself in the study of

[85] The second paragraph of chapter xlv of Bleak House reveals that Dickens was well-aware of these classical connotations.

> Flora, pathetically and grotesquely imprisoned in a past that cannot be realised in the present. Mr. F's Aunt is grotesque rather than pathetic, an unknowable comic mystery.[86]

In this sense, she can be seen as a kind of alter ego to Flora, who as Angus Wilson points out, "pursues Flora's old love, Arthur Clennam, with an inexplicable but ineradicable hostility as great as Flora's devotion".[87] As with Miss Flite in Bleak House, we often feel that in her eccentricity there is an underlying truth.

In summary, therefore, it can be seen that high points of tension in the novel are characteristically relieved by Dickens with one of Flora's flights or John Chivery's comically dismal epitaphs. One could cite, for instance, the comic interludes of Flora's reaction to the Dorrit fortune, coming before the news is broken to Mr. Dorrit; Flora leaning heavily on Arthur in the Clennam house as he struggles to interrogate Affery; or John Chivery's magnanimous struggles against his "rival" Arthur Clennam in the Marshalsea. The counterpoint provided by Chivery has been well-analysed by Sylvia Manning:

> At this point in the novel . . . his lugubriousness is virtually a burlesque of Clennam's depression. It does not have a derogatory effect upon the latter: though the emotional tension built up through Arthur's meditation is released in comedy of which the basis is ultimately satiric, the validity of Arthur's emotion remains unaltered. Yet the satirically biased comedy of Young John does have moral relevance to Arthur's situation: the bathos is a comic version of the self-regarding abdication from action and responsibility that Arthur verges upon. By diverting the satiric emphasis of Arthur's apathy onto Young John's dolefulness, Dickens manages to keep Arthur a sympathetic hero even while

[86] The Melancholy Man, p. 268.

[87] The World of Charles Dickens, p. 244.

> using him as one illustration of the book's satiric argument.[88]

A similar incident is Flora's flight in the pie-shop at the end of the novel, occurring just after Arthur and Amy have reached a final understanding:

> 'If Fancy's fair dreams,' she began, 'have ever pictured that when Arthur--cannot overcome it pray excuse me--was restored to freedom even a pie as far from flaky as the present and so deficient in kidney as to be in that respect like a minced nutmeg might not prove unacceptable if offered by the hand of true regard such visions have for ever fled and all is cancelled but being aware that tender relations are in contemplation beg to state that I heartily wish well to both and find no fault with either not the least, it may be withering to know that ere the hand of Time had made me much less slim than formerly and dreadfully red on the slightest exertion particularly after eating I well know when it takes the form of a rash it might have been and was not through the interruption of parents and mental torpor succeeded until the mysterious clue was held by Mr. F still I would not be ungenerous to either and I heartily wish well to both.' (p. 819)

Here again, the passage illustrates how inappropriate sentiment is purged from Arthur and Amy, and displaced onto Flora, where we may enjoy the emotional release in a comic form. At the same time, the comic tension between the mundane ordinariness of the pie-shop and her idealised vapourings assists in preparing us for the conclusion of the novel, where Arthur and Amy are sent out into a world containing these jumbled and conflicting elements.

In this section, I first examined the manner whereby Dickens's comic presentation of Pancks as a kind of steam engine helps us to gain sympathetic insight into the pressures of Pancks's work and environment. My discussion next of Pancks as Casby's employee led

[88] S.B. Manning, Dickens as Satirist (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1971), p. 174.

into an examination of the various modes of comic displacement in the novel that revealed Dickens's ability to make use of a similar comic technique for diverse purposes.

In the case of Casby, we saw how the displacement of unpleasant sentiments through Pancks functioning as his spokesman allows Casby to retain a superficial air of innocence. In Plornish's example, the displacement of his own opinions through his wife establishes both her superior understanding and the harmony of their marriage. We saw next how Mr. Dorrit's habit of displacing his own failings onto his brother Frederick makes us more aware both of Mr. Dorrit's own limitations and his lack of self-knowledge.

I discussed also the effectiveness and originality of Dickens's displacement of critical perspective from the direct to the unusual and the oblique in the examples of Mrs. Merdle's parrot and also the viewpoint offered on Fanny's place of work. Finally, I examined Dickens's technique of "cleansing" a love-relationship of excess sentiment and mawkish romanticism. By comically displacing these excesses onto the "alternative" lovers, John Chivery and Flora Finching, the seriousness of the central relationship between Arthur and Amy is heightened. At the same time, I noted how the complexity of Dickens's comic treatment of Flora helps us to empathise with her emotional condition.

V

Up to this point, I have been concerned largely with detailed explorations of Dickens's comic strategies in the novel. As a result, I have devoted comparatively little attention to examining the normative centre of the book, in so far as this is embodied in

Amy and Arthur. I have had to presume that in explicating certain passages concerning Flora or Mr. Dorrit, for example, the reader understands that Arthur or Amy are present as counterpoints, providing in their sensibilities a response that helps to define the reader's response as well.

In this section, however, I intend to draw back from detailed commentary on comic techniques in order to offer instead a synoptic view on the roles of Amy and Arthur in the novel. My purpose at this stage is to try to come to terms with the question: is Dickens's vision in Little Dorrit finally a comic vision?

J.R. Kincaid is one critic who argues that Little Dorrit is not a comic novel. On the contrary, he suggests that "the central vision of Little Dorrit is one where the cardinal principles of comedy are all brought up, only to be attacked, dismissed, or treated with a bitter and complex irony. . . ."[89] In contrast to this, I argued at the beginning of this chapter that the novel's very complexity defies attempts to categorise it neatly as a comic or tragic work (see p. 91 above). Nevertheless, I do intend to argue in this section that Dickens's treatment of Amy and Arthur does ultimately seem to weigh the balance in favour of a comic vision. For even if, as Kincaid claims, we can find no sign of a comic (that is, a re-structured or regenerated) society on the broader scale,[90] the liberation, the regeneration, and finally the marriage, of Amy and Arthur are all components of a definite comic movement that eventually comes to represent, in F.R. Leavis's

[89] Kincaid, p. 192.

[90] Kincaid's whole discussion of Little Dorrit on pp. 192-222 is pertinent here.

phrase, an "affirmation of life".[91]

The concept of Amy and Arthur as normative centres in the novel is one that I have also acknowledged elsewhere as Leavis's (see p. 102 above). In comparing Arthur with Pip in Great Expectations, Leavis cogently points out that:

> Clennam is not 'I' in [Little Dorrit], and not the ubiquitous immediate consciousness that registers and presents. Yet he too is felt as a pervasive presence, or something approaching it. He has been very early, with a subtlety of purpose and touch Dickens isn't as a rule credited with, established as that--established as the presence of what one may well find oneself referring to as plain unassertive normality.[92]

Virtually the same comment may be said to apply to Amy and her role in the novel.

The "liberation" of Amy and Arthur at the end of the novel counterpoints the various collapses in the second half of the book, whilst other liberations, in turn, prepare for theirs. Those who are also liberated include, notably, Pancks, who is able to cast off his role as Casby's bully-boy; Affery, in standing up to the combined domination of Flintwich and Mrs. Clennam; and, to a certain extent, Mrs. Clennam herself, whose final desire to settle accounts with Amy offers her at least a brief physical freedom from paralysis.

But it is Amy in particular who provides the constant, living counterpoint to Mr. Dorrit in his most moving scenes, some of which I have examined. In doing this, she appears to embody the true spirit of the Dorrit family: its pristine integrity before the taint of imprisonment, as it were. It is this quality which she

[91] Leavis, p. 297.

[92] Leavis, p. 289.

searches for so longingly in her father, convinced that in his verbal stumblings and occasions of remorse, his original integrity still lingers underneath his pretensions. Ironically therefore, in spite of Fanny and Tip's loud complaints--which merely serve to highlight this point--she is the real repository of the family pride; a true pride founded in an honest and compassionate sensibility of which she, in her daily actions, provides the touchstone. Here her care for the simple Maggy is important, because it is this concern which lifts her out of what might otherwise seem an obsessive anxiety for her father. Amy's concern for Maggy serves to break the bounds of this narrowly familial interest by demonstrating that her compassion operates on the wider human scale amongst all the down-trodden and the suffering.

If we compare Amy with previous heroines, we soon become aware of how far Dickens has travelled as an artist. As Leavis notes of Little Nell, "there's nothing there. She doesn't derive from any perception of the real; she's a contrived unreality, the function of which is to facilitate in the reader a gross and virtuous self-indulgence".[93] And whilst Florence represents an advance on Little Nell, she has in common with Little Nell a passivity that is captured in her frequent weeping. Where Florence differs is in her ability to transcend her background: the lack of parental love amidst the ironic wealth; but then Amy does this against far greater odds. As chapter xiv of Book 1 entitled "Little Dorrit's Party" shows, her education lies amongst the cold and hostile streets of London and the grinding poverty of the prison. Florence's response to a major crisis is to run away; Little Dorrit's is to face up to

[93] Leavis, p. 298.

things as they are.

Whereas Florence, as I suggested in my previous chapter, is deliberately kept at a childish level, the major paradox in Amy inheres in the contrast between her size and her spirit: she is a child in stature (as the scene with the prostitute on the bridge on p. 175 is designed to emphasise), but a Little Mother in actuality; the only one in the novel who deserves her title, for she shoulders responsibility not only for Maggy, but for her whole family. This paradox is repeatedly insisted upon; indeed, the emphasis begins in the very title of the book itself. What represents a real triumph of the human spirit against overwhelming odds is the way in which her shrunken, timid physical weakness is overcome by her indomitable steadfastness, a strength that ignores, as chapter xiv of Book 1 shows, the rain, wind, cold, hunger, and inadequate clothing. None of these can prevent her from her fixed purpose in feeding and caring for her father. In this, she provides a counterpoint also to the slackness and weak-mindedness of the Barnacles and the Sparklers, or the dilettantism of a Gowan. At the same time, she is not idealised, but rooted to life in the city with its ineluctable demands upon her capacity to care and to share; it is this rootedness that makes her a genuine heroine. As Lucas comments, "Amy Dorrit was born in the Marshalsea and not in Heaven, and if she symbolises anything it is the power of the human to cope with the worst that society is and does".[94]

A final comparison with Esther Summerson of Bleak House is pertinent here. In Esther we witness a heroine crippled by the denial of love as a child; this is what permeates and distorts her

[94] Lucas, p. 251.

whole narrative section of the novel because of her sometimes irritatingly repetitive refusal to believe that people can love her. Amy overcomes both this lack of real affection, and the bleak fragility of her entry into the prison world that I have discussed. The reader never senses in her this coy disbelief, but rather a firm and confident centre of compassion that, by an important distinction, looks outwards rather than inwards; she is too busy for crippling introspection. Nevertheless, there are certain qualities that Esther shares with Amy, for, as Inspector Bucket puts it, "'when a young lady is as mild as she's game, and as game as she's mild, that's all I ask, and more than I expect. She then becomes a Queen, and that's about what you are yourself'".[95] It is not difficult to feel Dickens's concurrence, or to sense that at least in this combination of tenacity and gentleness, Esther is Amy's forerunner.

If there is one disturbing element in Amy's character, it is her apparent desire to cling to the past. We feel that when she is amidst the ruins of Rome that she cannot let go of the Marshalsea; that she exhibits instead a sacrificial side to her that verges on the perverse.[96] It is, from one angle, disquieting to see the eagerness with which she assumes her old clothes to visit and nurse Arthur in the Marshalsea, as if he has replaced her father as the object for whom she suffers. But, from a different angle, this may also be seen to dramatise her constancy: her refusal to accept her new, but false, role, and her insistence instead upon retaining her

[95] P. 801 of the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens Edition of Bleak House.

[96] I found Dyson's comments on Amy's tendency to make sacrifices on p. 210 of The Inimitable Dickens helpful in this regard.

original and steadfast integrity. As Lucas concludes, "the way in which Amy becomes the symbol of endurance for Clennam, seems to me the most magnificent and deeply moving moment in the entire novel. . . . She is not a leading from above, but she _is_ the great transforming ordinary fact of endurance which counters Clennam's untoward thoughts".[97] In her ability to transcend her own physical frailty, to transform the prison world around her by her compassionate nature, and to liberate the spirit of the self-imprisoned Arthur Clennam, Amy forms an important part of Dickens's vision of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, and consequently of the novel's comic movement.

As with Amy, the central paradox in Arthur's case revolves around his unassertiveness. Flora's flights, for example, are mostly directed at Arthur, yet the reader is conscious of him, if at all, only as a bewildered, embarrassed, but unfailingly courteous, background figure. He claims to feel a willessness and a loss of hope in life, but in reality registers firm principles, such as those which provide the understated, yet ultimately powerful counterpoint to Mrs. Clennam's Christianity, with all its joyless repression and emphasis on atonement and suffering. In a central instance, we are told that Arthur has stubbornly retained, amidst this spiritual impoverishment, "a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had been without. Bred in meanness and hard dealing, this had rescued him to be a man of honourable mind and open hand. Bred in coldness and severity, this had rescued him to have a warm and sympathetic heart" (p. 165).

Like Esther, Arthur's loss of faith in himself seems primarily

[97] Lucas, p. 283.

the result of the denial of love in childhood. It is significantly made clear that he is not the true son of Mrs. Clennam either physically or spiritually--and the two are linked, as Trilling points out.[98] Arthur's principles represent his triumph against the deadening sterility of his mother:

> As the fierce dark teaching of his childhood had never sunk into his heart, so the first article in his code of morals was, that he must begin in practical humility, with looking well to his feet on Earth, and that he could never mount on wings of words to Heaven. Duty on Earth, restitution on earth, action on earth; these first, as the first steep steps upward. (p. 319)

It is this transcendence, rather than the age difference, that makes him unsuitable for Pet, who, as her name suggests, is altogether too facile, and has endured no struggle against odds of Arthur's order (though it is true that she gains her burden in her married life, even if this is cushioned by the Meagleses). In the adversity of his circumstance, and his transcendence over his upbringing, Arthur is more fittingly linked to Little Dorrit; their families respectively showing their common distance of travel.

Arthur's fight to sustain his integrity and honesty dramatises a real moral battle: the first real instance of liberation in the novel is Arthur freeing himself from the murky dealings of the Clennam business--set metonymically in the squalor of London--and the paralysing mixture of sanctimony and vindictiveness that his mother exemplifies.

What emerges too from Mr. Merdle's collapse is of great interest: who escapes, and who is punished. Against Doyce's firm principles, Arthur is weak enough to be persuaded by Pancks--in the

[98] Lionel Trilling, Introduction to the N.O.I.D. Edition of <u>Little Dorrit</u> (1953), pp. xii-xiii.

flush of his own success with the Dorrit estate--to speculate in the Merdle enterprises. Arthur has to suffer for this uncharacteristic lapse in his values, because his decision to speculate with the Firm's money represents an attempt to gain further wealth without work or effort, and as such it connects him, albeit temporarily, to the immoral ethos of the Barnacles, who exist by this same policy.

By contrast, the other synecdochic figures associated with Merdle--Bar, Bishop, Physician and their ilk--escape untainted. Even Mrs. Merdle, by a characteristic moral contortion, emerges as the hurt party. In portraying this, Dickens has enough satiric sense to realise that this represents the ironic truth of what happens in the real world: those responsible are rarely punished; if they were, Circumlocution Offices would cease to exist.

Arthur alone seems to become the scapegoat for the Merdle disgrace. Yet he both distinguishes and redeems himself by his readiness to accept responsibility for his actions, and to suffer what follows without attempting in any way to soften their force by any expedient measures open to him. Ironically, however, the condemnation of Arthur appears to increase in proportion to the strength of his adherence to his principle of responsibility. In addition, he has to reject the advice of those who try to maintain him in the Barnacle world: most notably Rugg, who attempts to place him in a "superior" prison, and whose plea for self-interest, "'What can we do for ourself?'" (p. 714), has a disturbingly familiar ring. His is the minor level of the corruption of values, but it is expressed in an easily recognisable linguistic obfuscation.

Arthur becomes more closely linked to Amy by his actual suffering and imprisonment in the Marshalsea; he is also, as

Sucksmith has pointed out, linked here to Mr. Dorrit:

> Arthur Clennam is also imprisoned in a delusion, namely his stubborn belief that love is no longer for him. Significantly, it is in prison that the scales fall from his eyes, an enlightenment stressed symbolically by his deliverance from the Marshalsea. This conclusion to the second book brings out the irony in William Dorrit's release from the Marshalsea which concluded the first book. Intended as parallel scenes, they stress that William Dorrit was not released from that other prison of delusion and indicate the full meaning of Arthur's deliverance.[99]

Arthur's refusal to accept Amy when she offers her wealth is the correct decision, not a mere Victorian propriety, since to accept her money would be again to connect himself with the parasitic values of a Gowan. At the same time, he has to work through his nullifying loss of faith in himself, and his resultant blindness to the steadfastness of Amy's love.

It is, however, the last paragraph of the novel that really refutes the dark or anti-comic view of the book. With its powerful Biblical cadences, it represents a wonderfully sane and genuine liberation for both Amy and Arthur, simply because it is tempered by a vision that places them amidst all the bewildering actualities of the world:

> 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, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar. (p. 826)

The ending specifically refutes Kincaid's claim that "*Little Dorrit* does not finally make any terms at all with this world".[100] On the contrary, although the ending *is* understated, it offers not

[99] Sucksmith, p. 338.

[100] Kincaid, p. 193.

sentiment, but a very specially balanced modus vivendi, wrought out of all the elements in the novel. In this, two people are placed who have suffered and endured, who are firm in their responsibilities, yet resilient enough to cope with the stresses of the world. The ending may lack the facility of the conventional happy-ever-after comic conclusion, but it would conversely be wrong to view it as gloomy. Amy and Arthur do not have to "renounce social membership"[101] to be saved; the conclusion instead particularly directs us to the realisation that they have the more difficult solution of coming to terms with its imperfections. Both Amy and Arthur have worked through suffering towards a personal liberation, and it is the regenerative process which they have both undergone that helps to prepare them for the society in which they have to live. This regeneration, together with the quality of their sensibilities which we have seen displayed in the course of the novel, provides the ultimate guarantee for the reader that they can succeed.

vi

I commenced this second chapter by arguing that the comic element plays a greater role in the opening section of Little Dorrit than has generally been acknowledged, and that the charge that Little Dorrit is a dark or gloomy novel consequently needs to be re-examined. My examination of the novel in this chapter as a whole has been aimed at demonstrating that Little Dorrit exhibits a remarkable diversity of comic approach, in a spectrum that

[101] Kincaid, p. 201.

encompasses the dark humour of Mrs. Clennam or Flintwich, the satire of the Circumlocution Office, and the absurdities of Flora's ramblings. It is the protean nature of the comic element and the role it plays in the book that refutes, as I suggested at the beginning of the chapter, any reductive attempts at categorising the novel.

