



DICKENSIAN MELODRAMA

A
READING
OF THE NOVELS

GEORGE J. WORTH

LAWRENCE:
THE UNIVERSITY
OF KANSAS
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Preface

Let me begin with a word of personal reminiscence. One November afternoon, after I had been checking some of the references that appear in this study, I found myself surrounded by piles of books on Dickens, more than my desk would hold, spread out untidily all over the floor; and, as I started to replace them on my shelves, a most disturbing thought struck me. Why am I, why should anyone be, so presumptuous as to want to add one more item to these unmanageable heaps? Has not the time come, I wondered uneasily, is it not in fact already long past, for good Dickensians to take to heart the teachings of one of Mr. Gradgrind's favorite authors, the Reverend Thomas Malthus, and practice the kind of moral restraint that will arrest the virtually geometric growth in the number of studies of Dickens that have been brought forth during the past few years? Some of us have been afflicted with acute despair at our inability to cope with this "surplus population," suffering from severe eyestrain and lack of sleep if we try to keep up, and experiencing all too often a depressing sense of *déjà vu* as we come yet again across familiar old ideas, or a keen onset of bewilderment as we encounter excessively ingenious new ones.

And yet, whatever one might think of scholarly contraception in the abstract, few of us are so humble as to believe that what *we* are capable of contributing to the "population" of Dickens studies could reasonably be considered "surplus." I will not resort to the excuse of the young unmarried mother in *Mr. Midshipman Easy* who pointed out that the infant she had produced was, after all, only "a very little one"; but I can certainly plead that my subject, Dickens' use of melodramatic devices in his novels, has not received from critics the sort of serious, sustained, and careful attention it demands, even though many of them have recognized it, usually in passing, as highly important. I have found, with growing wonder, that most of what has been written about it is fragmentary, biased, or unclear; contradictions and evasions abound; and little or nothing is settled. I hope, therefore, that my modest addition to this critical literature will survive to lead a decently useful life, contributing something to the enlightened well-being of readers of Dickens rather than augmenting the misery that Malthus foresaw in a teeming world of unchecked fecundity.

I do not, of course, mean to imply that I intend to engage any or all earlier critics of Dickens in battle. On the contrary, in over a quarter-century of reading, teaching, and writing about Dickens, I have contracted more debts to a legion of my forerunners than I can possibly acknowledge or even remember. During the past decade, I have read, or re-read, everything I could lay my hands on dealing with Dickens and melodrama; but, rather than encumbering the body of my text with a distractingly large number of footnotes, I have confined myself to indicating where my readers might go to follow up some of the more controversial issues I raise and to suggesting which of my predecessors I have found the most helpful—and unhelpful—on specific points: with which of them I agree, usually in part, and with which of them I disagree. I have learned one thing about Dickens criticism in the course of reading a vast amount of it: somewhere in those reams of print, it is possible to find support for, and refutation of, just about any position one might wish to take. Consensus on matters of importance is practically non-existent.

I have considered it necessary to do a good deal of quoting from Dickens. Some of these excerpts are relatively unfamiliar; all of them, I think, provide essential support and illustrations for my arguments. Unless otherwise indicated, they are taken from the Oxford Illustrated Dickens (known before 1966 as the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens), the one collected edition likely to be accessible to my readers. Since it will not be handy for all of them at all times, however, I have provided in parentheses chapter (and, where appropriate, book *and* chapter) citations as well as page references for the novels, so that, for example, the first quotation from *The Pickwick Papers*, indicated as “57, p. 799,” comes from Chapter 57 in any edition of the novel and occurs on page 799 in the Oxford Illustrated edition, and the first quotation from *Hard Times* (one of the novels that Dickens divided into books each of which begins with a chapter numbered 1), indicated as “I, 1, p. 1,” is taken from Book the First, Chapter 1, and appears on page 1 of the Oxford Illustrated edition. In my footnotes, I have wherever possible abbreviated journal titles in accordance with the “Master List and Table of Abbreviations” in the first volume of the 1975 *MLA International Bibliography*, the latest available when I prepared my final manuscript.

I began my research in 1968-69 and wrote a first draft in 1975-76 on sabbatical leaves and with the aid of General Research grants from the University of Kansas, and I am deeply grateful to my institution for these and other less tangible forms of support. To the teachers who, long ago,

introduced me to the serious but never solemn study of the Victorian novel, the late E. K. Brown at the University of Chicago and Royal Gettmann and Gordon Ray at the University of Illinois, I owe much more than I can say. An early version of Chapter 5, titled "The Control of Emotional Response in *David Copperfield*," appeared in a Festschrift honoring Professor Gettmann on his retirement—*The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. George Goodin (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972)—and I thank the University of Illinois Press for permission to incorporate that material. I discussed Chapter 6 at our departmental colloquium in the fall of 1974, and my greatest obligation is really to those colleagues and students who over the years have generously afforded me such welcome opportunities to exchange views about Dickens.

Introduction

I

Biographers and critics of Charles Dickens have often pointed to the broad, boldly colored theatrical streak that runs through his life and work. From early boyhood, Dickens participated vigorously in dramatic performances of one kind or another, an obsession that culminated in his exhausting reading tours and fatal damage to his health. His published works, as well as numerous letters and speeches that have found their way into print, are full of references—admiring, nostalgic, satirical, but always passionately engaged—to the theater. An inveterate playgoer from his youth, Dickens at the start of his career as a writer toyed briefly with dramatic literature before committing himself wholeheartedly to prose fiction—a genre then fraught with fewer pitfalls for the author and holding the possibility of much greater financial reward for him. But in deciding not to become a playwright Dickens did not by any means abjure the idea of incorporating into his fiction certain techniques of the sorts of plays he knew so well. An intensely theatrical person, he could not have made such a renunciation even if he had wanted to.

Many of the plays Dickens saw on the London stage of the 1820's and 1830's were melodramas, belonging to a genre which took many forms and resists easy definition, but which did, in its countless embodiments, tend to display certain prominent common features. Most characteristic, perhaps, was a frank appeal for the emotional involvement of the audience by presenting the spectacle of Virtue threatened by Vice and then redeemed, triumphant. This emotion was aroused in a variety of ways: by lofty, eloquent language; by rapid, surprising action; by appropriate musical accompaniments and interludes; by comic subplots that threw the tone of the main action into sharper relief by contrast. Melodrama was anything but subtle, dealing as it did in the grand gesture and the brilliant hue rather than in the almost imperceptible motion and the finely shaded nuance,

The unbridled, if highly stylized, emotionalism of stage melodrama has tended to cheapen it, if not turn it into a downright laughing stock, in the minds of many sophisticated, hardboiled, tightlipped twentieth-century people. The fact that melodrama presupposed a set of firm moral verities is another reason it has been so widely disparaged in our amoral age. The chief good to be sought in the world of early nineteenth-century melodrama was a chastely happy home and family life: founded on married love and

the affection between parents and children; sanctified through hard work, thrift, honesty, and sobriety; and sweetened with at least an adequate income. The chief evil, to be shunned even more vigorously than destitution or death, was loss of reputation, most commonly in consequence of crime or sexual subversion. Despite their all-too-human failings, the men who turned out such plays and the public that flocked to see them agreed in accepting these ethical standards, at least in theory, so that much in nineteenth-century melodrama that strikes us as sanctimonious ranting must have seemed unexceptionable and even reassuring to its first audiences.

Now, it is one thing to say that Dickens is dramatic or even theatrical as a writer of prose fiction: this we are prepared to accept, and even to praise, if the argument is put in the right way; but it is quite another thing to say, dismissively, that Dickens is melodramatic, as scores of critics have done during the past 140 years. There are two things wrong with this. First, very few writers on Dickens have troubled to ask themselves, or to tell their readers, what the adjective "melodramatic" might mean as applied to prose fiction such as his. Second, a good many of these critics have, somewhat irritably, reached for it as a handy all-purpose weapon whenever they want to cudgel Dickens for offenses he has, according to them, committed against the art of fiction or the canons of good taste as they have understood them. The results are predictable: vagueness in the use of the term; contradictions among the conclusions that are drawn as a result of such casual invocation; and a troubling sense in the reader that, because and insofar as he is melodramatic as a novelist, Dickens is to be summarily arraigned, tried, and condemned at the bar of critical justice.

This disparagement of Dickens' work as melodramatic began almost as soon as he started writing novels. As early as 1838, while *Oliver Twist* was still being serialized, T. H. Lister complained in the *Edinburgh Review* that Oliver's odious half-brother Monks was "a mere melo-dramatic villain," a charge that was repeated during the next several years by others.¹ The indictment was usually much fuzzier than that: in reading Victorian critics of Dickens like George Eliot, James Fitzjames Stephen, R. H. Hutton, Anthony Trollope, and George Gissing, one often finds it difficult to tell precisely what they had in mind in accusing Dickens of being melodramatic—his character drawing, his plot construction, or his general artistic disposition.² More recent writers on Dickens have, by and large, followed in the meandering footsteps of their nineteenth-century forerunners. They are similarly disinclined to explain what they mean by melodrama; and, with some

honorable exceptions, they share the usually tacit assumption that, whatever melodrama is, it is per se aesthetically defective. A few selected examples may prove instructive at this stage of the discussion.

Walter C. Phillips' study *Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists* was widely influential for decades after its publication in 1919. According to Phillips, Dickens was a melodramatist from *Oliver Twist* onward, but in his last four novels he subordinated his flights of fancy to a much "stricter narrative unity." Before *A Tale of Two Cities*—apparently the first long work of fiction Dickens wrote after enrolling in the "sensation" school postulated by Phillips—a typical Dickens novel consisted of "a loosely constructed melodrama or two, and exuberantly garrulous scenes for characters *ad libitum*."³ A few years later, Arthur Quiller-Couch kept apologizing to the audiences of his Cambridge lectures for Dickens' "stagey, melodramatic" plots; he clearly meant that they were contrived with excessive care, thereby contradicting Phillips' notion that, at least in his earlier novels, Dickens' penchant for melodrama *interfered with* the orderly arrangement of his plots.⁴ At the other end of the Oxbridge axis, Lord David Cecil was willing to concede that "some of Dickens' melodrama is very effective"; on the whole, however, he held that this strain in Dickens must be counted among his striking defects. Like Quiller-Couch disturbed by the factitiousness of Dickensian melodrama, Cecil extended his condemnation from structure to characterization and motivation. Such episodes as Nancy's murder in *Oliver Twist* and Carker's flight in *Dombey and Son* "are masterpieces in their way"; but "they are melodrama; they move us, because they give us a pleasing thrill. They do not stir the emotions of pity and terror that they would awake if we came across them in real life."⁵ (Cecil's last statement begs some fascinating questions concerning the relationship between imaginative literature and "real life"—questions to which I shall return.) None of these three prominent critics seemed to know, or at least to be able to convey to his audience, how to define Dickensian melodrama. Like many before and after them, they tended to label as "melodrama" or "melodramatic" features, scenes, or entire works of Dickens in whose presence they felt uneasy, without giving much thought to the reasons for their discomfort. They were typical, too, in applying these labels casually, as a way of avoiding genuine critical discourse, resorting to an easy shorthand designed to call up stock responses rather than working toward illumination.

A couple of generations later, contemporary critics—some of our best students of Dickens, in fact—are often no more helpful when they turn to

the subject of Dickens and melodrama. Taylor Stoehr, for instance, repeatedly uses "melodrama" and "melodramatic" in a vaguely pejorative way which suggests that Stoehr conceives of them as objectionable in themselves, though they may, he concedes, embody serious aspects of Dickens' meaning.⁶ Ross H. Dabney, too, without ever defining the concepts, habitually refers to "melodrama" and "melodramatic" elements to indicate conventionality, contrivance, and crudeness, particularly in discussing Dickens' early novels; he is, however, willing to grant that Dickens exercised some skill in his use of such devices.⁷ Even Harvey Peter Sucksmith, whose deservedly much praised *The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens* argues that Dickens is a conscious artist working to achieve carefully controlled effects, does not examine the rhetorical bases of his melodrama, a term Sucksmith uses to conjure up visions of theatrical excesses.⁸ And Robert Garis, who devotes an entire book to *The Dickens Theatre*, makes it very clear by his juxtaposition of adjectives what he thinks of melodrama: "I want to avoid the implication that it is the bad, the melodramatic, the trashy Dickens who is a theatrical artist."⁹

When they turn to particular novels and aspects of novels, Dickens' contemporary critics are usually no surer of their terms. To take just one especially striking example of the resulting confusion and disagreement among distinguished Dickensians, *Dombey and Son* has frequently come under fire for what many have called its deplorable melodramatic features. These are alleged to include the novel's sensational and/or sentimental plot, its turgid and/or bombastic diction, and its shallow and/or incredible characterization culminating in absurdly theatrical scenes.¹⁰ A favorite target has been the relationship between Edith Dombey and James Carker, especially the confrontation between them at Dijon about which I will have something to say in Chapter 4. But—so shaky is our critical vocabulary, and so shadowy the premises on which it rests—that novel and that relationship, "melodramatic" though they may be, have also found a few staunch defenders.¹¹

About one point there does exist what amounts to consensus: Dickens *is* a "melodramatic" novelist. But what that means, and whether it is good or bad, or, more usually, why it is bad—these are questions that, even at the present highly developed stage of Dickens criticism, have not often been seriously put, let alone satisfactorily answered.

This is a propitious time to raise such questions, as this study will undertake to do. For one thing, after the recent publication of such books as

Robert B. Heilman's *Tragedy and Melodrama* and Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination*,¹² the academic establishment may be ready to stop regarding "melodrama," unreflectingly, as—to use James E. Rosenberg's uncompromising term—"a dirty word,"¹³ and to consider the possibility that the perceptions essential to melodrama are valid, even vital. For another, it is likely that the biases underlying much of the condemnation of Dickens' indulgence in melodrama are dissipating. There have been signs of this for some time now,¹⁴ and, if there were such a thing as a coup de grâce in critical strife, Albert J. Guerard's *The Triumph of the Novel*, with its stress on the anti-mimetic tradition in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, might be expected to lay to rest once and for all the tired charge that "the heightening or selective distortion of 'real reality'" that many have seen, and deplored, as a characteristic feature of Dickensian melodrama is a grievous flaw rather than, as Guerard insists, an important virtue "in most great fiction."¹⁵

At the outset of any such discussion as that which I propose to undertake, there is a great deal of semantic underbrush to be cleared away before the path ahead lies open. The task is complicated by the fact that the words "melodrama" and "melodramatic" are used in at least three contexts:

1. To refer to a specific kind of play, which originated in France in the late eighteenth century and was imported into England early in the nineteenth.¹⁶
2. To refer to a particular vision of life and to numerous literary devices characteristic of this kind of play but also appearing, sometimes prominently, in other kinds of plays, in prose fiction, and in narrative poetry, before and after the heyday of stage melodrama and, more recently, in movies and television plays.¹⁷
3. To refer, usually condescendingly or contemptuously, to highly colorful or overwrought incidents or situations in "real life," outside of and quite apart from any form of literature.¹⁸

In most of the existing treatments of Dickensian melodrama it is not at all clear from which of these contexts the critic is taking his or her terms. An unpleasant odor of the third hangs over most of them, as we have already had occasion to notice. As far as the first is concerned, discussion is almost equally handicapped by the ill repute in which nineteenth-century stage melodrama has been held by so many critics. Thus, when Arnold Kettle—readier than most to acknowledge the positive side of the influence

popular culture exerted on Dickens—calls Lady Dedlock “a stock-figure of nineteenth-century melodrama,” “an ancestress of the heroine of *East Lynne* and of the smart bad women with a ‘past’ who move in and out of the plays of Pinero and Oscar Wilde,” one readily infers that he intends no compliment to the author of *Bleak House*.¹⁹

But even well meaning critics favorably disposed toward Dickens do not help us very much when they assume the second definition of “melodrama” and “melodramatic,” more general than the first and more specifically literary than the third. As a case in point, Edgar and Eleanor Johnson in the Prologue to *The Dickens Theatrical Reader* list a number of “well-worn devices of melodrama” that Dickens employs freely in his novels: “cruel fathers and stepfathers, scheming misers, heartless skinflints, generous benefactors, smooth and artful villains, stolen children, lost wills, missing heirs, masquerades and disguises, men returning from the dead, horrendous secrets starting up out of the buried past, midnight assignations, plots overheard and betrayed.” These elements are certainly abundant in Dickens’ plots, and the Johnsons are quite right to point out that “his art not merely triumphs over these conventions but even molds them into instruments of a profound and serious view of life.”²⁰ But will it really do to refer to them, in isolation or combined with one another in various ways, as “melodramatic”? If we do that, the term loses all generic and historical specificity and, for instance, Shakespeare, who made liberal use of them all, becomes our greatest, but by no means our first, melodramatist. These devices were probably not new when Homer employed most of them, and they are still staples in the repertory of many writers.

Nor can we get very close to definitions that will be useful in a study of Dickens by immersing ourselves in early nineteenth-century melodrama, hundreds of examples of which are enumerated in Allardyce Nicoll’s “Hand-List of Plays, 1800-1850.”²¹ These pieces are, in the first place, an incredibly heterogeneous lot, often embodying features—settings, characters, situations—that bear no resemblance whatever to anything in Dickens. And they are, in the second place and much more significantly, *plays* (often unpublished), meant to be performed by costumed human actors with the aid of all kinds of elaborate non-verbal effects in the physical presence of a highly demonstrative audience in the theater; not *novels*, meant to be perused in the relative tranquility of the home. Because of the inevitable differences between such multi-media spectacles and works of prose fiction, we must not hope to find many fundamental parallels that can legitimately be called melodramatic.

In what ways, then, does it make sense to speak of Dickensian melodrama or of melodramatic features in Dickens' novels? Two approaches to this question seem fruitful to me.

First, I think we can agree that the basic moral polarities so characteristic of stage melodrama may be sought, if not always found, in works of prose fiction. Such oppositions do certainly exist in Dickens—in a relatively pure state, though not without artful and sometimes surprising modifications, in the early *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, both of which turn on the conflict between clear good and clear evil; and in a variety of interesting combinations of differing, and generally increasing, complexity almost everywhere else in his novels.

Second, even though the plots of melodrama are of doubtful value to our discussion because their conventional features are of such questionable originality, and even though the help available to the melodramatic playwright from actors, costumers, designers, scene painters, carpenters, musicians, lighting technicians, sound effects men, directors, and theatrical architects is denied to the novelist, nevertheless prose fiction can, and in the case of Dickens often does, do much to incorporate the *language* peculiar to stage melodrama, especially when the novelist is dealing with the kind of sharply defined moral climate that was so characteristic of the melodramatic stage at the time of Dickens' youth and early manhood. A great deal of what follows will deal with language—language that appears on the printed page, but language that demands a reader willing and able to *hear* its distinctive tone and timbre in his mind's ear.

II

Though there is, unfortunately, no such thing as a typical early nineteenth-century melodrama, we can still learn something valuable about the chief ethical and linguistic features of this kind of play by looking at two examples from the pen of Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857), an enormously popular playwright who flourished in that capacity between 1829 and 1835 and who subsequently became a close friend of Dickens'. This procedure will yield some descriptive terms that will be exceedingly useful when we turn our full attention, beginning in the next chapter, to the novels of Dickens.

Jerrold's first great stage success was *Black Ey'd Susan*—"the prototype of English melodrama," according to George Rowell²²—which played to packed

houses at several London theaters in the months following its first production on 8 June 1829. The title character of this melodrama is the pretty young wife of a man who has had to join the Navy for lack of income ashore. Susan is the object of sexual intrigues on the part of Hatchet, a smuggler, and of Crosstree, her William's captain. She is also persecuted by a wicked uncle, Doggrass, who tries to turn her out of the humble cottage where she is living in her husband's absence at sea. Hatchet's plan to subvert Susan's virtue is frustrated when William returns, and Crosstree's evil design miscarries when William interrupts his attempt to overpower Susan and wounds him with his cutlass. A court martial sentences the sailor to death for this assault on his superior officer, but he is reprieved at the last moment by the intercession of the now remorseful Crosstree.

There is much in *Black Ey'd Susan* that bears little or no resemblance to Dickens' novels. Its strong nautical flavor, a pervasive feature of countless English melodramas, was of no interest to Dickens, who was a confirmed landlubber (unlike Jerrold, who had served in the Royal Navy as a boy). It makes repeated use of tableaux and music, which can at best be suggested in prose fiction. Its moments of comic relief, however effective they may have been on the stage, strike the reader as heavy-handed. What there is of its plot creaks much more audibly than that of any book-length work by Dickens, and its paper-thin characters make the least-developed of Dickens' creations look three-dimensional by contrast.

Nevertheless, the situations in which Susan and William find themselves are easily recognizable by any reader of Dickens. They are pure young people who, through no fault of their own, are gravely endangered by forces apparently beyond their control: the fate that has made them poor, and especially the wicked men who scheme against them. The villainy of these malefactors seems to know no bounds. For instance, Hatchet tries to work a cruel deception on Susan, telling her that William has died at sea in the hope that this news will weaken her resolve not to yield to him; and Doggrass, who is in league with his niece's would-be seducer, is quite unmoved by her appeals for mercy. Both of these miscreants duly receive their just deserts, Hatchet when he is arrested for trading in contraband, and Doggrass when he drowns.

The plights of Susan and William evoke widespread pity, not only in the good citizens of Deal, who are unable to save Susan from ruin, and in William's bewildered shipmates, who have never known him to be guilty of a criminal action; but also in the very officers who must reluctantly, in

accordance with the articles of war, condemn William to hanging, and even in a couple of the villains of the piece: the bailiff Jacob, who comes to see how wrong he has been to let himself be used by Doggrass in his evil plot against Susan, and Captain Crosstree, who saves William's life as he is mounting the scaffold by announcing that he has deliberately concealed the fact that William had been discharged from the Navy and therefore was not really under his command when he came to his wife's defense.

The lines of demarcation between good and evil are clearly drawn in *Black Ey'd Susan*, and the two forces are pitted implacably against each other. There is no doubt as to which side any of the chief characters belongs to, and indeed the only thing worth saying about Susan and William is that they are virtuous, just as Crosstree, Hatchet, and Doggrass can be summed up by calling them vicious. The fact that Crosstree conveniently (and incredibly) repents just as one of his intended victims is about to die merely emphasizes how very little there is to his character.

