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CLASSICS

CHARLES DICKENS

David Copperfield

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Charles Dickens

DAVID COPPERFIELD

With an Introduction and Notes by Jeremy Tambling

Revised Edition



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DAVID COPPERFIELD

Charles Dickens was born at Portsmouth on 7 February 1812, the second of eight children. Dickens's childhood experiences were similar to those depicted in *David Copperfield*. His father, who was a government clerk, was imprisoned for debt and Dickens was briefly sent to work in a blacking warehouse at the age of twelve. He received little formal education, but taught himself shorthand and became a reporter of parliamentary debates for the *Morning Chronicle*. He began to publish sketches in various periodicals, which were subsequently republished as *Sketches by Boz*. *The Pickwick Papers* were published in 1836–7 and after a slow start became a publishing phenomenon and Dickens's characters the centre of a popular cult. Part of the secret of his success was the method of cheap serial publication which Dickens used for all his novels. He began *Oliver Twist* in 1837, followed by *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41). After finishing *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) Dickens set off for America; he went full of enthusiasm for the young republic but, in spite of a triumphant reception, he returned disillusioned. His experiences are recorded in *American Notes* (1842). *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4) did not repeat its predecessors' success but this was quickly redressed by the huge popularity of the 'Christmas Books', of which the first, *A Christmas Carol*, appeared in 1843. During 1844–6 Dickens travelled abroad and he began *Dombey and Son* while in Switzerland. This and *David Copperfield* (1849–50) were more serious in theme and more carefully planned than his early novels. In later works, such as *Bleak House* (1853) and *Little Dorrit* (1857), Dickens's social criticism became more radical and his comedy more savage. In 1850 Dickens started the weekly periodical *Household Words*, succeeded in 1859 by *All the Year Round*; in these he published *Hard Times* (1854), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1860–61). Dickens's health was failing during the 1860s and the physical strain of the public readings which he began in 1858 hastened his decline, although *Our*

Mutual Friend (1865) retained some of his best comedy. His last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, was never completed and he died on 9 June 1870. Public grief at his death was considerable and he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Jeremy Tambling is Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Hong Kong. He is interested in opera, and film and in medieval and confessional literature, as in *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (1990). His book *Becoming Posthumous* (2001) is an exploration of literary theory, while in relation to nineteenth-century and modernist studies, he is author of *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (1995), *Henry James* (2000) and *Lost in the American City: Dickens, James, Kafka* (2001).

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TO
THE HON. MR AND MRS RICHARD WATSON,
OF
ROCKINGHAM, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE.

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Introduction

Critics used to – still do – argue over which Dickens they prefer: his early work, from the first newspaper pieces he wrote which were reprinted as *Sketches by Boz* in 1836, and his first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, through to *Dombey and Son*;¹ or the later novels. It is an argument which begins from the differences – perceptible, if hard to define – between the early and the late Dickens. It also includes the history of Dickens's relations with his illustrators, and the comparative tailing off of their importance to his art. His first seven novels (*Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Dombey and Son*) have been alternatively praised or criticized for being episodic, and for working with a hero whose adventures are picaresque – that is, dotting about from place to place, with no necessary connection between those separate episodes. Readers who value Dickens's creation of characters have usually found more to choose from in this group; so too have those who have stressed Dickens's achievements as a comic writer.

His last seven novels – *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Edwin Drood* – have been seen as more concentrated; connected, less comic and more angry or melancholic in tone, and at present their reputation is higher than the earlier novels. Readers have been influenced, too, by other writers who came into existence partly influenced by Dickens's own outstanding achievement in his earlier work – Thackeray, the Bronte sisters, Mrs Gaskell, for example.²

Of course this division is too schematic, and it leaves out Dickens's short stories and journalism, and, more dangerously, it puts the changes into a

vacuum. But having made it, it is fascinating to see that Dickens's preference amongst his novels, and what he called his 'favourite child', was the one in the middle, the one in between these two groups: *David Copperfield* (the 'favourite child' being the novel, not the character David). So the author said in the Preface to the Charles Dickens edition of his works, in 1867, at a time when his writing career was nearly at an end, and in many other places before that. *David Copperfield*, or to give it its full title, *The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (Which He Never Meant to be Published On Any Account)* – a title whose multifariousness implies the proliferation of the early novels – succeeded *Dombey and Son* and preceded *Bleak House*. It appeared first in monthly serial form between 1849 and 1850, then as a book.