I have attempted in this chapter to trace the greater complexity of the subsidiary characterisation and the role played by Dickens's art in achieving this complexity. The black humour of Mrs. Clennam and Flintwich has been discussed, together with its metonymic extension into the environment. Linked to their life-denying attitudes is the parodic satire on the parasitism and pretension of the Circumlocution Office, with its multiple ramifications. I have noted that in both cases the comic perspective in itself offers an humane counterpoint whose implicit, life-enhancing values increasingly become explicitly embodied, as the novel progresses, in the characterisations of Arthur and Amy.

In my examination of the Marshalsea chapters, we saw how Dickens's use of humour increases the pathos and the reality of Amy's birth amidst the degradation of prison life. I tried also to show how Dickens's depiction of this degradation, both in London and in the Marshalsea itself, gives point to his satire of the Circumlocution Office. In the comic attack on the numerous Barnacle clan, we noted how consistently and successfully Dickens undermines various false notions of gentility, managing thereby to expose the gross irresponsibility of a whole administrative class in England.

We saw too how this posturing and love of "surface" is reflected in other characters. It is Dickens's comic portrayal of

Mr. Dorrit that helps to reveal the transparency of his own genteel posturing. In Mr. Dorrit's case, however, we also noted that it is specifically the comic element in the characterisation which helps us to retain a measure of our sympathy for him in his twenty-five year imprisonment. Likewise, in the case of Pancks, I examined the manner in which the comic quality of his automatism facilitates the shock of participatory recognition of the human plight in the reader.

I next examined the technique of comic displacement in several of its aspects, noting how effectively Dickens is able to use a recognisably similar technique for diverse purposes. The examination covered Mr. Casby's "appropriation" of Pancks's speech; the "ventriloquy" found between Plornish and his wife; Dickens's use of oblique points of view; Mr. Dorrit's transference of his weaknesses and frailties onto his brother Frederick; and John Chivery's Epitaphs.

The sub-plots have been looked at for their illumination of the main themes, and a connection has been suggested between Flora's comic attempts to turn back time in her relationship with Arthur, and Mr. Dorrit's delusions when he leaves the Marshalsea. Then, too, both Arthur and Amy have, as we have seen, their comic lovers: both the excesses of Flora's fantasies and John Chivery's dismal romanticism help to purge and control the romantic sentiment that surrounds the true relationship between Amy and Arthur as it develops.

In its aspect of controlling emotion, I have suggested that the comic element is put to one of its most subtle and profound purposes in the decline of Mr. Dorrit, enabling Dickens to render some of his most moving passages. Perhaps we find something

analogous to the Aristotelian tragic emotions of pity and fear in Mr. Dorrit's collapse, whilst in Amy's response, Dickens is able to show us that sympathy is the proper comic emotion to mediate between pity and fear.[102]

In my final section, I offered a synoptic perspective on Amy and Arthur, in an attempt to show that as "neglected" normative centres in the novel, their progress through the book is characterised by a movement that works through suffering towards a sense of spiritual liberation and regeneration that culminates in their marriage. This movement, I argued, is essentially a completion of a comic cycle of action, and their normative centrality in the novel therefore suggests that Dickens's vision in the novel is ultimately weighed in favour of this comic resolution.

From the diverse examples of comic strategy that I have analysed in Little Dorrit, we may indeed induce the general principle that Dickens's complex and subtle comic art consistently works both as an indispensable aid to imaginative understanding, and as a fine control over the reader's reaction, enabling him to penetrate most fully into the imaginative world which is offered. If the comic element is ultimately not fully analysable, it may at least be described as the means to a swift and deep poetic insight. My final chapter, which deals with Great Expectations, is aimed at examining how this insight functions in the context of a first-person narrative.

[102] I should acknowledge that a discussion with my Supervisor helped me to sharpen this point.

CHAPTER 3

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The preceding chapter on *Little Dorrit* was devoted to extending and deepening the enquiry into Dickens's comic art that I initiated in my first chapter on *Dombey and Son*. One of my concerns in chapter two was to demonstrate that *Little Dorrit* is a more complex artistic achievement than *Dombey and Son*, and that this achievement is significantly linked to the greater diversity and complexity of Dickens's use of the comic element in *Little Dorrit*.

But although *Little Dorrit* is a more complex work than *Dombey and Son*, the two novels remain linked by the fact that they are both written in the omniscient mode. The comic techniques that Dickens adopts have consequently to function within this narrative method. This chapter, however, develops my exploration of Dickens's comic art in a different direction. It is specifically aimed at exploring the relationship between Dickens's comic methods and the finely sustained first-person narrative mode that the reader encounters in *Great Expectations*.

Dickens made use of the first-person narrative technique three times: in *David Copperfield* (1850), in the Esther Summerson sections of *Bleak House* (1853), and finally, in *Great Expectations* (1861). It was immediately after his great success with *David Copperfield* that Dickens tried mixing two different narrative modes in *Bleak House*; it is in this novel that we find the unusual alternation of Esther's first-person narration with an omniscient viewpoint. But

Dickens chose not to repeat this experiment, and, as the dates indicate, only returned to the use of a first-person narrator in Great Expectations after an eight-year gap during which he wrote three other novels in the omniscient mode.[1] Whilst David Copperfield and Bleak House both possess their special interest and merit, I have chosen to examine Great Expections as the final, and in my judgement, the most fully realised example of Dickens's achievement in the first-person narrative form.[2]

Great Expectations deals with the changes in Pip's consciousness as he progresses from young child and blacksmith's boy to London gentleman, and it is Dickens's sustained focus through the evolving consciousness of the protagonist Pip that provides so successful a structural unity to the novel. The changes in the consciousness of the young Pip are recorded for us by an older Pip, who interprets at the same time as he records the experiences of his younger self. I shall argue in this chapter that it is this mature narrator who controls our perception of Pip's growth, and that the characteristically comic tone of his narration is intimately linked to this control over our response. The various sections of this chapter are therefore designed to explore the ways in which the special comic techniques adopted by the mature narrator affect our understanding of the separate stages in Pip's growth towards his final integrity.

A pertinent point of departure into Great Expectations is provided by Forster's record of the novel's genesis:

[1] Hard Times (1854), Little Dorrit (1857), and A Tale of Two Cities (1859).

[2] By first-person narrator in Great Expectations, I mean simply what is generally referred to as "first-person protagonist narrator", or "first-person central narrator" rather than "peripheral" or "witness" narrator. Here I owe a general debt to Wayne Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), although it is not my intention to become involved in all the intricacies regarding points of view in the novel that Booth discusses.

> . . . the series of papers collected as the Uncommercial Traveller were occupying Dickens in 1860; and it was while engaged in these, and throwing off in the course of them capital "samples" of fun and enjoyment, he thus replied to a suggestion that he should let himself loose upon some single humorous conception, in the vein of his youthful achievements in that way. "For a little piece I have been writing--or am writing; for I hope to finish it to-day--such a very fine, new, and grotesque idea has opened upon me, that I begin to doubt whether I had not better cancel the little paper, and reserve the notion for a new book. You shall judge as soon as I get it printed. But it so opens out before me that I can see the whole of a serial revolving on it, in a most singular and comic manner." This was the germ of Pip and Magwitch. . . .[3]

The passage confirms the seminal importance of Dickens's comic intention in his conception of the novel. Indeed, the humorous bias of the work is reinforced in Dickens's comments when, his "idea" having germinated into the first section of Great Expectations, he wrote to Forster that,

> "I have made the opening, I hope, in its general effect exceedingly droll. I have put a child and a good-natured foolish man, in relations that seem to me very funny. Of course I have got in the pivot on which the story will turn too--and which indeed, as you remember, was the grotesque tragi-comic conception that first encouraged me."[4]

The "'grotesque tragi-comic conception,'" of which Dickens speaks in his letter I take to relate on the simplest level to the plot of the novel, in which a young blacksmith's boy, through a curious twist of circumstance, receives the prospect of "great expectations" at the hands of a convict. The various implications of this conception remain to be discussed in the balance of this chapter, but what is of immediate concern is that the terms that Dickens uses here imply that the embodiment of this plot in the

[3] The Life of Charles Dickens, 11, p. 284.

[4] Forster, p. 285.

novel requires a complex tone or attitude to which he wishes the reader to respond. And since Great Expectations is a first-person narrative, it is the mature narrator in the novel who becomes responsible for managing this complex mixture of the tragic and the comic. I therefore intend to commence with a scrutiny of Pip's role as narrator in the novel.

As I have mentioned, the narrator of Great Expectations is not the young Pip himself whom we encounter at the beginning of the novel, but a mature Pip who casts back ironically or humorously upon the childhood experiences and childish imagination of his younger self. It is this mature voice, the "overlay" of an adult mind upon the child's viewpoint that selects, controls, and orders the various experiences for the reader. The use of the mature Pip to recount the various experiences enables us also to accept that which might otherwise prove unacceptable from a young child, because the adult consciousness provides the correct articulation for the childish imaginings, since it is a mind distanced by time and the many experiences that the novel itself unfolds. The adult consciousness is able in this way to offer the reader an ironic perspective upon the struggles of childhood. Further, the experienced narrator mediates his youthful experiences to us through a tone that is nearly always a comic tone. This tone, by helping to establish the novel's basic comic convention, hints at a comic structure or cycle of action that we might therefore expect to include the ultimate regeneration of the protagonist. In a more direct sense, of course, as Q.D. Leavis points out, the narrator's very maturity offers proof

that Pip will eventually survive his own failings and vicissitudes.[5] The mature narrator is also a reliable narrator, since the ironic voice foreshadows a safe arrival. In this manner, the mature narrator mediates between the reader and his younger self; shaping and controlling his various experiences through the characteristic use of a comic tone. The hindsight licenses the humour, which in turn controls the reader's apprehension of the narrated events.

The novel concerns the growth of Pip's moral sensibility--his sentimental education--and the opening page offers an excellent exemplification of the narrative method which I have outlined:

> My father's family name being Pirrip, and my christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.
>
> I give Pirrip as my father's family name, on the authority of his tombstone and my sister--Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, '<u>Also Georgiana Wife of the Above</u>,' 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 trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.
>
> Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things,

[5] My account of the mature narrator's role in the novel is informed by Q.D. Leavis's treatment of this topic on pp. 376 ff. in her chapter entitled "How we must read <u>Great Expectations</u>" in <u>Dickens the Novelist</u>. I also found John Lucas's account on pp. 290-1 of <u>The Melancholy Man</u> helpful in this regard.

> 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. (p. 1)

The opening is a masterstroke of compression in setting the pattern for what is to come. Through the whimsical images that the young child conjures up of his dead family from the scanty evidence of the tombstones, we derive our initial impressions of the child's imaginative powers: a strength of imagination that will be vital to the quality of Pip's perception in the balance of the novel. Further, the depiction of the child totally alone amongst the graves of his family dramatises for us the sense of isolation which is to be Pip's lot for much of the novel, whilst the bleak and dreary setting of the marshes which surround Pip helps here both to hint at the impoverishment of his early life in the backward village, and to reflect the internal, spiritual condition of the child who presently bursts into tears.

He is alone in the world except for his sister, who turns out to be a travesty of what an elder sister should be; it is surely significant in this regard that right from the start of the novel we notice that she never possesses a name of her own. She is Mrs. Joe, defined always in terms of the kindly Joe--as if to emphasise through this omission her lack of Christian virtues and her resulting alienation from Pip. This isolation on the part of the

child is again reinforced by the very fact that Pip has to create for himself imaginative fantasies of his buried family from such slender resources as the graveyard tombstones.

At the same time, the narrative stance is firmly established. Words and phrases such as "unreasonably", "childish", and "universal struggle", are the obvious interpolative comments of an adult reflecting with wry humour upon his own childish imaginings. There is thus a marked tension between the relatively light-hearted tone of adult amusement discernible in the second paragraph, and the style of the following paragraph, which cumulatively builds up a sense of desolation and terror that culminates in the child's tears.

We can begin to see here how the adult amusement offers a check upon the tendency towards simple pathos in the passage. It begins to be evident that Dickens pursues this comic distancing through the mature narrator from the actual terror of childhood experience mainly in order that the reader should be diverted from the necessarily simplistic and exaggerated outlook of a young child to the more valuable perspective that the adult Pip is able to offer on that world. It is therefore the rhetorical coloration--the words built into the narrative by the mature narrator--which contains the essential penetrative insight into the child's condition that guides the reader towards the wisdom of the novel.

This scrutiny of the opening page of the novel has revealed at least the basic principles by which the mature narrator rhetorically manages the complexities of tone that the "tragi-comic conception" demands. We are now in a position to start exploring how the penetrative wisdom that the mature Pip has to offer actually emerges in the embodiment of the novel's thematic concerns.

In my previous paragraph, I used the term "child's condition"

purposively to signal that Dickens is starting to work through the mature narrator's account of the young Pip's isolated neglect in the opening pages of the novel towards an exposure of a more general malady in Victorian society. The first part of the novel which I intend to examine in the balance of this section, deals, in fact, with Dickens's theme of the violation of the child's world by adults. This is a familiar theme to the reader of Dickens, since it manifests itself in one form or another in all Dickens's major novels. We saw the theme appearing in Dombey and Son, for example, in the suffering of little Paul. Great Expectations, however, offers us the opportunity to explore this theme presented by a first-person protagonist narrator, rather than the more familiar omniscient narrator.

Q.D. Leavis has remarked of Pip's plight in Great Expectations that his initial sense of guilt—the guilt that is so important in the novel—is inevitable because it is the result of the Victorian attitude towards the child: "Pip is made to feel that he has committed a sin in being born . . . simply by being a child who has to be reared".[6] Dickens deals extensively with the subject of Pip's treatment by adults in the first seventeen chapters of the book up to the effective removal of Mrs. Joe through being struck down by Orlick, for it is in these chapters that we witness Pip's youthful sensitivity being battered by the adults who surround and control him.

It is in this connection that Mrs. Joe seems meant to be representative of Victorian attitudes towards children, as we encounter the first few chapters with their dominant impression of

[6] Q.D. Leavis, p. 380.

imposition. This impression is compounded both of her own heavy-handed imposition of authority, and also of her resentful sense that the child is an impossible burden upon her. "'Drat that boy'" (p. 11), we hear her exclaim, and she proceeds to treat the job of bringing up a child as one of inflicting punishment upon him for any real or imagined deviance. Be it "'Tickler'" (p. 6), or doses of tar-water, the home is transformed into a penitentiary where the mature narrator's wry admission that he was brought up "by hand" (p. 6) acquires an ironically literal meaning.

Our perception of adult attitudes towards the young is sharpened at the Christmas party presided over by the forbidding Mrs. Joe. The party commences with the indelible entrance of Pumblechook:

> 'Mrs. Joe,' said Uncle Pumblechook; a large hard-breathing middle-aged slow man, with a mouth like a fish, dull staring eyes, and sandy hair standing upright on his head, so that he looked as if he had just been all but choked, and had that moment come to; 'I have brought you as the compliments of the season--I have brought you, Mum, a bottle of sherry wine--and I have brought you, Mum, a bottle of port wine.' (p. 21)

The memorably bizarre description of Pumblechook offers additional testimony to the heightened imagination of the young Pip that the opening scenes of the novel have already established. It is also possible to see that there is a comic link between Pumblechook's "choked" appearance, and the "hanged" Flintwich in Little Dorrit, but here the resemblance ends, because it becomes clear from the rest of Pip's description of Pumblechook in the passage that he is not intended to bear the same disreputable and villainous weight as Flintwich.

One clue to the difference lies in Pumblechook's name. Wellek

and Warren have pointed out that in the novel genre, "The simplest form of characterisation is naming".[7] It seems hardly necessary to dwell on Dickens's success in this regard, except to note briefly how fittingly Pumblechook's name serves to define his role in the novel. As so often in the case of Dickens's names, it is hard to pin down exactly the richly portmanteau quality of Pumblechook's name--indeed, the exercise would be an obtuse one. It is sufficient to note how aptly the suggestiveness of the name captures Pumblechook's stolid and countrified nature; and how this image is in turn reinforced by his speech, with its laboured repetitions: "'I have brought you . . .'". Pumblechook is imprisoned by his name as surely as are both Wopsle and Hubble--the clumsy consonant sounds speak for themselves. His name defines for us with an appropriateness we come confidently to anticipate in a Dickens novel the framework of his action; we may enjoy his appearances secure in the knowledge that he can, at worst, be no more than a relatively minor irritation to Pip:

> Every Christmas Day he presented himself, as a profound novelty, with exactly the same words, and carrying the two bottles like dumb-bells. Every Christmas Day, Mrs. Joe replied, as she now replied, 'Oh, Un--cle Pum--ble--chook! This is kind!' Every Christmas Day, he retorted, as he now retorted, 'It's no more than your merits. And now are you all bobbish, and how's Sixpennorth of halfpence?' meaning me. (pp. 21-22)

A familiar memory for many from childhood is that it is the predictable adult who poses the least threat to the child. Pumblechook's unvarying patterns of behaviour thus help to increase our secure enjoyment of his absurdity. At the same time, however,

[7] Theory of Literature, p. 219.

Pumblechook's dull complacency of deportment also manages to capture, like the bleak opening image of the marshes, something of the atmosphere of limitation in the village life that surrounds Pip.

The picture too of Mrs. Joe simpering before Pumblechook's comparative prosperity is in sharp contrast to her bullying and unloving attitude towards Pip and Joe. Joe she treats simply as another child, and a retarded one at that. This contrast begins to establish for us the hypocrisy of the adult world, and to throw into ironic relief the way that the adults moralise over Pip. That this posturing is quite transparent to Pip the child constitutes a further sign of his essential difference from them, an isolation initially suggested through his imaginative powers. This ironically makes him superior in terms of insight and understanding to the adults who surround him, a difference which only increases the burden of his suffering at their pretentiously foolish hands.