The good people in this melodrama are essentially passive. Susan and William only want to be left alone to live their lives in peace, together if possible. But they must face destitution for Susan, death for William, and disgrace for both. It is the villains who strive—for base ends, of course. Hatchet and Doggrass attempt to enrich themselves by illegal or immoral means; Hatchet and Crosstree seek to achieve sexual conquest of Susan, even though both of them know that she has a living husband whom she loves and to whom she wants to remain faithful. Their greed and concupiscence lead them to commit, or at least condone, acts of great injustice to Susan and William, though, to be fair, we should concede that the only one of them who is in a position to abet what he comes to recognize as murder, Crosstree, does stop short of that ultimate step.

The language of *Black Ey'd Susan* expresses very precisely the moral positions of these characters and the conflicts between them. Since we are dealing with a play, it is all in the form of speeches; and it is all in prose, except for a song sung by one of the jolly jack-tars. Though much of it is conversational and even bantering, at the frequent moments of high tension when characters bare their emotions, to the audience in soliloquies or to the audience and one another in dialogue, it is unambiguously declamatory and highly structured—in a word, since we are now down to the essence of the kind of play this is, *melodramatic*. The fact that all of the language of this melodrama is not melodramatic should not disconcert us any more than we should feel cheated because, as Coleridge pointed out, no poem is entirely

comprised of poetry; melodramatic language has to soar, and there can be no sense of height if everything is at the same exalted level. In this sense, as in several others in melodrama, the element of *contrast* is crucial.

It is often difficult to remember when Susan or William speaks that she is an uneducated country girl and he a simple sailor. Especially when the emotional temperature rises, both of them talk with remarkable rationality in carefully constructed sentences; and they employ literary diction that seems deliberately designed by a highly sophisticated sensibility to achieve quite specific effects. There is never any doubt as to what is on their minds or in their hearts, since they are always quite ready, whether there is anyone else on stage or not, to expose their thoughts and feelings in ornately elevated language.

At Susan's first appearance, she soliloquizes as follows:

Twelve long tedious months have passed, and no tidings of William. Shame upon the unkind hearts that parted us—that sent my dear husband to dare the perils of the ocean, and made me a pining, miserable creature. Oh! the pangs, the dreadful pangs that tear the sailor's wife, as wakeful on her tear-wet pillow, she lists and trembles at the roaring sea. (I, iii)²³

The forces that are responsible for her plight here become "unkind hearts," and the harm they have done is described in three virtually parallel relative clauses—"that parted us," "that sent my dear husband to dare the perils of the ocean," and "[that] made me a pining, miserable creature"—each of which drives home her point a little deeper. Susan generalizes herself into "the sailor's wife," elevates her misery to "the pangs, the dreadful pangs," and describes her nightly vigils in two verbs, "lists and trembles," at least the first of which seems inappropriate coming from such a character, as does the modifier "wakeful on her tear-wet pillow" and its placement.

In a later soliloquy, Susan apostrophizes first her absent husband and then the winds and the seas, asking that they speed him safely homeward:

Oh, William! when, when will you return to your almost heart-broken Susan? Winds, blow prosperously, be tranquil, seas, and bring my husband to my longing eyes. (I, iv)

Susan's situation has deteriorated further: Hatchet has boldly cast himself in the role of the one who will save her from eviction, and Doggrass is only too ready to collaborate in his design. It is not surprising that she thinks

of her absent William as she sees their evil net tightening around her, but the way she personalizes the forces of nature in her distress in imperative, alliterative appeals—"blow . . . , be . . . , bring . . ."—displays the heightened language of melodrama.

For all its nautical characteristics, William's language is as sophisticated as Susan's. Like her, he is able to transcend the immediate situation, as, for example, when he is—as he thinks—being led to execution and describes death as if it, he, were an old friend:

. . . since I first trod the king's oak, he has been about me—I have slept near him, watched near him—he has looked upon my face, and saw I shrunk not—in the storm I have heeded him not—in the fury of the battle I've thought not of him—had I been mowed down by ball or cutlass, my shipmates, as they had thrown me to the sharks, would have given me a parting look of friendship, and over their grog have said I did my duty. . . . (III, iv)

William's misery now stems from having to meet death in unaccustomed circumstances, "the whole fleet—nay, the folks of Deal, people that knew me, used to pat me on the head when a boy—all these looking at me." His sentiments on this occasion do credit to his moral sense, and his intricately developed account of death personified under these two contrasting aspects testifies to his surprising command of the resources of the English language.

Earlier, when his ship returns to England, all the sailors are met by their women, but Susan is not there and William is disturbed by her absence. Tears well up in his eyes, and he reminisces to his friend Ploughshare about what the thought of Susan has meant to him during those long years away from her at sea. In loneliness, in darkness, and in danger—always the thought of her was a consolation to him, as he tells Ploughshare in parallel statements of remarkable complexity:

I have been piped up—roused from my hammock, dreaming of her—for the cold black middle watch; I have walked the deck, the surf beating in my face, but Susan was at my side, and I did not feel it; I have been reefing on the yards, in cold and darkness, when I could hardly see the hand of my next messmate—but Susan's eyes were on me, and there was light; I have heard the boatswain pipe to quarters—a voice in my heart whispered 'Susan,' and I strode like a lion; the first broadside was given—shipmates whose words were scarcely off

their lips, lay torn and mangled about me—their groans were in my ears, and their blood hot on my face—I whispered ‘Susan!’ it was a word that seemed to turn the balls aside, and keep me safe. (II, i)

When virtue and vice are in open conflict, the language they employ is especially uncompromising. Just before William comes providentially to the rescue, the aroused Crosstree and the outraged Susan tell each other exactly what they are feeling:

Crosstree. Forget him and live for me—by heavens, I love you, and must have you!

Susan. If you are a gentleman, if you are a sailor, you will not insult a defenceless woman.

Crosstree. My dear, I have visited too many seaports not to understand all this; I know I may be wrong, but passion hurries me—the wine fires me—your eyes dart lightning into me, and you shall be mine!
[Seizes SUSAN]

Susan. Let me go! in mercy!—William, William!

Crosstree. Your cries are vain! resistance useless!

Susan. Monster! William, William! (II, iii)

Equally eloquent, though much more static because unmarked by conflict, are the interactions between virtuous characters, as when Susan and William meet just before he is supposed to be hanged at the yardarm:

Susan. Oh, William! and I have watched, prayed for your return—smiled in the face of poverty, stopped my ears to the reproaches of the selfish, the worst pity of the thoughtless—and all, all for this!

William. Ay, Sue, it’s hard; but that’s all over—to grieve is useless. Susan, I might have died disgraced—have left you the widow of a bad, black-hearted man; I know ’twill not be so—and in this, whilst you remain behind me, there is at least some comfort. I died in a good cause; I died in defence of the virtue of a wife—her tears will fall like spring rain on the grass that covers me. (III, iv)

Again, Susan uses parallelism like a verbal battering ram (“watched, prayed . . . , smiled . . . , stopped” and “the reproaches of the selfish, the worst pity of the thoughtless”); and the simile William employs to characterize her tears after his death lends an air of grandeur and even of possible regeneration to her prospective grief.

Another highly successful melodrama by Douglas Jerrold was *The Rent-Day*, first performed at Drury Lane on 25 January 1832. Like the earlier play, but minus its nautical elements and with a much greater infusion of social criticism, *The Rent-Day* turns on the conflict between virtue, in the persons of the hard-working farmer Martin Heywood and his faithful wife Rachel, and vice, exemplified by several rascally characters each of whom tries to take advantage of one or both members of this blameless couple.

Heywood and his family, like Susan, face eviction for non-payment of rent; and, again like Susan, Rachel is offered and indignantly rejects the opportunity to avoid that kind of ruin by accepting another, in the form of the amorous advances of the robber Silver Jack. The sexual aspect of *The Rent-Day* is complicated and augmented inasmuch as Heywood for a time suspects his wife of having become Squire Grantly's mistress, and until he is undeceived he is prepared to cast her out of his life and emigrate to the West Indies with their children. Just when Heywood's situation is at its most hopeless, he finds a large sum of money in his grandfather's chair, finally accepts from Grantly an explanation of Rachel's actions and "a freeholder's right" to his farm, and all turns out well. Again, the grave threats of destitution and sexual corruption have been averted.

Like *Black-Ey'd Susan*, *The Rent-Day* is replete with characters who express their feelings openly in speeches of preternatural eloquence. They soliloquize freely, and, even more than their counterparts in *Black-Ey'd Susan*, they bring formidable linguistic resources to bear on scenes in which passion is enacted as well as declaimed.

When the lecherous Silver Jack tries to press his affection and a fat purse on the poverty-stricken and desperate Rachel Heywood, she throws the money at his feet and he is incredulous.

Jack. Are you mad?—listen to my offer.

Rach. Had you made it when the world went well with us—when this roof sheltered a happy family—when every day brought its plenty, its content—when we had no fear of poverty or persecution—even then, the thought of that you propose, should have brought the blushes to your face, and made you dumb with shame;—but now,—with want at our hearth—a husband mad with sorrow—children unprotected—now to offer!—oh! you have a heart of stone, or you could ne'er have thought it. (III, i)²⁴

In her frenzy, Rachel is able to demolish his arguments by drawing an an-

tithesis between the grotesqueness that would have marked such an offer in happy days (note the three parallel subordinate clauses beginning with "when . . .") and the unspeakable monstrousness of the present proposition, made with "want at our hearth—a husband mad with sorrow—children unprotected"; and by coining a neatly balanced aphorism to describe Silver Jack's depravity: "He who would destroy a happy fireside, is vile and infamous; but he who insults its wretchedness, is base indeed."

A little later, Silver Jack is able to persuade Martin Heywood that Rachel is in Grantly's bedroom making love rather than warning Grantly that he is about to be robbed, and the bewildered husband flies into a towering rage. (Grantly, in turn, believes that Heywood is in league with the robbers.)

Gran. Go, I pardon you—I spare you.

Mar. Pardon! Spare! I have at home four motherless children;—what! do you spare me them? Will you leave the poor man one miserable comfort?

Rach. Husband!

Mar. Can your lips yet say that word?—Heaven forgive you!—can you yet speak it? Let it be for the last time! Never let us look again upon each other's face. (*She clings to him*) Away! (*Casts her off*) My heart sinks at your touch! I leave you; and may God pardon and protect you.

Rushes off.

Rach. Martin! Martin! Oh! he is lost with misery!

Gran. Fear not: for your sake I will not accuse him.

Rach. Accuse!

Gran. Nay, I perceive and value your motives. You would not suffer your husband to become a criminal. You preserved, it may be, my life. I thank you, and pardon him.

Rach. And was it for this I saved you?—for this have endured the bitterest words that wife can listen to?—for this have made him mad? Sir, I never saw you till this hour. I never heard of you till named by villains who would have destroyed you. Then I flew to give you warning—I saved you;—and you give me this reward,—suspicion of my husband. (III, iii)

The power of this scene inheres at least as much in Martin's and Rachel's repeated rhetorical questions as it does in violent physical action.

The motives of Silver Jack and his accomplice Hyssop are quite simple, but there is at least a hint of greater depth in the character of Old Crumbs,

the steward, who has been squeezing Grantly's tenants in his master's absence. Years ago, Grantly's father stole Crumbs's wife, whose picture hangs in the oak room of Grantly's mansion, and this act of treachery has turned Crumbs into a heartless criminal. When he is exposed in the final scene, this villain attempts to justify himself in an eloquent appeal to the picture and the emotions it calls up:

That picture! I have stood and looked at it—in the still night I have gazed on it, until I have thought the devil himself looked from its eyes, and smiled upon my purpose. That picture, and the recollection that those cursed walls received my wife when she fled from her home, and left me to seek companions with the vile and infamous—Oh! I am an old man!—but there are injuries so graven in the heart, so burnt within the brain, that with the heart and brain they must live and die together! Enough. Now for my gaol. (III, iv)

Crumbs attributes to this painting a superhuman, a devilish, potency, sustaining this image and relating it to his own mental and moral state through-out a speech of great syntactic sophistication.

Nor is this the first time that the old steward has summoned up such eloquence. In a soliloquy in the previous scene, while he prepares to leave his master's house (as he thinks, forever), he apostrophizes it with great but controlled fury.

Ye cursed walls, I leave ye to your owner,—to him who I had vainly hoped to beggar—to sink into the dust, a wretched, undone spend-thrift!—May ye become the haunt of gamesters,—of hungry, smooth-faced knaves, who flatter and devour! May ye be staked upon a card, and pass from him who stakes ye! For ten years have I dwelt here, nursing my revenge. For ten years has vengeance been to me as a food—a nourishment. I have lived and gloated on it. May others finish the ruin I've begun! (III, iii)

Not only the archaic diction (the four "ye"s, the "ere") but, again, the use of parallel clauses, introduced by "May ye . . ." and "For ten years . . .," and the convoluted but perfectly grammatical sentence structure serve notice that here is a melodramatic character, a villain in this case, whose expressive powers are at full stretch.

In such examples from *Black Ey'd Susan* and *The Rent-Day*, whose counterparts might be found in scores of plays produced in London during

the 1820's and 1830's, we have seen typical melodramatic features that could be, and were, easily carried over into prose fiction. A *melodramatic situation* arises when virtuous and vicious characters are locked in relentless struggle against each other, with the latter acting as aggressors against the former. These agents, good or evil, are without significant psychological depth, and they lack not only the complexity but also the stature of tragic personages. They are, however, highly verbal, and in their extreme articulateness the heroes and heroines, and villains, of melodrama are to be distinguished from figures of pathos, who are for all practical purposes speechless as well as helpless—a contrast that will become clearer as we examine some pathetic characters in Dickens.

Melodramatic speech, as we have observed, rises well above the casualness of ordinary talk. Not just its diction but also the syntactic and figurative devices that are employed in it are literary rather than colloquial, showing evidence of greater learning and greater linguistic calculation than either the kind of characters who use it or the situations in which they find themselves seem to warrant. The sentences in which it is commonly cast, displaying copiously such devices as balance, antithesis, repetition, and parallelism, all achieving rich rhetorical effects, appear to be carefully crafted by the speakers rather than ejaculated in moments of great emotion. Emotion is, however, very much in evidence, and it is unambiguous and bold rather than disguised or subtle.

Melodramatic scenes, finally, occur when two or more remarkably articulate characters confront one another in states of high excitement, never losing their ability to use rational language as a powerful weapon.

In what follows, we shall notice many instances of such situations, such speeches, and such scenes in the novels of Dickens. But we shall notice, too, that Dickens is capable of ringing many changes on these melodramatic devices, of modifying them, of adapting them to other uses, of combining them with others, and even of undercutting them.

III

Dickens, we might recall here, did not begin his writing career as a novelist. In 1836, he published two series of *Sketches by Boz*, short prose pieces most of which had previously appeared in newspapers and magazines; and he wrote three plays—a comic burletta, *The Strange Gentleman*; a comic opera libretto, *The Village Coquettes*, set to music by John Hullah; and

another comic burletta, *Is She His Wife?*—for production at St. James's Theatre between September 1836 and March 1837. In much of this apprentice work we can see that, even as an inexperienced writer who had not yet found his *métier*, Dickens was thoroughly aware not only of the possibilities but also of the limitations of melodramatic situations, melodramatic speeches, and melodramatic scenes in work intended for performance on the stage; that from the beginning of his career he was able to devise ways of modifying and varying these devices; and that he was learning how to carry them over to other literary forms. The following consideration of *The Village Coquettes* and three of the *Sketches* will give specific examples of the skillful and free use the youthful Dickens made of melodramatic devices, and will develop some additional terms to be employed in our examination of the novels.

The Village Coquettes revolves around what might well have been a classic *melodramatic situation*. During the first of the two acts, Squire Norton presents the innocent Lucy Benson with the melodramatic heroine's traditional dilemma: will she surrender her honor to the unscrupulous landowner, or will she be responsible through her refusal for the loss of the farm which her family has leased for generations? But Norton has a change of heart half way through the piece, comes to the rescue of the distraught Bensons, and helps to expose the rascality of his erstwhile companion in dissipation, Sparkins Flam. *The Village Coquettes* abounds in humorous scenes, usually involving the self-important farmer Martin Stokes, and it is punctuated with various kinds of songs—solos, duets, ensemble numbers, and choruses. It is, after all, a comic opera rather than a melodrama.

Nevertheless, it shows that Dickens was thoroughly familiar with melodramatic language and could use it to good effect. For example, when the busybody Martin hints to Old Benson that Lucy is not indifferent to Squire Norton's overtures, the father's indignation finds vent in *melodramatic speech* replete with repetition, parallelism, and rhetorical questions:

They lie! Her breast is pure and innocent! Her soul is free from guilt; her mind from blemish. They lie! I'll not believe it. Are they mad? Do they think that I stand tamely by, and look upon my child's disgrace? Heaven! do they know of what a father's heart is made?
(I, iii)²⁵

There is a full-blown *melodramatic scene* when Old Benson comes upon Squire Norton trying to persuade Lucy to elope. Norton argues that Lucy

can only help her father by yielding to him—"you will be his pride, his boast, his support"—when Old Benson bursts in and hurls back at the Squire the words he has just uttered.

It is a lie, a base lie!—(LUCY *shrieks and throws herself at his feet*).
My pride! my boast! She would be my disgrace, my shame: an outcast from her father's roof, and from the world. Support!—support *me* with the gold coined in her infamy and guilt! Heaven help me! Have I cherished her for this!

Nothing Norton says can soothe the irate father; on the contrary, each such attempt merely gives rise to another eloquent rejoinder skillfully built around a term the Squire uses. Norton begins, clumsily, by urging that Old Benson "Be calm." Benson keeps repeating the offensive word ironically and puts a series of rhetorical questions to the increasingly uneasy landlord.

Calm!—Do you know that from infancy I have almost worshipped her, fancying that I saw in her young mind the virtues of a mother, to whom the anguish of this one hour would have been worse than death! Calm!—Do you know that I have a heart and soul within me; or do you believe that because I am of lower station, I am a being of a different order from yourself, and that Nature has denied me thought and feeling! Calm! Man, do you know that I am this girl's father?

The Squire next offers to make Benson "some reparation," only to hear him make fanciful use of that unfortunate reference.

Reparation! You need be thankful, sir, for the grasp she has upon my arm. Money! If she were dying for want, and the smallest coin from you could restore her to life and health, sooner than she should take it from your hand, I would cast her from a sick bed to perish on the road-side.

Nor does it mend matters for Norton to call Benson what he is, a "farmer."

Yes, sir; a farmer,—one of the men on whom you, and such as you, depend for the money they squander in profligacy and idleness. A farmer, sir! I care not for your long pedigree of ancestors,—my forefathers made them all.

Old Benson's wrath is expressed in highly structured, highly figurative language normally to be heard from an old rustic like him only in melo-

drama. Squire Norton, in turn, finds it impossible, despite all his efforts, to keep his temper, and the scene culminates in a stern admonition from him.

Take care you do not drive me to extremities. Remember—the lease of this farm for seventy years, which your father took of mine, expires tomorrow; and that I have the power to refuse its renewal. (I, iii)

As in a melodrama, the battle lines between good and evil are clearly drawn. Though this is a comic opera, Dickens is here resorting to the kind of no-holds-barred confrontation which he was to use, with all kinds of variations, so often in his novels.

But there is another sort of scene in *The Village Coquettes* which should detain us for a moment. Before Old Benson and Norton face off, Lucy's brother warns the Squire to take care how he deals with the Benson family. In his linguistic prowess, Young Benson is truly his father's son; he launches one furious assault after another at Norton, but the Squire does not deign to reply in kind, or really at all, to his social inferior.

Young Benson. If you contemplate treachery here, Mr. Norton, look to yourself. My father is an old man; the chief prop of his declining years is his child,—my sister. For your actions here, sir, you shall render a dear account to me.

Squire. To you, peasant!

Young Benson. To me, sir. One other scene like that enacted by your creature, at your command, to-night, may terminate more seriously to him. For your behaviour here you are responsible to me.

Squire. Indeed! Anything more, sir?

Young Benson. Simply this:—after injuring the old man beyond reparation, and embittering the last moments of his life, you may possibly attempt to shield yourself under the paltry excuse, that, as a gentleman, you cannot descend to take the consequences from my hand. You *shall* take them from me, sir, if I strike you to the earth first. (I, iii)

Young Benson's words, both in their choice and in their arrangement, certainly render his speeches melodramatic, but Squire Norton's haughty refusal to engage in discourse at the same exalted level makes the scene between them something less than melodramatic: something, which will recur in the novels, that might be called *mixed melodrama*, when one

character employs melodramatic language and another, for some reason, does not.

In the *Sketches by Boz*, vice—to the extent that it is to be found at all—is not embodied in greedy, larcenous, lecherous, or murderous men, as it is in melodrama. Rather, it stems from the corrosive effects of poverty and other forms of deprivation, whereas virtue consists in the ability of valiant men, women, and children to surmount such pressures and kindred temptations. Since vice is depersonalized in this way, there can hardly be palpable, audible encounters between it and virtue, and as a result the *Sketches* are much barer of melodramatic speeches and scenes than most of the novels. Nevertheless, there are features in at least three of the *Sketches* that will repay our study.

The last of the “Tales” in the collected *Sketches* bears the title “The Drunkard’s Death.” Though by no stretch of the imagination a successful story, it is several other things of interest: a sermon on the evil consequences of alcoholism worthy of Dickens’ teetotalist illustrator George Cruikshank; an account of the misery and degradation of life in the slums of Whitefriars; and, in its depiction of the protagonist’s tortured mental processes just before and during his successful suicide attempt, a chilling glimpse of abnormal psychology.

The man’s name is Warden. His family is ruined as a result of his uncontrollable craving for liquor: his wife sickens and dies; his sons “run wild in the streets” (p. 487) and flee their squalid lodging, to fall into evil ways; only his daughter stays with him, earning the money he squanders on his binges. One of the sons, wanted for murder, takes refuge with Warden, who—having been bribed with drink—promptly turns him in to the authorities. After the young fugitive is apprehended by the two agents of the law whom Warden has brought to his hiding place, he denounces his father in a richly melodramatic speech.