In choosing the novel in the middle, we have a wonderful example of how Dickens, who seldom said anything of theoretical interest concerning his novels, either in his letters, to his biographer, John Forster, in the novels themselves, or in their Prefaces, evaded any critical demand for an either/or choice to be made between the novels and their various periods. That this was not accidental may be confirmed when we note how carefully David Copperfield too refrains from talking about the novels he has written. Dickens disallowed any decision to be made on which part of his work is the stronger, most energetic, the most Dickensian. But the fact that he reread *David Copperfield* before starting that much later novel, *Great Expectations* (1860–61), and, as he told Forster, 'was affected by it to a degree you would hardly believe', proves that it was at some level crucial to him and the way he wanted to think about his work. *David Copperfield* feeds the later text. Perhaps it helps to make it Dickensian. The point certainly complicates the distinction between the early and the late Dickens.

David Copperfield: Reading the Novel

It has often been noted that *David Copperfield* is a text which critics find hard to discuss, or have refrained from discussing, for reasons which are

worth exploring. The problems associated with it relate to the depth of interest the book holds. Is it simple, or primarily comic, a book for children almost, a book which displays the simplicities or complacencies of feeling of the English middle class? Or is it a sceptical or suspicious text, unmasking Victorian ideology, especially in such areas as class, or sexuality, or in the ideology of work? Does it look back nostalgically to a past moment, as autobiography tends to do? Or is the novel modern, a text looking forward to Freud, and of the same moment as Marx? (From [chapter LIX](#) onwards, its references seem more contemporary than before.) What is the dominant note in it? Is it the melodrama and the melodramatic dialogue which is derived from the theatre, as with several of the scenes relating to Emily and Mr Peggotty – for example, the confrontations between Dr and Mrs Strong in [chapter XLV](#), or between Rosa Dartle and Emily in [chapter L](#). Or is it the sentimentality which hovers round several figures – though perhaps there is not much agreement over which figures? Or is the text far more knowing and sly, with insights which come from an awareness of people's unconscious states of mind and of what Freud was to call 'the psychopathology of everyday life'? The attention to unconscious states, to dreams – David Copperfield's recorded dreams have been estimated to number around twenty – and to the workings of memory and the power of association have attracted several readings of the text which identify Dickens as proto-Freudian.³

Readers who prefer to see *David Copperfield* as an early work might note that a son born to the Dickenses on 15 January 1849 was named Henry Fielding in recognition of the style of the novel that Dickens had just begun writing. That would make the text eighteenth-century, picaresque and masculine in tone – a point I shall return to. The books that David Copperfield says he reads in [chapter IV](#), by Fielding and Smollett for instance, further bear out the idealization of the eighteenth century and its novelists as a feature within the text. We might also note the number of distinctive 'characters' in the novel: Micawber, Uriah Heep, Mr Creakle, the Murdstones, Miss Trotwood, Julia Mills, Dora Spenlow and her father, Steerforth, Rosa Dartle... a list nearly as long as the list of names in the

book. They relate to an early interest in individual physiognomies, in grotesquerie and characterization derived from the popular stage. The creation of Mr Wickfield, for example, is a reminder of a style of characterization which reads character solely in terms of one attribute: a mode often associated with Dickens's earlier style. Writing to Forster in late January 1849, Dickens asked him his opinion about including a character in the book (i.e. Mr Wickfield) who replied to everything, 'Yes, that is very true: but now, *What's his motive?*'.... 'Well now, yes – no doubt that was a fine thing to do! But now, stop a moment, let us see – *What's his motive?*' This, indeed, is how Mr Wickfield is presented in the novel, just as Uriah Heep is known always by his professions of humility, or Mr Micawber by his circumlocutionary form of utterance. How many characters in this book are known by statements they repeat so often! 'Barkis is willin' (Barkis); 'waiting for something to turn up' (Micawber); 'I will never desert Mr Micawber' (Mrs Micawber); 'be 'umble' (Uriah); 'King Charles's head' (Mr Dick); 'I'm a mother myself (Mrs Crupp); 'I'm a lone lorn creetur and everything goes contrairy with me' (Mrs Gummidge); 'she's thinking of the old 'un' (Peggotty); 'annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness' (Micawber again); 'somebody's sharp' that somebody being 'Brooks of Sheffield' (Mr Murdstone); the book is known by such idiosyncratic statements and repetitions, which make the characters who utter them single-minded, sometimes to the point of being maniacal.