But here again, it is the overlay of the mature narration that enables an intrinsically disturbing situation to be purged into comedy by the distance afforded by time and experience. Whilst the reader can yet perceive through the overlay the original degree of unpleasantness for the child, the comic interpolations help to increase the transparency of the adults' behaviour for us. This is very evident when this gathering of village society feel it encumbent upon themselves to afflict Pip with what he refers to as "moral goads" (p. 22):

> It began the moment we sat down to dinner. Mr. Wopsle said grace with theatrical declamation--as it now appears to me, something like a religious cross of the Ghost in Hamlet with Richard the Third--and ended with the very proper aspiration that we might be truly grateful. Upon which my sister fixed me with her eye, and said, in a low reproachful voice, 'Do you hear that? Be grateful.'
> 'Especially,' said Mr. Pumblechook, 'be grateful, boy,

> to them which brought you up by hand.'
> Mrs. Hubble shook her head, and contemplating me with a mournful presentiment that I should come to no good, asked, 'Why is it that the young are never grateful?' This moral mystery seemed too much for the company until Mr. Hubble tersely solved it by saying, 'Naterally wicious.' Everybody then murmured 'True!' and looked at me in a particularly unpleasant and personal manner.
> (pp. 22-23)

On the superficial level, it can be seen from the passage that the typical mode of the narrative overlay, here and elsewhere, consists in offering those phrases and polysyllabic words that are at comic variance with the triviality of the proceedings; examples here being "theatrical declamation", "very proper aspiration", and "moral mystery". As G.L. Brook has shown, this polysyllabic convention was common practice amongst Victorian novelists for obtaining a humorous effect; it is certainly a convention which Dickens uses extensively.[8]

But deeper than this, Mr. Hubbles's contribution, "'Naterally wicious'", provides the clue to the attitude that Dickens is here attacking. The sentiment has its origin in the Christian Church's dogma of Original Sin, which implies that all children are born into this fallen state, and can only be led, therefore, into light and goodness by the strict moral precepts and guidance of their parents. In reality, however, the doctrine, delivered in the distortion of a country dialect (suggesting the fuzziness of doctrinal comprehension at this level), provides an expedient rationale for the assembled adults to project their own failings onto Pip, whom they stigmatise as a kind of devil:

> 'Swine,' pursued Mr. Wopsle, in his deepest voice, and

[8] The Language of Dickens (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970), p. 16.

> pointing his fork at my blushes, as if he were mentioning my christian name; 'Swine were the companions of the prodigal. The gluttony of Swine is put before us, as an example to the young.' (I thought this pretty well in him who had been praising up the pork for being so plump and juicy.) 'What is detestable in a pig, is more detestable in a boy.' (p. 23)

Here again, it is the mature narrator's distanced perspective that allows us to enjoy the comic side of what must have been a rather less enjoyable experience for the young Pip, as these gluttonous villagers afflict him with their pompous homilies about the moral shortcomings of the young. Indeed, the humour here verges on a satirical treatment of the villagers, and this serves to alert us to the dramatic irony of the passage in its context, for we possess privileged knowledge about the real reason for Pip's blushes regarding the pork. The dramatic irony is heightened further when, immediately after this, Pumblechook sees fit to add his own little moral sermon, which consists of picturing the fate that might have befallen Pip, had he been born what Pumblechook is pleased to call a "'Squeaker'" (p. 24):

> 'You would have been disposed of for so many shillings according to the market price of the article, and Dunstable the butcher would have come up to you as you lay in your straw, and he would have whipped you under his left arm, and with his right he would have tucked up his frock to get a penknife from out of his waistcoat-pocket, and he would have shed your blood and had your life. No bringing up by hand then. Not a bit of it!' (p. 24)

This scarcely veiled form of adult sadism, which at first seems no more than an embellishment to the ponderous morality being exchanged, actually turns out on closer examination to have an interesting connection to the threats which Magwitch makes against Pip during their first encounter; indeed, there seems to be a pun here upon the word "'Squeaker'", so reminiscent is it of Magwitch's opening threat:

"'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!'" (p. 2). It is also reminiscent of Magwitch's invention of the young man who tears open the heart and liver of boys who fail to obey him (p. 3). There is, moreover, a similarity of attitude between Pumblechook's vision of Pip as a "'Squeaker'" having his throat cut preparatory to being eaten, and Magwitch's own reflection on Pip's plumpness: "'You young dog,' said the man, licking his lips, 'what fat cheeks you ha' got. . . . Darn Me if I couldn't eat 'em'" (p. 2). Both cases explore the psychology of childhood terror and the forms taken by adult aggression against the young.

But there is also a level of situational irony that the mature narrator makes us aware of, which inheres in the very fact that this _is_ a Christmas party, so that the bountiful nature of the food and drink (at least for the adults present), together with their general gluttony, comes to present a marked contrast with the picture of the shivering and hungry Magwitch out on the marshes; a contrast intensified by the traditional connotations of Christmas as a season of fellowship and generosity.

This discrepancy now makes the link between Pip and Magwitch clearer. Despite the initial evidence that Magwitch shares the same language, and hence attitudes towards Pip as the villagers, Pip actually has more in common with the convict than with the adults at the Christmas party. His connections with Magwitch are several: to start with, as an orphan he is, in a sense, an outcast like Magwitch. It is this "homeless" aspect of Pip that we saw dramatised at the opening of the novel, where he is placed amongst his dead relatives in the bleak and lonely isolation of the church-

yard. Secondly, the adult's attitude towards Pip appears to incriminate him, as we see through the comic quality of Mr. Hubble's comment "'Naterally wicious'" (p. 23), and Mrs. Hubble's "mournful presentiment" (p. 23) that Pip will come to no good, both of which reflect the general feeling of the other adults present, Joe excepted. Then, too, it is Pip's sense of isolation from those around him, together with his fear of the imaginary "'young man'", that has forced him to steal for Magwitch, and the consequence of this act has already, in his mind's eye, linked him to the world of the convict. This is most vividly in evidence in that passage where Pip steals furtively back across the marshes to the waiting Magwitch:

> The mist was heavier yet when I got out upon the marshes, so that instead of my running at everything, everything seemed to run at me. This was very disagreeable to a guilty mind. The gates and dykes and banks came bursting at me through the mist, as if they cried as plainly as could be, 'A boy with Somebody-else's pork pie! Stop him!' The cattle came upon me with like suddenness, staring out of their eyes, and steaming out of their nostrils, 'Halloa, young thief!' One black ox, with a white cravat on--who even had to my awakened conscience something of a clerical air--fixed me so obstinately with his eyes, and moved his blunt head round in such an accusatory manner as I moved round, that I blubbered out to him, 'I couldn't help it, sir! It wasn't for myself I took it!' Upon which he put down his head, blew a cloud of smoke out of his nose, and vanished with a kick-up of his hindlegs, and a flourish of his tail. (p. 14)

The manner whereby the young child projects his guilt onto his surroundings is dramatised for us quite clearly, whilst the mature narrator's commentary, the "flourish in the tail" of the writing, as it were, invests the passage with a comic quality which assists the reader through the adult perspective to understand this mode of childish guilt and fear.

If we are led to recognise at this stage, therefore, that it

is Pip's upbringing rather than Pip--although he takes the burden of guilt upon himself--that has forced him into the position of having to steal, the later course of the novel demonstrates that it is the same corrupt and hypocritical values on the part of society in general that lock the Magwitches of the world into their lives of crime. The inference which the mature narrator offers is that the young Pip can successfully be manipulated by Magwitch primarily because he does share with the convict this rapport of circumstance. The reader realises at this point that the kindly Joe can be of little assistance to Pip, firstly because his role in the house has in practice been diminished by Mrs. Joe virtually to Pip's level, and secondly because Pip himself makes it quite clear that he avoids the subject of Magwitch with Joe, since he realises that the ingenuous Joe is plainly incapable of grasping the complexities of the situation. Not the least of these complexities is the fact that a passage such as the one above helps to demonstrate that Pip's own guilt is in part an outward manifestation of his own isolated experience. And the inclusion of that comic scene where the dull-witted Joe's response to Pip's hiding of his bread for the convict--a response which earns for them both a dose of tar-water (pp. 9-10)--merely serves to confirm the soundness of the child's judgement in excluding Joe from the burden of his secret.

Pip's rapport with Magwitch is significantly emphasised in the considerate way in which he manages to feed the convict, in notable contrast to the manner whereby Pip himself is fed. For despite Pip's guilt and fear, he contrives to steal for the convict a surprising variety of food. What he takes includes some bread, a rind of cheese, about half a jar of mincemeat, some brandy (with

unfortunate consequences for Pumblechook), a meatbone and "a beautiful round compact pork pie" (p. 13). The variety of food he assembles obviously transcends his original orders from the convict, and suggests a concern, reinforced by the loving description of the pie, that is very different to Pip's own treatment by Mrs. Joe. The contrasting description of Mrs. Joe jamming the bread hard and fast against her uninviting bib with its pins and needles captures instead a joyless inversion of normal maternal care.[9] Likewise, at the Christmas party, the mature narrator remembers wryly that he was "regaled" with "the scaly tips of the drumsticks of the fowls, and with those obscure corners of pork of which the pig, when living, had had the least reason to be vain" (p. 22).

Not only does Pip steal with some generosity for Magwitch, but, in spite of his terror of the man, he also shows a concern that Magwitch should enjoy his meal that poignantly suggests his measure of identification with the hunted fugitive:

> Pitying his desolation, and watching him as he gradually settled down upon the pie, I made bold to say, 'I am glad you enjoy it.'
> 'Did you speak?'
> 'I said, I was glad you enjoyed it.'
> 'Thankee, my boy. I do.'
> I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food; and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog's way of eating, and the man's. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog. He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast; and he looked sideways here and there while he ate, as if he thought there was danger in every direction of somebody's coming to take the pie away. He was altogether too unsettled in his mind over it, to appreciate it comfortably, I thought, or to have anybody to dine with him, without making a chop with his jaws at the visitor. In all of which particulars he was very like the dog. (p. 16)

[9] I am indebted here to pp. 358-9 especially of Barbara Hardy's illuminating essay, "Food and Ceremony in Great Expectations", Essays in Criticism, 13, No. 1 (1963), 351-63.

The comparison that Pip makes at this point between the man and a dog becomes ironically reversed at a later stage in that humiliating scene where Estella is ordered by Miss Havisham to feed Pip, when it is his turn to feel the spurned social outcast: "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" (p. 57). Whereas Pip feels pity for Magwitch's plight, Estella (ironically, Magwitch's daughter), feels only contempt for the coarse village lad, whilst the echo of the scene on the marshes serves to strengthen the connection between Pip and Magwitch.[10]

But perhaps the most important irony in Pip's feeding of Magwitch lies in the contrast if offers to the moral obtuseness that prevails at the Christmas party, where the unshakeable complacency of the gorging adults and their blindness to the world of the child and his conception of Christmas is demonstrated. Their "giving" resides solely in the conviction that the child profits enormously by their moral conversation. And the mature narrator is subsequently able to show us, with some delight, how a comic punishment superbly proportioned to the crime is appropriately brought about by the generosity of Pip's theft, when Pumblechook raises his glass of brandy lingeringly to the light to admire its quality as a self-appointed connoisseur of the better things in

[10] There is an added irony in the much later scene, which I discuss on pp. 257-8 below, when Magwitch has returned to London. Pip once more likens Magwitch to a dog whilst watching him eat, but on this occasion the compassionate glance of the child is replaced by the revulsion of a "gentleman" who has caught all the worst features of Estella's class contempt.

life.[11] This comic incident, minor though it appears, is not without point; it does foreshadow what will later become clearer. For just as Pumblechook cannot, in spite of his portentous scrutiny, tell the difference between pure brandy and that adulterated by tar-water, so he will later be unable to discriminate between fact and fiction when Pip regales him and Mrs. Joe with his fantastical inventions concerning his experiences at Satis House. This later event constitutes the second comic punishment of Pumblechook, in which Pip through his wild exaggerations exposes Pumblechook as a gullible ignoramus.

There is more, however, to this later episode than the mere enjoyment of both Pumblechook and Mrs. Joe's open-mouthed swallowing of Pip's bizarre fabrications. That they are prepared to believe Pip is in itself the most convincing evidence of their small town parochialism: Pumblechook accepts Pip's story because he is, in the final analysis, no more than a country townsman who is incapable of grasping events outside of the narrow constrictions of village life. Miss Havisham belongs to a different class altogether; so removed from the villagers by her station in life that she might well exist in another world altogether (as, in a sense she does), a world where, to the villagers, all things seem possible. If Pip as a child feels alienated from the villagers, then equally the different classes know little about each other. The gulf between the classes, however, is a theme that I shall be exploring more

[11] On p. 72 of his essay, "The Hero's Guilt: The Case of Great Expectations", Essays in Criticism, 10 (1960), 60-79, Julian Moynahan discusses the later incident where Joe relates to Pip how Orlick robbed Pumblechook and "'stuffed his mouth full of flowering annuals'" (p. 442), and comments that "Pumblechook's punishment is nicely proportioned to his nuisance value for Pip".

thoroughly in my next section, where I propose to examine Pip's entry into Miss Havisham's world.

I commenced this section by discussing Pip's role as mature narrator in Great Expectations. We saw in the opening pages of the novel that it is the "overlay" of the mature voice--the interpretative rhetorical coloration in the narrative--which selects, controls, and orders the various childhood experiences for the reader. I noted how this mediation imposes a characteristically comic tone upon the narrative which has the effect of guiding the reader towards the essential insights of the novel. I went on to demonstrate how this effect emerges from the mature narrator's portrayal of Mrs. Joe's Christmas party, where the comic treatment alerts us to the differences between the special qualities of imagination and intelligence in the young Pip, as against the unimaginative obtuseness of the villagers. Furthermore, it is the perspective offered by the mature voice which articulates the ironies that flow from the contrast between a starving felon, an isolated and guilt-ridden young child, and a group of villagers who indulge themselves in a Christmas feast and who moralise over a young child with such complacent lack of awareness.

ii

The opening chapters of the book that I examined in my first section show us the mature narrator successfully establishing Pip as a child of superior intelligence and imagination. These are the gifts that will carry Pip through the various vicissitudes recorded in the novel towards his final, mature self; they are also the qualities, however, which are destined to torment Pip's conscious-

ness in the course of his experiences.

The first major transformation of Pip's consciousness occurs when he gains entry to the disturbing world of Miss Havisham and Estella. I shall be concerned in this section with the mature narrator's presentation of this transition, and I shall again be arguing that a close relationship exists between the narrator's use of a comic tone and his exposure of the essential dilemmas of his youthful progress.

Towards the end of my previous section, I discussed how Pumblechook's two comic "punishments" reveal to us his limitations of experience and outlook. It is consequently ironic to find that the very person who is to introduce Pip to the mysterious new world of Miss Havisham is none other than the stolid Pumblechook himself. This introduction is what provides Pumblechook with much of his comic status in the rest of the novel, as we see him subsequently fostering his own aggrandisement in the town as Pip's "benefactor". The irony resides, of course, in the fact that Pumblechook in reality knows practically nothing about the world to which he commits Pip, although, characteristically, he pretends to a knowledge of Miss Havisham.

As if to emphasise the absurdity of Pumblechook's bluff, the very first thing that happens to Pumblechook (who has been burdening Pip with arithmetical exercises in lieu of the ample breakfast he has himself consumed), is that on his arrival at Satis House with Pip he is firmly excluded. His physical exclusion by Estella here reflects his mental exclusion from Miss Havisham's world:

> Mr. Pumblechook was coming in also, when she stopped him with the gate.

> 'Oh!' she said, 'Did you wish to see Miss Havisham?'
> 'If Miss Havisham wished to see me,' returned Mr. Pumblechook, discomfited.
> 'Ah!' said the girl; 'but you see she don't.' (p. 50)

The comic ease with which the young girl is able to repel and disconcert the same Pumblechook who only a moment ago had been lording it over Pip, immediately suggests the mysterious power of this new world. Later we discover that Pumblechook has never, in fact, "seen" Miss Havisham. It is left to Pip alone, therefore, to penetrate the mysteries of this strange world, and it is a world that he enters in darkness, guided by the enigmatic Estella bearing a single candle (her Latinate name becomes of significance here), very much in the spirit of an initiate undergoing a strange and rather frightening <u>rite de passage</u>.

What Pip discovers in the house is the decaying figure of Miss Havisham, whose creation exemplifies Dickens's vision of a society that allows autocratic powers to those who happen to possess money. She is the product of a milieu which goes beyond the mere acceptance of her eccentric and tyrannous behaviour to offer in addition a servile attendance upon her wealth and power, as the case of Camilla and the rest of the Pockets (barring Herbert's father) illustrates. The deference shown her by her relatives extends also to the awe of the villagers, and even to the respectful attentions of the powerful Mr. Jaggers. In Miss Havisham, money-power is taken to its destructively eccentric point of absurdity; because she has money, she may do as she wishes--she can be "'flighty'", as Mr. Pumblechook describes her, with complete impunity. The more incredible the stories are that Pip invents about her behaviour, the more readily are they believed, so isolated is she from the villagers by virtue of her wealth,

education, and upbringing--in short, her class.