“Listen to me, father,” he said, in a tone that made the drunkard’s flesh creep. “My brother’s blood, and mine, is on your head: I never had kind look, or word, or care, from you, and alive or dead, I never will forgive you. Die when you will, or how, I will be with you. I speak as a dead man now, and I warn you, father, that as surely as you must one day stand before your Maker, so surely shall your children be there, hand in hand, to cry for judgment against you.” (pp. 491-92)

Despair and anger mark this speech, but it displays very careful control.

Words are used in symmetrical pairs and series—"My brother's blood" and "mine"; "look," "word," and "care"; "alive" and "dead"; "when" and "how"—and the picture the son draws of Warden's final judgment is chilling in its vividness.

Another sort of theatrical effect, much more common in the *Sketches* than melodramatic speech, occurs near the beginning of the same story when Mrs. Warden dies. Though as affecting to the susceptible as the incident of the young criminal's capture, this scene is really quite different. It is quiet: muffled sobs, whispered prayers, and the ticking of a watch are the only sounds in the shabby sickroom until her distraught children call out to their dead mother. Nothing moves, except the figures stirring aimlessly around her bed: our attention is drawn to the trembling of the dying woman's fingers and, at the moment of her death, the soft thud of her head on the pillow. We are at the opposite extreme of the articulate, vigorous melodrama of the other scene: we are now confronted by *pathos*.

It is important that we not confuse pathos with other melodramatic devices, as readers of Dickens' novels have so often done. Such confusion is not surprising, because pathos frequently co-exists in close proximity to one or more of them, as is the case in "The Drunkard's Death." Indeed—even though it does appear prominently in works that are commonly called melodramatic—it is possible to argue that pathos is not a melodramatic device at all, because it does not depend for its effect, and its effectiveness, on the passionate but patterned speeches of markedly verbal characters. In the deathbed scene of "The Drunkard's Death," for example, the characters who participate hardly speak at all, and nothing they say is quoted. Dickens, stage director-like, has artfully arranged actors and props so as to evoke our pity; moreover, he has gone outside the scene itself, by telling us about the history and the cause of the poor woman's suffering "for many a weary year," and in the one sentence recording her end—"That heart was broken, and she was dead!"—he has told us how to react by his use of metaphor and punctuation. The narrator's intervention is thus much more explicit than it is in the rendering of melodramatic speeches and melodramatic scenes, which—however far-fetched they might seem on reflection—owe their impact to the high pitch of the characters' own words. In pathos we are quite overtly manipulated by the narrator and nudged into making what he suggests is the appropriate response.²⁶

Before we come back to scenes turning on the more or less unmediated interaction of speaking characters, we might glance at one other kind of

narrative strategy Dickens employs. Borrowing a term from William Axton, I call *melodramatic narrative* that technique by which the narrator in his own words recounts, usually in rather lengthy stretches, successive actions or psychological states in such a way as to arouse the reader's excitement and curiosity regarding what is to happen next.²⁷ The connection with the theater here is perhaps somewhat tenuous, except that, like melodramatic speech, the extremely formal language of the storyteller is deliberately arranged so as to create in the audience as much emotional tension as possible. Some famous examples of melodramatic narrative, all involving flight, guilt, and death, can be found in such Dickens novels as *Oliver Twist*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and *Dombey and Son*, but Dickens has already come close to perfecting this device in "The Drunkard's Death," where he devotes half a dozen paragraphs near the conclusion to chronicling the miserable end of Warden's grim and useless life.

One cold, rainy night, slumped in a doorway, Warden finds himself reduced to "the last stage of poverty, disease, and houseless want." Desperate and delirious, he makes up his mind to throw himself into the Thames, but he is lacerated by spiritual torment before he acts on his resolve, and struggles furiously once he is in the water until he is overwhelmed by the force of the tide. In this remarkable passage (pp. 493-94), which is far too long to quote, Dickens amplifies Warden in one way that a melodramatic playwright employs to make his characters larger than life size, through artful language. Warden is nothing more than a dumb brute at bay, feverishly trying to escape from suffering and guilt, but the narrator articulates and heightens his anguish through means that Warden himself would have been quite incapable of, using words, images, and syntactic patterns totally beyond that miserable creature's grasp. Though he does not utter a single word during this closing scene of "The Drunkard's Death," Warden resembles many of those figures in plays and prose fiction who employ melodramatic speech in that his case is made for him in language far more coherent and eloquent than seems appropriate to his situation, his nature, his education, or his station in life.

Two final points about Dickens' use of melodramatic devices need to be raised here, and again the *Sketches by Boz* will be helpful. I shall argue that Dickens, at least as much as most of his critics, was well aware that such devices can lend themselves to overuse and misuse. At times, he studiously avoided them when a lesser talent as steeped in the theater as he was might have fallen into them almost inadvertently. At other times, he ridiculed

the way in which they were often applied to situations where they were grossly unsuitable.

Another of the "Tales" reprinted in the *Sketches*, "The Black Veil," deals with a young physician hired by a grieving, half-crazed mother to restore life to her son, who has been sentenced to death by hanging. As her interview with the doctor on the eve of the execution shows, the woman is certainly capable of eloquence, but words fail her when he examines the young man's corpse the next day, not comprehending the nature of the case into which he has been called.

"There has been violence here," said the surgeon, preserving his searching glance.

"There has!" replied the woman.

"This man has been murdered."

"That I call God to witness he has," said the woman, passionately; "pitilessly, inhumanly murdered!"

"By whom?" said the surgeon, seizing the woman by the arm.

"Look at the butchers' marks, and then ask me!" she replied.

The surgeon turned his face towards the bed, and bent over the body which now lay full in the light of the window. The throat was swollen, and a livid mark encircled it. The truth flashed suddenly upon him.

"This is one of the men who were hanged this morning!" he exclaimed, turning away with a shudder.

"It is," replied the woman, with a cold, unmeaning stare.

"Who was he?" inquired the surgeon.

"My son," rejoined the woman; and fell senseless at his feet.

(pp. 380-81)

There is great passion in what she says, but no bombast, no expansive rhetorical flights: before words fail her altogether she spits out her pain and rage with a terseness that is the antithesis of melodramatic speech.

The effectiveness of melodramatic speeches and melodramatic scenes in Dickens is closely related to the judiciousness with which they are employed, and—as this early example shows—he was able to resist the temptation to resort to such devices indiscriminately, at every possible opportunity. Moreover, Dickens was as ready as anyone to lampoon the inappropriate use of such conventions, and the *Sketches* offer several excellent examples of his *mock melodrama*, which is like mock epic in applying to inconsequential or

ridiculous characters and situations the outward features of an elevated literary mode. Perhaps the best instance of mock melodrama in the *Sketches* occurs in the "Tale" called "The Tuggses at Ramsgate." The family of a *nouveau riche* erstwhile grocer falls in with a trio of fortune hunters at the seaside, and the chuckleheaded son becomes ensnared in an innocent relationship with the female member of this unsavory threesome. Belinda Waters skillfully plays on the susceptibilities of young Cymon Tuggs, rhapsodizing about "the chaste delight, the calm happiness, of this one week of Platonic love," and conjuring up awful visions of her husband's wrath should he become aware of Cymon's interest in her. "Jealous and vengeful; ferocious in his revenge—a maniac in his jealousy!" Despite his cowardly fears, Cymon allows himself to be lured into Belinda's drawing room, only to take refuge in terror behind the curtain when Captain Waters, his accomplice Lieutenant Slaughter, and the rest of the Tuggses appear suddenly on the scene. Affected by the cigar smoke that soon pervades the room after the others enter, the young idiot falls victim to a fit of coughing and is flushed out of his hiding place by Slaughter.

"Aha!" exclaimed the captain, furiously. "What do I see? Slaughter, your sabre!"

"Cymon!" screamed the Tuggses.

"Mercy!" said Belinda.

"Platonic!" gasped Cymon.

"Your sabre!" roared the captain: "Slaughter—unhand me—the villain's life!"

"Murder!" screamed the Tuggses.

"Hold him fast, sir!" faintly articulated Cymon.

"Water!" exclaimed Joseph Tuggs—and Mr. Cymon Tuggs and all the ladies forthwith fainted away, and formed a tableau. (p. 354)

By no stretch of the imagination could Cymon and Belinda be considered the virtuous hero and heroine of a melodrama, with Captain Waters playing the villain's role; but their words and actions throughout this scene are close enough to those of melodrama to make plain Dickens' parodic intention.

What Dickens' detractors have often proclaimed in strident triumph and his partisans have usually conceded with some embarrassment is true: his novels are replete with melodramatic devices. But, I have argued, neither

condemnation nor apology is called for at this moment in the history of Dickens studies. What is wanted, rather, is an attempt, first, to define those devices, to strip them of irrelevant associations and unexamined value judgments. That has been my primary purpose in these introductory remarks. We must now go on in the chapters that follow to see how these devices are employed, extended, transformed, occasionally ridiculed or deliberately eschewed, and frequently combined with other techniques, in the body of work for which Dickens is remembered and loved, his novels. At no point in that examination should we forget that it is *novels*, not plays, we are dealing with and that melodramatic devices can only appear in prose fiction accompanied by elements and embedded in contexts that have little or nothing to do with the stage. Any treatment of Dickensian melodrama that ignores such generic considerations is doomed to failure, and so we cannot allow ourselves to lose our sense of these rich books as wholes or our readiness to respond to the uniqueness of each of them. Indeed, at times this study may appear to be straying from its subject, but the judicious reader will recognize that wholes have to be explored and understood before parts can be related to them.

Though Dickens employs both pathos and mock melodrama in *The Pickwick Papers*, it is not until *Oliver Twist* that melodramatic speeches and melodramatic scenes of several different kinds assume a prominent position; in fact, in *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, clearly the most "melodramatic" of his novels, they grow inevitably out of the subject matter and contribute fundamentally to the effect of each novel. But, beginning with the pathetic *Old Curiosity Shop*, these devices are relegated to the periphery of Dickens' craft, for the simple reason that they have much less to do with his subject: they do, of course, appear in that novel, in *Barnaby Rudge*, and in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but distinctly subordinated to other techniques.

Melodramatic devices undergo substantial changes in Dickens' later novels. *Dombey and Son* marks a new departure both in the boldness with which the author's persona intervenes to control the reader's responses and in the complexity of the effects Dickens produces in that way; melodramatic features are largely shifted from the speech of characters to the language of the narrator, not only in the narrative itself but also in what I term *melodramatic commentary*. In *David Copperfield* and the Esther half of *Bleak House* (the "omniscient" half poses other problems), the first-person point of view introduces further refinements, and in the latter novel Dickens ex-

plots fully for the first time a significant variant of the melodramatic scene, one that he hit upon as early as *Oliver Twist* and that I call *melodrama of mystery*. In the last five completed novels—*Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*—Dickens uses melodramatic devices sparingly but with telling impact: in the most “melodramatic” of these, *A Tale of Two Cities*, this master showman attacks his climactic scene with at least one hand tied behind his back, unable to make the scene conventionally melodramatic but nevertheless endowing it with stunning force.

I am not out to prove that Dickens the novelist is not a melodramatist, because in fact I believe that he is, in the only ways that a novelist like him can be. But I do hope to show that the term need not and must not be applied to him loosely, much less abusively: that Dickensian melodrama, in the carefully defined senses I have in mind, contributes much that is uniquely precious to his art. Since this study is not an exercise in hagiography, I shall be compelled to examine some scenes in which Dickens’ melodramatic devices simply do not come off, not because they are inherently faulty but rather because they are inappropriately employed. Far more often than not, however, we shall find that he knew exactly what he was doing and did it very well—possessing, like Daniel Doyce in his *Little Dorrit*, a “steady manner of making everything good and everything sound.”

NOTES

1. “Dickens’s Tales,” *Edinburgh Review*, 68 (1838), 96. The reviewer is identified as Lister in the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900*, ed. Walter E. Houghton, I (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1966), 415. Cf. “*Oliver Twist*,” *Quarterly Review*, 64 (1839), 94; R. H. Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age* (New York: Harper, 1872), p. 19 (orig. publ. 1844).

2. George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life” (1856) in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), p. 272; Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923), p. 226 (written 1876, publ. 1883); Anthony Trollope, “Novel-Reading,” *Nineteenth Century*, 5 (1879), 33 and 35; George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (London: Gresham, 1903), pp. 48, 50, 58, and 63 (orig. publ. 1898); George Gissing, *The Immortal Dickens* (London: Palmer, 1925), pp. 27, 78, and 91-92. For Stephen (*Saturday Review*, 1857) and Hutton (*Spectator*, 1870), see *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 345 and 348 and p. 522, respectively. Other disparaging comments by Stephen about Dickens’ melodrama (*Saturday Review*, 1859) are reprinted in *The Dickens Critics*, ed. George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 41 and 44-45. Cf. *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 284 (George Brimley, *Spectator*, 1853), 303 (Richard Simpson, *Rambler*, 1854), and 350 (William Forsyth, *Fraser’s*, 1857).

3. Walter C. Phillips, *Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1919), p. 186.

4. Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Charles Dickens and Other Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1925), pp. 45, 47, 53, and 54.

5. Lord David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), p. 28

(orig. publ. 1934). The material in this landmark study was "derived from a series of lectures on the Victorian novel delivered at Oxford two or three years" before its first publication (p. 9).

6. Taylor Stoehr, *Dickens: The Dreamer's Stance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 9, 114, 162, 183, and 231-32.

7. Ross H. Dabney, *Love and Property in the Novels of Dickens* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), pp. 11, 13, 14, 20-21, 27, 33, 38, 44, 57-61, 62, 69, 70, and 169-70.

8. Harvey Peter Sucksmith, *The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 29, 149, 186, 202, 210, 226, 233, 234, 235, 269, 298, 301, and 336.

9. Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 28.

10. John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber, 1973), p. 60; A. H. Gomme, *Dickens* (London: Evans, 1971), pp. 129-130; E. A. Horsman, *Dickens and the Structure of the Novel* (Dunedin: Univ. of Otago Press, 1959), pp. 5-6 and 8; Irving W. Kreutz, "Sly of Manner, Sharp of Tooth: A Study of Dickens's Villains," *NCF*, 22 (1968), pp. 341, 342, and 344; F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), pp. 2, 23-24, and 356; Sylvere Monod, *Dickens the Novelist* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 251; Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), pp. 177 and 179-81; Angus Wilson, "Charles Dickens: A Haunting," in *The Dickens Critics*, p. 379; and Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: 'The Two Scrooges,'" in *Eight Essays* (Garden City: Anchor, 1954), p. 63.

11. Denis Donoghue, "The English Dickens and *Dombey and Son*," *NCF*, 24 (1970), 402-03; A. E. Dyson, *The Inimitable Dickens* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 96; and Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), II, 642.

12. Robert B. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1968) and Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976). Cf. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Athenaeum, 1967) (orig. publ. 1964); James L. Rosenberg, "Melodrama," in *The Context and Craft of Drama*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan and James L. Rosenberg (San Francisco: Chandler, 1964), pp. 168-85; James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (London: Methuen, 1973); and Wylie Sypher, "Aesthetics of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama," *Kenyon Review*, 10 (1948), 431-44.

13. Rosenberg, p. 168.

14. A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Imagination of Charles Dickens* (London: Collins, 1961), pp. 13, 79, and 133; Northrop Frye, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humours," in *Experience in the Novel: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 75 and 80; Humphry House, "The Macabre Dickens," *All in Due Time* (London: Hart-Davis, 1955), p. 183; Arnold Kettle, "Mr. Kettle's Reply," *Carleton Miscellany*, 3, 4 (1962), 94; and John Henry Raleigh, "Dickens and the Sense of Time," *NCF*, 13 (1958), 131-32. Earlier defenders of Dickens' melodrama include G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1906), pp. 182-83; T. S. Eliot, "Wilkie Collins and Dickens," in *The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ian Watt (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), 133-34 and 141 (orig. publ. *TLS*, 4 August 1927); and André Maurois, *Charles Dickens* (London: John Lane, 1934), pp. 133-46.

15. Albert J. Guerard, *The Triumph of the Novel: Dickens, Dostoevsky, Faulkner* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 13. Guerard's first and sixth chapters, "Anti-Mimesis" and "The Dickensian Voices," are especially relevant to the concerns of the present study.

16. J. O. Bailey, "Introduction," *British Plays of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Odyssey, 1966), pp. 1-38; Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Jenkins, 1965); Robert W. Corrigan, "Melodrama and the Popular Tradition in the Nineteenth Century British Theatre," in *Laurel British Drama: The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Dell, 1967), pp. 7-22; Allardyce Nicoll, *Early Nineteenth Century Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1955); Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1967); and George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

17. Robert Heilman, for instance, in *Tragedy and Melodrama* sees melodramatic elements in a wide range of dramatic literature, ranging from ancient Greek through English Renaissance to modern European and American.

18. The *OED*, for example, refers to the "depreciative sense" in which the adjective is often used, to indicate that what is being described displays "sensationalism and spurious pathos."

19. Arnold Kettle, "Dickens and the Popular Tradition," *Carleton Miscellany* 3, 1 (1962), 26.

20. *The Dickens Theatrical Reader*, ed. Edgar and Eleanor Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 5. John R. Reed's *Victorian Conventions* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1975) shows

that many such aspects of Dickens' work were fundamental features of the Victorian literary consciousness, rather than specifically melodramatic. Wilhelm Dibelius, a perceptive reader of Dickens whose masterly book on him remains untranslated after more than six decades, is admirably cautious about the genesis of putatively melodramatic elements in Dickens' novels; *Charles Dickens* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1916), pp. 68, 69-70, 71, 73, 395, 396, 399-400, and 413-14. Another fine Continental critic, J. B. van Amerongen, is equally sensible, most of the time, in pointing out how difficult it is to disentangle the melodramatic strand of Dickens' art from others, but goes on to disappoint by unhesitatingly labeling as melodramatic Dickensian devices that may well have owed their origins to other sources: *The Actor in Dickens* (New York: Appleton, 1927), pp. 217, 225, 227, 228, 230, and 231.

21. This takes up more than half of his *Early Nineteenth Century Drama*.

22. George Rowell, "Introduction," *Nineteenth Century Plays* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p. vi.

23. My text is that printed in the collection referred to in the previous footnote.

24. My text is that printed in the collection edited by J. O. Bailey referred to in n. 16.

25. My text is that printed in *The Plays and Poems of Charles Dickens*, ed. Richard Herne Shepherd (London: Allen, 1885).

26. I have resisted the temptation to give this scene the name of tableau—a term often applied to similar scenes in stage melodrama—because of this very manipulation. Here, we see nothing, except of course in our mind's eye; the impact of what is laid before us is powerfully affected by the verbal references and verbal effects which are not available to the playwright, whose tableaux are purely visual and who cannot rely on narrative or even dialogue to move his audiences.

27. William F. Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens' Vision & Style & The Victorian Popular Theater* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1966); see especially Chapter 10.

Chapter 1

The Pickwick Papers

Dickens' first novel is crowded with incidents, rich in a variety of characters, and generously stocked with the devices of the storyteller of genius. But pure melodrama has virtually no part in it. For melodrama is not a mere bag of tricks. It presupposes a certain kind of subject matter, a certain kind of outlook on the world; and we do not find these in *The Pickwick Papers*.

What the novel is about—indeed, whether or not it *is* a novel—has been the subject of some controversy.¹ At the very simplest level, however, it is indisputable that *The Pickwick Papers* deals with nearly two years in the life of Samuel Pickwick, and with the adventures and misadventures he encounters, usually in the company of one or more of his associates—Augustus Snodgrass, Tracy Tupman, and Nathaniel Winkle—and his faithful servant, Sam Weller. On business of doubtful credibility, they wander over the length and breadth of the English countryside, returning periodically to London; and they are confronted with copious doses and various forms of rascality, folly, hypocrisy, affectation, pretentiousness, and trickery. With a few prominent exceptions, the world of *The Pickwick Papers* is sunny and cheerful. To be sure, it has its inconveniences and annoyances, but such showers and cloudbursts cannot permanently dispel the generally prevailing brightness. It is, in short, a world from which genuine evil—evil of the kind essential to melodrama—is virtually absent.

Sounding a kind of keynote, almost the first word in the novel is “light”; the initial sentence contains as well the phrase “dazzling brilliancy.” After Dickens finishes with the elephantine joke of the Transactions of the Pickwick Club, the second chapter opens with the rising of the sun and Mr. Pickwick bursting “like another sun from his slumbers” and giving vent to some very cheerful philosophizing. The contrast to the gloomy openings of such gloomy novels as *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend* is striking indeed.

But what—it might be asked—about the machinations of the lawyers Dodson and Fogg? What about the hopelessness, the misery, and the degradation of some of the scenes in the Fleet Prison and what they suggest about the imperfections of the social order? What about the blacker interpolated tales and their searing accounts of perverted human psyches? I would revert to the traditional view that these are somber spots in a predominantly bright-

colored fabric, rather than agreeing with those recent critics who argue that they significantly deepen the hue of the whole work.² In this connection, we could do worse than heed Dickens' admonition in the closing chapter, as he is taking a "last parting look" at his characters "when the brief sunshine of the world is blazing full upon them": "There are dark shadows on the earth, but its lights are stronger in the contrast. Some men, like bats or owls, have better eyes for the darkness than for the light" (57, p. 799).³

Dodson and Fogg, to begin with, are objects of satire rather than agents of evil. Dickens' quarrel with the law as an institution and lawyers as its representatives was long and fierce, but we must distinguish between various degrees of sly humor on the one hand and scornful reprobation on the other. Tulkinghorn and Vholes in *Bleak House*, for example, may be unequivocally condemned as bad men; Dodson and Fogg, though most assuredly no better than they should be, are more in the nature of figures of fun (something that cannot be said about Tulkinghorn or even Vholes). We smile at the not altogether fanciful, not altogether comic, notion that lawyers—Pickwick's solicitor Perker no less than Dodson and Fogg—live as professional men in a coherent amoral universe of their own, one which is not as a rule ethically congruent with the world the rest of us inhabit. Perker is annoyed if a client, be he Wardle when his sister has been abducted or Pickwick when he is being sued for breach of promise, attempts to intervene in his own cause and invoke the moral standards of the layman. "You know, my dear sir, if you *will* take the management of your affairs into your own hands after intrusting them to your solicitor, you must also take the consequences," he chides Pickwick (31, p. 426), having previously challenged his referring to Dodson and Fogg as "'scoundrels'": "'that's a matter of opinion, you know, and we won't dispute about terms; because of course you can't be expected to view these subjects with a professional eye'" (31, p. 425). As we see from Lowten's contemptuous treatment of Mr. Watty in the same chapter, Perker's firm does not deal with its clients any more humanely than do Dodson and Fogg, and Perker is cynically amused at Pickwick's insistence on fighting his case on principle. Perker prefers to "trust to Snubbin's eloquence; throw dust in the eyes of the judge; throw ourselves on the jury" (31, p. 426).