Those who link this text with the early Dickens could also note that the novel looks back in time. For example, there are no railways in this novel, as there were in *Dombey and Son*. This locates the action in the 1820s at the latest. Is the text a step back from *Dombey and Son*? When Dickens came to his next novel, *Bleak House*, which is also set in the past, and is largely anti-industrial, but which is also immensely engaged with the public condition of England, and angry about it as *David Copperfield* seems not to be – though there is a perceptible darkening of mood in the novel's [chapter LIX](#) – he wrote in a letter of 22 July 1852, 'to let you into a secret, I am not quite sure that I ever did like, or ever shall like, anything *quite* so well as

Copperfield’ – before adding, ‘but I foresee (I think) some very good things in Bleak House... I behold them in the months ahead, and weep.’ Writing *Bleak House* changed Dickens, moving him away from material which was obviously deeply congenial to him.

David Copperfield is partially picaresque; it is inscribed by David in wanderings as a boy from Suffolk to London, from London to Dover and Canterbury, back to London as a young man, eventually to Switzerland and back again. Characters are met on the way and disappear, many of them reappearing in unexpected contexts. It also works, strikingly, by repetition. David Copperfield is introduced to London twice (chapters XI and XIX); makes a new start so that he goes to two different types of schools; has two different forms of occupation; marries twice. Smaller, but equally odd, forms of repetition appear: he has two fathers, and he is surrounded by two women called Clara (his mother and Peggotty). He is introduced to Micawber in [chapter XI](#) and re-meets Micawber in just the same circumstances – only the locale has changed – in [chapter XXVII](#). Micawber’s various letters to him, too, could be taken as so much repetition of the same theme. The reappearance of Uriah Heep in [chapter LXI](#), after he had been cleared out of the main plot, is another instance. At the end of the novel Mr Murdstone is doing just what he was doing at the beginning: torturing a young wife. The first question that the young David Copperfield poses is, ‘Peggotty... were you ever married?’ (chapter II), and the ‘subject’ of the novel could be said to be marriage, as examined through Betsey Trotwood and her husband, Clara and Mr Murdstone, Peggotty and Barkis, David and Dora, Dr Strong and Annie Strong, Mr Wickfield and his late wife, giving a proliferation of nearly repeated experiences. Rosa Dartle, who wants to get married, Emily who does not, both seduced by the same Steerforth, also comment on this theme. Since marriages imply families, a related topic is the unsatisfactory mother – Clara Copperfield; Mrs Steerforth; Mrs Markleham (a continuation in some ways of Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son*). Or the unsatisfactory father – and both of these parenting themes have autobiographical implications (to be discussed later). One way of reading this set of rich improvisations and repetitions with

variations on related themes would be to take it as evidence of how the twenty monthly parts (in which the novel originally appeared) dictated repetitiousness and superfluity to the writer, making it like a soap opera. Another, however, would take it as evidence of fascination in the text with something else, more modern, something David Copperfield notes at the moment when Uriah Heep tells him he loves Agnes: 'He seemed to swell and grow before my eyes; the room seemed full of the echoes of his voice; and the strange feeling (to which, perhaps, no one is a stranger) *that all this had occurred before, at some indefinite time, and that I knew what he was going to say next*, took possession of me' (chapter XXV, my emphasis). At such a moment, when repetition takes over, the novel form seems revolutionary, the repetitions not coincidental but relating to a new and modern sense of space and time as not singular, and unidirectional. Memory is not necessarily of the past, but is indistinguishable from the imagination.

Those who prefer this second view, who see the text as modern, or even modernist, might note how influential the book has been within modernism in America and Europe: for example, on Henry James, where its impact is felt throughout, but especially with *The Princess Casamassima* and *What Maisie Knew*; or with Tolstoy, who was reading it in 1852, and whose *Childhood* uses it, as does his *War and Peace*, or with Dostoyevsky, who took the Micawbers and made them the Marmeladov family in *Crime and Punishment*,⁴ or with Freud, with Joyce, in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; or with Kafka, whose *Der Verschollene* (translated as *The Man Who Disappeared* or as *America*) is an attempt to rewrite Dickens's novel.⁵ *David Copperfield* belongs to a genre of fiction known as the *Bildungsroman*, which can be defined as the novel describing a person's all-round development, or growth in self-cultivation, and which is normally seen as starting with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1794–6) which was translated by Carlyle as *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1824).⁶ With these European precedents, it has had profound influences: in English literature – with George Eliot throughout; with Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*, or Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, or Edmund Gosse's *Father*

and Son, or D.H. Lawrence's example of a *Bildungsroman*, *Sons and Lovers*.