It is this gulf which that comic scene where Joe is ordered to appear with Pip before the august presence of Miss Havisham to discuss Pip's apprenticeship is designed to emphasise. For Joe, as at first for Pip, the encounter is with a weird new world; but the comedy inheres in the fact that unlike Pip, he is wholly incapable of coming to terms with that world, a failure splendidly dramatised in his complete inability to talk to Miss Havisham. The distance between the two classes is so great that Pip is forced to mediate as a kind of court interpreter:

> Estella told me we were both to go in, so I took Joe by the coat-cuff and conducted him into Miss Havisham's presence. She was seated at her dressing-table, and looked round at us immediately.
> 'Oh!' said she to Joe. 'You are the husband of the sister of this boy?'
> I could hardly have imagined dear old Joe looking so unlike himself or so like some extraordinary bird; standing, as he did, speechless, with his tuft of feathers ruffled, and his mouth open as if he wanted a worm.
> 'You are the husband,' repeated Miss Havisham, 'of the sister of this boy?'
> It was very aggravating; but, throughout the interview, Joe persisted in addressing Me instead of Miss Havisham.
> 'Which I meantersay, Pip,' Joe now observed, in a manner that was at once expressive of forcible argumentation, strict confidence, and great politeness, 'as I hup and married your sister, and I were at the time what you might call (if you was any ways inclined) a single man.'
> 'Well!' said Miss Havisham. 'And you have reared the boy, with the intention of taking him for your apprentice; is that so, Mr. Gargery?'
> 'You know, Pip,' replied Joe, 'as you and me were ever friends, and it were looked for'ard to betwixt us, as being calc'lated to lead to larks. Not but what, Pip, if you had ever made objections to the business--such as its being open to black and sut, or such-like--not but what they would have been attended to, don't you see?'
> 'Has the boy,' said Miss Havisham, 'ever made any objection? Does he like the trade?'
> 'Which it is well beknown to yourself, Pip,' returned Joe, strengthening his former mixture of argumentation, confidence, and politeness, 'that it were the wish of your own hart.' (I saw the idea suddenly break upon

> him that he would adapt his epitaph to the occasion, before he went on to say) 'And there weren't no objection on your part, and Pip it were the great wish of your hart!' (p. 94)

The confrontation (or, more correctly, lack of confrontation) is most obviously humorous in the way that it clashes the two classes together so absurdly: "'Astonishing!'" exclaims Joe afterwards, leaning against a wall for support (p. 96). The comic factor is also increased by the skilful way that the mature narrator makes us realise how Joe, in addressing all his remarks to Pip, inescapably forces the focus of attention onto Pip at the very moment that he is acutely embarrassed merely by Joe's gawky presence. Joe's naive identification with Pip, therefore, incisively adds to Pip's sense that the contemptuous Estella in the background sees her judgement of Pip's coarseness confirmed. Joe's ungainliness is captured for us in the passage both in the cumbersome syntax of his speech, as in his awkward periphrasis "'which I meantersay, Pip'", and in the comic but (to Pip) horrifying predictability with which--typical of his moments of high emotion--Joe triumphantly concludes with a laboured adaptation of the ingenuously rhyming epitaph he composed for his father.

The episode outlines too the cruel paradox that is to be exposed in the second third of the novel. We begin to see from the passage that it is the very closeness and sincerity of Joe's love for Pip, his unshakeable steadfastness of affection, which is to increase Pip's burden of guilt and unhappiness as he moves further into his new world. It is the comic perspective offered by the mature narrator which enables us through our laughter to perceive that despite Joe's ungainliness, he remains affectionate and honest. The task which the mature narrator undertakes from this point

onwards is to deepen our awareness of the complexities of Pip's position as regards Joe. We are shown that Joe is simple--a comic figure, in fact--but that he also embodies in this simplicity all the worthwhile qualities of the human heart that Pip in his social opportunism and his rush to acquire new pretensions is increasingly coming to reject.

But what we are also shown in this passage is that Joe talks to Pip simply because he does not have a language with which to communicate with Miss Havisham; hence the absurd sense we derive that Miss Havisham should, as part of her mysterious powers perhaps, have the same privileged access to Joe's mind and thoughts that Pip himself enjoys. But Joe does not lack this language by accident, for whilst the lack underscores his simple-minded innocence, it is this same innocence that protects him from the corrupting world of Satis House: without talking to Miss Havisham, Joe cannot be contaminated by her values in the way that Pip becomes infected by them. What the comic qualities of the passage demonstrate is that it is Joe's very limitations of outlook and comprehension that preserve his innocence; there is no place for Joe's simple, loving heart in the deadness of Satis House.

From another angle, the passage reinforces our sense that Pip is estranged from Joe by his imaginative intelligence. This, on the one hand, provides him with the painful self-awareness which the mature narrator highlights for our appreciation, but on the other, enables him to make the mental leap into Miss Havisham's world, leaving the simple Joe far behind.

If we take innocence as being characterised by the unself-conscious state, then it is this torturing self-awareness on Pip's part that represents a fall from innocence. But I have argued that

Pip's innocence has been seriously altered <u>before</u> he ever visits Satis House, for I suggested that his alienation from his fellow villagers springs as much from his superior intelligence as from his sense of being alone in the world; indeed, that the two are inextricably linked: his intelligence increasing the sense of isolation. The comedy of the Christmas party has already demonstrated to us his awareness of adult hypocrisy and pretentiousness. To this we may add that he also possesses the necessary penetration to hold the conviction that he has been unfairly and unjustly treated; this takes the form not simply of a self-pityingly subjective impression of being hardly done by, such as might be expected from a child, but of an unerringly absolute conviction that no child deserves to be treated as he has been:

> My sister's bringing up had made me sensitive. In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice. It may be only small injustice that the child can be exposed to; but the child is small, and its world is small, and its rocking-horse stands as many hands high, according to scale, as a big-boned Irish hunter. Within myself, I had sustained, from my babyhood, a perpetual conflict with injustice. 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. Through all my punishments, disgraces, fasts and vigils, and other penitential performances, I had nursed this assurance; and to my communing so much with it, in a solitary and unprotected way, I in great part refer the fact that I was morally timid and very sensitive. (pp. 57-8)

Notwithstanding the mature narrator choosing to describe his younger self as "morally timid", the passage offers important evidence of a seemingly innate sense of tenaciously held right and wrong. The evidence is important since it offers clues to the continually troubled nature of Pip's conscience that underlies much

of his later action.

We may note, furthermore, that Pip has already had a foretaste of the imposition that becomes possible through education; this is illustrated for us in that comic scene where Pip laboriously constructs a letter on his slate to Joe:

> One night, I was sitting in the chimney-corner with my slate, expending great efforts on the production of a letter to Joe. . . . With an alphabet on the hearth at my feet for reference, I contrived in an hour or two to print and smear this epistle:
> 'MI DEER JO i OPE U R KRWITE WELL i OPE i SHAL SON B HABELL 4 2 TEEDGE U JO AN THEN WE SHORL B SO GLODD AN WEN i M PRENGTD 2 U JO WOT LARX AN BLEVE ME inF XN PIP.'
> There was no indispensable necessity for my communicating with Joe by letter, inasmuch as he sat beside me and we were alone. But, I delivered this written communication (slate and all) with my own hand, and Joe received it, as a miracle of erudition.
> 'I say, Pip, old chap!' cried Joe, opening his blue eyes wide, 'what a scholar you are! Ain't you?'
> 'I should like to be,' said I, glancing at the slate as he held it: with a misgiving that the writing was rather hilly.
> 'Why, here's a J,' said Joe, 'and a O equal to anythink! Here's a J and a O, Pip, and a J-O, Joe.'
> (pp. 40-1)

The ingenuous respect of the illiterate Joe for the magic act of writing, even as displayed here in its crudest form, makes the episode a parody of the undeserving way that the educated attract the reverence of the illiterate: "'Astonishing!' said Joe, when I had finished. 'You ARE a scholar'" (p. 41). Joe's awe for Pip's very basic achievement helps to explain his dumbfounded reaction in the presence of Miss Havisham.[12] The scene in its entirety is therefore seminal in preparing Pip for the grossly disproportionate

[12] It is interesting that Pip's writing efforts appear in dialectal form as if to emphasise the clumsiness, whereas his speech in the rest of the novel is "cleansed".

respect that will come to seem to him the automatic entitlement of a gentleman.

If the mature narrator has taken particular care to establish his youthful self's prior awareness of the limitations of village life, his first visit to Satis House does nevertheless represent for Pip a profound experience. The sharp particularity with which he is able to record his impressions of Miss Havisham, sitting amidst the ruins of her wedding-day finery, is the best proof of the intensity of the experience. The sense of darkness and the macabre decay that surround Miss Havisham, and of which she herself is now part; the stopping of the clocks at twenty minutes to nine; the general sense of stasis; all these elements help to cast a sardonic light upon the name of the house: "'Enough House'" says Pip to Estella, 'that's a curious name, Miss'" (p. 51). The synchronous stopping of all the clocks, as well as the manner in which Miss Havisham replaces all her objects carefully in their exact place, comes to emblematise the very precision of her plans for revenge; plans which ironically depend upon the course of natural time itself, as she impatiently awaits Estella's maturity.

Pip's previous loss of innocence may now be regarded as comparatively minor in comparison to the major shocking awareness sprung upon him by Estella's disdain; a gain in knowledge that is to shape much of his later action, and hence the course of the novel itself. We are shown that he now experiences a terrible new sense of his self-deficiency.[13] Whereas his previous feeling of isolation sprang from his intelligence, which helped him to a

[13] The sub-title to p. 59 underlines this: "I find that I am a low fellow".

position of superior insight over the simple villagers, that position is now reversed, and it is Pip who is made to feel bewildered and inferior. He seems, in his own eyes, besmeared with dirt, his very soul tainted by the "'sut'" from the forge: in Estella's disgusted eyes he is a "'common labouring-boy'", who has "'coarse hands'" and "'thick boots'" (p. 55). These deficiencies seem to transpose themselves to his mental abilities, for after being soundly trounced at a game of cards by Estella, she "denounced me for a stupid, clumsy labouring boy" (p. 55).

But the most important facet of Estella's contempt is that it serves to confirm what Pip had previously only sensed in his inmost heart: that he does not fit his surroundings. This is not to suggest that the boy is able to comprehend this insight in the form in which it has been outlined here; for much of the corrosive nature of this new knowledge derives from the inchoate sense of dissatisfaction in the boy's mind that will characteristically express itself in the form of a gradual poisoning of his old happiness and relationships. But it does help to explain the otherwise inexplicable: the phenomenon of Estella's deep and lasting impact upon Pip; an impact that cannot be the result merely of her beauty for so young a child, or of any emotional exchange, since she is already incapable of loving. Her imprint upon him depends instead upon the fact that through her contempt she has articulated the young boy's innate dissatisfaction, and has set before him as an ideal the possibility of extricating himself from the constrictions of the village environment.

What Pip really discovers at Satis House, therefore, is the existence of an alternative model to the unhappiness of his life hitherto. Through chance, Satis House happens to be the first

alternative model that he stumbles across, and it is a testimony to the real strength of his misery and sense of alienation that he seizes upon it, since it will turn out in its darkness to be for Pip a most destructive model, based as it is upon the corrupting quality of vindictive revenge that entails emotional death for all who become contaminated by its influence. This is all clearly exhibited to Pip from his initial moments in the house; in the macabre imagery of decay and unnaturalness besetting Miss Havisham in her rotting darkness. As Angus Calder points out, the appropriate metonymic extension of her diseased mind is the wedding table, with its mice and spiders predatorily consuming the remnants of the laid-out feast.[14]

Yet the imprint of the beautiful Estella's scorn, confirming as it does Pip's inner sense that he is truly out of his place, is so strong that he ignores the warnings of destruction to seize eagerly upon the opportunity to escape; he comes, indeed, to talk of its effects in terms of an illness when he says, "'Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it'" (p. 55). From now on, "'coarse'" and "'common'" are to be part of Pip's new vocabulary,[15] and the balance of the novel is largely concerned to work out the effects of his choice.

In this unpromising manner, Pip is introduced to the world of snobbery, with its attendant absurdities and ironies. The first thing we notice is the sheer arbitrariness of this new world: the characteristic way in which distinction is made between things

[14] Introduction to the Penguin edition of Great Expectations (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 21.

[15] Lucas, p. 294, is among several critics who have also noted Pip's assimilation of Estella's language.

which in themselves are utterly trivial: "'He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy!'" (p. 55) exclaims Estella with disdain. This kind of distinction points to the deeper ironies of snobbery, for it insists upon the importance of the trivial and the external at the expense of the essential and internal. What become of overriding importance are such matters as coarse hands, thick boots, and calling knaves Jacks. It is now possible to see the connection between the arbitrarily trivial nature of snobbish discrimination, and the disproportionate reward and esteem that, as we saw in the slate-writing episode, Pip has already discovered is the tribute paid to the better educated.

This destructive world chooses completely to ignore those human qualities of goodness, kindness, tolerance, and love; those virtues which are classless and which we have seen embodied in Joe. These qualities are associated instead with the life-enhancing nature of the compassionate laughter which we feel for Joe in his gauche interview with Miss Havisham. Indeed, we are now in a position to reflect that it is the mature narrator's comic perspective in this interview that significantly opposes the life-enhancing qualities of laughter with the life-denying absence of comedy in the bitter Miss Havisham. The comic counterpoint to the terse asperity of her speech in this scene becomes in this manner a valuable criticism of the sterility which she represents. The conspicuous lack of any comic quality in Pip's perception of Miss Havisham or Estella is what progressively heightens our awareness that Pip is becoming entangled with destructive and deadening forces.

Appropriately, "Beggar my neighbour" is the card game that Pip plays on his first visit to Miss Havisham's house; a game that pits

Pip against Estella. It is a game which can be seen to have a wider significance in the novel, for it represents the means by which distinctions are drawn between one class and another. The game is the main focus of Miss Havisham's energies, as she tries to beggar men through Estella. It is Estella's game, energetically inculcated by Miss Havisham, for the first thing that happens to Pip in his new world is that he is contemptuously beggared by Estella; a proceeding which accurately foreshadows their future relationship. Previous to this, it was Compeyson who beggared Miss Havisham (as also Magwitch), through his swindles. The reader may well ask, in this connection, if swindles are perhaps not merely a variation of the superficial concerns of snobbery; what, after all, is the <u>real</u> difference between a Jack and a knave, if not a surface swindle of words?

The game appears also to be the concern of Mr. Jaggers, in his cross-examinational humiliation of those with whom he comes into contact, and lastly, it is Magwitch's game too, as he tries to exact retribution by beggaring society with the splendour of his young gentleman. Perhaps, on reflection, the game provides the clue to the reason why Miss Havisham could not perceive that Compeyson was an emotional swindler, since to be reared in a system of snobbery that fails to distinguish between externals and internal human qualities must render one particularly vulnerable to deception.

It is now possible to understand that Pip, in relating his inventions regarding his experiences at Satis House to Mr. Pumblechook and Mrs. Joe, is not merely exacting a comic revenge for their impertinent curiosity and his consequent suffering at their hands. The fantastic lies represent his safe-guarding of

the truth from their ears, because the truth of his experience lies too closely to the matrix of his inner emotions. He covers up these powerful emotions, therefore, with his reconstruction of the experience. Miss Havisham's world is not the villagers' world; it must be protected from their prying eyes by iron gates, just as Pip has had to protect his own world of the imagination from them. A good initiate lies or invents details about his secret induction, because the knowledge he has gained merely increases his isolation from those who cannot be admitted to the inner temple. Furthermore, as John Lucas points out, what Pip relates to their eager ears also serves to replace the powerful but uncomfortable truth with inventions that conveniently idealise his experience;[16] what Pip invents is, in a sense, how he would have preferred his experience to have been: the black velvet coach, the cakes and wine and gold plate, rather than the decidedly less enjoyable reality of the sobbing Pip being fed out in the backyard like a dog by a disdainful Estella. Pip continues to construct fantasies out of starker facts, the most notable example of this being his comfortable presupposition that Miss Havisham is his secret benefactor, an assumption which Miss Havisham is only too happy to foster in Pip for her own purposes of vindictive revenge upon her attendant parasites--a revenge in which Pip entangles himself by his own presupposition.

The apparently magical power of wealth in Miss Havisham's case, prepares the reader for what is to happen to Pip after Mr. Jaggers has informed him of his great expectations, for shortly after this event there occurs the comic scene where Pip visits Mr.

[16] Lucas, p. 293.

Trabb, the tailor:

> Putting on the best clothes I had, I went into town as early as I could hope to find the shops open, and presented myself before Mr. Trabb, the tailor; who was having his breakfast in the parlour behind his shop, and who did not think it worth his while to come out to me, but called me in to him.
>
> 'Well!' said Mr. Trabb, in a hail-fellow-well-met kind of way. 'How are you, and what can I do for you?'
>
> Mr. Trabb had sliced his hot rolls into three feather beds, and was slipping butter in between the blankets, and covering it up. He was a prosperous old bachelor, and his open window looked into a prosperous little garden and orchard, and there was a prosperous iron safe let into the wall at the side of his fireplace, and I did not doubt that heaps of his prosperity were put away in it in bags.
>
> 'Mr. Trabb,' said I, 'it's an unpleasant thing to have to mention, because it looks like boasting; but I have come into a handsome property.'
>
> A change passed over Mr. Trabb. He forgot the butter in bed, got up from the bedside, and wiped his fingers on the table-cloth, exclaiming, 'Lord bless my soul!'
>
> 'I am going up to my guardian in London,' said I, casually drawing some guineas out of my pocket and looking at them; 'and I want a fashionable suit of clothes to go in. I wish to pay for them,' I added--otherwise I thought he might only pretend to make them--'with ready money.'
>
> 'My dear sir,' said Mr. Trabb, as he respectfully bent his body, opened his arms, and took the liberty of touching me on the outside of each elbow, 'don't hurt me by mentioning that. May I venture to congratulate you? Would you do me the favour of stepping into the shop?'
>
> Mr. Trabb's boy was the most audacious boy in all that country-side. When I had entered he was sweeping the shop, and he had sweetened his labours by sweeping over me. He was still sweeping when I came out into the shop with Mr. Trabb, and he knocked the broom against all possible corners and obstacles, to express (as I understood it) equality with any blacksmith, alive or dead.
>
> 'Hold that noise,' said Mr. Trabb, with the greatest sternness 'or I'll knock your head off! Do me the favour to be seated, sir. Now, this,' said Mr. Trabb, taking down a roll of cloth, and tiding it out in a flowing manner over the counter, preparatory to getting his hand under it to show the gloss, 'is a very sweet article. I can recommend it for your purpose, sir, because it really is extra super. (pp. 142-3)

Mr. Trabb is the quintessential small tradesman; rendered by Dickens

with a wonderful fidelity and attention to particular detail, as, for instance, in the professional trick of sliding his hand under the cloth to show off the gloss. The metaphor comparing the hot buttered roll to feather beds aptly captures Mr. Trabb's mood of prosperously complacent self-indulgence, whilst the snarls and threats to his employee, alternating with a honeyed tone towards an important new client, familiarly captures the typical double standards of a shopkeeper. The mature narrator could hardly have selected a more pertinent experience than his younger self's encounter with this country—town tradesman to convey the comment he wishes to make at this juncture concerning the power of money over men's principles, for Mr. Trabb is a man trained by his instinctive sense of profit to effect smoothly the instant transition between an indifferent condescension towards the familiar figure of the blacksmith's boy, and, at the slightest glimpse of gold, suave deference towards a new source of income. The transition is reflected in the break from a plain style of speech at the beginning of the passage to the mannered phrases of a tradesman: "'Would you do me the favour of stepping into the shop?'" a servility shortly to be taken to its absurd extreme in the fawning attentions of Pumblechook's "'May I--<u>may</u> I--?'" (p. 145).