Dodson and Fogg, in using the addeplated Mrs. Bardell for their own selfish purposes, are merely a bit extreme in pursuing the main chance. They scheme, and they are foiled, like comic figures. Though they cause Pickwick and Mrs. Bardell considerable distress, they are not by virtue of that fact

wicked men, since they are too shallow and too much caught up in other things to have or display truly evil hearts; and it can be argued that their victims' experiences in the Fleet are tonic for both of them, in different ways.

Those scenes in the prison are a mixed lot. Some of them are replete with comic conviviality. Others afford Samuel Pickwick, Esq., G. C. M. P. C., more opportunity than he ever expected, or wanted, to observe (in the words of the Pickwick Club's resolution) "character and manners." Only a few, less neutral, show him, and us, unrelieved suffering, and that always for a specific purpose. The case of the Chancery prisoner, a very eloquent man, gives us an early example of Dickens' outrage at the law's delays: he "had been there long enough to have lost friends, fortune, home, and happiness, and to have acquired the right of having a room to himself" (42, p. 593). His railing at his lonely and neglected existence does display the patterning and the rhythm of melodramatic speech:

'Friends! . . . If I lay dead at the bottom of the deepest mine in the world; tight screwed down and soldered in my coffin; rotting in the dark and filthy ditch that drags its slime along, beneath the foundations of this prison; I could not be more forgotten or unheeded than I am here. I am a dead man; dead to society, without the pity they bestow on those whose souls have passed to judgment. Friends to see *me*! My God! I have sunk, from the prime of life into old age, in this place, and there is not one to raise his hand above my bed when I lie dead upon it, and say, "It is a blessing he is gone!" (42, p. 594)

But this is an isolated outburst. The only other time we see him is when he is on his deathbed. His physical state by then is such that he can only manage to gasp out "half-formed sounds," asking the God who is about to judge him to "bear in mind my heavy punishment on earth" (44, p. 628). This scene is an effective one, but it is pathetic rather than melodramatic. The narrator has set the stage very carefully: at the Chancery prisoner's request, someone has opened the window, admitting, in addition to fresh air, street noises which effectively contrast with, and thereby heighten, the dismal atmosphere of his bare cell.

The noise of carriages and carts, the rattle of wheels, the cries of men and boys, all the busy sounds of a mighty multitude instinct with life and occupation, blended into one deep murmur, floated into the room.

. . . Melancholy sounds to a quiet listener at any time; how melancholy to the watcher by the bed of death! (44, p. 627)

After he asks for God's forgiveness, the dying man sinks into a deep sleep. Those watching see a smile on his face.

They whispered together for a little time, and the turnkey, stooping over the pillow, drew hastily back. 'He has got his discharge, by G—!' said the man.

He had. But he had grown so like death in life, that they knew not when he died. (44, p. 628)

The reader is moved by the Chancery prisoner's death, and is clearly meant to be; but the fact remains that this is a transitory episode, unprepared for and never mentioned again, involving an exceedingly minor character. His one excursion into highly emotional, highly structured melodramatic speech, though quite appropriate in its context, is quickly forgotten.

The Pickwickians' old adversaries Jingle and Job Trotter turn up in the Fleet in severely reduced circumstances, but their incarceration is a just and appropriate punishment for earlier misdeeds rather than an undeserved misfortune. In addition to putting master and man out of action, their confinement in squalor and degradation serves several functions, and all of these make us feel better rather than worse about the universe of *The Pickwick Papers*: we are enabled to watch Pickwick's generosity, Jingle's repentance, and Trotter's fidelity, in ways that would not have been possible had they all not been brought so low.

Much has been made of Pickwick's declaration after his visit to the prison "whistling shop" that "I have seen enough. . . . My head aches with these scenes, and my heart too. Henceforth I will be a prisoner in my own room" (45, p. 645). But, far from signaling a major new phase of renunciation and isolation in Pickwick's life, this announcement comes immediately before the chapter that brings Mrs. Bardell to the Fleet and sets in motion the series of circumstances that leads to Pickwick's release. Nor does it indicate any kind of end point in Pickwick's development. He was already capable, much earlier in the story, of even more passionate outbursts, as when he vowed vengeance on Jingle: "Whenever I meet that Jingle again, wherever it is, . . . I'll inflict personal chastisement on him, in addition to the exposure he so richly merits. I will, or my name is not Pickwick'" (16, p. 226). And after his discharge from the Fleet, Pickwick is not a profoundly changed

man who has been deeply scarred by his prison experiences and therefore confronts his life much differently. Comic adventures that befall Pickwick late in the novel, such as his unfortunate visit to Winkle's father in Birmingham (50) or his finding himself literally in the middle when Pott and Slurk have it out at the Saracen's Head, Towcester (51), might just as plausibly have occurred before his confinement. With at best moderate help from Pickwick, the affairs of the people in whom he takes an interest—e.g., Winkle and Arabella Allen, Snodgrass and Emily Wardle, and the Wellers—are sorted out for the best, and it is the approaching end of the story in the final number rather than any new wisdom or power in Pickwick, gained as a result of his exposure to the seamy side of life in the Fleet, that is responsible for these denouements.

As for the nine interpolated tales, one of them, "The True Legend of Prince Bladud," is essentially a fairy tale dealing with the supposed circumstances of the founding of Bath, during which the storyteller's tongue keeps straying mischievously toward his cheek; four others are even more obviously comic in nature: "The Bagman's Story," "The Parish Clerk," "The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton," and "The Story of the Bagman's Uncle." This leaves only four whose predominant mood is somber: "The Stroller's Tale," "The Convict's Return," "A Madman's Manuscript," and "The Old Man's Tale about the Queer Client."

It is not very probable that these four stories were intended by Dickens to alter markedly the tone of *The Pickwick Papers* or that they can have this effect for the reader who approaches them, or the whole novel, without wheeling a bed of Procrustes along with him. They occupy only parts of four of the fifty-seven chapters in the novel; they take up something like four per cent of its pages. They are not interspersed throughout *The Pickwick Papers* with any kind of regularity: the first three occur in Chapters 3, 6, and 11, respectively; the fourth in Chapter 21. None of them appears in the last thirty-six chapters. If we are to account for their presence in *The Pickwick Papers*, surely we must look for an explanation to the tradition of the picaresque novel, to their genesis in circumstances of the main narrative, or to the working habits of their creator, rather than to any portentous thematic significance.

To be sure, the same motifs keep recurring in these four interpolated tales in a way that arouses some insistent questions about Dickens' inventiveness and, at a deeper level, about his obsession with certain troubling subjects at this stage of his career. All four deal with acutely suffering families.

In the first, "The Stroller's Tale," the situation is strikingly similar to that in one of the stories from the *Sketches by Boz*, "The Drunkard's Death," which I discussed in my Introduction: the dissipation of the husband, a broken-down clown in this instance, has brought misery to his wife and child, and the old sot's deathbed scene, as narrated by a fellow actor, makes up the body of the tale. Similarly in the second, "The Convict's Return," Edmunds' dissolute ways turn life into a hell for his wife and son; the wife dies, and many years later John Edmunds returns from transportation to avenge himself on his wretched father. The narrator of the third, "A Madman's Manuscript," literally torments his wife to death (this time, uniquely, there is no child). In the last, "The Old Man's Tale about the Queer Client," the protagonist, Heyling, is imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea, the scene of Dickens' father's confinement for the same offense during the novelist's boyhood. The narrator, an elderly habitu  of the Inns of Court, says of the neighborhood of the prison, intriguingly in view of Dickens' sensitivity about the scenes of his own early suffering and shame, "It may be my fancy, or it may be that I cannot separate the place from the old recollections associated with it, but this part of London I cannot bear" (21, p. 284). While Heyling is unable to provide for them, first his little boy and then his wife die in poverty, and the rest of the story is devoted to his merciless revenge against his father-in-law, whom he holds responsible for the family's desperate fortunes.

In none of these interpolated tales are melodramatic speeches or melodramatic scenes prominent features. "The Stroller's Tale" is pathetic in its dwelling on a deathbed scene. The narrator observes closely, listens carefully to the ravings of the dying clown, and recounts dispassionately what he sees and hears. The clergyman whom Dickens employs as his sympathetic point of view in "The Convict's Return" also keeps things under control in that tale. There is an exchange of hot words between father and son just before the elder Edmunds dies suddenly, but it is too short and crude to be genuinely melodramatic: the two participants hardly speak at all, and the scene is over before much feeling can be aroused in the reader.

"Let me hear you speak," said the convict, in a thick broken voice.

"Stand off!" cried the old man, with a dreadful oath. The convict drew closer to him.

"Stand off!" shrieked the old man. Furious with terror he raised his stick, and struck Edmunds a heavy blow across the face.

“Father—devil!” murmured the convict, between his set teeth. He rushed wildly forward, and clenched the old man by the throat—but he was his father; and his arm fell powerless by his side.

‘The old man uttered a loud yell which rang through the lonely fields like the howl of an evil spirit. His face turned black: the gore rushed from his mouth and nose, and dyed the grass a deep dark red, as he staggered and fell. He had ruptured a blood-vessel: and he was a dead man before his son could raise him.’ (6, p. 81)

There are very brief melodramatic confrontations between Heyling and his wife (21, pp. 287-88) and Heyling and his father-in-law (21, pp. 291-92 and 295) in “The Old Man’s Tale about the Queer Client,” but such melodramatic interest as the tale possesses resides, rather, in the suspenseful narration. This is also true of “The Madman’s Manuscript,” where the protagonist is also the narrator and is literally insane, rather than merely monomaniac like Heyling in “The Queer Client.” The obsessions and delusions of each of these unfortunate men do much to heighten the tense, grim atmospheres of these stories.

If, then, the traditional, Chestertonian view of *The Pickwick Papers* as uninterrupted merriment cannot be, and has not been, allowed to stand without modification, it is an even more extreme and indefensible reading which imputes to Dickens in this first novel an underlying pervasive gloom about the human condition. That gloom is sporadically there is beyond dispute, but it is just as obvious to the objective reader that the prevailing tone of the novel is equable and cheerful. Evil exists in the world, to be sure: what reasonable person would deny it? But it poses no serious and lasting threat to any character about whom we care in the main narrative. Insofar as Pickwick and his associates are put into peril, this is far more the consequence of their own foolish gullibility than of the viciousness of their adversaries.

In this kind of moral setting, melodrama cannot flourish. When good is amiable, not a little silly, and decidedly unheroic rather than eloquently assertive, and evil is sly and scheming and (in the case of Jingle) downright entertaining rather than uncompromisingly villainous, there can be no serious encounter between them. A superb case in point is Mr. Pickwick’s confrontation with Dodson and Fogg in Chapter 53. The more the indignant Pickwick tries to elevate his language, the more the scene lapses into the comedy of mock melodrama. “Do you know,” he assaults Dodson and

Fogg in the first of a series of beautifully patterned but perfectly gratuitous questions, "that I have been the victim of your plots and conspiracies? . . . Do you know that I am the man whom you have been imprisoning and robbing? Do you know that you were the attorneys for the plaintiff, in Bardell and Pickwick?" Of course they know, and as the scene goes on, Pickwick's wrath rising all the while, comic actions are joined with his indignant words in such a way that the sheer fun of it all fatally undercuts his serious intent—though the reader's amused satisfaction at seeing that pair of rascals so justly upbraided and put to flight is not very different from the audience's reaction to Virtue routing Vice under more dignified circumstances (53, pp. 750-51).

Mock melodrama, in fact, is one comic device to which Dickens resorts with some frequency in *The Pickwick Papers*. Both Pickwick and his friend Tracy Tupman are fat, well past the prime of life, and decidedly unromantic in appearance and demeanor; yet both of them are thrust into situations with equally mature and unprepossessing women which, had they involved different principals, would have conveyed unmistakably the flavor of sexual melodrama. As we have these scenes, however, they are decidedly funny, largely because we cannot help contrasting them, unconsciously, with their serious melodramatic analogues.

Tupman, in making his declaration to Miss Wardle, expresses himself in the high-flown language and bold gestures of the virtuous young stage lover; but, however virtuous he may be, he is certainly not young, and neither is the quivering object of his affections. Dickens is masterful in his use of such inappropriate speech and behavior to arouse laughter in his reader, and his handling of setting and props does much as well to create the anti-romantic, mock melodramatic quality of the scene: the bower in which Tupman and Miss Wardle meet is sardonically described as "one of those sweet retreats which humane men erect for the accommodation of spiders," Miss Wardle's watering can keeps getting in the amorous couple's way (some pebbles in it rattle noisily as she trembles with emotion), and the whole encounter is made even more grotesque by the fact that it is observed by the narcoleptic Fat Boy (8, pp. 97-98).

In this whole abortive love affair and its unhappy aftermath, Tupman makes a bizarre attempt to play the role of the heroic swain, heart-stricken when disappointed in his suit of a virtuous maiden. There is, for example, his letter to Pickwick after his departure from Dingley Dell.

‘My dear Pickwick,

‘You, my dear friend, are placed far beyond the reach of many mortal frailties and weaknesses which ordinary people cannot overcome. You do not know what it is, at one blow, to be deserted by a lovely and fascinating creature, and to fall a victim to the artifices of a villain, who hid the grin of cunning, beneath the mask of friendship. I hope you never may.

‘Any letter, addressed to me at the Leather Bottle, Cobham, Kent, will be forwarded—supposing I still exist. I hasten from the sight of that world, which has become odious to me. Should I hasten from it altogether, pity—forgive me. Life, my dear Pickwick, has become insupportable to me. The spirit which burns within us, is a porter’s knot, on which to rest the heavy load of worldly cares and troubles; and when that spirit fails us, the burden is too heavy to be borne. We sink beneath it. You may tell Rachael—Ah, that name!—

‘TRACY TUPMAN’ (11, p. 133).

Going in search of his friend, Pickwick finds that Tupman’s sorrowful renunciation of the world takes the form of stuffing himself with food and drink at the Leather Bottle, and Pickwick has no difficulty persuading Tupman to make his peace with at least part of human society. “‘It mattered little to him,’ he said, ‘where he dragged out the miserable remainder of his days: and since his friend laid so much stress on his humble companionship, he was willing to share his adventures’” (11, p. 136).

Pickwick’s own pseudo-romantic encounters, with Mrs. Bardell and Miss Witherfield, are of a rather different nature. As in the case of Tupman and Miss Wardle, the people involved are by no stretch of the imagination likely participants in sexual confrontations. But Pickwick, unlike Tupman, has no designs on any woman, and it is as a victim of circumstance that he is erroneously taken to be proposing marriage in the first instance and contemplating seduction in the second. Both in Mrs. Bardell’s house in Goswell Street and Miss Witherfield’s bedroom in the inn at Ipswich, Pickwick is seen by his lady companions to be playing classic melodramatic parts: the hero-wooer in the former, the villain-ravisher in the latter. Of course, he is doing nothing of the sort in either case; and our knowledge in each scene that the woman is ludicrously deceiving herself and ignoring what we take to be convincing evidence of Pickwick’s asexuality in his appearance, manner, and speech adds immeasurably to the comedy.

Real melodrama, then, plays virtually no role in *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens tends to avoid it or to cut it short in those few places where he might easily have used it, as in the interpolated tales. The closest we consistently come to anything like melodrama is in its obverse, what I have called mock melodrama. And that is as it should be in a novel which views the world in predominantly comic and optimistic terms.

NOTES

1. The best expression of the traditional view that it is inappropriate to look for profound significance in *The Pickwick Papers* or to chart the development of its protagonist can be found in the writings of G. K. Chesterton. See his *Charles Dickens*, pp. 83 and 87, and *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (New York: Dutton, 1911), p. 24. W. H. Auden's interpretation of the novel was to become much more fashionable: "the real theme of *Pickwick Papers* . . . is the Fall of Man," Pickwick himself "changes from an innocent child into an innocent adult who no longer lives in an imaginary Eden of his own but in the real and fallen world," and the cause of Pickwick's new awareness is his "encounter with the world of the Fleet" ("Dingley Dell & The Fleet," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* [New York: Random House, 1962], pp. 408-09 and 427). Those who have adopted, or adapted, Auden's opinion include James R. Kincaid (*Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971], pp. 21-22), Bert G. Hornback (*Noah's Arkitecture: A Study of Dickens' Mythology* [Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1972], pp. 12-14), and Christopher Herbert ("Converging Worlds in *Pickwick Papers*," *NCF*, 27 [1972], 19). Barbara Hardy's argument that the "celebratory optimism" of Pickwick and his friends remains unimpaired despite all their misadventures strikes me as more reasonable; see "The Complexity of Dickens," in *Dickens 1970*, ed. Michael Slater (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), p. 47; cf. the fourth chapter of her *The Moral Art of Dickens* (London: Athlone Press, 1970). Philip Rogers, in an essay I regard as perhaps the most significant recent contribution to our understanding of *The Pickwick Papers*, views Pickwick as fully responsive neither to the real world of the novel nor to the fictional world of the interpolated tales; if he were, "he would cease to be Pickwick," a character whose "function in the novel is not . . . to grow in the knowledge of evil, but to remain himself, an elderly child, happily unaware of the full nature of the world he passes through." See his "Mr. Pickwick's Innocence," *NCF*, 27 (1972), 35.

2. The significance of the tales has been an especially controversial point. Auden (p. 418) takes them very seriously indeed, as do H. M. Daleski (*Dickens and the Art of Analogy* [London: Faber, 1970], p. 47), James R. Kincaid (p. 47n.), and Christopher Herbert (p. 8). Several other contemporary critics, however, hold that they do not fundamentally alter the nature of the novel. Steven Marcus, for example, considers them to be isolated "pockets of darkness" (*Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1965], p. 41). John Lucas finds it difficult to put much stock in the evil the tales display, "because they are so contrived and otiose an expression of Dickens's imagination" (*The Melancholy Man: A Study of Dickens' Novels* [London: Methuen, 1970], p. 10). According to Barbara Hardy, Dickens went out of his way to segregate them from the main narrative "by placing misery in the inset tales and celebrating plenty in the main stream of action" (*The Moral Art of Dickens*, p. 91). And Garrett Stewart points out that most of the tales are not really "bleak gothic departures from the main narrative," and that imagination rather than darkness "seems to be the common denominator" among them (*Dickens and the Trials of Imagination* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974], p. 32).

3. I have cribbed this comment on the overly-solemn critics of *The Pickwick Papers* from K. J. Fielding, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longmans, 1958), p. 22.

Chapter 2

Oliver Twist and *Nicholas Nickleby*

I

When we move from the sunshine of *The Pickwick Papers* into the shadows of *Oliver Twist* and the stage lighting of *Nicholas Nickleby*, we find ourselves squarely in the moral universe of traditional melodrama: a world full of deep-dyed villains in conflict with figures of stainless virtue, of elaborately interconnected incidents and situations rich in coincidence, and of language that is at once eloquently explicit and demurely evasive. Small wonder that critics have so readily invoked stage melodrama as analogue and source for much in both of these novels—usually for those aspects of them that they dislike.

Oliver Twist and *Nicholas Nickleby* are in fact replete with melodramatic situations, melodramatic speeches, and melodramatic scenes. Dickens' handling of these devices, however, is not as mechanical and crude as many have suggested; and if, as I shall argue, the tact and skill with which he employs them in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the later novel, demonstrates discernible growth in his art, it will be instructive to examine why this is so.

II

In *Oliver Twist*, the moral polarities are very sharply defined. There is, on the one hand, pure irredeemable evil, embodied most uncompromisingly in Fagin, Sikes, and Monks, but also in such lesser characters as Bumble, Noah Claypole, and Mrs. Corney (later Mrs. Bumble); there is also, on the other, pure untarnishable goodness, as seen particularly in Oliver, but also in his various friends and protectors: Mr. Brownlow, Mrs. Maylie, Rose, Harry, and Mr. Losberne.¹ That there is in addition an intermediate class of characters consisting of evildoers who repent of their wickedness, like Nancy and Charley Bates, does not diminish the force of this contrast.

As to Oliver himself, let it be said straightaway that he figures hardly at all in the melodrama of the novel that bears his name. Though highly and eloquently verbal, he is not a principal in a single melodramatic scene. Very occasionally, his confrontations with evil take the form of vigorous action on his part, as when he assaults Noah Claypole under severe provocation; far more often and characteristically, however, he is the passive, mute, and

generally uncomprehending victim of the indifference, neglect, abuse, and physical violence of others.

This is the story of his life, literally from the moment of his birth in the workhouse until his future is secured near the end of the novel. Always—at the baby farm, back in the workhouse, at Sowerberry's, and in Fagin's clutches—Oliver suffers poignantly. His almost constant loneliness, hunger, illness, or pain (culminating in the gunshot wound he receives in a robbery attempt in which he is an unwilling participant) are sufficiently grim and undeserved; what is even worse for a boy of such exquisite sensibilities is to be thought of as a young criminal—deliberately and gleefully by Mr. Fang, reluctantly and sadly by Mr. Brownlow.