The Novel in 1850

David Copperfield charts the triumph of a middle-class hero. The years 1847 and 1848 had seen revolution in Europe, and the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. In England, however, there was no revolution, save for the Chartist movement, which collapsed in 1848, and save for what Raymond Williams has seen as a revolution in the novel, which he documents through reference to *Dombey and Son*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, *Mary Barton*, *Tancred*, *Town and Country* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.⁷ And the Pre-Raphaelite movement founded in 1848 was a protest against middle-class taste. The triumph of the middle classes in England in and after 1848 produces in *Copperfield* a hero aware of his class position; this shows with the working-class Peggottys of Yarmouth, who seem a contented family, but are not a family at all, and who are, underneath the respect they show, angry and resentful.⁸ Such discontent seethes in Uriah Heep, too (see below).

In 1851, the year following the work's publication, the Great Exhibition opened in London's Hyde Park, an expression of confidence in British manufacture and industry, but it has been argued that this decade saw a reaction against the ethos of work and industrial progress.⁹ And there do seem to be elements in *David Copperfield* of a pastoral retreat, evident even in the places where Dickens wrote the novel. Studying the literary events of 1850, Carl Dawson concludes that 'while one can point to this or that example of social conscience, to Carlyle... or to Kingsley, the writers [of 1850] do not seem... primarily concerned with political and social issues. Nearly all are preoccupied with individual crises of identity or faith, with the autobiographical account of themselves as pilgrims.'¹⁰ Dawson names two causes for these crises: religion and the new science, which he saw as making mid-century writers introspective, preoccupied with memory. There is notably little stress on industrialism in *David Copperfield*; the only

person who refers to the industrial classes is Jack Maldon, a Steerforth without the talent or the money.

David Copperfield is a success story of the Victorian bourgeoisie; its praise of the 'genteel' and of bourgeois values, such as those of the home and domesticity, leads to a convergence of all the characters around Copperfield's values. They work for his good, and find their own heterogeneity – their own marks of difference – swallowed up by their allegiance to his interests. Peggotty, Betsy Trotwood, Mr Dick, Agnes, Dora, Traddles, the Micawbers, Mr Peggotty, Miss Mowcher – all suffer that fate. Perhaps Dora is, of these, the least subservient to his progress, and this gives her part of the book, including her death, considerable interest. The others move towards what the novel would take to be the central ground, which is the subordination of their own otherness to the values of David Copperfield. Those who oppose also find themselves treated in a way which brings them all together, either to punishment or to loss of their hopes.

There has been much discussion of *David Copperfield* through its relation to Dickens's autobiography and its use of autobiographical detail. In this it is distinctive in comparison to the rest of Dickens's work. Different possibilities offer themselves: that the novel mattered to Dickens because it was at least in part autobiographical or confessional, perhaps even cathartic; or, on the contrary, that autobiography represented a new tendency or drive in Dickens's fiction, enabling things to be done that had never been done before. The relationship with autobiography was first raised by Edmund Wilson in 1941, in his famous essay 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', in his book *The Wound and the Bow*. Wilson took the childhood experience of the twelve-year-old boy (discussed below) as decisively formative and as traumatic, producing heavily conflicting feelings towards the father. He took Dickens's accounts of this at face value. If Wilson needs supplementing here, remembering Dickens was *creating* a memory for himself, a memory he at some level of consciousness needed because of certain compulsions felt at the time of writing, nonetheless Wilson drives us towards Dickens's biography.

Dickens: Biography and Autobiography

It is the early life that is important here. Charles Dickens was the son of John Dickens, who worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office in London, then in Portsmouth, where Charles was born in 1812; in London again; then in Chatham in Kent (1817–22); then again in London from the end of 1822 until the time he was arrested for debt (20 February 1824) and sent to the Marshalsea Prison in Southwark, on the south side of the Thames. He was released on 28 May 1824. The twelve-year-old Charles was deprived of schooling when he left Chatham to come to London, to stay at wretched lodgings in Bayham Street, Camden Town, then a village three miles north of the Thames, between 1822 and 1823. He lived in a two-storey house built in the early nineteenth century, with four rooms, basement and garret, rented for £22 a year. Worse followed when he was put to work in Warren's shoe-blackening factory during the time of his father's imprisonment and for some time afterwards, perhaps for a year in all. This brings us into *David Copperfield* territory: the factory experience appears in chapters XI and XII, the father appears as Mr Micawber, and the Bayham Street house is partially recognizable in [chapter XXVII](#) as later lodgings of Mr and Mrs Micawber. But the boy David who is sent to work in the blacking factory is dispatched there by Mr Murdstone, his stepfather, who is 'in straitened circumstances' at the time, so that there seem to be already *two* living fathers or father substitutes for David in the book – Murdstone and Micawber – not to mention David's real father, David Copperfield the elder, who is dead before the hero is born.