In its comic compression, the scene exposes, more successfully than any other method perhaps, the arbitrary yet self-serving way in which people make their social judgements, and in this way it sets the tone for the second third of the book, where tradesmen and others (notably, the "Avenger"), prey upon Pip in his new fortune.[17]

[17] It is thus clear that Trabb's response mirrors on the comic level the same superficiality of response towards Pip that I discussed on p. 224 above, in Estella's disdain for Pip's "'coarse hands'" and "'thick boots'".

There is an important effect gained, too, by the undermining presence of Trabb's boy (shortly to be given a greater comic role of his own), who serves here as a reminder of Pip's former status, for no doubt Pip was "Joe's boy" to Trabb and the other townsmen. Trabb's boy functions as a kind of <u>alter ego</u> who remains indomitably rebellious towards the gratuitous change in fortune of a fellow village lad, and who helps, through his spirit of mockery and parody, to remind Pip of the uncomfortable transparency of his freshly adopted pretensions. The subversive spirit of Trabb's boy in knocking "the broom against all possible corners and obstacles", is increased if we consider that, being connected to a genteel trade, he would probably enjoy something of a social advantage over the blacksmith's apprentice.

I began this section by examining Pip's lonely entrance into Miss Havisham's world. This step marks a fundamental departure from Pip's previous life that is soon signalled to us in the idiom of class contempt that Pip "catches" from Estella. The mature narrator's choice of this metaphor aptly connects Pip's new attitudes to a disease, and thus conveys to us the destructive irony of Satis House as a model for Pip's aspirations.

Pip first witnesses the extraordinary deference paid to Miss Havisham's world in that brief but illuminating comic episode where Estella effortlessly repels the hitherto imposing Pumblechook. This deference towards Miss Havisham is what helps to isolate her from the other inhabitants of the town. Indeed, we come to realise that isolation is a hallmark of Miss Havisham. This isolation is emphasised for us through the mature narrator's humorous treatment of that scene where Joe is brought into Miss Havisham's presence and Pip is forced into the intermediary position of "court"

interpreter. The mature narrator uses this same scene to dramatise also the split in Pip's mind as we witness him torn between the transparent honesty, sincerity and affection of Joe on the one hand, and on the other his new knowledge of Joe's social coarseness and gaucherie.

We saw too how this new knowledge is formed by the way that Estella's contempt for Pip articulates Pip's own inchoate dissatisfaction with himself and his existence. At the same time, the triviality and the arbitrariness of this new world are clearly displayed to us in Estella's disdain for Pip's thick boots and awkward lack of the finer social graces. These superficialities of dress and behaviour contrast ironically with the enduring human values embodied in Joe that Pip now turns away from. The manner in which Pip idealises his experiences at Satis House on his return to the forge further underscores his growing alienation from his childhood world.

Finally, the humorous treatment of Pip's reception at Trabb's shop illuminates for us the magically instantaneous power of wealth through the startling transition of Mr. Trabb's behaviour. The absurd extremities of Mr. Trabb's performance, moreover, effectively point forward to the corruption of Pip's London experiences, whilst the subversion of Trabb's boy provides us with a foretaste of the parodic undermining that from now on will accompany Pip's newly-acquired pretensions.

iii

The revolution in Pip's consciousness after his visit to Satis House encompasses many painful and conflicting emotions in

the young boy as we witness him torn between his regard for Joe and Biddy, and the destructive knowledge of his own deficiencies that accompanies his new class-awareness. I was concerned in section ii to explore the careful way that the mature Pip focuses our response towards his younger self in this first major transformation of his life. I argued that it is the mature narrator's comic voice which provides the controlling sensibility that clarifies for us the complexities of Pip's moral dilemmas. This ordering perspective that the mature narrator imposes upon the moral intricacies of Pip's world through his comic vision remains the basis of the argument that I shall extend into this section as well.

In the scene that I discussed at the end of my last section, we saw the mature narrator adopting a humorous tone to portray the discrepancy between Trabb's expedient attentions towards Pip, and his brusque treatment of his apprentice boy. It is the comic treatment of this discrepancy that alerts us to the pathos of the sudden gulf that by now has opened up between Pip and his childhood associates; a gulf that irrevocably separates him from their lives. In this way, the episode at Trabb's prepares us for Pip's next major step in the pursuit of his "great expectations". This next step necessitates Pip's removal to London--a physical separation that represents a further reflection of the mental dislocation which has already taken place. This section is designed to deal with the mature narrator's presentation of the experiences that Pip has in London, and the further changes of consciousness that affect Pip there.

The mature narrator's account starts with a disturbing vision of London that prefigures the upheavals which will afflict Pip in

that great city. It continues with the period that sees Pip adjusting to his new status, and making eager excursions to see Estella and Miss Havisham. Towards the end of this part of the novel comes the reappearance of Magwitch and the consequent turbulence in Pip's life that signals Pip's first painful steps towards the integration of the conflicting forces within him. The mature narrator's scope, however, is broader than this suggests, for he is also concerned to show us, in Wemmick and Jaggers, the deracinating and dehumanising forces of a great city, and I shall therefore be exploring his portrayal of these characters as well, for they form an important part of the narrator's vision of the city and its effects upon Pip.

As Q.D. Leavis has shown, Pip's initial impression of London ironically foreshadows the ultimate hollowness of his "great expectations".[18] His first view of the city is an ambivalent one:

> We Britons had at that time particularly settled that it was treasonable to doubt our having and our being the best of everything: otherwise, while I was scared by the immensity of London, I think I might have had some faint doubts whether it was not rather ugly, crooked, narrow, and dirty. (p. 153)

As if to reinforce these ominous first impressions of the city, his welcome at his seedy lodgings is such that, as Q.D. Leavis points out, his attempt to let some fresh air into the staircase results in the window attempting to guillotine him (p. 162).[19] If it is by now quite clear that the village is no pastoral paradise, Pip also finds it difficult right from the start to

[18] Q.D. Leavis, pp. 403-4.

[19] Q.D. Leavis, p. 404.

maintain his illusions regarding London's supposed glamour. His initiation into London life is as shocking, in its way, as his first visit to Satis House. This, for example, is the description of his first stroll whilst waiting for Mr. Jaggers to appear:

> When I told the clerk that I would take a turn in the air while I waited, he advised me to go round the corner and I should come into Smithfield. So, I came into Smithfield; and the shameful place, being all asmear with filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of Saint Paul's bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate Prison. (p. 155)

The details seem very carefully worked out in their effect, for it is clearly the mature narrator who orders the perspective, suggesting that it is by no coincidence that the Smithfield slaughtering market is juxtaposed with St. Paul's black dome, itself seen bulging out at Pip from behind Newgate prison. The blackened church in this vision is seen as an integral part of this social system that includes the butchery of Smithfield, and the gross brutality of Newgate, where, as at Magwitch's trial, prisoners are condemned to death in job lots like animals at the slaughterhouse. Q.D. Leavis comments that in its intensity of effect the vision of the great city in this passage is strongly reminiscent of Blake's "London".[20]

Newgate assumes a further significance in Pip's life when he visits it later under the guidance of Wemmick whilst awaiting Estella's arrival by coach:

[20] Q.D. Leavis, p. 401. I owe a general debt to her account of this passage.

> I consumed the whole time in thinking how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime; that, in my childhood out on our lonely marshes on a winter evening I should have first encountered it; that, it should have reappeared on two occasions, starting out like a stain that was faded but not gone; that, it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement. While my mind was thus engaged, I thought of the beautiful Estella, proud and refined, coming towards me, and I thought with absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and her. (p. 249)

On this occasion Pip feels the taint of Newgate more deeply, since it harmonises with his guilty thoughts about the nature of crime and his past connections with criminals. In his mind are memories of stealing the food and the file for Magwitch, the leg-iron that strikes down Mrs. Joe, the man with the strange face who looks "as if he were taking aim at something with an invisible gun" (p. 70), who pays Pip the "two fat sweltering one-pound notes that seemed to have been on terms of the warmest intimacy with all the cattle markets in the county" (p. 73), and who, Pip later realises, after sharing an oppressive coach journey with him, is also a convict. These thoughts form part of an unconscious concatenation binding Pip to the oppression of the prison.

In this way the realities of London conspire to undermine Pip's idealistic illusions regarding Estella. The strength of the later ironic revelations is prepared for in the vagueness of Pip's present feelings: "What <u>was</u> the nameless shadow which again in that one instant had passed?" (p. 250). There is also a latent irony in Estella's contempt as she passes by the prison in a coach with Pip who hears her refer disdainfully to the prisoners as "'Wretches!'" (p. 255), for only later do we discover that she herself is a child of Newgate.

There is an instructive episode just before this point,

however, which occurs after Pip meets Estella and takes her, as instructed, for a disastrous tea at the Coaching Inn:

> I was, and I am, sensible that the air of this chamber, in its strong combination of stable with soup-stock, might have led one to infer that the coaching department was not doing well, and that the enterprising proprietor was boiling down the horses for the refreshment department. Yet the room was all in all to me, Estella being in it. I thought that with her I could have been happy there for life. (I was not at all happy there at the time, observe, and I knew it well.) (p. 252)

The tea itself is appropriate to the preposterous conditions:

> I rang for the tea, and the waiter . . . brought in by degrees some fifty adjuncts to that refreshment, but of tea not a glimpse. A tea-board, cups and saucers, plates, knives and forks (including carvers), spoons (various), salt-cellars, a meek little muffin confined with the utmost precaution under a strong iron cover, Moses in the bulrushes typified by a soft bit of butter in a quantity of parsley, a pale loaf with a powdered head, two proof impressions of the bars of the kitchen fireplace on triangular bits of bread, and ultimately a fat family urn: which the waiter staggered in with, expressing in his countenance burden and suffering. After a prolonged absence at this stage of the entertainment, he at length came back with a casket of precious appearance containing twigs. These I steeped in hot water, and so from the whole of these appliances extracted one cup of I don't know what, for Estella. (p. 254)

The humour of this interlude supports the more serious reflections of Newgate, for the change in tone here helps to undercut the naïve intensity of Pip's emotional response towards Estella. As the mature narrator can now enjoyably appreciate, it is impossible to sustain one's romantic delusions in the comic context of a bumbling waiter and odours from the stable.

The double standards which were comically portrayed in Trabb the tailor have, too, a far more disturbing counterpart in the great city, for the lesson of London as a dehumanising agent is

captured for us in the portrayal of Wemmick. In this respect, Wemmick is related to Pancks of Little Dorrit, where Dickens was also trying to portray the devastations of city life upon the human psyche. Yet there is a marked advance in the characterisation of Wemmick, since in him Dickens has hit upon the strategy of dramatising explicitly the division forced by the pressures of the city. This is achieved by separating Wemmick's conduct and values at home from his role at the office: Wemmick's mouth becoming drier and more like a post-box slit as he leaves his castle and proceeds towards his place of work.

Through this technique, Dickens manages to clarify what was awkwardly confused in the case of Pancks, where we found a cold business efficiency jumbled incongruously with his more humane qualities. As with Pancks, however, the ineluctable demands of city life result in a Bergsonian *mécanisation de la vie*,[21] and a professional need to suppress his emotional life which finds a physical expression in his wooden stiffness of appearance:

> Casting my eyes on Mr. Wemmick as we went along, to see what he was like in the light of day, I found him to be a dry man, rather short in stature, with a square wooden face, whose expression seemed to have been imperfectly chipped out with a dull-edged chisel. There were some marks in it that might have been dimples, if the material had been softer and the instrument finer, but which, as it was, were only dints. The chisel had made three or four of these attempts at embellishment over his nose, but had given them up without an effort to smooth them off. (p. 161)

By extension, Wemmick's Walworth house with its moat and other pseudo-fortifications represents his attempt to defend himself from the exigencies of his London life, and the strength of his internal

[21] I discussed this effect on p. 167 of my previous chapter on Little Dorrit.

struggle to retain his humanity is depicted in a characteristic Dickensian mode of physical, concrete structures. Thus, as John Lucas notes, the whole elaborate and absurd little construct of Wemmick's home, the Stinger, moat and all, is a comic working out by Dickens of the cliché, an Englishman's home is his castle.[22] The humour assists us to perceive the pathos that has forced upon him the need for elaborate rituals to preserve a sense of human values. And, in a character like Wemmick--as with Pancks--we recognise more or less ruefully, in an extended form, the same distortions by the pressures of life to which we ourselves are prone.[23]

The mechanical sense of life which I discussed in the case of Pancks, also surfaces in Great Expectations in the forms of Wemmick's woodenness, his post-box mouth, Jaggers's habitual action of biting his forefinger, his creaking shoes and office mannerisms, and the "click" of emotion in Magwitch's throat. All are manifestations of the stress of work or emotion causing a tendency towards automatism in human beings.

Increasing the sense of realism in Wemmick's portrait is the reader's awareness that Wemmick has not, in fact, been able neatly to divorce his two lives, so that elements of the Little Britain ethos have crept into his home, as, for instance, in the mechanical flag-raising devices, or more importantly, in a certain woodenly mechanical quality embedded in Wemmick's very nature--and also, fittingly, in Miss Skiffins. It is this quality that

[22] Lucas, p. 305.

[23] Bergler's comments, which I quote on p. 169 of my previous chapter, apply just as appropriately to Wemmick as they do to Pancks.

surfaces in the stiffness of their courtship, holding as it does for Pip all the fascinating predictability of two clockwork dolls:

> As Wemmick and Miss Skiffins sat side by side, and as I sat in a shadowy corner, I observed a slow and gradual elongation of Mr. Wemmick's mouth, powerfully suggestive of his slowly and gradually stealing his arm round Miss Skiffins's waist. In course of time I saw his hand appear on the other side of Miss Skiffins; but at that moment Miss Skiffins neatly stopped him with the green glove, unwound his arm again as if it were an article of dress, and with the greatest deliberation laid it on the table before her. Miss Skiffins's composure while she did this was one of the most remarkable sights I have ever seen, and if I could have thought the act consistent with abstraction of mind, I should have deemed that Miss Skiffins performed it mechanically. (pp. 283-4)

It is this inescapable permeation of his very character by the outlook of Little Britain that later explains the small comic diversion of Wemmick's wedding. This interlude, coming as it does after Magwitch's capture, is not merely intended as a narrative strategy to lighten Pip's low point of darkness. It is also designed to show how even at his own marriage, Wemmick inescapably carries over the attitudes of Little Britain--although the seriousness of this point is admittedly mitigated by the light-hearted tone suitable to the celebration. Hence the secrecy and the charade of carrying a fishing rod, followed by the purpose of the day being sprung on Pip: "'Halloa!' said Wemmick. 'Here's Miss Skiffins! Let's have a wedding'" (p. 430). His self-delighting way of conducting the whole operation is strongly reminiscent of his master Mr. Jaggers's courtroom technique of withholding evidence for tactical reasons, or of refusing, even in his private conversations, to make outright admissions.

In the case of Mr. Jaggers, the suppression of emotion results in a characterisation that approaches a Jonsonian "humour",

as exemplified in his mannerism of biting and threatening with his forefinger, as well as his general bullying air:

> 'What do you suppose,' said Mr. Jaggers, bending forward to look at the ground, and then throwing his head back to look at the ceiling, 'what do you suppose you are living at the rate of?'
> 'At the rate of, sir?'
> 'At,' repeated Mr. Jaggers, still looking at the ceiling, 'the--rate--of?' And then looked all round the room, and paused with his pocket-handkerchief in his hand, halfway to his nose.
> I had looked into my affairs so often, that I had thoroughly destroyed any slight notion I might ever have had of their bearings. Reluctantly, I confessed myself quite unable to answer the question. This reply seemed agreeable to Mr. Jaggers, who said, 'I thought so!' and blew his nose with an air of satisfaction. (p. 273)

In retrospect, the mature narrator is able to perceive the humour of Mr. Jaggers's performance, but the entertaining theatricality of these court-room gestures also exposes, as with Mr. Wemmick, a certain mechanical quality in Mr. Jaggers's response: "bending forward to look at the ground, and then throwing back his head to look at the ceiling", is a mannerism, like several others, that is characterised by a hypnotic predictability. And there is a note of pathos lurking beneath the controlling humour of the description, for the reader senses that Mr. Jaggers is another character who has imprisoned himself by abandoning genuine human contact for these reductive and ritualistic mannerisms that displace emotion into mere gesture: "blew his nose with an air of satisfaction".

In his approach to people, Jaggers exhibits a formulaic response that ironically contradicts his vaunted preference for hard facts over feelings or speculation, and becomes instead a pessimistic Humour. His interest in people, as he displays most prominently in the case of Bentley Drummle, is proportionate to

what he imagines to be their criminal potential. His comment regarding Orlick displays a similar preconception: "'Why, of course he is not the right sort of man, Pip,' said my guardian, comfortably satisfied beforehand on the general head, 'because the man who fills the post of trust never is the right sort of man'" (p. 231). There is a similar attitude in his opening words to the young Pip whom he encounters on the steps of Miss Havisham's house: "'I have a pretty large experience of boys, and you're a bad set of fellows. Now mind!' said he, biting the side of his great forefinger as he frowned at me, 'you behave yourself!'" (p. 77). This attitude he sustains in his later belief that Pip will "'go wrong somehow'" as he assumes his new role of gentleman, and in this prophecy at least, Jaggers is accurate.

In order to become a gentleman, Pip imagines that it is necessary to escape from the human ties that bind him to the "'common'" and the "'coarse'". But Pip's previous fear of contamination from the "'sut'" of Joe's forge--we recall how desperately anxious he was that Estella should not peer in the window of the forge whilst he was at work in his lowly and blackened state (p. 101)--this kind of imagined "coarseness" resonates ironically through the much darker grime and contamination in London; a squalor which reaches far beyond its physical level to become a widespread moral degradation. One of the major discoveries for Pip, therefore, will be the ultimate realisation that human ties cannot expediently be abandoned; he needs Joe and Biddy even though he rejects them at this stage. Pip's eventual illness signals the crisis that will cause him to turn away from Miss Havisham's world back to his roots in the village.