Oliver's profoundly moving case inevitably arouses a deeply sympathetic response in all the virtuous characters who became aware of it: frequently, they shed tears over him, as Brownlow and his housekeeper Mrs. Bedwin do after his first escape from Fagin's gang (12, pp. 77, 79, and 80) and as Rose and Mr. Losberne do after the aborted housebreaking (30, pp. 218 and 219). Even hardened villains recognize the special claims of Oliver's abused goodness: Nancy, of course, comes to champion him—it is clearly she whom Brownlow has in mind when he says that “‘the sight of the persecuted child has turned vice itself, and given it the courage and almost the attributes of virtue’” (49, p. 379); Bumble on one occasion hems “three or four times” at “Oliver's piteous and helpless look” of loneliness, mutters “something about ‘that troublesome cough,’” and falls into an unaccustomed silence (4, pp. 26-27); and Fagin, near execution, confides in Oliver alone where he has hidden the papers which Monks gave him for safekeeping.

Now, this affecting display of passive suffering on the part of a child or other helpless person leads to pathos rather than melodramatic speech or melodramatic scenes, and Dickens makes copious use of pathos in *Oliver Twist*: not only in connection with Oliver himself, for there is also Oliver's dying little playmate Dick; and not only in connection with children, for there are also the workhouse inmates and other recipients of society's “charity,” who are irritably regarded as mere objects by their parochial guardians. “‘They always die when I'm at meals,’” Mrs. Corney grumbles (23, p. 166), convinced—like Bumble and the members of the board—that the paupers' sole purpose in life is to cause inconvenience and annoyance for their betters. Typically, Oliver is referred to as “an item” on the first page of the novel; he is bargained over as if he were some inanimate commodity by Mr. Limbkins and Mr. Gamfield; and when the plan to sell him to the

chimney-sweep is foiled by the magistrates, he is advertised, like the dehumanized and undesirable piece of property he is in the eyes of the workhouse establishment, as being "To Let" (3, p. 21).

So cowed and helpless are such victims in *Oliver Twist* that only once in the entire novel does their smoldering misery blaze up into anything like melodramatic speech, and Oliver is merely an observer and a listener on that occasion. When the boy accompanies Mr. Sowerberry to the squalid room where a poor dead woman is to be measured for her coffin, her husband and mother give vent to their passionate feelings about the pitiful situation not only of the deceased and her family but also (by extension) of the countless others then dying of starvation in England. Both of them are preternaturally articulate in expressing their emotion, and the distraught old woman—"speaking with an idiotic leer, more ghastly even than the presence of death in such a place"—is aware of the theatrical dimension of their plight as she perceives and describes it:

"Lord, Lord! Well it *is* strange that I who gave birth to her, and was a woman then, should be alive and merry now, and she lying there: so cold and stiff! Lord, Lord!—to think of it; it's as good as a play—as good as a play!" (5, pp. 36-37)

In general, the quietly pathetic and the vocally melodramatic effects in *Oliver Twist* exist in separate spheres. This in itself is neither good nor bad, but Dickens is capable of going wrong in this novel when he attempts to invest a pathetic situation or a melodramatic scene with a higher affective charge than it is capable of bearing or needs to bear. When depicting Oliver's deprivation and degradation, for instance, he is sometimes not content to let narrative, description, and dialogue do their work but has his narrator engage in laboriously sardonic commentary on what is happening—commentary that tends to jar the reader in ways that vitiate much of what the author is trying to achieve. On Oliver's first night back in the workhouse after his sojourn at Mrs. Mann's, for example, we are told, "he sobbed himself to sleep." But then the narrator adds, stridently and gratuitously, "What a noble illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep!" (2, p. 10). Or, having already driven home the point that Oliver is forced to make a meal of some cold scraps that the Sowerberrys' dog refused to eat several hours earlier, he goes on for another whole paragraph as follows:

I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine. There is only one thing I should like better; and that would be to see the Philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish. (4, p. 28)

Nor is Dickens willing to let the description of the dirty jail cell in which Oliver is confined after his arrest for supposedly robbing Mr. Brownlow—a description which is telling enough—speak for itself: he attempts, needlessly, to arouse our feelings further by some ill-timed reflections on social conditions:

In our station-houses, men and women are every night confined on the most trivial *charges*—the word is worth noting—in dungeons, compared with which, those in Newgate, occupied by the most atrocious felons, tried, found guilty, and under sentence of death, are palaces. Let any one who doubts this, compare the two. (11, p. 69)

Such gratuitous comments, at best, do nothing to heighten the pathos of Oliver's plight.

On other occasions, Oliver's suffering or his mere presence gives rise to false steps of a more melodramatic nature—emotional barrages that misfire, not because strong passions are being let off, but because the speakers' words call attention to themselves in ways that distract the reader from what is being said. Always redolent of the stage, Rose Maylie is never more intrusively so than when she rhapsodizes about the mistreated lad, lying wounded and asleep after the aborted robbery:

'But even if he has been wicked, . . . think how young he is; think that he may never have known a mother's love, or the comfort of a home; that ill-usage and blows, or the want of bread, may have driven him to herd with men who have forced him to guilt. Aunt, dear aunt, for mercy's sake, think of this, before you let them drag this sick child to a prison, which in any case must be the grave of all his chances of amendment. Oh! as you love me, and know that I have never felt the want of parents in your goodness and affection, but that I might have done so, and might have been equally helpless

and unprotected with this poor child, have pity upon him before it is too late!' (30, p. 217)

Her plea for Oliver is so elaborately structured as to become convoluted, and—aside from the fact that this is elemental virtue recognizing its own kind, a point which is all but lost on the reader here—it is difficult to accept that the plight of this total stranger could propel even Rose to melodramatic speech.

When Oliver accidentally bumps into Monks at an inn where he has gone to mail a letter for Mrs. Maylie, his odious half-brother curses the puzzled and frightened lad in terms worthy of the blackest stage villain: "‘Death! . . . Grind him to ashes! . . . Rot you! . . . Curses on your head, and black death on your heart, you imp!’" (33, pp. 244-45). In view of his fondness for such outbursts as this, it is not surprising that Monks has, from the beginning, been condemned by critics as a refugee from the melodramatic stage. But the trouble with this particular bit of ill-natured growling is not that it is stagy but rather that it is so drastically out of keeping with the comic realism of the scene leading up to it, which describes, from Oliver’s naive point of view, how he gets to the inn and how he is received on his arrival by the self-important people who work there.

Most of the melodramatic scenes in *Oliver Twist* occur when Oliver is off stage. A number of them, as I will attempt to show, are extremely effective. Others fall flat, not because there is anything inherently wrong with characters in prose fiction addressing one another in melodramatic speech, but for one of two chief reasons: in the given context, the reader has difficulty understanding why *these* figures should be speaking in *this* way; or else Dickens is attempting to achieve in melodramatic scenes objectives which might better have been met in other ways.

There are several places in the novel where virtuous characters interact by making melodramatic speeches. Dickens has set himself a difficult task in such scenes, which lack the emotional tension generated when virtue confronts vice, and it becomes almost impossible to bring it off when the principals are as pallid as Rose, Harry, and Mrs. Maylie. Dickens’ valiant attempt to pump the color of life into such ciphers by having them deliver melodramatic lines results in little more than mere inflation. I have three scenes of this sort particularly in mind.

The first—in Chapter 34, after Harry Maylie has been summoned to Rose’s bedside during an illness from which she has by now recovered—is

between Harry and his mother. The young man is agitated by the thought of how narrowly Rose has escaped death and by the strength of his love for her; Mrs. Maylie, however, is firmly opposed to a match between Harry and Rose and points out to him the dangers of allying himself with a girl of her unfortunate background. Her carefully patterned arguments are unavailing, and the scene rises to a climax in Harry's ardent protestation of his undying love:

'The mental agony I have suffered, during the last two days, wrings from me the avowal to you of a passion which, as you well know, is not one of yesterday, nor one I have lightly formed. On Rose, sweet, gentle girl! my heart is set, as firmly as ever heart of man was set on woman. I have no thought, no view, no hope in life, beyond her; and if you oppose me in this great stake, you take my peace and happiness in your hands, and cast them to the wind. Mother, think better of this, and of me, and do not disregard the happiness of which you seem to think so little.' (34, p. 251)

Both Mrs. Maylie and her son use the eloquent, passionate language of melodrama, but their dialogue goes nowhere: the principals are and remain on excellent terms with each other, and neither throws down a challenge for the other to defy.

Much in the same vein is the conversation between Harry and Rose herself in the following chapter. Harry ardently presses his suit, but Rose resists him because she regards herself as "a friendless, portionless girl with a blight upon my name" who "should not give your friends reason to suspect that I had sordidly yielded to your first passion, and fastened myself, a clog, on all your hopes and projects" (35, p. 261). This scene, too, ends inconclusively: Harry does not win Rose, and Rose does not persuade Harry to look elsewhere for love. They merely agree that Harry may again plead his case within a year. Once more the elaborate language, the emotional fervor, and the affirmations of high principle smack of the melodramatic stage; and once more the interest inherent in the characters and their situation is not great enough to redeem or justify such feelings so expressed.

When Rose finally accepts Harry, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, there is a different sort of incompatibility between language and situation. Not even the most scrupulous moralist would deny that the full disclosure of her family history has by now removed all stigma from Rose and

thereby cleared away any remaining obstacle to a match between her and Harry; but both of them still talk, in highly melodramatic terms, as if Harry were lowering himself by taking her as his wife. Though his mother now says nothing against their marriage, and presumably would no longer oppose it, Harry somewhat self-righteously declaims about the sacrifice he has, willingly, made in order to ally himself with her.

‘Such power and patronage: such relatives of influence and rank: as smiled upon me then, look coldly now; but there are smiling fields and waving trees in England’s richest county; and by one village church—mine, Rose, my own!—there stands a rustic dwelling which you can make me prouder of, than all the hopes I have renounced, measured a thousandfold. This is *my* rank and station now, and here I lay it down!’ (51, pp. 402-03)

But the least successful melodramatic scenes in *Oliver Twist* are those in which the high-flown speeches serve purely expository purposes: to disclose to the reader information not readily to be conveyed in any other way. In Chapter 49, Mr. Brownlow berates Monks at considerable length in language suffused with his deep indignation at the villainy of Oliver’s half-brother and step-mother. He is not telling this unappetizing creature anything he does not already know, though Monks has not been aware that Brownlow has pieced the family history together. The main function of the scene, in fact, is to tell the *reader*, at last, the true story of Oliver’s parentage. The means employed—protracted melodramatic dialogue, extending through an entire chapter—seem grossly disproportionate to the end achieved.

We get more, a great deal more, of this sort of thing two chapters later, when Brownlow and Monks cover much the same ground, and go beyond it to take in Rose’s story, in much the same tone. But this time they are not alone: Rose herself, Oliver, Losberne, and Grimwig are with them, and they are subsequently joined at intervals by Mr. and Mrs. Bumble, the two old women from the workhouse, Mrs. Maylie, and Harry. On this occasion, not only the language but also the action and the entrances and exits of appropriate characters at crucial moments bear the unmistakable mark of the stage. The private revelations of Chapter 49 were obviously not enough for Dickens: he felt compelled to repeat and elaborate on them publicly, with most of his cast present. It is not the melodramatic syntax and diction of Chapter 51 that strain the reader’s credulity: rather, he is troubled at the way in which Brownlow and Monks in effect join forces to make their

disclosures in concert, while their fellow actors listen awestruck. The text even refers to this dialogue as a "narrative," and what a strange one it is.

There was a short silence here, until Mr. Brownlow took up the thread of the narrative.

'Years after this,' he said, 'this man's—Edward Leeford's—mother came to me. He had left her, when only eighteen; robbed her of jewels and money; gambled, squandered, forged, and fled to London: where for two years he had associated with the lowest outcasts. She was sinking under a painful and incurable disease, and wished to recover him before she died. Inquiries were set on foot, and strict searches made. They were unavailing for a long time, but ultimately successful; and he went back with her to France.'

'There she died,' said Monks, 'after a lingering illness; and, on her death-bed, she bequeathed these secrets to me, together with her unquenchable and deadly hatred for all whom they involved—though she need not have left me that, for I had inherited it long before. She would not believe that the girl had destroyed herself, and the child too, but was filled with the impression that a male child had been born, and was alive. I swore to her, if ever it crossed my path, to hunt it down; never to let it rest; to pursue it with the bitterest and most unrelenting animosity; to vent upon it the hatred that I deeply felt, and to spit upon the empty vaunt of that insulting will by dragging it, if I could, to the very gallows-foot. She was right. He came in my way at last. I began well; and, but for babbling drabs, I would have finished as I began!' (51, p. 397)

There is something mechanical and tired about the writing in scenes like these. The stock figures involved in them resort to melodramatic speech, which obviously comes very easily to Dickens, when it is not clear to the reader why they should be talking as they do, or at all. But things go much better when Dickens withdraws from the respectable Maylie-Brownlow milieu and plunges into the criminal sphere of Fagin and his gang. Here, there is no temptation—indeed, no occasion—to lay on formulaic verbal padding. Rather, there are strong feelings to be bared by characters who are not accustomed to mincing words, and the emotional temperature of their encounters is usually so high that the reader is not put off by the symmetrical, melodramatic patterns into which those words often tend to fall.² A good example is the passionate scene after Oliver's enforced return

from Brownlow's to the thieves' den, when Nancy intervenes with Sikes and Fagin to prevent them from punishing the boy (who, characteristically, does not utter a word). The three principals in it contrast sharply in their attitudes and styles: we witness Nancy's outrage at Sikes's and Fagin's cruelty, and remorse at her own degradation; Sikes's naked and surly brutishness; and Fagin's hypocritical wheedling. Angry hot words fly freely; the threat of physical violence is constant; and Nancy, especially, is capable of rising to powerful eloquence when she is chided about her way of life. Accepting the terms with which first Sikes and then Fagin taunt her, by then "not speaking, but pouring out the words in one continuous and vehement scream," Nancy concludes her defense by lashing out at Fagin in language that is carefully controlled, for all her frenzy: "It is my living; and the cold, wet, dirty streets are my home; and you're the wretch that drove me to them long ago, and that'll keep me there, day and night, day and night, till I die!" (16, p. 116).

In such melodramatic scenes, the author strikes a delicate balance between cerebral and visceral response in the reader. The reader's mind takes in the words of the narrative and, especially, of the dialogue; if the author has chosen and arranged them skillfully, and set them in the right sort of context, the reader will react with the desired emotion. But if the characters turn from hurling powerful words to laying violent hands on one another, the reader reacts differently, more viscerally than cerebrally: the balance essential to melodrama has been upset. (Contrast the effect of hearing the virtue of a woman indirectly and verbally threatened in a nineteenth-century play with that of seeing the body of a woman directly and physically violated in a twentieth-century film.) Unforgettable as it is, the famous scene of Bill Sikes's murder of Nancy in Chapter 47 is not really melodramatic: the force of her passionate words is no match for the force of his brutal blows; and it is Sikes's inarticulate fury before the vicious crime and his almost Dostoevskian hauntings of guilt afterward that the reader is likely to remember longest.

But, before her violent death, Nancy carries out of the underworld of *Oliver Twist* attributes that enable her to set off extremely effective melodramatic scenes involving members of the respectable society of the novel. After Oliver makes his appearance in Saffron Hill, Nancy's latent better nature is awakened, and she is quite prepared to articulate her painfully ambiguous moral position for sympathetic listeners when suitable occasions arise. She has two excellent opportunities to do this.

The first occurs when Nancy—having drugged Bill Sikes so as to get away from him briefly, and having made a frantic dash across London—seeks out Rose in the West End in order to disclose what she has learned about Oliver's origins by eavesdropping on Monks and Fagin. The scene has its climax in an almost classic confrontation between the virtuous heroine and the corrupted companion of criminals—the pure woman and the fallen one. There is eloquent language on both sides: in Rose's passionate appeals to Nancy to give over her sinful, squalid life and in Nancy's equally heartfelt avowals of her sense of unworthiness and of her inability to leave Bill and the existence she has been leading.

'Think once again on your own condition, and the opportunity you have of escaping from it. You have a claim on me: not only as the voluntary bearer of this intelligence, but as a woman lost almost beyond redemption. Will you return to this gang of robbers, and to this man, when a word can save you? What fascination is it that can take you back, and make you cling to wickedness and misery? Oh! is there no chord in your heart that I can touch! Is there nothing left, to which I can appeal against this terrible infatuation!'

'When ladies as young, and good, and beautiful as you are,' replied the girl steadily, 'give away your hearts, love will carry you all lengths—even such as you, who have home, friends, other admirers, everything, to fill them. When such as I, who have no certain roof but the coffin-lid, and no friend in sickness or death but the hospital nurse, set our rotten hearts on any man, and let him fill the place that has been a blank through all our wretched lives, who can hope to cure us? Pity us, lady—pity us for having only one feeling of the woman left, and for having that turned, by a heavy judgment, from a comfort and a pride, into a new means of violence and suffering.' (40, p. 306)

For all the strain and unnaturalness in such speeches by Rose and, especially, Nancy, this melodramatic scene has undeniable power. The reader's propensity to disbelief when confronted with such soaring, carefully patterned language has been weakened by the excitement aroused through the narrative of Nancy's escape and wild journey to the hotel and by Nancy's own gripping account of mysteries that have not previously been unfolded to us. Embedded in such a context, this dialogue not only does not jar or offend: it succeeds.

The same is true of Nancy's midnight interview with Rose and Mr.

Brownlow below London Bridge, in Chapter 46. Again, it will not do simply to pluck out of this scene examples of Nancy's eloquent remorse or Brownlow's verbose sanctimoniousness: we must consider their speeches in the light of the ominous riverside atmosphere that Dickens has so successfully evoked at the beginning of the chapter and of the fact that the whole conversation is given to the reader as overheard by the despicable Noah Claypole. In that setting, and rendered from that point of view, the scene is genuinely stirring.

The melodramatic scenes in *Oliver Twist*, then, come off well when they are energized by the participation of vividly depicted characters in states of high feeling. Those in which Dickens is simply going through the motions, putting melodramatic speeches into the mouths of dull characters at inappropriate moments or for inappropriate reasons, tend to leave the reader untouched, if not actually alienated. But there are two other kinds of melodramatic devices—one new in this novel and one familiar from *Sketches by Boz*—that Dickens employs with great effectiveness in *Oliver Twist*.

Long before Nancy has her nocturnal encounter with Mr. Brownlow and Rose Maylie, Dickens depicts another important nighttime meeting in Chapter 30: that in which Mrs. Bumble sells Agnes' locket to Monks. The principals in this encounter talk tersely and almost elliptically, but the reader's excitement is heightened appreciably not only by the clash of strong wills and by the strange, fragmentary tale Mrs. Bumble tells Monks of the provenance of the locket, but also by the bizarre setting in a derelict factory and by the thunder and lightning which punctuate the conversation. In its clipped language and lack of verbal posturing, this is not a true melodramatic scene; but dialogue of marked intensity is of great importance to its effect, and the skillful indication of theatrical effects links it intimately with the melodramatic stage. It is necessary to find a term for such scenes, which Dickens uses increasingly in novels written after *Oliver Twist*. Because they arouse curiosity and suspense in the reader by confusing him more than they enlighten him, and because they do so under such murky circumstances, I refer to this device as the *melodrama of mystery*. In ordinary melodramatic scenes the reader is in no doubt as to the meaning of the represented words and actions; in the melodrama of mystery, by contrast, the only thing that is really clear is that evil forces are at their malevolent work, conspiring to do harm to the representatives of virtue: how this might come about remains to be disclosed.

Oliver Twist also contains some excellent examples of melodramatic narrative, a device we have already noticed in "The Drunkard's Death." As in melodramatic speech, a character's perceptions are structured for him in melodramatic narrative in ways he could not have been expected to find for himself so as to arouse the highest possible degree of feeling in the reader, and these structured perceptions are expressed in affective language that could not be the character's own. (The difference between melodramatic narrative and melodramatic speech, of course, is one of degree of authorial intervention rather than of kind.) There are several feverish journeys in *Oliver Twist* that are rendered in this way, the most extensive and memorable being Bill Sikes's roundabout flight after he has bludgeoned Nancy to death (Chapter 48) and his desperate attempt to elude his would-be captors (Chapter 50). The effect of melodramatic narrative is generally cumulative, and the quotation of excerpts can only suggest how it works; but two paragraphs dealing with this criminal's physical movements and, especially, his mental states as he frantically makes his way from Hatfield to St. Alban's will illustrate how the precise diction, the symmetrical syntax, and the rhythmical movement of the narrator's language resemble the features of melodramatic speech, and arouse a corresponding excitement in the reader:

He went on doggedly; but as he left the town behind him, and plunged into the solitude and darkness of the road, he felt a dread and awe creeping upon him which shook him to the core. Every object before him, substance or shadow, still or moving, took the semblance of some fearful thing; but these fears were nothing compared to the sense that haunted him of the morning's ghastly figure following at his heels. He could trace its shadow in the gloom, supply the smallest item of the outline, and note how stiff and solemn it seemed to stalk along. He could hear its garments rustling in the leaves, and every breath of wind came laden with that last low cry. If he stopped it did the same. If he ran, it followed—not running too: that would have been a relief: but like a corpse endowed with the mere machinery of life, and borne on one slow melancholy wind that never rose or fell.

At times he turned, with desperate determination, resolved to beat this phantom off, though it should look him dead; but the hair rose on his head, and his blood stood still, for it had turned with him and was behind him then. He had kept it before him that morning, but

it was behind now—always. He leaned his back against a bank, and felt that it stood above him, visibly out against the cold night-sky. He threw himself upon the road—on his back upon the road. At his head it stood, silent, erect, and still—a living grave-stone, with its epitaph in blood. (48, pp. 367-68)³

III

The basic situation of *Nicholas Nickleby* is even more clearly melodramatic than that of *Oliver Twist*. The protagonist of this novel is much more aggressively on the side of virtue than the boy hero-victim of the earlier one: Nicholas resolutely seeks out confrontations with evil, and, once embroiled in them, he handles himself adroitly, combining verbal facility with physical prowess. There are two pure heroines, Kate and Madeline, rather than just one as in *Oliver Twist*, and both are involved in infinitely more threatening situations than any in which Rose Maylie finds herself. There is a fully-drawn arch-villain in the character of Ralph Nickleby; and Wackford Squeers and Arthur Gride, though fewer pages are devoted to them, are capable of actions quite as vicious as the worst of his. The contest between clearly defined good and clearly defined evil is carried on relentlessly, and not until the Cheeryble brothers—whose role as fairy godfathers, *dei ex machina*, is apparent from their very introduction—enter the action more than halfway through does anything other than luck or pluck come to the aid of the noble young people and their friends in the struggles they wage against formidable antagonists.