The boy Dickens was released from his experience in the blacking factory and sent to school at Wellington House Academy, on the corner of Granby Road and Hampstead Road, which he attended from 1825 to 1827. The Headmaster, William Jones (1786–1836), inspired the character of Mr Creakle, who runs Salem House school (see *David Copperfield* [chapters V–IX](#)). In a speech of 1857, Dickens called Jones 'by far the most ignorant man I have ever had the pleasure to know, who was one of the worst-tempered men perhaps that ever lived, whose business was to make as much

out of us and to put as little into us as possible'.¹¹ On leaving school, Dickens worked as a solicitor's clerk and as a freelance reporter for Doctors' Commons, an anachronistic legal institution dealing with marriage and probate, which was not dissolved until 1857. David Copperfield is trained to become a proctor in Doctors' Commons: Steerforth explains what this means in [chapter XXIII](#). Something of the near-contempt Dickens felt for it is apparent in a sketch called 'Doctor's Commons' which he wrote for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1836, and formed one of his *Sketches By Boz* (source material for *David Copperfield*). Young Dickens, by now a parliamentary reporter, for which he had learned shorthand (see [chapter XXXVI](#)), had gone into journalism and his first article appeared in 1833. David Copperfield parallels this in [chapter XLIII](#), and by [chapter XLVIII](#) he has become a full-time writer, as Dickens had done by 1836. In addition, in the 1830s Dickens had a romantic disappointment. He was attracted to Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a banker whom he met in 1830. The affair, disapproved of by her parents, ended in 1833, but it supplies material for the portrait of Dora Spenlow who enters the novel in [chapter XXVI](#).

Dickens divulged the episode of the blacking factory to no one, perhaps not even to his wife Catherine Hogarth, whom he married in 1836. It remained a matter of deep personal shame, a trauma. Nonetheless near the end of the 1840s, he had written a fragment of autobiography which, handed to John Forster, was included by him in Part I, chapters I and II, of his *Life of Dickens*, published after Dickens's death. The relevant sections of that autobiography are reprinted here as Appendix I, and they correspond very interestingly with sections of *David Copperfield*, chapters IV, X, XI and XII. Something of the repressed material had also appeared in *Dombey and Son* (1846–8) in [chapter VIII](#), where the boy Paul Dombey is sent to board with Mrs Pipchin at Brighton. In his number-plans, Dickens called her 'Mrs Roylance', this being the name of the woman with whom he had lodged, in April/May 1824, in Little College Street, Camden Town, while his father was in prison and he was working at the blacking factory. He wrote about Mrs Pipchin at the end of 1846, telling Forster that the portrait was 'from the life'. The following spring, Forster asked him about his

childhood, and heard the story, though he did not see the autobiographical fragment until January 1849. What had been repressed was now in the open, in what he called, in a letter to Forster of 10 July 1849, 'a very complicated interweaving of truth and fiction'. And *David Copperfield*, then into its fourth monthly serialization, was the first Dickens novel where the narrative is entirely first person – Forster apparently having suggested that he should write the novel after *Dombey and Son* in that way. One pretend autobiography, *David Copperfield's*, masks another autobiography.

Writing *David Copperfield*

The writing of the early chapters of *David Copperfield* coincided with the publication of poems by Matthew Arnold, with Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, the serialization of Thackeray's autobiographical novel *Pendennis* (November 1848–December 1850) and Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, with its interest in memory described as the sixth 'Lamp of Architecture'. Memory had also been the subject of Dickens's 'Christmas Book' *The Haunted Man*, which appeared in December 1848. This has autobiographical implications for in it the hero is tempted to allow himself to forget his unhappy past, with the suggestion that this will enable him to live in the present, though at the cost of disallowing any creative relationship to others in the present or future. The tale ends with the decision to retain memories, however bitter, and concludes with the prayer 'Lord, keep my memory green'. This – a quotation from *Hamlet* (I.ii.2) – means both 'let me be remembered after I am dead' and 'let me keep my memories of the past fresh'.