More ironically, Pip needs Magwitch--the one tie he shrinks

from most--since it is Magwitch who produces the money that enables Pip to pursue his quest of attaining Estella. All the action of the book stands finally revealed as generated from Pip's first action in stealing food for the convict on the marshes; that act which so guiltily pervades Pip's thoughts, and which, as I noted on p. 198 above, Dickens himself referred to as the "'grotesque tragi-comic conception'" upon which the book turns. The further Pip attempts to isolate himself from his childhood, therefore, the more he unwittingly becomes dependent upon the people who shaped that world.

But there is additional irony in Pip's condescending view of the simple villagers whom he has left behind, since it is Pip himself who is being dehumanised by the separative course that he so eagerly chooses. This is conveyed by the record of Pip's progress in London; a record remarkably devoid of any real enjoyment. It is characterised instead by a general dissipation of energies, by overspending (in which Pip is doubly guilty by involving Herbert Pocket), and by sterile boredom.[24]

The lack of enjoyment of life is linked directly to the fact that Pip has no constructive role to play in his new life, for there are no instructions that he is to be educated for any specific profession. In contrast to the organic community that he has left behind him, therefore, where even the preposterous Pumblechook has a clearly defined role in the town as a corn chandler, Pip in his new surroundings (Herbert Pocket excepted), has to invent pseudo-relationships and roles to replace genuine

[24] Lucas, p. 300, comments of this period in Pip's life that, "The dream of freedom turns slowly into a nightmare of dissipation, boredom and ennui".

ones. The prime instance of this is his membership of that most useless of clubs, the Finches of the Grove:

> At Startop's suggestion, we put ourselves down for election into a club called the Finches of the Grove: the object of which institution I have never divined, if it were not that the members should dine expensively once a fortnight, to quarrel among themselves as much as possible after dinner, and to cause six waiters to get drunk on the stairs. I know that these gratifying social ends were so invariably accomplished, that Herbert and I understood nothing else to be referred to in the first standing toast of the society: which ran, 'Gentlemen, may the present promotion of good feeling ever reign predominant among the Finches of the Grove.' (pp. 258-9)

The absurd puerility of the club is captured in its name, whilst the wry humour on the part of the mature Pip results in a succinct summary of this period of nullity:

> We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. We were always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintance were in the same condition. There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we never did. To the best of my belief, our case was in the last aspect a rather common one. (p. 260)

If the main concern of Pip's life, apart from his longing for Estella, is reduced to the problem of spending the hours between rising in the morning and going to sleep at night with a maximum of expenditure and a minimum of pleasure, it is possible to note here a connection between the drunken waiters at the Club, the parasites who surround Miss Havisham, the tradesmen and "Avenger" who attend Pip, and the servants at the Inn where Pip takes Estella for tea, his tips resulting in "the whole house [being] bribed into a state of contempt and animosity" (p. 254).

In the same direction, the mature narrator's depiction of

Mrs. Pocket provides a satirical side commentary on the results of "great expectations". Having been raised to marry into the nobility, she is incapable of effecting the mental transition to the "plebeian domestic knowledge" (p. 178) appropriate to the ordinary Mr. Pocket, with the result that Pip discovers that "she had grown up highly ornamental, but perfectly helpless and useless" (p. 178). She lives a neurotic life: unable to face the reality around her, she prefers to inhabit the mental world of her favourite book on the pedigrees of the nobility of England. In consequence of her absurd pretensions, she is a danger to her own children and an irritating hindrance to the running of her household. The comic result is anarchy amongst the servants, whilst Mr. Pocket attempts to lift himself out of his difficulties by his hair (p. 181). Mrs. Pocket's ability to bask in self-pity, secure in her own sense of esteem, links her to the isolated world that Miss Havisham also has constructed for herself.

These satirical commentaries on the part of the mature narrator help us to perceive a more serious dimension to Pip's "great expectations". Now it is possible to see past our laughter to how thoroughly subversive Pumblechook's attentions or Trabb's servility has been. These "tributes" make it all the more difficult for Pip to react normally to people like Joe and Biddy, when his recent oppressors switch suddenly into fawning admirers. As John Lucas comments, it is people like Pumblechook who provide the real indictment of Pip's essential hollowness: "The deep disaster of great expectations is the terrible human impoverishment to which they lead. They disturb and often destroy the

dreamer's capacity for love and friendship".[25]

Nowhere is this made clearer than in that comically painful scene where Joe visits Pip for the first time in his London lodgings. The passage operates in a skilfully compressed manner to display Pip in that unpleasant stage where snobbery denies the demands of ordinary human relations. After a particularly awkward greeting between Joe and Pip, Herbert arrives:

> A ghost-seeing effect in Joe's own countenance informed me that Herbert had entered the room. So I presented Joe to Herbert, who held out his hand; but Joe backed from it, and held on by the bird's-nest.
>
> 'Your servant, Sir,' said Joe, 'which I hope as you and Pip'--here his eye fell on the Avenger, who was putting some toast on table, and so plainly denoted an intention to make that young gentleman one of the family, that I frowned it down and confused him more--'I meantersay, you two gentlemen--which I hope as you gets your elths in this close spot? For the present may be a wery good inn, according to London opinions,' said Joe, confidentially, 'and I believe its character do stand i; but I wouldn't keep a pig in it myself--not in the case that I wished him to fatten wholesome and to eat with a meller flavour on him.'
>
> Having borne this flattering testimony to the merits of our dwelling-place, and having incidentally shown this tendency to call me 'sir,' Joe, being invited to sit down to table, looked all round the room for a suitable spot on which to deposit his hat--as if it were only on some few very rare substances in nature that it could find a resting-place--and ultimately stood it on an extreme corner of the chimney-piece, from which it ever afterwards fell off at intervals.
>
> 'Do you take tea, or coffee, Mr. Gargery?' asked Herbert, who always presided of a morning.
>
> 'Thankee, Sir,' said Joe, stiff from head to foot, 'I'll take whichever is most agreeable to yourself.'
>
> 'What do you say to coffee?'
>
> 'Thankee, Sir,' returned Joe, evidently dispirited by the proposal, 'since you <u>are</u> so kind as make chice of coffee, I will not run contrairy to your own opinions. But don't you never find it a little 'eating?'
>
> 'Say tea, then,' said Herbert, pouring it out.
>
> Here Joe's hat tumbled off the mantel-piece, and he started out of his chair and picked it up, and fitted it to the same exact spot. As if it were an absolute point

[25] Lucas, p. 300.

> of good breeding that it should tumble off again soon.
> 'When did you come to town, Mr. Gargery?'
> 'Were it yesterday afternoon?' said Joe, after coughing behind his hand as if he had had time to catch the whooping-cough since he came. 'No it were not. Yes it were. Yes. It were yesterday afternoon' (with an appearance of mingled wisdom, relief, and strict impartiality). (pp. 209-10)

The scene has links with Joe's stumbling interview with Miss Havisham, with the difference that it is now Pip who provides the focus of embarrassment, for there is a marked difference between the behaviour of Pip and Herbert in the passage. Pip is the silently embarrassed observer, who, far from doing anything to ease Joe's feelings, frowns him down at the point where he is about to commit the gaffe of "Sirring" the Avenger, as he has already done towards Pip and Herbert. Although Herbert's entry increases Pip's sense of distress, we rapidly become aware that it is Herbert in the encounter who behaves like the real gentleman, as he deftly interprets Joe's preference for tea, and carries this out with discreet promptitude. It is this sensitivity towards the feelings of the nervous Joe that distinguishes Herbert from Pip. In his actions he exemplifies that definition of a gentleman originating from his father, that he had earlier mentioned to Pip; his father's principle holding that "'no man who was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner'" (p. 171).

Joe's gaucherie is only the visible gaucherie, dramatised in his comic antics with his hat. These antics serve both as a displacement activity for his awkwardness, and again as a most appropriate physical expression of the bumbling impossibility of Joe's social balancing act; they show that he cannot act a role which is foreign to him as Pip tries to do. Joe's attempted

posture sits as uneasily on him as his clothes and the hat itself, yet in our minds there remains the comparative picture of Joe at work in his forge, secure in his simple dignity and competent at his work. "'I'm only master of my own trade'" (p. 140), he tells Pip at one stage with unconscious irony, before Pip sets out for his dilettante existence in London.

The invisible gaucherie in the scene resides in the fact that Pip makes no effort to accommodate Joe. Although all the bumbling seems on Joe's side, Herbert's response to Joe clarifies for us Pip's social deficiencies and his uneasiness in his new station; we become aware that the true gentleman is one who can be at ease with men of all rank and condition.

The humour in Joe's incongruous performance helps us to perceive, therefore, the underlying pathos, for the episode is really one of alienation and the poignant loss of a precious friendship. We note the familiar elements in Joe's speech pointing towards this: in his respect, for example, for the educated gentleman even in the trivial matter of tea versus coffee. "'I will not run contrairy to your own opinion'", is the kind of respect that reminds us of his exaggerated reception of Pip's first writing efforts. His comic circumlocution at the end of the passage represents an apparent attempt on his part to lend profundity to the simple fact of his arrival, whilst his confusion and uneasiness is captured in the sense it conveys that to his mind an unadorned answer would hardly suffice for such a sophisticated audience. Seen from another angle, however, the periphrasis also serves comically to parody the very social pretensions that he faces. We see, too, in his remarks regarding the squalor of Pip and Herbert's lodgings how the real strength of Joe's natural and

and direct honesty breaks through his efforts at attaining a suitable decorum. In its comic frankness, the comment provides the truest ironical criticism of Pip's new pretensions, for it is precisely this type of honesty that these pretensions seek to deny.

Pip's pretensions are more directly parodied in that episode where he returns to the town, and is waylaid by Trabb's boy, whom I have already suggested on p. 231 above, may be taken as a kind of <u>alter ego</u> for Pip:

> It was interesting to be in the quiet old town once more, and it was not disagreeable to be here and there suddenly recognised and stared after. One or two of the tradespeople even darted out of their shops, and went a little way down the street before me, that they might turn, as if they had forgotten something, and pass me face to face--on which occasions I don't know whether they or I made the worse pretence; they of not doing it, or I of not seeing it. Still my position was a distinguished one, and I was not at all dissatisfied with it, until Fate threw me in the way of that unlimited miscreant, Trabb's boy.
>
> Casting my eyes along the street at a certain point of my progress, I beheld Trabb's boy approaching, lashing himself with an empty blue bag. Deeming that a serene and unconscious contemplation of him would best beseem me, and would be most likely to quell his evil mind, I advanced with that expression of countenance, and was rather congratulating myself on my success, when suddenly the knees of Trabb's boy smote together, his hair uprose, his cap fell off, he trembled violently in every limb, staggered out into the road, and crying to the populace, 'Hold me! I'm so frightened!' feigned to be in a paroxysm of terror and contrition, occasioned by the dignity of my appearance. As I passed him, his teeth loudly chattered in his head, and with every mark of extreme humiliation, he prostrated himself in the dust.
>
> This was a hard thing to bear, but this was nothing. I had not advanced another two hundred yards, when, to my inexpressible terror, amazement, and indignation, I again beheld Trabb's boy approaching. He was coming round a narrow corner. His blue bag was slung over his shoulder, honest industry beamed in his eyes, a determination to proceed to Trabb's with cheerful briskness was indicated in his gait. With a shock he became aware of me, and was severely visited as before; but this time his motion was rotatory, and he staggered round and round me with knees more afflicted, and with uplifted hands as if beseeching for mercy. His sufferings were hailed with the greatest joy by a knot of spectators,

> and I felt utterly confounded.
> I had not got as much further down the street as the post-office, when I again beheld Trabb's boy shooting round by a back way. This time, he was entirely changed. He wore the blue bag in the manner of my great-coat, and was strutting along the pavement towards me on the opposite side of the street, attended by a company of delighted young friends to whom he from time to time exclaimed, with a wave of his hand, 'Don't know yah!' Words cannot state the amount of aggravation and injury wreaked upon me by Trabb's boy, when, passing abreast of me, he pulled up his short-collar, twined his side-hair, stuck an arm akimbo, and smirked extravagantly by, wriggling his elbows and body, and drawling to his attendants, 'Don't know yah, don't know yah, pon my soul don't know yah!' The disgrace attendant on his immediately afterwards taking to crowing and pursuing me across the bridge with crows, as from an exceedingly dejected fowl who had known me when I was a blacksmith, culminated the disgrace with which I left the town, and was, so to speak, ejected by it into the open country. (pp. 231-3)

The high comedy of the encounter is handled in a masterful way, particularly in the transition between Pip's initial sense of secure self-complacency and his subsequent humiliation. As in the passage concerning Joe's visit to Pip--though it is far more prominent here--a tone of comic delight on the part of the mature narrator characterises his attitude towards the performance of Trabb's boy, an enjoyment that once more becomes an integral part of the narrator's criticism against the pretensions of his younger self, but which also assures us that we may enjoy Pip's discomfiture secure in the knowledge of his final transcendence over these false values.

But we notice, too, that the incident is very carefully placed in the novel, for it occurs soon after Pip has returned to Satis House as a fashionable London gentleman. Miss Havisham has just been condescending enough to suggest that he seems now less coarse and common, whilst this interchange with Estella is fresh in Pip's mind:

> 'Since your change of fortune and prospects, you have changed your companions,' said Estella.
> 'Naturally,' said I.
> 'And necessarily,' she added, in a haughty tone; 'what was fit company for you once, would be quite unfit company for you now.'
> In my conscience, I doubt very much whether I had any lingering intention left of going to see Joe; but if I had, this observation put it to flight. (pp. 223-4)

The clash with the subversive mimicry of Trabb's boy, therefore, coming so soon after this scene, alerts us in particular both to the absurdity of Pip's sartorial posturings, and beyond this, to his guilty knowledge that in these posturings he is being false to Joe and Biddy. The mimicry only hurts because it contains an essential truth: "'Don't know yah!'" is precisely the strategy that Pip has attempted to adopt towards all his childhood connections in the village; it comments specifically on his choosing to stay at the Blue Boar as a gentleman rather than to return to his old bed at Joe's house.

In aspiring to become a gentleman, Pip has had to wilfully turn his back on all that was wholesome in his past, in a manner that has disturbing echoes to the course chosen by Miss Havisham in cutting herself off from all beneficial influences of the outside world and immersing herself in darkness instead. We are made fully aware of the contrast between the healthy freedom and irreverence of the tailor's boy, and the figure of Pip, imprisoned in his clothes and the ludicrously pompous postures that he has chosen to act out. In this manner, the comic interlude with Trabb's boy counterpoints the serious scene with Estella and forces the reader through laughter to recognise the falsity of Pip's behaviour. And as with the episode of Joe's visit, the scene at a deeper level deals also with alienation, for it displays in an

absurd form the pathos of class distinctions that forbid Pip to recognise an equal of yesterday.

It is Mr. Trabb himself, however, rather than his indomitable employee, who features in the episode dealing with Mrs. Joe's funeral. This is a scene which demonstrates that pretensions are by no means limited to young London gentlemen, but are also to be found in the village itself. The scene mirrors the unnaturalness of Pip's behaviour in an interesting way, for it shows that upon certain occasions the villagers demand pretensions, and it shows how these pretensions can transform a natural occasion into a grotesque spectacle.[26]

To emphasise the grotesquerie of Mr. Trabb's contrivances for the occasion, his choice of employees turns out to consist of those village ne'er-do-wells least likely to be suitable for the gravity of a funeral: "two dismally absurd persons" (p. 264), one, "a postboy discharged from the Boar for turning a young couple into a sawpit on their bridal morning, in consequence of intoxication rendering it necessary for him to ride his horse clasped round the neck with both arms" (p. 265), and the other, "a carpenter, who had once eaten two geese for a wager" (p. 265). These two degenerates serve to emphasise to the reader how far removed the outward, impressive display of funeral trappings is from the underlying reality, and how little the posturing has to do with genuine feelings of grief or gravity. The comic implication here is that these two louts are readily hireable for any performance, however absurd.

[26] The grotesque distortion of a solemn sacrament is reminiscent of Dickens's treatment of Dombey's wedding which I discussed on pp. 59-60 of my first chapter.

What we find in this episode, therefore, is that the funeral service is primarily conducted by Mr. Trabb as a public dramatic display for the benefit of an approving audience of villagers, who would not accept the sincerity of anything simpler, for, as Joe mournfully observes to Pip, his dream of a plain service "'with willing harts and arms'" would have been regarded as "'wanting in respect'" (p. 266).