The melodrama in *Nicholas Nickleby* has a distinctly sexual basis, and is therefore much stronger than that in *Oliver Twist*. The enormity of evil is never seen to better advantage, never appeals more powerfully to the reader's primal fears, than when it seeks to pollute innocent virginity, and that is very much an issue in *Nicholas Nickleby*. The most dastardly of Ralph's plots (as, to do him justice, he realizes himself, however dimly) hinges on his willingness to use Kate, his own niece, as a lure to draw Lord Frederick Verisopht even more firmly into his power. Ralph is also responsible for throwing Kate into Sir Mulberry Hawk's company, and that dissolute knight nearly succeeds in raping the young woman. Especially repugnant to the sensibilities of Dickens' reader are Arthur Gride's designs on Madeline Bray. Though it is Madeline's legacy that he is after, the

old lecher is fully aware of the girl's charms, and his grotesque lust for her is obvious as he describes them to Ralph.

'Dark eyes, long eyelashes, ripe and ruddy lips that to look at is to long to kiss, beautiful clustering hair that one's fingers itch to play with, such a waist as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily thinking of twining his arm about it, little feet that tread so lightly they hardly seem to walk upon the ground—to marry all this, sir, this—hey, hey!' (47, p. 613)

Unlike *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby* is drenched in a literally theatrical atmosphere. Nicholas himself spends a good deal of time with the traveling company of Vincent Crummles during a half-dozen chapters early in the novel, in the course of which we learn much about the workings of such a troupe and the provincial nineteenth-century English stage in general; Crummles turns up again later on, in London; Henrietta Petowker, an actress, figures as a minor character from time to time throughout, until, we are told by her disconsolate husband, she elopes with a bottle-nosed half-pay captain; and so forth.

This aura of the stage carries over naturally and effectively into other aspects of the novel, particularly its technique. More than once, for example, Dickens' characters resort to the soliloquy. When Ralph Nickleby decides on suicide near the end—alone in his gloomy house, bitter about the defeats he has incurred, and deeply remorseful at the thought that Smike, the poor creature, now dead, whom he had hounded so relentlessly, was his own long lost son—his desperate thoughts burst out into speech. "I am trampled down and ruined. . . . Is there no way to rob them of further triumph, and spurn their mercy and compassion? Is there no Devil to help me?" (62, p. 805). Earlier, Newman Noggs, having overheard Ralph and Gride hatching their miserable scheme against Madeline, emerges from his hiding place, bottle in hand, and delivers himself aloud of the reflections which this unsavory scene has aroused in him.

'I don't know who she may be, or what she may be, . . . but I pity her with all my heart and soul; and I can't help her, nor can I help any of the people against whom a hundred tricks, but none so vile as this, are plotted every day! Well, that adds to my pain, but not to theirs. The thing is no worse because I know it, and it tortures me

as well as them. Gride and Nickleby! Good pair for a curricule.
Oh roguery! roguery! roguery!' (47, p. 619)

But far more often than they soliloquize, the *dramatis personae* of *Nicholas Nickleby* engage one another in highly emotional scenes of truly melodramatic fervor. Their language blazes and soars, at the same time as it arranges itself in meticulously crafted syntactic patterns. It is possible, if foolish, to regard such scenes in isolation and scoff at them as contrived; but, for the reader willing to surrender to the flow of the action and to accept the moral assumptions Dickens posits, they have an undeniable power. In Peter Brooks's terms, such scenes, though set in "an apparent context of 'realism' and the ordinary," actually stage "a heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation."⁴ To invoke the strictures of realism narrowly defined and maintain that people do not make speeches like that in ordinary life is beside the point: we are not dealing here with ordinary life, but rather with a frankly "heightened and hyperbolic" representation of "pure and polar" forces that underlie human existence.

Of many possible examples, two melodramatic scenes can be singled out as especially characteristic. In Chapter 20, Ralph confronts Kate and Mrs. Nickleby with Squeers's distorted version of Nicholas' activities at Dotheboys Hall. The women are incredulous, and, as Ralph tries to reinforce his shaky case with a series of rhetorical questions of increasing violence, Nicholas bursts in at an opportune moment.

'Everything,' said Ralph, after a long silence, broken only by Mrs. Nickleby's sobs, 'everything combines to prove the truth of this letter, if indeed there were any possibility of disputing it. Do innocent men steal away from the sight of honest folks, and skulk in hiding-places, like outlaws? Do innocent men inveigle nameless vagabonds, and prowl with them about the country as idle robbers do? Assault, riot, theft, what do you call these?'

'A lie!' cried a voice, as the door was dashed open, and Nicholas came into the room. (p. 250)

Nicholas' powers of eloquence are in every way equal to those of his uncle.

'Who speaks in a tone as if I had done wrong, and brought disgrace on them?' said Nicholas, looking round.

'Your mother, sir?' replied Ralph, motioning towards her.

'Whose ears have been poisoned by you,' said Nicholas; 'by you—who, under pretence of deserving the thanks she poured upon you, heaped every insult, wrong, and indignity, upon my head. You, who sent me to a den where sordid cruelty, worthy of yourself, runs wanton, and youthful misery stalks precocious; where the lightness of childhood shrinks into the heaviness of age, and its every promise blights, and withers as it grows. I call Heaven to witness,' said Nicholas, looking eagerly round, 'that I have seen all this, and that he knows it.' (pp. 250-51)

Nicholas' furious denunciation of Ralph is entirely contained in two elaborately structured relative clauses, the second even more elaborately structured than the first. But Ralph is unwilling to accept either his nephew's tongue-lashing or his defense of his actions, and the older man's rejoinder—strongly marked by parallelism and antithesis—is as withering as anything in the scene (of which I have quoted only a small part):

'Of what I have done, or what I meant to do, for you, ma'am, and my niece, I say not one syllable. I held out no promise, and leave you to judge for yourself. I hold out no threat now, but I say that this boy, headstrong, wilful, and disorderly as he is, should not have one penny of my money, or one crust of my bread, or one grasp of my hand, to save him from the loftiest gallows in all Europe. I will not meet him, come where he comes, or hear his name. I will not help him, or those who help him. With a full knowledge of what he brought upon you by so doing, he has come back in his selfish sloth, to be an aggravation of your wants, and a burden upon his sister's scanty wages. I regret to leave you, and more to leave her, now, but I will not encourage this compound of meanness and cruelty, and, as I will not ask you to renounce him, I see you no more.' (p. 252)

Even more compelling is the scene during which Nicholas and Kate attempt to interfere with the bizarre marriage between Arthur Gride and Madeline Bray that is about to take place. More explicitly and more violently than in the earlier one, virtue and vice are pitted against each other here, and the syntactic weapons that are brought to bear on the conflict are formidable. Ralph is aghast at the temerity of his nephew and niece.

'Away!' was the first word he could utter as he literally gnashed

his teeth. 'Away! What brings you here? Liar, scoundrel, dastard, thief!'

'I come here,' said Nicholas in a low deep voice, 'to save your victim if I can. Liar and scoundrel you are, in every action of your life; theft is your trade; and double dastard you must be, or you were not here to-day. Hard words will not move me, nor would hard blows. Here I stand, and will, till I have done my errand.'

'Girl!' said Ralph, 'retire! We can use force to him, but I would not hurt you if I could help it. Retire, you weak and silly wench, and leave this dog to be dealt with as he deserves.'

'I will not retire,' cried Kate, with flashing eyes and the red blood mantling in her cheeks. 'You will do him no hurt that he will not repay. You may use force with me; I think you will, for I *am* a girl, and that would well become you. But if I have a girl's weakness, I have a woman's heart, and it is not you who in a cause like this can turn that from its purpose.'

'And what may your purpose be, most lofty lady?' said Ralph.

'To offer to the unhappy subject of your treachery, at this last moment,' replied Nicholas, 'a refuge and a home. If the near prospect of such a husband as you have provided, will not prevail upon her, I hope she may be moved by the prayers and entreaties of one of her own sex. At all events they shall be tried. I myself, avowing to her father from whom I come and by whom I am commissioned, will render it an act of greater baseness, meanness, and cruelty in him if he still dares to force this marriage on. Here I wait to see him and his daughter. For this I came and brought my sister even into your presence. Our purpose is not to seek or speak with you; therefore to you, we stoop to say no more.' (54, pp. 716-17)

Nicholas prevents Gride from leaving the room, and just as he seizes his uncle, "with his eyes darting fire," the timely and sudden death of the father of the bride effectually puts a stop to the proceedings.

Central as such melodramatic scenes representing the elemental conflict between good and evil undeniably are to Dickens' serious concerns in *Nicholas Nickleby*, it is nevertheless also true that he often uses theatrical elements for comic purposes in this novel. The very first reference to the drama in *Nicholas Nickleby* is a humorous one, when the country bumpkin John Browdie is described as wearing "that peculiarly oppressive scowl with

which the cut-and-thrust counts, in melodramatic performances, inform each other they will meet again" (9, p. 113). When we are introduced to the Crummles company, somewhat later, Dickens' treatment of their operations, their mode of living and working, is anything but serious. It is not surprising, therefore, that he frequently resorts to mock melodrama as a device.

As we might expect, it occurs while Nicholas is with the Crummles troupe, since this long portion of the novel combines a theatrical subject with comic treatment. There is, most notably, Nicholas' encounter with Lenville, the jealous tragic actor whom he has displaced in the public favor and who challenges Nicholas to a ludicrous quasi-duel. Totally lacking any sort of heroic stature, Lenville—a coward, a weakling, and a fool—addresses Nicholas grandiloquently and strikes absurd theatrical poses, until his brief campaign is brought to an ignominious and abrupt close when Nicholas knocks him down (29, pp. 379-80). But—so strongly does the mood of the Crummles episodes color the rest of the novel—mock melodrama recurs even after Nicholas retires from the stage. Just as Lenville makes a ridiculous melodramatic protagonist, so Fanny Squeers is simply silly when she affects the outraged virtue of a melodramatic heroine on overhearing the disparaging remarks that Nicholas and the Browdies have been making about her. As she shrieks out her denunciations, Fanny's inadequate vocabulary fails her.

'Was you, ma'am—was you?' cried a shrill female voice, 'was you given to understand that I—I—was going to be engaged to an assassinating thief that shed the gore of my pa? Do you—do you think, ma'am—that I was very fond of such dirt beneath my feet, as I couldn't condescend to touch with kitchen tongs, without blacking and crocking myself with the contract? Do you, ma'am? Do you? Oh, base and degrading 'Tilda! . . .

'This is the hend, is it?' continued Miss Squeers, who, being excited, aspirated her h's strongly; 'this is the hend, is it, of all my forbearance and friendship for that double-faced thing—that viper, that—that—mermaid?' (Miss Squeers hesitated a long time for this last epithet, and brought it out triumphantly at last, as if it quite clinched the business.) 'This is the hend, is it, of all my bearing with her deceitfulness, her lowness, her falseness, her laying herself out to

catch the admiration of vulgar minds, in a way which made me blush for my—for my—'

'Gender,' suggested Mr. Squeers. . . . (42, p. 547)

Similarly, when the humdrum, petty-bourgeois Kenwigses try to screw themselves up to a high pitch of indignant emotion at Mr. Lillyvick's sheepish return to their family, the result is mock melodrama. Mrs. Kenwigs is particularly put out.

'Uncle,' said Mrs. Kenwigs, 'to think that you should have turned your back upon me and my dear children, and upon Kenwigs which is the author of their being—you who was once so kind and affectionate, and who, if anybody had told us such a thing of, we should have withered with scorn like lightning—you that little Lillyvick, our first and earliest boy, was named after at the very altar! Oh gracious!' . . .

'My feelings have been lacerated,' said Mrs. Kenwigs, 'my heart has been torn asunder with anguish, I have been thrown back in my confinement, my unoffending infant has been rendered uncomfortable and fractious, Morleena has pined herself away to nothing; all this I forget and forgive, and with you, uncle, I never can quarrel. But never ask me to receive *her*, never do it, uncle. For I will not, I will not, I won't, I won't, I won't!'

'Susan, my dear,' said Mr. Kenwigs, 'consider your child.'

'Yes,' shrieked Mrs. Kenwigs, 'I will consider my child! My own child, that no uncles can deprive me of; my own hated, despised, deserted, cut-off little child.' And, here, the emotions of Mrs. Kenwigs became so violent, that Mr. Kenwigs was fain to administer hartshorn internally, and vinegar externally, and to destroy a staylace, four petticoat strings, and several small buttons. (52, p. 689)

In his autobiography, Mark Twain relates his wife's vain attempt to shame him out of swearing by showing him how his salty language sounded. "In my lifetime," he wrote years later, "I had never heard anything so out of tune, so inharmonious, so incongruous, so ill suited to each other as were those mighty words set to that feeble music."⁵ Characters like Fanny Squeers and Mrs. Lenville experience the opposite difficulty: they can summon up, in a kind of way, the music—the rhythm and movement—of melodramatic speech, but their words are woefully inadequate to their purpose.

Dickens also contrives to combine melodramatic with other devices, generally comic ones, to produce effectively mixed results. Newman Noggs employs the expansively phrased rhetorical questions characteristic of melodramatic speech to tell Nicholas of his uncle's plot to marry Madeline off to Gride:

'Do you know that within one day, by means of your uncle Ralph, she will be married to a man as bad as he, and worse, if worse there is? Do you know that, within one day, she will be sacrificed, as sure as you stand there alive, to a hoary wretch—a devil born and bred, and grey in devils' ways?' (51, pp. 677-78)

But the scene is essentially comic: Newman, in his eccentric and oblique way, takes an unconscionably long time to get to the point of his disclosure, and, once Nicholas has finally grasped what the old clerk has been trying to tell him, Newman seems surprised and aghast at the indignant youth's impetuous reaction. "'Stop him!' cried Newman, bolting out in pursuit. 'He'll be doing something desperate; he'll murder somebody. Hallo! there, stop him. Stop thief! stop thief!'" (51, p. 678)

Other scenes of mixed melodrama are fundamentally much more sober. Certainly there is a great deal at stake in Chapter 45, when Ralph, abetted by Squeers and Snawley, tries to take Smike away from Nicholas and "reunite" him with Snawley, and uncle and nephew hurl eloquent melodramatic speeches back and forth at each other. But the nature of the scene is much leavened by the presence, and occasional participation, of the other characters. Snawley, for example, does his best to rise to the occasion, with results that are absurd. Searching for a phrase to describe his reaction to the imminent capture of Smike, Snawley gratefully accepts Squeers's suggestion that he is moved by "parental instinct."

'That's what it was, sir,' rejoined Snawley; 'the elevated feeling, the feeling of the ancient Romans and Grecians, and of the beasts of the field and birds of the air, with the exception of rabbits and tomcats, which sometimes devour their offspring. My heart yearned towards him. I could have—I don't know what I couldn't have done to him in the anger of a father.' (45, p. 589)

Mrs. Nickleby's contribution to the discussion is characteristically woolly and unhelpful.

'I really don't know what would be best to do, and that's the truth. Nicholas ought to be the best judge, and I hope he is. Of course, it's a hard thing to have to keep other people's children, though young Mr. Snawley is certainly as useful and willing as it's possible for anybody to be; but, if it could be settled in any friendly manner—if old Mr. Snawley, for instance, would settle to pay something certain for his board and lodging, and some fair arrangement was come to, so that we undertook to have fish twice a-week, and a pudding twice, or a dumpling, or something of that sort—I do think that it might be very satisfactory and pleasant for all parties.' (45, p. 593)⁶

It takes two characters (at least) to produce a melodramatic scene, and sometimes in *Nicholas Nickleby*, when one of the participants in a conversation declines to play according to the rules, the result is mixed melodrama of still a different kind. Thus, when Nicholas tries to call Sir Mulberry Hawk to account after he has made demeaning remarks about Kate in public, the haughty knight refuses to engage in melodramatic dialogue with the irate young man. Indeed, the mood of the scene and of the principals in it is almost too excited for ordinary melodrama: there are no long, carefully constructed speeches, merely terse exchanges, pregnant silences, and (at the end) violent action resulting in injury to both men.

'Will you make yourself known to me?' asked Nicholas, in a suppressed voice.

'No,' replied the other fiercely, and confirming the refusal with an oath. 'No.'

'If you trust to your horse's speed, you will find yourself mistaken,' said Nicholas. 'I will accompany you. By heaven I will, if I hang on to the foot-board!'

'You shall be horsewhipped if you do,' returned Sir Mulberry.

'You are a villain,' said Nicholas.

'You are an errand-boy for aught I know,' said Sir Mulberry Hawk.

'I am the son of a country gentleman,' returned Nicholas, 'your equal in birth and education, and your superior I trust in everything besides. I tell you again, Miss Nickleby is my sister. Will you or will you not answer for your unmanly and brutal conduct?'

'To a proper champion—yes. To you—no,' returned Sir Mulberry, taking the reins in his hand. 'Stand out of the way, dog. . . .'

Or when, in Chapter 53, Nicholas appeals to Arthur Gride in violent language to free Madeline Bray from her engagement to marry him, Nicholas cannot provoke his adversary into retorting in kind. Gride holds all the trump cards, and he knows it. His only response to Nicholas' passionate eloquence is to threaten to call for help and to torture the young man by painting for him a fanciful picture of the connubial bliss he expects to enjoy with his beautiful young bride.

Rich as his materials are in melodramatic possibilities, Dickens refuses to exhaust his reader or to rob his key scenes of their power by playing everything fortissimo. Contrary to what some of Dickens' critics have been saying about him for nearly a century and a half, he is quite capable of understatement, of cutting a melodramatic scene short, when it suits his purpose. Sir Mulberry Hawk's attempt to seduce Kate, for instance, is most economically rendered. This could have been a very big scene indeed, but in fact it occupies less than a page. Though the occasion might have called forth some of Kate's most powerfully indignant eloquence, her longest speech, in which she tells Sir Mulberry that he "offends and disgusts" her, consists of just two sentences, and she barely gets out the obligatory "Unhand me, sir, this instant," before he loses his balance and sprawls indecorously on the floor. (Dickens, resorting to a stock phrase, puts it more elegantly: Sir Mulberry, we are told, "measured his length upon the ground.") (19, pp. 240-241).

When Nicholas, who has been called back to London by Newman Noggs's mysterious warning that Kate is in danger, is reunited with her at the Wititterlys', their first meeting is remarkably free of fustian. Kate's account of her suffering is limited to sobbing out, "I have been so unhappy here, dear brother, . . . so very, very miserable. Do not leave me here, dear Nicholas, or I shall die of a broken heart." Nicholas does, it is true, start declaiming in response to this appeal, but Kate very sensibly cuts him off.

'Tell me that I acted for the best. Tell me that we parted because I feared to bring misfortune on your head; that it was a trial to me no less than to yourself, and that if I did wrong it was in ignorance of the world and unknowingly.'

'Why should I tell you what we know so well?' returned Kate soothingly. 'Nicholas—dear Nicholas—how can you give way thus?'
(33, p. 421)

On such occasions Dickens manages to control his tendency to show his characters engaging in intensely melodramatic conversation. At other times

he suppresses that tendency altogether. Perhaps the best example of this occurs in Chapter 50. It is likely that during the scene of drunken revelry which culminates in Sir Mulberry Hawk's decision to fight a duel with Lord Frederick Verisopht there would have been heated words exchanged by the two men, but we are left to imagine what they might have been, for Dickens chooses—wisely, in view of the wildly kaleidoscopic quality of this debauch, which comes off very well—to employ narrative rather than dramatic rendering here. We know clearly enough by now how strongly Lord Frederick has come to feel about the depravity of his former mentor, and a scene of riotous confusion culminating in a blow and a challenge serves Dickens' purpose much better than yet another passionate dialogue between the two men would have done.

Such restraint and subtlety in his use of melodrama, for which Dickens has been given insufficient credit, is matched in *Nicholas Nickleby* by the considerable skill with which he depicts the underlying conflict between good and evil that makes possible such highly pitched emotional scenes as those we have been examining.

Not only—to begin with his virtuous characters—are Kate and Madeline in genuine peril during much of the novel, but in limning their respective plights Dickens is able to utilize pathos in a way that was not available to him in *Oliver Twist*, where pathetic effects and melodramatic language generally function independently of each other. Both of these young women are explicitly objects of pity, as Rose and even Nancy in *Oliver Twist* are not. Kate's unhappy situation moves Newman Noggs to tears (28, p. 372), and even her uncle, hard-hearted as he is, is repeatedly affected by it, and by the helpless girl's resemblance to his dead brother (19, p. 244; 26, p. 341; 28, p. 373; 31, pp. 400-01; 34, p. 441). As for the monstrous trap in which circumstances have caught Madeline, her plight not only arouses the sympathy and indignation of the admirable characters in *Nicholas Nickleby*: it even awakens some momentary pangs of conscience in her ordinarily shameless tormentors. Ralph cannot quite manage to persuade her father that marriage with the hideous Gride will be in Madeline's interest: Ralph clearly does not believe this himself, and as for the eager bridegroom, Gride knows better than anyone what horrors are in store for her as his wife. The three men feel the "shame and terror" of their conspiracy, marked as it is by "meanness and heartless deformity" (47, p. 622). When such helpless victims are also capable, as Kate and Madeline are, of lashing out so elo-

quently at their fate and the villains responsible for it, the power of the resultant melodrama is greatly heightened.