In July 1850, just after Wordsworth's death, *The Prelude: Or, The Growth of a Poet's Mind*, a text full of memory, appeared posthumously. Dickens bought it within a month, and quoted from it in the last double number of his novel. That year also saw Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, written in autobiographical mode, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, a long poem on his friend Arthur Hallam's death, and, like *David Copperfield's* reaction to the death of Steerforth, unaffected in the tenderness with which one man writes

about his love for another. Between February and August 1850 Carlyle published his *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, eight long essays directed against English society, and inflected with Carlyle's own nausea about Britain. Their influence on *David Copperfield* is plainly discernible.

Tracing the writing of the novel can begin with the Number-Plans (Appendix II) and with 7 January 1849, when Dickens set out with a group of friends to visit Norwich and went on to Lowestoft (Suffolk) and Great Yarmouth (Norfolk), seeing on the way to Lowestoft a sign for a village named Blunderston. Yarmouth, he said in a letter to his wife of 9 January, was 'the strangest place in the wide world', divided from London by 'one hundred and forty-six miles of hill-less marsh'. An imaginary distance, of course, but one which enables Dickens to think of a new community, centred on the village of Blunderstone, able to make excursions to Lowestoft (chapter II) and Yarmouth (chapter III); though it should be recalled that, in a speech made at Chatham much later, Dickens was to say that he associated the 'East Anglian' characters of *David Copperfield* with 'the very stones of Chatham'.¹² On 3 February 1849, Dickens wrote in a letter that he was 'revolving a new work', which he began writing by 27 February ('in the first agonies of a new work', as he put it). The choices of title, meditated over that month, and settled by 21 March, are given here in Appendix III. Dickens professed himself surprised when Forster pointed out to him that the name of the hero he had chosen had his own initials reversed. The first part of the twenty monthly serializations appeared on 30 April (for 1 May), the last (the double number, containing parts XIX and XX) on 31 October 1850. Dickens wrote in London and also in other places: Broadstairs, where he finished it; at Bonchurch on the Isle of Wight (26 July to 1 October 1849, staying in a cottage adjacent to one inhabited by a Captain Samuel Dick RN – the period when Mr Dick makes his appearance), at Brighton and in Paris.

At the same time he began editing a weekly newspaper, *Household Words*, the first edition of which appeared on 27 March 1850. This is Dickens at his most confident, and also at his most socially concerned, for social matters were the backbone of *Household Words*. Letters of this period

are concerned with his schemes for encouraging emigration to Australia. In February 1850, he met Caroline Chisholm, one of those campaigning for emigration to Australia, as opposed to transportation, also an element in this novel.¹³ There are also his views on prisons, especially Pentonville; on public health and even on burial places; and, above all, his work with the heiress Angela Burdett-Coutts (1814–1906). This concerned a home for ‘fallen women’ – prostitutes – who were to be sent abroad for marriage – perhaps to Australia – after being reclaimed. Urania House, as it was called, in Shepherd’s Bush, opened in 1847, and Dickens virtually ran it for Burdett-Coutts until 1858. These issues find their way into the second half of *David Copperfield*.

Other letters show a deep enthusiasm for the novel he was writing. Around the fourth part, which contained the details of the blacking factory, he wrote to Forster (21 June 1849), ‘Fourteen miles today in the country, revolving number four.’ Towards the end, while writing parts XVI to XX; from [chapter XLVII](#) onwards, he wrote to Bulwer, ‘I like it very much, and am deeply interested in it – and... I have kept and am keeping, my mind very steadily upon it’ (26 July 1850). With reference to chapters LI to LIII, he wrote, ‘I feel the story to its minutest point’ (13 August). About [chapter LV](#), ‘Tempest’, with the drownings of Ham and Steerforth, he wrote to Forster, ‘I have been tremendously at work these two days; eight hours at a stretch yesterday, and six hours and a half today, with the Ham and Steerforth chapter, which has completely knocked me over – utterly defeated me!’ (15 September). He frequently describes himself as in ‘a paroxysm of Copperfield’ or ‘rigid with Copperfield’. While writing part XVIII, including ‘Tempest’, he said to Mrs Watson, one of the book’s dedicatees, ‘there are some things in the next Copperfield that I think better than any that have gone before’ (24 September). On 21 October he wrote to Forster, ‘I am within three pages of the shore; and am strangely divided, as usual in such cases, between sorrow and joy. Oh, my dear Forster, if I were to say half of what *Copperfield* makes me think tonight, how strangely, even to you, I should be turned inside-out! I seem to be sending some part of myself into the Shadowy World.’ The words of the Preface to the first

edition of *David Copperfield* as a book, which appeared immediately after the last part, should be compared with this. So should the last paragraph of the book itself. They, together with the letters, imply the extent of identification with not just the character of David Copperfield, but with *everything* in the text. Dickens as writer created a text that created Dickens as the reader. An American reader, Kate Douglas Wiggin, said that when she was a child she asked Dickens, on his American tour in 1868, if like her he wept over Steerforth, and got the reply, 'Yes, I cry when I read about Steerforth.'¹⁴ No doubt he was primarily referring to the readings he gave of the novel (starting in 1861), which concentrated on Steerforth and Emily, and on David Copperfield and Dora,¹⁵ but it is still a significant marker of identification. We are left wondering what the details in the text are that so especially turned the novelist inside out. For example, what was Dickens mourning in Steerforth?