But the debasement of the natural has its undeniably comic side, which the hindisght of the mature narrator allows him readily to appreciate:

> 'Pocket-handkerchiefs out, all!' cried Mr. Trabb at this point, in a depressed business-like voice--'Pocket-handkerchiefs out! We are ready!'
> So, we all put our pocket-handkerchiefs to our faces, as if our noses were bleeding, and filed out two and two; Joe and I; Biddy and Pumblechook; Mr. and Mrs. Hubble. The remains of my poor sister had been brought round by the kitchen door, and, it being a point of Undertaking ceremony that the six bearers must be stifled and blinded under a horrible black velvet housing with a white border, the whole looked like a blind monster with twelve human legs, shuffling and blundering along under the guidance of two keepers--the postboy and his comrade.
> The neighbourhood, however, highly approved of these arrangements, and we were much admired as we went through the village; the more youthful and vigorous part of the community making dashes now and then to cut us off, and lying in wait to intercept us at points of vantage. At such times the more exuberant among them called out in an excited manner on our emergence round some corner of expectancy, '_Here_ they come!' '_Here_ they are!' and we were all but cheered. In this progress I was much annoyed by the abject Pumblechook, who, being behind me, persisted all the way, as a delicate attention, in arranging my streaming hatband, and smoothing my cloak. My thoughts were further distracted by the excessive pride of Mr. and Mrs. Hubble, who were surpassingly conceited and vainglorious in being members of so distinguished a procession. (p. 266)

It is clear from the extract that the episode in its entirety becomes one of high farce, compounded by Pumblechook's gross

performance in his irritatingly servile attentions towards Pip, which alternate with his stuffing himself with sherry and cake--actions that link him to the indifference of the two degenerates. In his gluttonous enjoyment of the proceedings, Pumblechook together with Mr. Hubble, behave "as if they were of quite another race from the deceased, and were notoriously immortal" (p. 267); behaviour which confirms their obtuseness to human feelings around them that we first witnessed at the beginning of the novel.[27]

The farcical episode of the funeral, however, characteristically contains its own counterpoint in Joe's simple dignity which I have mentioned, but especially in that deservedly well-known passage where Mrs. Joe's death is described to Pip by Biddy, her honest simplicity of idiom lending the account a moving quality which so effectively highlights the hypocrisy of Trabb's display:

> 'I have not heard the particulars of my sister's death, Biddy.'
> 'They are very slight, poor thing. She had been in one of her bad states--though they had got better of late, rather than worse--for four days, when she came out of it in the evening, just at tea-time, and said quite plainly, "Joe". As she had never said any word for a long while, I ran and fetched in Mr. Gargery from the forge. She made signs to me that she wanted him to sit down close to her, and wanted me to put her arms round his neck. So I put them round his neck, and she laid her head down on his shoulder quite content and satisfied. And so she presently said "Joe" again, and once "Pardon," and once "Pip." And so she never lifted her head up any more, and it was just an hour later when we laid it down on her own bed, because we found she was gone.' (pp. 268-9)

In its entirety the funeral episode also offers an instructive commentary on the whole mode of Pip's reception by the villagers,

[27] Their indifference reminds one of the detachment displayed by Major Bagstock towards Mrs. Skewton's suffering, which I discussed on p. 52 of my first chapter.

for the farce serves to increase our understanding of the connection between "'respect'" and class, and to show how completely this kind of "'respect'" is divorced from genuine feeling. Pip can only be a gentleman, in his superficial understanding of the word, if others are prepared to "'respect'" his outward manifestations of superiority, be these clothes or apparent dignity of deportment.

A more obvious counterpoint to Pip's progress is provided by Mr. Wopsle. In the first section of the novel, it was the mature narrator's depiction of the empty oratory of Wopsle grandiloquently declaiming over Pip as victim/audience, which effectively epitomised the imposition of the adult world upon the child (pp. 109-10). In the second third of the novel on the other hand, Wopsle assumes a role that W.F. Axton, amongst other critics, has termed a "comic paradigm of Pip's disappointed expectations".[28]

The important point about this paradigm, however, is that it is not recognised for what it is by the young Pip; it is the mature narrator who again provides the service of revealing the connections and the later insights through his comic presentation of events. He offers us several carefully placed earlier hints of a parallel between the two careers. One of these is strategically placed on the occasion of Joe's first visit to Pip in London, in his report to Pip that Wopsle has "'had a drop'" since he "'left the Church and went into the playacting'" (p. 208). Then again, the way that the episodes dealing with Mr. Wopsle are structured into the novel is illuminating. The first instance where Mr. Wopsle features prominently in the second part of the book is in chapter xxxi,

[28] Circle of Fire, p. 6. Q.D. Leavis, p. 428, makes a similar point.

where Pip and Herbert attend the theatre and witness the farcical miscasting of Wopsle as Hamlet. It is significant that this scene follows soon after Pip's humiliating encounter with Trabb's boy, and even more directly after he has admitted his self-delusions about Estella to Herbert. It is interesting too that both Pip and Wopsle assume different names in London as if to emphasise how they both reach out after new identities.[29] Pip accepts the nickname of "Handel" from Herbert, whilst Mr. Wopsle plumps for the more portentous architecture of "Mr. Waldengarver", as befitting his thespian aspirations.

The barrage of shouts, jeers, and orange peel that greets Mr. Wopsle's act reveal him to the reader as a parish clerk whose unlimited stage ambitions are at comic odds with his lowly provincial origins. His fate at the hands of his audience in this way parallels in a more extreme form Pip's own humiliation in the streets of the town by Trabb's boy. It is the same comment transferred, as it were, into a different comic register. The parallel suggests that Pip's act is equally incompetent, and that he is capable of similar foolishness in his overreaching ambitions. The criticism is rendered all the more ironical when we are afterwards shown Pip patronising Mr. Wopsle and finding a secret amusement in Mr. Wopsle's lack of penetration into his thespian atrocities whilst displaying at the same time an egregious blindness towards any possibility of a connection between Wopsle's vanity and his own condition.

Wopsle makes a second, briefer appearance, when Pip again

[29] I am indebted here to Axton's instructive account on pp. 125-32 of Wopsle's relationship to Pip in the novel.

attends the theatre, this time at a more anxious and depressed moment in Pip's life; a moment when he is running short of funds whilst awaiting Wemmick's instruction to smuggle Magwitch out of England. Appropriate to our sense of the decline in Pip's fortune at this stage, therefore, is the discovery that Mr. Wopsle's career has degenerated from the grander Shakespearean roles to the motley of pantomime. After watching Wopsle in a farcical series of roles the humiliation of which seems now to penetrate even to Mr. Wopsle, Pip comments dryly, "'I was aware that Mr. Wopsle had not succeeded in reviving the Drama, but, on the contrary, had rather partaken of its decline'" (p. 362).

It is just this awareness of Pip's blindness towards Mr. Wopsle's fate that increases our sense of his obtuseness in the far more serious matter of Pip's behaviour subsequent to Magwitch's reappearance and his revelation that he is Pip's benefactor. This passage is typical of Pip's revulsion towards Magwitch at this point in the novel:

> He ate in a ravenous way that was very disagreeable, and all his actions were uncouth, noisy, and greedy. Some of his teeth had failed him since I saw him eat on the marshes, and as he turned his food in his mouth, and turned his head sideways to bring his strongest fangs to bear upon it, he looked terribly like a hungry old dog.
>
> If I had begun with any appetite, he would have taken it away, and I should have sat much as I did--repelled from him by an insurmountable aversion, and gloomily looking at the cloth. (p. 312)

The phrase "very disagreeable" is the class idiom of Estella, but the more important irony in the passage inheres in Pip's inability to perceive in Magwitch a more extreme example of his own uncouth performance at the table when Pip first arrived in London (p. 170), so short is the memory of a newly-fledged gentleman. And

the remembrance of Pip's gentle correction by Herbert again calls to mind the difference between good breeding, and its unassimilated, superficial form. But the key simile in the passage is the comparison of Magwitch with a dog, since this must resonate ironically in the reader's mind against the very different generosity and the compassionate glance of the young Pip feeding a shivering and starving felon out on the marshes. The echo illustrates how swiftly Pip has lost his humanity in his London experience, for his attitude now is that of the contemptuous Estella, feeding the "'coarse'" and "'common'" Pip outside Satis House, like "a dog in disgrace" (p. 57).

The ironic point at this stage in the novel is also, however, that in reacting with horror and revulsion at Magwitch's appearance and manners, Pip is not simply suffering a reaction from his broken dreams and ideals (although this is a major factor), he is also reacting along the lines of what he imagines a refined gentleman's judgement should be towards the repulsive coarseness of the criminal classes. The judgement emphasises the point that Pip now belongs to the class that helps to create, condemn, and imprison the Magwitches of the world.[30] But a refined gentleman is precisely what Magwitch wishes Pip to be. That Magwitch is disappointed and deeply hurt by the moral trap which he has sprung upon himself is one of the supreme ironies of the book, an irony matched only by Miss Havisham's self-pity in discovering that the foster-daughter whom she has rigorously taught to be emotionally ruthless is unable

[30] On p. 137 of her essay, "On Great Expectations" in The English Novel: Form and Function, Dorothy Van Ghent observes that "spiritually committed by his 'great expectations' to that irresponsibility which has accounted for the Magwitches, Pip is projectively, at least, answerable for Magwitch's existence and for his brutalization".

to love her.[31]

Pip's case seems to show that the golden rule as far as class is concerned is that those moving upwards should do unto others exactly what was done unto them. Those who rise in class, therefore, merely help to perpetuate a vicious circle of snobbery and class isolation. What is also now revealed is that Pip's role as a gentleman--as Magwitch's agent for social revenge--is a notably vague and empty one simply because Magwitch from his position at the very bottom of the social scale can have no real understanding of what should constitute a real gentleman, or what a gentleman's function in society ought to be. All he comprehends are what the villagers also understand and respect: those obvious and superficial outward signs of superiority. This is an attitude that we have seen displayed in various contexts in the course of the novel. Magwitch's emphasis, accordingly, lies in providing Pip with these externals, and it is by a correspondingly superficial judgement that Magwitch comes to stand condemned by his own creation.

As we come to realise how Magwitch's revenge on society can be nothing more than a revenge of externals, so our pity for his whole motivation and ultimate fate increases; for we see that his behaviour depends not on moral action, but on the flimsy trappings of wealth, the showy trimmings that his new money can purchase,

[31] In comparing Magwitch to Miss Havisham, however, it is only fair to point out that there are important differences between the two. Miss Havisham is born into wealth and luxury; Magwitch is born an outcast. Miss Havisham's revenge is the result of a carefully fostered self-pity; Magwitch is remarkable free from this destructive emotion. Miss Havisham imprisons herself; Magwitch is imprisoned by society. Dyson comments in his helpful comparison of the two characters on pp. 238-9 of The Inimitable Dickens that "whereas Miss Havisham's 'revenge' is born of hatred, Magwitch's comes from a comparatively innocent pride".

evident in the fine linen and jewels that Magwitch is so eager for Pip to have. Behind all the elaborate secrecy of Jaggers's admonition to Pip not to ask questions about his benefactor, is now revealed the bizarre hollowness.

It is the dawning realisation of this emptiness that appears to revolt Pip now as much as Magwitch's criminal taint; for he comes to appreciate the manner whereby he has been dehumanised as an instrument for revenge,[32] a plan of Magwitch's which has been carried out with scant regard for his human potential. As much as Estella in the case of Miss Havisham, Pip is now exposed as the victim of Magwitch's single-minded dream, as we see here in the convict's proudly inventorial eye:

> 'Look'ee here!' he went on, taking my watch out of my pocket, and turning towards him a ring on my finger, while I recoiled from his touch as if he had been a snake, 'a gold 'un and a beauty: that's a gentleman's, I hope! A diamond all set round with rubies; that's a gentleman's, I hope! Look at your linen; fine and beautiful! Look at your clothes; better ain't to be got! And your books too,' turning his eyes round the room, 'mounting up, on their shelves, by hundreds! And you read 'em; don't you? I see you'd been a reading of'em when I come in. Ha, ha, ha! You shall read 'em to me, dear boy! And if they're in foreign languages, wot I don't understand, I shall be just as proud as if I did.' (p. 305)

In the light of this attitude, Wemmick's expedient phrase "'portable property'" (p. 190), takes on an added ironic dimension, as we see Pip regarded quite literally by Magwitch as his own "portable property". Increasing the impact of the irony is the

[32] Q.D. Leavis, p. 409, comments cogently that Magwitch's "affection for Pip is for the idea of his 'brought-up' London gentleman . . . Pip is to be his puppet. Magwitch makes this very plain and it is this which revolts Pip, with reason, for he had not supposed this to be his function for his patron".

ineradicably larcenous flavour of his idiom, which gives the impression of being that of a thief gloating over a particularly rich haul from what Jaggers, in the professional argot, would term a "'stroke of business'".[33]

A striking similarity may now be perceived between Magwitch's reverence for Pip's education, and that comic episode where Joe is amazed by Pip's reading abilities. Magwitch also requests Pip to read to him, finding this most impressive in the case of foreign languages. That this remains incomprehensible to the ignorant but admiring listener is the whole point: for this worship of education is part of a general reverence on the part of the lower classes for what is not understood. The connection, therefore, is to that scene which I have discussed where Joe faces Miss Havisham, but lacks a language through which to talk to her.

It is through this sense of the gulf between the classes that Dickens's social vision in the novel begins to be revealed most strongly, particularly in the emerging paradox that the self-willed isolation of the upper classes is in ironic tension with their mutual dependence upon those below them. The inter-connectedness of the classes is stressed by the ready way in which those who rise from the lower classes, the former victims, become the oppressors in their turn.

In the passage dealing with Pip's stroll whilst awaiting Jaggers at Little Britain, which I discussed on p. 235 above, we saw how the carefully worked-out juxtaposition of Smithfield with St. Paul's and Newgate represents a critical vision of society.

[33] Jaggers actually uses this term on p. 191 when he challenges the London underworld to rob his house.

This passage neatly encapsulates the theme of pervasive savagery and brutality that permeates Great Expectations; a theme that is established right at the beginning of the novel in the perspective of the prison hulks and the gibbet on the bleak marshes. These opening images become emblematic of a society that has instituted them, and that deals in the systematic brutality which assumes so many different forms in the novel. This brutality is evident, for example, in the sadistic treatment of Pip by Mrs. Joe, or in the manner whereby Magwitch, the Tinker's boy, has been turned into a criminal by the arbitrary justice of the system, or again, in Miss Havisham's emotional degradation by Compeyson.

Some of the connections in the novel may now be briefly summed up. The two characters linked together as Compeyson's victims are Miss Havisham and Magwitch,[34] who are also unwittingly connected through Estella and Pip. Both these victims become manipulators of others in turn. Miss Havisham primarily manipulates Estella, but also Camilla Pocket and the other fawners, and through Estella, Pip and men in general.

Likewise Magwitch tries to turn Pip into a gentleman so that Pip may live without working. The ironic result is that Pip joins the parasitic ranks of those who create more Magwitches--a process we see enacted when Pip hounds Orlick out of his job as Miss Havisham's watchman. It is a further ironic turn of events that sees Orlick, driven by Pip's persecutions into a life of petty crime, selecting as his victim Pip's former persecutor turned servile admirer, Pumblechook. One of the most horrifying features

[34] As Q.D. Leavis points out on p. 412, Magwitch's Christian name is clearly significant in this regard, as he plays Abel to Compeyson's Cain.

of <u>Great Expectations</u> built up through all these connections is the sense we get, on one level at least, of the cyclical nature of human action: a vision of human history repeating itself in a bleak and imprisoning circularity.

Miss Havisham, through Estella, and Magwitch, seeking reparation through his London "gentleman", are the two characters who live vicariously through the "creatures" whose lives they have appropriated to serve their special purposes. It is this kind of predatorily vicarious living that is comically mirrored, and hence clarified, for the reader in those comic scenes where Pumblechook enormously raises his status in the village by puffing himself as Pip's benefactor. In this passage towards the end of the novel, for example, Pumblechook's glory is refracted for Pip through the landlord of an inn in the town, who "was so good as to entertain me with my own story--of course with the popular feature that Pumblechook was my earliest benefactor and the founder of my fortunes":

> 'Do you know the young man?' said I.
> 'Know him?' repeated the landlord. 'Ever since he was --no height at all.'
> 'Does he ever come back to this neighbourhood?'
> 'Ay, he comes back,' said the landlord, 'to his great friends, now and again, and gives the cold shoulder to the man that made him.'
> 'What man is that?'
> 'Him that I speak of,' said the landlord. 'Mr. Pumblechook.'
> 'Is he ungrateful to no one else?'
> 'No doubt he would be, if he could,' returned the landlord, 'but he can't. And why?' Because Pumblechook done everything for him.'
> 'Does Pumblechook say so?'
> 'Say so!' replied the landlord. 'He han't no call to say so.'
> 'But does he say so?'
> 'It would turn a man's blood to white wine winegar, to hear him tell of it, sir,' said the landlord. (pp. 398-9)

Pumblechook's claim to be the fountain-head of Pip's fortunes, "'the man that made him'", clearly offers a comic reflection of Magwitch's claims over Pip. But there is a further comic truth in the absurdity of the landlord's tale. When he relates how the "'young man'" on his return to the town "'gives the cold shoulder to the man that made him'", we recognise an echo to the parodic cry of Trabb's boy: "'Don't know yah, don't know yah, pon my soul don't know yah!'" (p. 232). In that episode, we felt the comic force of the reference to Pip's guilty abandonment of Joe and Biddy; here we perceive the comic criticism of Pip's initial ungratefulness towards his real benefactor after Magwitch's return to London.

I began this section by discussing how the mature narrator's account of Pip's bleak first impressions of London undermines his idealistic illusions and foreshadows the hollowness of his "great expectations". Likewise, the narrator's treatment of Pip's tea-drinking scene with Estella reveals how the realities of life, exemplified in the comic context of a London Inn with its stable odours, bumbling waiters and general indifference, serve to erode Pip's romantic notions. The more extended effects of London life are portrayed for us in some of the residents with whom Pip comes into contact. We saw how effectively the division between Wemmick's private and public behaviour, the humour of his <u>mécanisation</u>, conveys to us the pathos of the psychic distortions forced upon an essentially humane man by the pressures of city life. In the case of Mr. Jaggers, we are shown how a misanthropic Humour imprisons him in a reductive response to life characterised by his formulaic mannerisms of bullying and skepticism.

The narrator reveals the course of Pip's own dehumanisation in

London through the farcical dissipations of the "Finches of the Grove", where the real relationships that Pip enjoyed in his childhood are replaced by quarrelsome and forced attempts at merriment and high living that result only in sterile boredom, misery, and debt. We saw that Pip's capacity to form genuine relationships diminishes in proportion to the increase in his "genteel" pretensions. The narrator's comic presentation of Mrs. Pocket further illustrates for us the vacuity of snobbish pretensions and their divorce from meaningful reality. Likewise it is the humorous aspects of Joe's visit to Pip that trenchantly reveal to us Pip's shortcomings as a gentleman manqué, just as it is the comic quality of Joe's ingenuously honest remarks about Pip's lodgings that makes us more aware of Pip's blindness concerning the ironic squalor of his new life and values.

When Pip returns to his village to see Estella, but avoids contact with Joe and Biddy, his punishment comes in the form of the subversive mimicry of Trabb's boy, whose parodic cry, "'Don't know yah!'" (p. 232), neatly encapsulates the pathos of Pip's attempt to divorce himself from his own past. The finest part of that past is embodied for us in the unpretentious dignity of Joe and of Biddy at Mrs. Joe's funeral. The moving honesty of their response to Mrs. Joe's death is in turn highlighted for us by the absurdly unnatural funeral performance arranged by Mr. Trabb.