Nicholas himself must not be regarded solely as a stuffy prig. There is a ridiculous side to him, and I am not referring now to the mirth which the spectacle of stridently self-righteous goodness arouses in the worldly-wise and cynical reader. Quite deliberately, I think, Dickens has drawn Nicholas as his mother's son, with a pronounced, if usually latent, foolish streak in him.⁷ When he first hears of the job at Dotheboys Hall, for example, he starts to erect more elaborate castles in Spain than even the absurdly naive Mrs. Nickleby would dream of designing. He will, he is sure, meet "some young nobleman who is being educated at the Hall" who will make Nicholas' fortune, marry Kate, and restore the little family to happiness and prosperity (3, pp. 27-28). Especially when it is regarded in the context of this novel, his love at first sight for Madeline cannot be taken altogether seriously either. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, after all, it is the silly or crazy people who are remarkable for their romantic impetuosity: the outlandish Fanny Squeers forms an instant attachment to Nicholas himself, and the gentleman next door demonstrates his insane infatuation for Mrs. Nickleby by tossing garden vegetables over the wall in her general direction. The absurd side of Nicholas' passion may be seen to good advantage in his indignant reaction to the sentiments which the clerk in the register office dares to express about Madeline, before Nicholas has so much as made her acquaintance (16, pp. 189-90).

As to the villains in *Nicholas Nickleby*, we never feel for them the fleeting sympathy which a Sikes at bay or a Fagin in the condemned cell is capable of arousing. There is nothing of the underdog about Ralph Nickleby or Squeers or Gride; in no sense at all are they victims of social injustice or social prejudice. They are, quite simply, thoroughly evil men, instinctively at odds with goodness in any of its manifestations.

Among this unsavory threesome, Ralph stands out as resembling most closely the stereotype of the melodramatic villain.⁸ Not only do his speeches, as we have observed, fit the pattern we expect the utterances of such an archetypal character to follow: described as he so often is as scowling, sneering, snarling, gnashing his teeth, and even frothing at the mouth, he actually *looks* the part. The only softening element in his nature is his ability to feel an occasional twinge of guilt about his treatment of Kate; but clearly his conscience pangs do not keep him from using her in his nefarious schemes, nor do his stirrings of avuncular feeling extend to Nicholas, who is

just as much his brother's child as Kate is, and whom he quickly grows to loathe.

His colleague in usury, Arthur Gride, has no redeeming feature at all. Greed, lechery, and a deeply cruel *Schadenfreude* exhaust the list of his attributes. Though a less important character, he comes to life more successfully than *Kapri* does because he so often displays his contemptible nature casually and by the way rather than in elaborately set speeches. Here is Gride, for instance, ordering his wedding suit.

'The bottle-green,' said old Arthur; 'the bottle-green was a famous suit to wear, and I bought it very cheap at a pawnbroker's, and there was—he, he, he!—a tarnished shilling in the waistcoat pocket. To think that the pawnbroker shouldn't have known there was a shilling in it. *I* knew it. I felt it when I was examining the quality. Oh, what a dull dog of a pawnbroker! It was a lucky suit too, this bottle-green. The very day I put it on first, old Lord Mallowford was burnt to death in his bed, and all the post-obits fell in. I'll be married in the bottle-green, Peg. Peg Sliderskew—I'll wear the bottle-green!' (51, p. 668)

As for Squeers, he operates his Yorkshire school even more sadistically than the parish workhouse in *Oliver Twist* is run. The deprivation and neglect which the inmates of that institution suffer is benign by contrast with the outright viciousness which the schoolmaster and his family employ at Dotheboys Hall. His account to Ralph of how he paid his doctor's bill after being wounded by Nicholas is typical in its insouciant brutality:

'... after my bill was run up, we picked out five little boys (sons of small tradesmen, as was sure pay) that had never had the scarlet fever, and we sent one to a cottage where they'd got it, and he took it, and then we put the four others to sleep with him, and *they* took it, and then the doctor came and attended 'em once all round, and we divided my total among 'em, and added it on to their little bills, and the parents paid it. Ha! ha! ha!'

'And a good plan, too,' said Ralph eyeing the schoolmaster steadily.

'I believe you,' rejoined Squeers. 'We always do it. Why, when Mrs. Squeers was brought to bed with little Wackford here, we ran

the whooping-cough through half-a-dozen boys, and charged her expenses among 'em, monthly nurse included. Ha! ha! ha!

(34, pp. 436-37)

Even more than is the case with Arthur Gride, Squeers's evil character is enhanced rather than diminished by the comic treatment which Dickens lavishes on it. Certainly Squeers is not less dangerous to his hapless pupils or to Nicholas because he happens to be, utterly unknown to himself, an ignorant and boorish brute.

Neither virtue nor vice in *Nicholas Nickleby*, then, is described with tedious sameness or without important qualification. To say this is not to detract from the fury of the combat between them. On the contrary, to the extent that this struggle is waged by characters who cannot be readily stereotyped and the responses that are aroused are not merely the stock ones, by so much is the power of the contest enhanced and the melodramatic situation of the novel brought closer to successful realization.

Nicholas Nickleby has elicited significantly less critical favor than its immediate predecessor among Dickens' novels, *Oliver Twist*. There is, some complain, too much in *Nicholas Nickleby*: it is "a meaningless muddle," as Angus Wilson puts it.⁹ The more usual charge, however, is that Dickens lets his melodramatic tendencies run riot in *Nicholas Nickleby*: the novel contains, according to R. C. Churchill, "the very crudest melodrama that Dickens ever wrote."¹⁰ That it is the most melodramatic of Dickens' novels there is no denying. But, I have argued, Dickens knows exactly what he is doing in employing melodramatic devices in *Nicholas Nickleby*. He is aware that they can be misapplied, as he shows by his use of mock melodrama, not only in the Crummles episodes but also elsewhere. When it suits his purpose, he is able to resist turning on the melodramatic tap, to turn it off as soon as it has served his purpose, or to blend its flow with other currents. Especially—and in this, I think, the superiority of *Nicholas Nickleby* to *Oliver Twist* chiefly consists—he employs melodramatic scenes to illustrate the elemental conflicts on which the novel turns and propel the action forward, and not merely for the sake of narrative padding or dramatic posturing. Such use of melodramatic scenes, firmly set in a plot like that of *Nicholas Nickleby*, requires no apology from me: it does, however, demand of the reader a willingness to approach the novel, with a mind cleared of critical cant, on its own unique terms.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Bishop has argued, ingeniously but not altogether persuasively, that the moral opposites in the novel are imaginatively linked, that there are important resemblances, as well as differences, between Oliver and Monks, Brownlow and Fagin, Rose and Nancy ("The Hero-Villain of *Oliver Twist*," *VN*, No. 15 [Spring 1959], pp. 14-16).

2. John Bayley's remarks on the elevated diction in which much of the dialogue in *Oliver Twist* is cast are instructive: he regards it as a necessary feature of the "melodramatic ceremonial" in which Dickens is indulging, part of his effort "to disarm criticism by drawing his readers into a hypnotic unity with the tale and the author." According to Bayley, Dickens was prevented by "the taste of the age" from depicting realistically "what must have been the continual and brutish sexual activity in Fagin's hole" or "the actual oaths of Sikes," and this was fortunate, because, as Dickens knew, "such disguises and prevarications are indeed the truth of the fantasy" ("Oliver Twist: 'Things as They Really Are,'" in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962], pp. 55-56).

3. For a properly appreciative account of Dickens' "brilliant" handling of Sikes's flight, see Barbara Hardy, "Dickens and the Passions," *NCF*, 24 (1970), 454-57.

4. *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. ix.

5. Mark Twain, *Autobiography* (New York: Harper, 1929), II, 87.

6. This is apparently an example of the sort of thing Michael Slater has in mind in saying that Mrs. Nickleby "'earths' the wilder flights of melodrama throughout the novel" ("Appreciating Mrs. Nickleby," *Dickensian*, 71 [1975], 138).

7. As far as I am aware, only one critic (John Forster, according to Philip Collins), long ago, reviewing *Nicholas Nickleby* in the *Examiner* on 27 October 1839, has so much as ventured as a conjecture what I regard as a fact: that Dickens slyly but methodically, and without seriously damaging his status as a hero, pokes fun at the self-righteousness of Nicholas. "We are not sure," he writes, "that even Mr. Dickens himself is indisposed to quiz now and then these little foibles of his favourite hero" (*Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, p. 51).

8. But not entirely. Several critics have shown that there is more to Ralph than this. See, e.g., Barbara Hardy, "The Complexity of Dickens," pp. 42-43; Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, I, 289; Jerome Meckier, "The Faint Image of Eden: The Many Worlds of *Nicholas Nickleby*," in *Dickens Studies Annual I*, ed. Robert B. Partlow, Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1970), p. 145; and John W. Noffsinger, "The Complexity of Ralph Nickleby," *DSN*, 5 (1974), 112.

9. Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970), p. 136.

10. R. C. Churchill, "Charles Dickens," in *The Penguin Guide to English Literature: From Dickens to Hardy*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), pp. 128-29.

Chapter 3

The Old Curiosity Shop, *Barnaby Rudge, Martin Chuzzlewit*

Each critic has his or her favorite way of subdividing Dickens' massive output as a novelist. Such attempts to break down a complex and variegated whole into parts often show a great deal of ingenuity and always teach us much about the assumptions and working methods of those who engage in them. As for me, though I am much more interested in examining how individual Dickens novels work than I am in grouping consecutive ones according to any principle, I cannot avoid noticing, and stating, that something fundamental to my approach to Dickens changes after *Nicholas Nickleby*: that, indeed, only in that novel and in *Oliver Twist* is Dickens dealing with central *situations* that are essentially melodramatic. Of course he continues to use melodramatic *devices* in his later novels, but since the nature and role of good and evil change in them, the contexts in which those devices are placed and the ways in which they are deployed alter significantly. This process begins, somewhat haltingly, in his next three novels. In all of them, Dickens' melodramatic vein is largely submerged. It does crop out from time to time, but only rarely does it touch on their central concerns. The reasons differ as we pass from *The Old Curiosity Shop* through *Barnaby Rudge* and on to *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but they have this much in common: in none of these novels is the basic issue simply stateable as a clear-cut conflict between vice and virtue embodied in human agents, the sort of conflict so prominently on display in *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. It will never again, as a matter of fact, play a crucial role in Dickens' novels; but, as we shall see, this does not mean that he abandons the melodramatic techniques he had brought to virtual perfection in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Rather, he refines and enriches them in conformity with his changing perceptions and emphases, in ways I hope to illustrate and explain.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, to be sure, the diabolically evil Quilp is at the bottom of all the afflictions that beset the pure Nell and Kit Nubbles; but Quilp is a devil, a monster (and, paradoxically, a very funny one), rather than anything approaching by any stretch of the imagination a stage villain, and the difference is important.¹ Moreover, Nell's fate is as much

determined by her grandfather's moral weakness and the workings of an inscrutable providence as it is by the grotesque dwarf's machinations. There are vicious characters in *Barnaby Rudge*, too, but most of the very considerable harm that is done in that novel is the work of weak or misguided men in the grip of powerful forces hopelessly beyond the control of the all-too-fallible individuals concerned. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, finally, Dickens' target is a very large and general one: human venality, as it is manifested not only in the selfishness which he explicitly attacks on a number of occasions but also in the hypocrisy of the Pecksniffs of the world and in the ignorant crudity which is seen to best advantage in the American episodes.

Insofar as it deals with the hardships of virtuous characters, *The Old Curiosity Shop* is pathetic. For, almost without exception, these innocent victims are helpless children, quite incapable of adequately confronting their tormentors on their own terms—even if these malefactors could be identified, which is not generally the case. This is most obviously true of Nell and Kit, but they are only the two outstanding examples. The novel abounds with abused or neglected or doomed children, and what happens to Nell and Kit takes place in an atmosphere in which the young and guiltless seem destined to suffer. The hardships the little Marchioness incurs at the hands of the Brasses are far more extensive, and at times no less intense, than those Nell and Kit have to endure, but at least she survives, as do the reunited sisters whom Nell so feelingly observes in Chapter 32 and the youthful victims of the Industrial Revolution alluded to in Chapter 45. A number of afflicted children in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, however, do not: there is not only Nell, but also the schoolmaster's favorite pupil (Chapter 25) and the boy Willy, whose little brother is unable to accept the reality of death and the grave (Chapter 53). Indeed, from the time Nell and her grandfather reach what is to be their last home, the church keeper's house in the village graveyard, she is constantly faced with reminders of death—in particular, the deaths of children.

In depicting the suffering of these victims, Dickens generally resorts to narrative rather than dramatic rendering. When they do talk, Nell and Kit are ordinarily given brief and businesslike lines rather than lengthy speeches which might afford them opportunities to indulge in melodramatic eloquence. There are exceptions, of course. Here is Nell, early in the novel, pleading with her grandfather—in language that is richly patterned—to give over the debilitating life he has been leading and to seek a better one with her help:

'If you are sorrowful, let me know why and be sorrowful too; if you waste away and are paler and weaker every day, let me be your nurse and try to comfort you. If you are poor, let us be poor together; but let me be with you, do let me be with you; do not let me see such change and not know why, or I shall break my heart and die. Dear grandfather, let us leave this sad place to-morrow, and beg our way from door to door. . . .

'Let us be beggars. . . . I have no fear but we shall have enough, I am sure we shall. Let us walk through country places, and sleep in fields and under trees, and never think of money again, or anything that can make you sad, but rest at nights, and have the sun and wind upon our faces in the day, and thank God together! Let us never set foot in dark rooms or melancholy houses, any more, but wander up and down wherever we like to go; and when you are tired, you shall stop to rest in the pleasantest place that we can find, and I will go and beg for both.' (9, p. 71)

Or Kit, much later, spiritedly defending himself against the Brasses' attempt to frame him:

'Who is there that knows me . . . that would not trust me—that does not? ask anybody whether they have ever doubted me; whether I have ever wronged them of a farthing. Was I ever dishonest when I was poor and hungry, and is it likely I would begin now? Oh consider what you do. How can I meet the kindest friends that ever human creature had, with this dreadful charge upon me!' (60, p. 445)

But these are atypical instances. Dickens' normal practice with Nell and Kit and other such virtuous but powerless characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is to intervene vigorously in telling their stories, giving them little occasion to speak for themselves, and thereby heightening the reader's sense of their passivity and the pathos of their circumstances. What is done on their behalf is done by others and not by themselves.

Extreme pathos cannot sustain narrative interest for very long. Even a Victorian reader could take only so much noble hopelessness declining inevitably toward the grave. Realizing this, Dickens all but abandons the Nell line of action for the last third of the novel in order to concentrate on the machinations of Quilp and the Brasses against Kit.² The pathos here is not nearly so acute as that associated with Nell, not only because Kit's plight is

of much shorter duration, but also because his powerful friends are never far absent from the scene of his suffering; and of course there is never any question of Kit's dying. He is speedily exonerated and removed from danger, because the lucky coincidence of the Marchioness' having overheard the Brasses' plotting against him comes to the fore very quickly; whereas the coincidences on Nell's side—chiefly the relationship between Mr. Garland and the bachelor—do not become operative until too late to save her.

There are other brief outbursts of melodramatic speech in the novel, but they are either quite peripheral touches or else mechanical shortcuts to get Dickens through tricky scenes more expeditiously than any other device would have done. Nell's grandfather occasionally attempts to justify himself or laments Nell's condition in melodramatic language, but his more typical stance is one of impotent and inarticulate resignation. In Chapter 71, there is much melodrama in the reunion between the grandfather and his long lost brother, particularly in the speeches of the bachelor and the single gentleman, but here—as on a couple of similar occasions in *Oliver Twist*—the scene is largely expository, giving the reader, very late in the game and in language too emotional for such a utilitarian purpose, information about Nell's family history that he has not previously had. If one objects, it is not because such diction per se is unacceptable, but rather because this does not seem to be an appropriate situation in which to have such characters indulge in it. Still, since it obviously came easily to Dickens, he must have been tempted to resort to it when he felt called on to unravel some tangled strands of his plot near the end of his novel, with results that are less than happy.

Something comparable happens toward the conclusion of *Barnaby Rudge*, in Chapter 81. The two old enemies, Sir John Chester and Geoffrey Haredale, meet at night, close by the ruins of the Warren, Haredale's burned-out country house. They denounce each other in eloquent language of great intensity, they fight a duel, and Chester dies, "with scorn and hatred in his look" (p. 627). A wicked character of great importance, one who has been obstructing the happiness of his son and that son's sweetheart, is thus conveniently removed from the action; and so is his antagonist, also opposed to the match between the young people, who is compelled to flee England and end his days in the only way appropriate to someone with his troubled past, in a strict "religious establishment" on the Continent where "merciless penitence" will be exacted from him (82, p. 628).

The only real trouble with this otherwise effective melodramatic scene, so convenient for Dickens in the denouement of *Barnaby Rudge*, is that one

of the principals in it has to depart completely from character in order to make it possible. For if there is anything striking about John Chester's manner as the reader comes to know it in the first eighty chapters it is that he never allows himself to get visibly ruffled. Whatever the provocation, Chester is always bland, always affable, so that a number of scenes in which he participates—scenes in which the stakes are high and the emotions felt and expressed by others are keen—are anything but melodramatic.

During Chester's first and only other private meeting with Haredale, when the two men discuss their displeasure over the romance between Emma Haredale and Edward Chester (the sole point on which they agree), his manner is much truer to form. He refuses to get excited.

' . . . I have determined not to quarrel with you, and not to be betrayed into a warm expression or a hasty word.'

'There again,' said Mr. Haredale, 'you have me at a great advantage. Your self-command—!'

'Is not to be disturbed. . . .' (12, p. 91)

Later on the same page, Chester expresses what may pass for his creed, and, rotten though he unquestionably is, this is no melodramatic villain speaking.

'The world is a lively place enough, in which we must accommodate ourselves to circumstances, sail with the stream as glibly as we can, be content to take froth for substance, the surface for the depth; the counterfeit for the real coin. I wonder no philosopher has ever established that our globe itself is hollow. It should be, if Nature is consistent in her works.'

Now, obviously, these still waters run much deeper than Chester's placid surface might lead the casual observer to believe. One reason we know that there is a difference between what Chester says and what he thinks is that Dickens has him indulge in some really vicious soliloquies (see, e.g., 40, p. 306, and 75, p. 573)—a theatrical device, to be sure, but one in these instances as free from the language of melodrama as is his customary mode of speech in company. And Chester's imperturbability aborts more than one potentially melodramatic scene. Even the troubling interview between Chester and Edward which culminates in Sir John's denouncing and driving out his son is much muted by the older man's "equanimity and even temper" (32, p. 246).

The subject of *Barnaby Rudge*—an exceeding difficult novel, for all its

undeniable virtues, with which to come to terms—has stubbornly eluded precise definition.³ It can be agreed, I think, that two chief spheres are dealt with: a “private” one, which involves the family affairs and domestic generational conflicts of the Chesters, the Willets, the Vardens, the Rudges, and the Haredales, and the interrelationships among these families and their members; and a “public” one, mainly to be found in the second and longer of the two parts of the novel, which concerns the social, political, and religious confusion of late eighteenth-century London, culminating in the Gordon Riots of 1780.

Despite the circumstances of his death, Chester—as I have tried to show—is not ordinarily a melodramatic figure. In his dealings with both of his sons (the bastard Hugh as well as Edward), his voice never rises, his temper never flares, his smooth exterior is never discomposed. The opposition between John Willet and Joe is even less sharply drawn since neither the narrow-minded publican nor his harassed son is sufficiently complex in his nature or gifted in his powers of language to resort to passionate speech. Gabriel, the only real personality under the Varden roof, is capable of occasional eloquence, but this is the articulateness of honest plain-speaking and not the elevated diction of melodrama.

‘Let them come and pull the roof about our ears; let them burn us out of house and home; I’d neither have the protection of their leader, nor chalk their howl upon my door, though, for not doing it, they shot me on my own threshold. . . . Let them come and do their worst. The first man who crosses my door-step on such an errand as theirs, had better be a hundred miles away. Let him look to it. The others may have their will. I wouldn’t beg or buy them off, if, instead of every pound of iron in the place, there was a hundred weight of gold. Get you to bed, Martha. I shall take down the shutters and go to work.’ (51, p. 395)

Melodramatic features do abound in the intercourse of the other two principal families, certain members of which have had their lives scarred by suffering or crime. Haredale makes a melodramatic speech practically every time he opens his mouth, and Barnaby’s unhappy parents are constantly thrust into situations in which extravagant language comes easily to them. However, the affairs of the elder Rudges lie beyond the main action, and Haredale—a bitter and disappointed man, well past the prime of life, and a Catholic to boot—is in every way an outsider in the world of *Barnaby*

Rudge. Whereas the intense public excitement of the Gordon Riots, so superbly rendered by Dickens, makes possible much of what little private melodrama the novel contains, it also dwarfs it in its enveloping vehemence.

Martin Chuzzlewit seems to include several characters whose circumstances might lend themselves to melodramatic treatment, but these elements are so mixed with others as to undergo a fundamental change in nature. Mary Graham in Pecksniff's clutches might, at first glance, remind the reader of Madeline Bray at the mercy of Arthur Gride, but—unpleasant as Mary's plight is no doubt meant to be—her virtue is plainly in much less danger than Madeline's. For Dickens' emphasis in depicting Pecksniff's designs on Mary is not so much on their sexual aspect as on the comic self-delusion and avarice which make them possible and fan the fire of his ardor. As Dickens depicts it, his wooing of Mary is much more reminiscent of Mr. Collins paying clumsy court to Elizabeth Bennet than of Lovelace in pursuit of Clarissa:

'Mary,' said Mr. Pecksniff in his tenderest tones: indeed, they were so very tender that he almost squeaked: 'My soul! I love you!'

A fantastic thing, that maiden affection! She made believe to shudder.

'I love you,' said Mr. Pecksniff, 'my gentle life, with a devotion which is quite surprising, even to myself. I did suppose that the sensation was buried in the silent tomb of a lady, only second to you in qualities of the mind and form: but I find I am mistaken.'

She tried to disengage her hand, but might as well have tried to free herself from the embrace of an affectionate boa-constrictor: if anything so wily may be brought into comparison with Pecksniff.

'Although I am a widower,' said Mr. Pecksniff, examining the rings upon her fingers, and tracing the course of one delicate blue vein with his fat thumb, 'a widower with two daughters, still I am not encumbered, my love. . . . I have a character, I hope. People are pleased to speak well of me, I think. My person and manner are not absolutely those of a monster, I trust. Ah, naughty Hand!' said Mr. Pecksniff, apostrophising the reluctant prize, 'why did you take me prisoner! Go, go!'