Autobiography in *David Copperfield*

Many Dickens novels begin at some point after an event which is gradually revealed to the reader: a secret in the past which has to be discovered. This applies, for example, to *Oliver Twist*, to *Bleak House*, to *Little Dorrit* and to *A Tale of Two Cities*, but it does not describe *David Copperfield*. Like *Oliver Twist* and *Dombey and Son*, this is a novel where a child is born in the first chapter. But in this case the father is already dead, the hero is posthumous and, as such, deprived of a history. The narrator, the older, adult David Copperfield, who is not quite allowed to escape objective representation since he appears in Phiz's illustrations which provide another and different narrative of the events, including him, and making his experience relative, not the only important experience in the book, is always trying to recall the past in full presence. Dickens's interest in writing a veiled autobiography is matched by the text's interest in the past and *retrospect*. Four chapters contain this word in the title (XVIII, XLIII, LIII and the last, LXIV), and in them, as in others, notably sections of chapters II, IV, VII, IX, XLII, LV and LVIII. David Copperfield writes in the present

tense, as if cancelling the past as past, thus making the past present. Further, he is always trying to find ghosts within the past, as in this: 'my occupation in my solitary pilgrimages [on his return to Suffolk, in [chapter XXII](#)] was to recall every yard of the old road as I went along it, and to haunt the old spots, of which I never tired. I haunted them, as my memory had often done, and lingered among them as my younger thoughts had lingered when I was far away.' It is as if the repetition in the book functions to deposit layer after layer of sedimentation into the novel, so that memories and the past can be created through a rich context established through different textual levels, which are reinvoked time and time again, rather than the plot simply moving forward.

David Copperfield is haunted by the events of Dickens's own life, and it is haunted very extensively by literature. Its literary predecessors are wide ranging: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (1847); Wordsworth's poetry, and not just *The Prelude*, Burns's poetry, and both Byron's poetry and his personality in the character of Steerforth. In Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (I.ix), a text Dickens certainly knew, an instruction in anti-Romanticism is given 'Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe' and *David Copperfield* is about the cost involved in doing that. Steerforth's biography also evokes the memory of Shelley drowning in the Bay of Lerici in 1822. There is also Scott (the general romance form of *Waverley*), and the presence of Hogarth and his sequences of 'progresses'; as noted already, there is extensive reference to the eighteenth-century novel, and there is above all Shakespeare, whose bust, it seems, appears, though quite out of place, in the illustration to 'Our Pew at Church', as if presiding as an inspirational father.¹⁶ There is also Chaucer, whom Mr Micawber evokes twice. There is a history of reading and of memories of popular songs and of the theatre in the text, at least as powerful as the remembered experiences from Dickens's own life.

There is also, for both author and narrator, the memory of places, some casually introduced. *David Copperfield* and Mr Micawber, in different moments, visit Chatham, where Dickens had spent five years of his childhood. But the most outstanding are memories of London. London has

become synonymous with aspects of Dickens; it marks and haunts this text. It appears as a world city, a place of trade and shipping, and a place to be shown off, a tourist venue: Steerforth shows London to David Copperfield; David does the same for Peggotty and his aunt and Peggotty for Mr Dick. That is one London; the city noted as the public spectacle, the place for display, but it is not the London the child uses in chapters XI and XII, when it is his 'home'. Nor is it the place of its streets – where prostitutes such as Martha are to be found. But it is interesting that often the London described is already no more. Several times it is said that a place mentioned in the novel has disappeared. London is a city moving in time, so that affections and emotional attachments are made in relation to places no longer existing, or replaced by something else. The city becomes an image of the psyche, which continues its attachments to things no longer in place, so that at the heart of everything there is loss – what David Copperfield in [chapter XXXV](#) calls 'a vague unhappy loss or want of something [which] overshadow[ed] me like a cloud'. This comes at the point of intersection of all his feelings; he has lost Steerforth, he is in love with Dora and his aunt has been hinting at Agnes and her emotional life. It is not an adequate reading to say, as some critics have done, that the words show a sense that Dora will not be the 'right' wife for him. This recognition of the hollow nature of desire is repeated in the text several times, and it cuts across an orderly temporal progression, much as London has to be seen in multiple time frames, including what is present and what is absent.