Whilst Trabb's boy provides a critical reminder of Pip's past in his home environment, we saw that an even closer connection with his childhood accompanies him to London in the form of Mr. Wopsle. The narrator's portrayal of the farcical gap between Wopsle's grand thespian ambitions, and his ludicrously inept performances on the stage that the young Pip witnesses with such

ironic condescension, provides an illuminating commentary on the futility of Pip's own ambitions.

Finally, I discussed the ironies that result from Magwitch's sudden re-appearance. We saw how Pip's revulsion at the convict's coarseness snares Magwitch in a trap of his own making, as he becomes the first victim of the social revenge for which he has so ardently worked. We saw on the other hand how Pip's dawning realisation of the hollowness of his "great expectations" arises from Magwitch's superficial cataloguing of Pip's external accomplishments and possessions. Magwitch is here linked to Miss Havisham in his vicarious pride in Pip's accomplishments, and both instances of predatory and manipulative behaviour are summed up and comically clarified for us by the mature narrator through the ludicrously proprietorial air that Pumblechook invariably assumes when Pip returns to his village.

iv

I propose to conclude my examination of Great Expectations with a brief discussion in this section of Pip's regeneration as a comic resolution to the novel. My concern initially will be less with matters of comic detail, than with the question of the comic movement of the novel towards renewal and integration.

Pip's regeneration begins when he realises as a result of his various trials that he has to abandon the false image of gentlemanhood which has constituted his particular self-imprisonment. He has to accept his criminal patron. But although Pip's acceptance and protection of Magwitch force a change in certain of Pip's attitudes, it is really Pip's illness that precipitates a radical

re-valuation of his moral outlook. And Pip's consequent regeneration is only completed after he has returned to the village of his birth.

If Pip's physical collapse signals his moral crisis, it is at this stage that Joe becomes Pip's touchstone in nursing Pip through his illness. And what has already helped to drive his thoughts back to Joe even before the illness are the ridiculous antics of Pumblechook, which form part of the accompanying comic criticism of Pip's actions in the novel that cumulatively lead Pip back to wholeness. The passage where Pumblechook complains through the landlord of Pip's "'cold shoulder'" that I discussed on p. 264 above, for instance, has this accompanying tailpiece: "I thought, 'Yet Joe, dear Joe, _you_ never tell of it. Long-suffering and loving Joe, _you_ never complain. Nor you, sweet-tempered Biddy!'" (p. 399). Being a gentleman, Pip finally discovers, has less to do with class or money (both Herbert and his father, significantly, are poor), than with holding those values which Joe embodies.

Joe's nursing of Pip at his sickbed enables Pip to return, with a fresh sense of their importance, to those simple, but solid values imbibed in his youth but later abandoned in so cavalier a manner. Without in any way wishing to romanticise Joe or his limitations, of which Pip remains inescapably aware, it nevertheless seems clear that towards the end of the novel the mature narrator increasingly reveals Joe to us as the man of truly healing integrity. Unlike both Mr. Jaggers and Wemmick, he needs no mask with which to face life. Joe's awkwardness in strange clothes has indeed been comically treated, but so, likewise, has his solid

mastery at his blacksmith's work been emphasised.[35] In recalling Jaggers's scarcely concealed contempt for Joe the simpleton who refuses money to cancel Pip's indenture, it now seems Jaggers who suffers most from the comparison, because the reader realises that, in his concern for the boy who is to abandon him, Joe nevertheless refuses to exploit Pip for money. His attitude to this friendship means that his catchphrase, "'Wot larks, Pip!'" takes on a decidedly less ingenuous aspect, for it is his inarticulate way of expressing what is essentially a deeply felt and utterly steadfast bond. Whilst, by virtue of his trade, Joe can never, of course, be termed a gentleman, we finally come to see him as a truly gentle man.

Pip's longed-for return to the village after his illness, represents his attempt to recapture this lost innocence of boyhood, an innocence that the soft pastorality of the scenery on his way home lulls him into believing is still attainable (pp. 452-3). The last shock he is to receive, however, is that Biddy is to marry Joe; a shock that indicates finally to Pip that time cannot be turned back, as Miss Havisham has so tragically discovered. His memories of Biddy have remained static, imprisoned in images of their relationship long ago, so that his final "great expectation" that she will be eagerly awaiting him unchanged by time or circumstance constitutes his last act of self-deception in the novel. The truth to be discovered is that time cannot remain fixed, nor can Pip return to his youth, a wisdom that Joe unconsciously enacts

[35] I have already quoted Joe's unwittingly ironic comment to Pip that, "'I'm only master of my own trade'" (p. 140).

in starting to call Pip "'Sir'" (p. 445), as Pip recovers.[36] Pip is irrevocably altered, but he needs the shock of Biddy's marriage to Joe to alert him fully to this understanding.

The immediate comic prelude and preparation for this shock is Pip's breakfast at the Blue Boar on his way home, where Pumblechook launches into an impressive display of disappointment at the failure of his young protégé:

> 'Young man, I am sorry to see you brought low. But what else could be expected! what else could be expected!
>
> As he extended his hand with a magnificently forgiving air, and as I was broken by illness and unfit to quarrel, I took it.
>
> 'William', said Mr. Pumblechook to the waiter, 'put a muffin on table. And has it come to this! Has it come to this!'
>
> I frowningly sat down to my breakfast. Mr. Pumblechook stood over me and poured out my tea--before I could touch the teapot--with the air of a benefactor who was resolved to be true to the last.
>
> 'William,' said Mr. Pumblechook, mournfully, 'put the salt on. In happier times,' addressing me, 'I think you took sugar? And did you take milk? You did. Sugar and milk. William, bring a watercress.'
>
> 'Thank you,' said I, shortly, 'but I don't eat watercresses.'
>
> 'You don't eat 'em,' returned Mr. Pumblechook, sighing and nodding his head several times, as if he might have expected that, and as if abstinence from watercresses were consistent with my downfall. 'True. The simple fruits of the earth. No. You needn't bring any, William.'
>
> I went on with my breakfast, and Mr. Pumblechook continued to stand over me, staring fishily and breathing noisily, as he always did.
>
> 'Little more than skin and bone!' mused Mr. Pumblechook, aloud. 'And yet when he went away from here (I may say with my blessing), and I spread afore him my humble store, like the Bee, he was as plump as a Peach!'
>
> This reminded me of the wonderful difference between the servile manner in which he had offered his hand in my new prosperity, saying, 'May I?' and the ostentatious clemency with which he had just now exhibited the same fat five fingers.

[36] As Q.D. Leavis notes on p. 420, "that no one can be a child again is one of the stern realities of experience".

> 'Hah!' he went on, handing me the bread-and-butter: 'And air you a going to Joseph?'
> 'In Heaven's name,' said I, firing in spite of myself, 'what does it matter to you where I am going? Leave that teapot alone.'
> It was the worst course I could have taken, because it gave Pumblechook the opportunity he wanted.
> 'Yes, young man,' said he, releasing the handle of the article in question, retiring a step or two from my table and speaking for the behoof of the landlord and waiter at the door, 'I will leave that teapot alone. You are right, young man. For once, you are right. I forgit myself when I take such an interest in your breakfast, as to wish your frame, exhausted by the debilitating effects of prodigygality, to be stimulated by the 'olesome nourishment of your forefathers. And yet,' said Pumblechook, turning to the landlord and waiter, and pointing me out at arm's length, 'this is him as I ever sported with in his days of happy infancy! Tell me not it cannot be; I tell you this is him!'
> A low murmur from the two replied. The waiter appeared to be particularly affected. (pp. 450-1)

In Pumblechook's final appearance, we see a recapitulation of several points made in the novel's action. There is, firstly, a comic return to Pumblechook's pre-expectational patronisation of Pip: "'What else could be expected!'" His condescension is also captured in the manner in which "he stood over me and poured out my tea", a description which has echoes of Pumblechook's childhood bullying of Pip. Then, too, there is Pumblechook's prolixity, a rhetorical exhibitionism which characteristically takes the form of a dull-witted repetition of phrases: "'has it come to this! Has it come to this!'" The verbosity betrays him for the fraudulent impostor that he is, an effect reinforced by his appearance, "staring fishily and breathing noisily", which reminds us of the initial unforgettably comic description of Pumblechook as the half-choked man who has just "come to" (p. 21).

In his "magnificently forgiving air", there is a reminder of Pumblechook's notorious agility, like Mr. Trabb, when it comes to expedient behaviour. This, in a broader sense, echoes all the moral

opportunism in the novel, including Pip's own convenient change in values. Pumblechook's command of his audience ("The waiter appeared to be particularly affected"), parodies the theatricality of both Wopsle and Pip in their respective London roles, that capacity for self-dramatisation which has been shown to be so dangerous throughout the novel. We recall here, for example, Miss Havisham's cry "'Broken!'" (p. 53) as she points out her heart to Pip, and how this connected with her corrosive self-pity.

There are further comic insights worth exploring in the passage. Pumblechook's general air of bullying Pip, for instance, reminds us of Jaggers's cross-examinational methods, whilst Pumblechook's country accent, his awkward syntax, sententious expression and overreaching vocabulary ("'debilitating effects of prodigygality'") help to expose his pretensions, which are like so many of the other pretensions that we have encountered in the course of the book.

Yet there is, too, an element of truth in what he has to say, the penetrative quality of which is intensified by the comic surface: Pip <u>has</u> acted like the prodigal in first abandoning, then returning bankrupt to his village. Whilst we may regard Pumblechook's moralising over the "'simple fruits of the earth'" as highly comic, in view of his own amply demonstrated capacity for gluttony, Pip has, in fact, thoughtlessly turned his back on "'the 'olesome nourishment of your forefathers'". It becomes evident in the passage how the mature narrator, through the distorting mirror of the comic mode, is able to offer a serious accompanying criticism of Pip's actions; a criticism that, expressed in other narrative modes, might have emerged as offensively didactic.

When Pumblechook, however, claims to his audience that, "'this

is him as I ever sported with in his days of happy infancy!'" Pip knows that the reality was very different, both as regards the "'happy infancy'", and Pumblechook's role therein. Yet, during the weakness of his illness, he himself has displayed this same tendency to sentimentalise the childhood to which he is now attempting to return, and in particular, to distort the memory of his past relationship with Biddy. In this latter instance, Pip conveniently ignores the crude and insensitive sermonising on his part of which Biddy was as much the victim as Pip himself was at the hands of Pumblechook.

Finally, it is once more worth stressing how the passage is complicated by the mature narrator's tone of enjoyment. This attitude on the part of the mature narrator takes us beyond the impression the reader customarily obtains that Dickens's rogues believe their own fabrications, and that this accounts sufficiently for the typical comic gusto of their performances. The comic tone of the mature narrator here, as elsewhere, is closely connected with his realisation through hindsight of how faithfully Pumblechook's posturing exposes the truth about his younger self. As it does consistently throughout the book, therefore, the comic tone functions in this passage as a critical commentary enabling the reader to penetrate the very essence of the human situation.

The actual ending of the book is clouded in critical disagreement. It seems to me, however, that Dickens was too sure a novelist not to be aware of the ironic dangers of changing the last pages in favour of a romantic resolution that might directly contradict the sentimental stasis that he had been attacking throughout the novel. At the same time, though, it is clear that Dickens has managed to construct the ending in such a skilfully ambiguous way that it may

be interpreted in at least two different senses: "'I have put in as pretty a little piece of writing as I could'" was Dickens's comment to Forster.[37]

The evidence of the book as a whole leaves me in no doubt that Dickens intended the final paragraphs to be interpreted as suggesting a moral rather than a matrimonial integration in Pip and Estella. Taken in this sense, I find the revised ending a satisfying resolution to the story. The only weakness that I am able to discern in the re-worked conclusion is that the ambiguity necessarily means that it lacks the intrinsic comic criticism that so distinguishes the rest of the novel.

V

After discussing two novels written in the omniscient mode, I set out in this chapter to explore the nature of Dickens's achievement in a first-person narrative. My argument attempted to connect closely his success in this mode in Great Expectations with his use of various comic techniques.

I began by arguing that it is Dickens's filtering of the narrative through the mature Pip that is our key to the novel and consequently to our understanding of Pip's growth as he labours towards his ultimate state of wholeness. I tried to show how the mature narrator guides our appreciation of Pip's growth through a characteristically comic tone. I discussed how, in the opening pages of the novel, the detachment of time is represented by this comic

[37] The comment is noted on p. 461 of the Appendix to the N.O.I.D. edition of Great Expectations.

element, resulting in a distanced control over the directly recorded experience. In shaping the various experiences, the comic tone adds to them the dimension of mature understanding. I argued at the start of this chapter that this exerts a complex effect on the reader, for whilst we are encouraged to participate in the young Pip's experience, we remain simultaneously aware of the adult voice finely controlling the self-pity and the mere sensationalism of that experience, and purging these emotions through a comic element into the trenchant insight of mature knowledge.

As we progress from the young, guilt-ridden child bullied by his elders, to the boy who undergoes a profound change in Miss Havisham's dark world by absorbing the worst aspects of class distinctions, so the comic tone of the mature narrator provides us with mature insight into the young child's fearful experience or the guilt of the boy who is torn between his past and the new challenges that seem to open up in front of him. At the beginning of the novel, it is the mature narrator's comic treatment of the villagers that exposes their limitations to us, and that helps us to understand how they project these failings onto Pip. Later, it is a similar comic tone of presentation that reveals to us the instantaneously corrupting power of wealth in the opportunistic behaviour of Mr. Trabb and Mr. Pumblechook.

In the context of London, it is the mature narrator who undermines the pretensions of a would-be young gentleman. Just as earlier his depiction of Joe's confrontation with Miss Havisham incisively exposed to us the complexities of Pip's torn loyalties, so it is our laughter at Joe's awkwardness on his later visit to Pip at Pip's London lodgings that clarifies the intricacies of the

situation. We become aware of Joe's limitations as well as his praiseworthy qualities, of Pip's embarrassment and divided loyalties as well as his shortcomings as a new "gentleman".

The mature narrator also uses the atmosphere of London, both in its sombre aspects of prison, church, and slaughterhouse, and in its comic aspects of odorous Coaching Inns, to offer a controlling counterpoint to the sentimental romanticism of a young lover. The effects of prolonged exposure to London are conveyed to us in Wemmick's split existence where, as with Jaggers, the comic element both evokes and controls the pathos that we feel for men who adopt certain mechanical mannerisms as a form of psychic defense against the dehumanising pressures of existence in a great city.

I went on to discuss other ways in which our knowledge of Pip's problems and his failures is increased. Whether in the subversive mimicry of Trabb's boy, or in the farcical parallel "progress" of Mr. Wopsle, or in Mr. Pumblechook's repeated claims to be Pip's benefactor, the common element in these illuminations of Pip's growth is the mature narrator's awareness of the comic discomfiture of his youthful self.

It is the consistency of this comic delight in the tone of the book as the exposure of pretension and irony or absurdity unfolds that provides such a superb sense of the structural unity of the novel. We are assured always of firmer and more enduring values and guided consistently towards them. It is this sense of unified perspective that makes us certain of Pip's final integrity. The pervasiveness of this comic perspective again bears ample and extended testimony to the importance of the comic element in Dickens's art.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have been able to examine only three of the nine novels which follow Martin Chuzzlewit, and that collectively make up Dickens's mature canon. Although my findings consequently cannot hope to be either comprehensive or finally authoritative, I believe that certain valid inductions may be made from the body of detailed criticism that I have offered.

The starting point for any conclusions must be the reiteration that Dickens is a comic novelist. Dickens uses comic elements pervasively in his narrative art, and, from Dombey and Son onward, these comic elements become carefully integrated into the structures and thematic concerns of his novels. I have shown, too, that Dickens's comic art is diverse in its scope and complex in its effect, and that it is capable of evoking a corresponding diversity and complexity of response in the attentive reader.

Furthermore, the weight of evidence in this thesis does not support the preconception that Dickens's comic art is customarily aggressive or malicious, or that it tends to debase. This view simply cannot be sustained by any reasonable alert or open-minded examination of the text. Dickens's comic art is certainly diverse enough to encompass elements of black humour or dark satire, but Dickens cannot accurately be characterised as a black humourist, nor is his vision ultimately an anti-comic one. On the contrary, I have argued that in characters such as Pancks, Wemmick, and Mr. Dorrit, Dickens's most successful comic achievement engenders a sympathetic response in the reader. We are encouraged in many

central and important instances to participate through humour in the human plight of others.

I have argued that the comic perspective, whether in the comic metonymy of Mr. Dorrit's house, or in the comic satire of the Circumlocution Office, offers us an humane counterpoint, whose life-enhancing qualities oppose the values being depicted. I have also shown how successfully Dickens uses comic elements to control sentimentality, a technique which has its roots in descriptions such as Mrs. Dombey's death or Little Dorrit's birth, where the humour increases the pathos and the reality of the descriptions. This comic control reaches one of its most subtle and profound purposes in the description of Mr. Dorrit's collapse, where the tension between laughter and pathos results in a deeply moving description of human disintegration.

By contrast, I have shown that when Dickens abandons his use of comic elements, his narrative prose stands in danger of a slide towards the banal or the sentimental. I demonstrated what can occur both in a descriptive passage as well as in various characterisations: in the conventional pieties surrounding Mr. Dombey's death, as well as in the problematical presentations of character such as Edith, Carker, or Florence. These examples help to clarify the fact that Dickens's finest achievement is inextricably bound up with his comic art.

Finally, if we compare the ending of Dombey and Son with Great Expectations, it is possible to see that Dickens sustained his comic vision over a period of thirteen years and seven novels. Indeed, this comparison of the two novels reveals a significant advance: Pip's regeneration is more convincing than Mr. Dombey's because it is worked out in greater detail. The earlier transform-

ation that leaves Mr. Dombey sitting next to the sea with his grandchildren comes to seem rather cursory juxtaposed with the subtler and more extended account of Pip's regeneration in Great Expectations.

That Dickens remains deeply committed to this drive towards regeneration and integration in one of his final novels provides conclusive testimony that he did not become disillusioned with life, or abandon his comic vision of society. We find Dickens concerned instead in this late novel to re-work the comic vision in a more complex and convincing way. Any assessment of Dickens, therefore, that ignores the sustained force of his comic vision, or the pervasive nature of the comic element in his art, lies in serious danger of distorting his achievement.

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