These locales acquire resonances from repeated use. Peggotty, a worn-out wanderer, stays at Southwark (on the way to the Dover road) in the area where Mr Micawber went to prison, as if bringing these two moments into association. Micawber's boat to Australia puts off from Hungerford Stairs, where Dickens worked in the blacking factory. Martha is encountered near Blackfriars where David Copperfield worked in Murdstone and Grinby's. Covent Garden, the Adelphi, Holborn, all acquire a plural significance from the way they mean different things at different times in the book. Another form of repetition appears when Highgate, a suburb of London, is used and reused in different contexts; its name and hilly locale suggesting how the

‘high’ may still be overwhelmed. As David Copperfield puts it, looking from Highgate towards London, ‘from the greater part of the broad valley... a mist was rising like a sea, which, mingling with the darkness, made it seem as if the gathering waters would encompass them’ (chapter XLVI). Clearly, that anticipates the storm which will drown Steerforth; but it could also be read as a threat of revolution from London’s working classes, as if suggesting that this fear has not gone. David Copperfield, coming to live in Highgate near to the Steerforth home – quite coincidentally, but obviously very revelatory of something within him which is unconscious and unrecognized – implicitly challenges the power of aristocratic old money with bourgeois new money. It is the nineteenth-century ‘history’ of Highgate; but it is also the history of which class was triumphing; and the word ‘history’ is deliberate, following its appearance in the title and in David Copperfield’s writing (for instance, at the opening of [chapter XXXII](#)).

Autobiography and Memory

Not only Dickens, but David Copperfield too, consciously draws attention to the nature of autobiographical writing. Before writing *David Copperfield* the narrator says he has already written one story deriving from his experience (chapter LVIII) – as a way of getting out of a three-year-long emotional crisis, caused by the death of Dora (chapter LIII), the deaths of Ham and of Steerforth (chapter LV) and the emigration of so many friends (chapter LVII). In the novel he comments on the validity of autobiography, as when he says that ‘the memory of most of us can go back farther into such times [infancy] than many of us suppose; just as I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy’ (chapter II). It suggests that every part of the text is haunted, not by a knowable secret but by a whole history which is equal to that of Dickens himself, but not, however, necessarily accessible even to Dickens. What are we to understand when David Copperfield returns to Blunderstone Rookery to find his childhood home now occupied by a

lunatic and his carers? The madman is sitting at the window that Copperfield sat at when a boy. It is a strange form of dispossession, and another form of doubling, for this madman obviously duplicates Mr Dick, and, as he looks at David Copperfield out of his old window, he becomes his mirror.

Many other life stories crowd into these pages becoming part of Dickens's, not David Copperfield's, autobiography. Take Mr Dick's mad attempts to write his Memorial (chapter XIV). They bring to the surface the instability of memory, but they also make Mr Dick an autobiographer. Since he is always disturbed in his writing by King Charles's head, it will be seen that the name Charles Dickens is reforming itself around him, like a rebus. Betsey Trotwood explains his referring to King Charles I as 'his allegorical way of expressing' disturbing recollections which prevent him writing his past. 'He connects his illness with great disturbance and agitation, naturally, and that's the figure which... he chooses to use' (chapter XIV). Memory, which for David Copperfield seems accessible, for Mr Dick is blocked by other memories, historical and traumatic. His memories are constructed by a history which is not his 'personal history'. It is worth noting that, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1847), Karl Marx had said that what distinguished the 'bourgeois epoch' from earlier ones was 'constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation'.¹⁷ Mr Dick is a casualty from the 'ordinary' disturbances and agitations of bourgeois existence, as well as from the influence of past national history. While only Mr Dick suffers from King Charles's head, Dickens's name appears in two other characters: Mr Mell, and in the mad old man at Chatham (chapter XIII). The emigration of various souls to Australia (the Micawbers, Peggotty and Emily, Martha and Mrs Gummidge, and Mr Mell in different circumstances) is not only a way of escaping the poverty that class condemned people to in Britain. (An immigrant girl in Australia in 1846 could say 'I know what England is. Old England is a fine place for the rich but the Lord help the poor.'¹⁸) Emigration is also a radical way of freeing the self from the past and memories of the past. Memory works to eradicate the subject; as David