He slapped the hand to punish it; but relenting, folded it in his waistcoat to comfort it again. (30, pp. 481-82)

Gride is a monster; Pecksniff is a buffoon.

His presence considerably modifies or altogether vitiates the melodramatic quality of a number of other scenes. Mary Graham's rhetorical and highly patterned (she uses the formula "what is he . . . ?" no fewer than six times) appeal to Tom Pinch in the next chapter is robbed of much of its power not only by Tom's sophomoric rejoinders but especially by the fact that Pecksniff is a clownish eavesdropper in the supposedly empty church in which Mary and Tom are talking, "constantly diving down into the state pew, and coming up again like the intelligent householder in Punch's Show, who avoids being knocked on the head with a cudgel" (31, p. 493). Much later, when young Martin sees his grandfather for the first time after returning from America and speaks movingly to the old man of his penitence and reformation, Pecksniff keeps interrupting with foolish observations and finally drops a crocodile tear right on old Martin's bald head (43, p. 670).

There are two other oppressed females in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but it is difficult to regard either of them as a melodramatic heroine. The former Merry Pecksniff takes some terrifying fire-and-brimstone verbal abuse from her husband Jonas Chuzzlewit, but the reader's very genuine pity for her is strongly colored by his knowledge of her foolhardiness in getting involved with this villain in the first place; and though Tom Pinch roundly denounces the gentleman in whose family his sister has served as a governess (Chapter 36), Ruth is well out of that position and quickly exchanges this domestic role for a much happier one playing house with her brother.

Though the three novels which are the subject of this chapter make much more limited and tangential use of straightforwardly melodramatic devices than do *Oliver Twist* or *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens remains fully aware of the possibilities of mock melodrama and exploits them with great skill where appropriate. Dick Swiveller's spouting bombastic nonsense to the Marchioness and gesticulating "after the manner of a theatrical bandit" (*Old Curiosity Shop*, 58, p. 529), Sampson Brass's absurdly high-flown denunciation of Quilp (*Old Curiosity Shop*, 66, pp. 497-98), Sim Tappertit's affecting the roles of lover and outlaw chieftain (*Barnaby Rudge*, 22, p. 172; 51, p. 391; 59, pp. 456-57), Pecksniff's combination of hypocritically exalted sentiments with comic pratfalls (*Martin Chuzzlewit*, 12, pp. 209-10; 52, pp. 802-03), and Moddle's romantic despair (*Martin Chuzzlewit*, 32, pp. 508-11) are all delightful instances of Dickens' unsurpassed ability to lampoon the conventions of stage melodrama.

Melodramatic narrative, too, plays a role in all three novels: in Dickens'

accounts of Nell's being robbed by her grandfather and Quilp's journey to his death (*Old Curiosity Shop*, 30, pp. 228-29, and 67, pp. 509-10); of the approaching execution of Hugh, Dennis, and, it is thought, Barnaby (*Barnaby Rudge*, Chapter 77); and of Jonas Chuzzlewit's murder of Tigg Montague, its preliminaries, and its aftermath (*Martin Chuzzlewit*, Chapter 47).⁴ Their traveling to Salisbury (Chapter 42) is another fine example; and still other aspects of Jonas' involvement with his ultimate victim and with the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company are deeply shrouded in the melodrama of mystery (38, pp. 595-98; 40, pp. 627-33; 41, pp. 635-39).

But, like the mixed melodrama of *Barnaby Rudge* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, these are techniques which Dickens has employed before, though his mastery of them is clearly growing. It is not until his next novel that he takes a marked step forward in his use of melodramatic devices.

NOTES

1. If Quilp were nothing more than the melodramatic villain he is sometimes said to be, critics would not have bestirred themselves so vigorously to find other origins for him and other explanations for the powerful spell he casts on readers. See, e.g., Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*, p. 155; Warrington Winters, "The Old Curiosity Shop: A Consummation Devoutly to Be Wished," *Dickensian*, 63 (1967), 176-80; Northrop Frye, "Dickens and the Comedy of Humours," p. 62; Robert Simpson McLean, "Putting Quilp to Rest," *VN*, No. 34 (Fall 1968), pp. 29-33; A. E. Dyson, *The Inimitable Dickens*, p. 29; Toby A. Olshin, "'The Yellow Dwarf' and *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *NCF*, 25 (1970), 96-99; John Holloway, "Dickens and the Symbol," in *Dickens 1970*, p. 60; Robert Simpson McLean, "Another Source for Quilp," *NCF*, 26 (1971), 337-39; G. M. Watkins, "A Possible Source for Quilp," *N. & Q.*, n.s. 18 (1971), 411-13; Rachel Bennett, "Punch versus Christian in *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *RES*, n.s. 22 (1971), 423-34; and Joseph Gold, *Charles Dickens: Radical Moralists* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1972), p. 96.

2. Jerome Meckier's suggestive analysis of the plot of *The Old Curiosity Shop* explains the virtual disappearance of Nell for a long stretch of the novel near the end as a deliberate device on Dickens' part to work on the feelings of the reader by postponing her clearly inevitable demise ("Suspense in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: Dickens' Contrapuntal Artistry," *JNT*, 2 [1972], 199-207).

3. James Gottshall's reading of the novel as a "melodramatic battle between heaven and hell" seems to me somewhat simplistic ("Devils Abroad: The Unity and Significance of *Barnaby Rudge*," *NCF*, 16 [1961], 134).

4. Without any explanation (a common practice among critics when they use the term "melodrama" in a pejorative sense), Philip Collins dismisses "Jonas Chuzzlewit's attempts to murder . . . Montague Tigg" as "typical melodrama," though Collins does concede that Dickens begins to rise above such "mere conventional rubbish" when he begins to investigate the psychological dimensions of Jonas' guilt (*Dickens and Crime* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968], pp. 276 and 278).

Chapter 4

Dombey and Son

Many readers have followed Dickens' lead in regarding *Dombey and Son* as a novel about *pride*. Dombey is a proud man, Edith is a proud woman, and this trait brings great sorrow to both characters and also to a number of others with whom they have—to use the word which is part of the full title—“dealings.” But there is another way to understand *Dombey and Son*: as a novel about *feeling*, and about what happens to people who do not allow themselves to show normal human emotions. This interpretation accounts for the sparing use Dickens makes in *Dombey and Son* of melodramatic speech and melodramatic scenes: both are impossible if the characters concerned are unwilling or unable to display their feelings. But, almost in spite of themselves, they do have feelings, which they suppress at great cost, and Dickens must, and does, find ways to convey this essential fact to the reader. These entail the deliberate and skillful use of techniques of which he has not previously availed himself to such a significant extent—techniques that embody aspects of the melodramatic devices that I have been discussing.

Both Dombey and his second wife have been accustomed to keep a tight rein on their emotions. In Dombey's case, this is made abundantly clear from the first chapter on.¹ The birth of Paul fills his “cup of satisfaction” (1, p. 3), not for the usual reasons of paternal affection or even pride, but because the “young gentleman has to accomplish a destiny” (1, p. 4): i.e., he is to be in turn the “and Son” in the family firm, as his father has been before him. That firm “had often dealt in hides, but never in hearts. They left that fancy ware to boys and girls, and boarding-schools and books” (1, p. 2). The imminent death of his first wife gives rise to no emotional upheaval in Dombey: rather, “he would find a something gone from among his plate and furniture, and other household possessions, which was well worth the having, and could not be lost without sincere regret” (1, p. 5).

To Florence at this time her father appears as merely a “blue coat and stiff white cravat [and] a pair of creaking boots and a very loud ticking watch” (1, p. 3). As she grows older and especially after her little brother's death, Florence repeatedly tries to get through such externals to whatever real man may be hidden behind them, meeting with nothing but rebuffs from Dombey, to whom images of coldness are constantly applied for the

best of reasons. It is not so much that Dombey dislikes his daughter as that he is unaware of her existence and would prefer to remain so. Until the statutory calls his attention to the mistake, Dombey is prepared to have the tablet for little Paul inscribed to the memory of his "beloved and only child." Clearly the man's diffident correction irritates Dombey, though he allows himself to display no emotion at this reminder, or indeed at the death which made it necessary: "what the face is, in the shut-up chamber underneath: or what the thoughts are: what the heart is, what the contest or the suffering: no one knows" (18, p. 241).

When Florence herself tries to break into the privacy of her father's bereavement with an expression of love and concern, he answers her with a countenance so forbidding that "the glowing love within the breast of his young daughter froze before it."

There was not one touch of tenderness or pity in it. There was not one gleam of interest, parental recognition, or relenting in it. There was a change in it, but not of that kind. The old indifference and cold constraint had given place to something: what, she never thought and did not dare to think, and yet she felt it in its force, and knew it well without a name: that as it looked upon her, seemed to cast a shadow on her head. (18, p. 256)

There is very little speaking in this short episode, and without proper guidance to the reader the few words Dombey utters near its close might almost be taken as tender expressions of fatherly care. But—as is so often the case in *Dombey and Son*—the narrator intervenes vigorously in order to manipulate the reader's reactions. First, immediately following the paragraph I have just quoted, he supplies, in the form of rhetorical questions, the explanation for Dombey's chilling glare:

Did he see before him the successful rival of his son, in health and life? Did he look upon his own successful rival in that son's affection? Did a mad jealousy and withered pride, poison sweet remembrances that should have endeared and made her precious to him? Could it be possible that it was gall to him to look upon her in her beauty and her promise: thinking of his infant boy! (18, p. 256)

Then he underscores the great importance of this scene of rejection by portentously intoning several times the sentence "Let him remember it in that room, years to come" (18, pp. 256 and 257). Clearly, the emotional impact

of the episode resides in such narrative commentary rather than in the rudimentary action or the fragmentary dialogue; what is so remarkable about this commentary—with its probings of the characters' minds and its speculations about their future—is that it is cast in the diction and structure of melodramatic speech, strongly marked by repetitions, syntactical parallels, and rhetorical questions. It is as if Dickens, having long since discovered how to move his reader by certain elaborately arranged linguistic formulas and now dealing with situations in which their use is inappropriate or impossible, internalizes melodramatic speech within the narrator: not here in the form of melodramatic narrative, which moves forward in time (and which often occurs elsewhere in *Dombey and Son*), but rather in the form of *melodramatic commentary*, which is essentially static and concerned with the present, even while taking in both past and future. A less accomplished novelist might well have yielded to the temptation to turn this father-daughter confrontation into a big melodramatic scene, notwithstanding the incredibility inherent in hearing these two indulge in soaring melodramatic speech. Dickens, however, wisely forbears. Rather, he supplies in his commentary a high degree of insight into the significance of this encounter that the participants lack: Florence, because she is too immature and too blinded by her own strength of feeling; Dombey, because he is incapable of coming to terms with emotion internally or expressing it externally.

There are two more such scenes between Florence and Dombey later in the novel. In each the daughter goes to the father in a time of trouble and meets with no response to her expression of sympathy. During the next—which, significantly, does not occur for nearly four hundred pages after the first one—Florence, now much older, seeks out Dombey after he has been injured by a fall from his horse. He is asleep, and she does not awaken him, fascinated to find in the face of the unconscious man a tranquility which she had never been able to observe when he was aware of her presence. Not a word is spoken; the most insistent voice, indeed the *only* voice, in the scene is that of the narrator, urging Dombey, repeatedly, to “Awake!” (43, p. 609)—not so much from his physical slumber as from his emotional oblivion to his daughter. The last such scene between father and child, even briefer than the first two, comes after Edith's elopement with Carker. Only one spoken sentence is quoted: Florence says, “‘Oh dear, dear Papa!’ as if she would have clasped him round the neck.” Disregarding the fervor of his daughter's concern for him, Dombey strikes her, “told her what Edith

was, and bade her follow her, since they had always been in league" (47, p. 665). In three short paragraphs, the scene is over, and so is Florence's unrequited feeling for Dombey: "she had no father upon earth, and ran out, orphaned, from his house" (47, p. 666). In both of these scenes, melodramatic narrative and melodramatic commentary supply the place of melodramatic speech. By such means, and with great economy and effectiveness, Dickens has made a point which his reader must grasp: to the extent that he thinks about her at all, Dombey can conceive of Florence only as an encumbrance and an adversary; he has none of the conventional, and healthy, paternal feeling for her.

Even Paul, while he is still alive, receives no real affection from his father. Dombey does entertain "visions of the youth, education, and destination of his baby son" (2, p. 15), but he takes no pleasure in the lad's infancy or too-brief boyhood, always looking ahead to the time when Paul can take part in his business. "Six years old!" said Mr. Dombey. . . . 'Dear me, six will be changed to sixteen, before we have time to look about us!'" (11, p. 138). Dombey's choice of school for Paul is in keeping with this unfeeling emphasis of his on the boy's speedy development into a man. Doctor Blimber's establishment is a "great hot-house, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work" (11, p. 141). Much earlier, Dombey makes it plain to Paul's wet nurse that the arrangement he envisages for her is "'a question of wages, altogether.'" Feeling is not to enter into what is to be solely a "cash-payment nexus" in Carlyle's sense.

'When those duties cease to be required and rendered, and the stipend ceases to be paid, there is an end of all relations between us. . . .

When you go away from here, you will have concluded what is a mere matter of bargain and sale, hiring and letting: and will stay away. The child will cease to remember you; and you will cease, if you please, to remember the child.' (1, p. 16)

Dombey's growing uneasiness about Florence is largely caused by her natural ability to establish close emotional ties with her young brother and, much later, with her stepmother—an ability that Dombey totally lacks and does not care to cultivate, even though it makes him uncomfortable to see it in his daughter.

There is, of course, no conventional feeling in Dombey's courtship of and marriage to Edith. If there is an element of desire in this strange relationship, it is his complacent wish for a handsome adornment to his position,

an enviable piece of property such as few men can aspire to, one which will greatly redound to his prestige.

It flattered him to picture to himself, this proud and stately woman doing the honours of his house, and chilling his guests after his own manner. The dignity of *Dombey and Son* would be heightened and maintained, indeed, in such hands. (30, p. 428)

When Edith leaves him and Florence too flees his house, *Dombey* contains within himself whatever emotions he may be experiencing, much afraid of the exposure to "the world" of any vulnerability. Again, Dickens resorts to commentary taking the meticulously structured form of melodramatic language:

Though he hide the world within him from the world without—which he believes has but one purpose for the time, wherever he goes—he cannot hide those rebel traces of it, which escape in hollow eyes and cheeks, a haggard forehead, and a moody, brooding air. Impenetrable as before, he is still an altered man: and, proud as ever, he is humbled, or those marks would not be there.

The world. What the world thinks of him, how it looks at him, what it sees in him, and what it says—this is the haunting demon of his mind. It is everywhere where he is; and, worse than that, it is everywhere he is not. It comes out with him among his servants, and yet he leaves it whispering behind; he sees it pointing after him in the street; it is waiting for him in his counting-house; it leers over the shoulders of rich men among the merchants; it goes beckoning and babbling among the crowd; it always anticipates him, in every place; and is always busiest, he knows, when he has gone away. When he is shut up in his room at night, it is in his house, outside it, audible in footsteps on the pavement, visible in print upon the table, steaming to and fro on railroads and in ships; restless and busy everywhere, with nothing else but him. (51, p. 716)

It is not until Chapter 59, almost at the end of the novel, that *Dombey* realizes where he has gone wrong. His business, which has been his whole life, lies in ruins. In blocking any possibility of a warm father-daughter relationship with Florence and driving her away, he has banished his best hope of consolation and regeneration in time of such deep trouble. "He knew, now, what it was to be rejected and deserted; now, when every loving

blossom he had withered in his innocent daughter's heart was snowing down in ashes on him" (59, p. 839). Because Florence opportunely comes back to him, more willing than ever to cherish and comfort him, and finds that at last he responds gratefully to her overtures, Dombey does ultimately attain true peace and security such as he has never before known. He is equipped now with a capacity for feeling and demonstrating love which he had lacked during his days of proud superiority. "His only pride is in his daughter and her husband" (62, p. 873), and later in their two children: the boy, who reminds him of his dead Paul; and especially the girl, on whom he lavishes the strong affection he had never been able to show his own daughter during her childhood.

As for Edith, she is, outwardly at least, as cold and imperious as Dombey in his prime. Fully conscious of the nature of their relationship and of the reasons behind Dombey's wish to make her his, she quite accurately regards herself—as her mother, Bagstock, Carker, and Dombey do, and as previous suitors have apparently done—as nothing more than a desirable commodity on the marriage market. Her position, given the social, economic, and family realities which she must bear in mind, is both impossible and inescapable, and she is sensible enough to submit to it. Edith is loath to express in public her shame and disgust at the situation which circumstances have forced on her; but though she is normally too proud to put her feelings into words, her agitated gestures repeatedly give her away: her bosom heaves, her nostrils quiver and dilate, her eyes flash, she trembles, she bites her lip, she twists her bracelet until it leaves a red mark on her wrist, and—on one especially distressing occasion, after Carker has kissed it—she strikes her hand on the marble mantelpiece so hard that it bleeds, "and held it from her, near the shining fire, as if she could have thrust it in and burned it" (42, p. 603).²

The fact that Edith is able to preserve a dignified facade under crushing difficulties does not mean that she is without emotion. On the contrary, she feels her degradation keenly, as we are made to realize not only by her gestures but also in her conversations with her mother and especially with Florence. In the person of neither of them, however, does she encounter a partner able to understand or respond to her anguish. "It is surely not worth while, Mama," Edith says to Mrs. Skewton, "to observe these forms of speech. We are quite alone. We know each other" (26, p. 373). Because she can talk plainly to her mother, whom she holds largely responsible for her plight, she indulges in passionate outbursts during their tête-a-têtes

which would qualify these confrontations as melodramatic scenes if only Mrs. Skewton were able to rise to her daughter's level of eloquence. As it is, however, the old woman responds with banalities to such patterned speeches as these:

'Look at me,' she said, 'who have never known what it is to have an honest heart, and love. Look at me, taught to scheme and plot when children play; and married in my youth—an old age of design—to one for whom I had no feeling but indifference. Look at me, whom he left a widow, dying before his inheritance descended to him—a judgment on you! well deserved!—and tell me what has been my life for ten years since.'

And

'There is no slave in a market; there is no horse in a fair; so shown and offered and examined and paraded, mother, as I have been, for ten shameful years,' cried Edith. . . . 'Is it not so? Have I been made the bye-word of all kinds of men? Have fools, have profligates, have boys, have dotards, dangled after me, and one by one rejected me, and fallen off, because you were too plain with all your cunning: yes, and too true, with all those false pretences: until we have almost come to be notorious? The licence of look and touch,' she said, with flashing eyes, 'have I submitted to it, in half the places of resort upon the map of England. Have I been hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within me, and I loathe myself? Has *this* been my late childhood?' (27, p. 394)

Edith cannot be this straightforward with Florence, both because the girl is too young to grasp the full enormity of her stepmother's entrapment and because Edith is reluctant to take Florence too much into her confidence and thus bring down Dombey's wrath on both of them and cause their separation. But the injured woman is strongly drawn to the innocent girl, and so it is natural for Edith to spend the last miserable night before her wedding in Florence's room. Here, as nowhere else, she can find temporary succor for "her unquiet spirit, tearless, friendless, silent, proud, and uncomplaining," and give vent to the feeling that has been bottled up inside her for so long, even though the other participant in the scene is sound asleep.

Drawn nearer, nearer, nearer yet; at last, drawn so near, that

stooping down, she pressed her lips to the gentle hand that lay outside the bed, and put it softly to her neck. Its touch was like the prophet's rod of old upon the rock. Her tears sprung forth beneath it, as she sunk upon her knees, and laid her aching head and streaming hair upon the pillow by its side. (30, p. 435)

At other times, she makes elaborate, emotional speeches to Florence, but Florence does not comprehend Edith's words, only that she is deeply agitated.

'I have dreamed,' said Edith in a low voice, 'of a pride that is all powerless for good, all powerful for evil; of a pride that has been galled and goaded, through many shameful years, and has never recoiled, except upon itself; a pride that has debased its owner with the consciousness of deep humiliation, and never helped its owner boldly to resent it or avoid it, or to say, "This shall not be!" a pride that, rightly guided, might have led perhaps to better things, but which, misdirected and perverted, like all else belonging to the same possessor, has been self-contempt, mere hardihood, and ruin'

'I have dreamed,' she said, 'of such indifference and callousness, arising from this self-contempt; this wretched, inefficient, miserable pride; that it has gone on with listless steps even to the altar, yielding to the old, familiar, beckoning finger,—oh mother, oh mother!—while it spurned it; and willing to be hateful to itself once and for all, rather than to be stung daily in some new form. Mean, poor thing!' . . .

'And I have dreamed,' she said, 'that in a first late effort to achieve a purpose, it has been trodden on, and trodden down by a base foot, but turns and looks upon him. I have dreamed that it is wounded, hunted, set upon by dogs, but that it stands at bay, and will not yield; no, that it cannot if it would; but that it is urged on to hate him, rise against him, and defy him!' (43, p. 611)

Though she is clearly a more feeling person than Dombey, Edith is like him in that she can find no adequate outlet for her emotions during the main action of the novel, and like him too in that this unnatural restraint does her immense psychological damage. Edith does not completely let down her guard until her final interview with Florence—by now a grown woman herself, a wife and a mother—in the penultimate chapter, when she fervently swears to Florence that she did not commit adultery with Carker. A brief authorial comment about Edith at a key moment in this

scene is most significant: "She was moved and weeping. Had she been oftener thus in older days, she had been happier now" (61, p. 868).

Since *Dombey* and Edith are both excessively inhibited about uttering their feelings to each other during their entire brief life together, one cannot expect the several confrontations between them to be ordinary melodramatic scenes. These are powerful scenes, to be sure, but their impact does not primarily come from the words which husband and wife utter. Whatever their real emotions are, they keep them well below the surface of their discourse, and most of the effect of their encounters resides in the narrator's language rather than theirs.

There is scarcely any real interaction between *Dombey* and Edith before their marriage. They are not lovers during this courtship period, merely polite and wary role players in a sordid mating rite. The first stormy scene between them takes place in Chapter 36, after the disastrous dinner party when Edith offended *Dombey* by not paying what he considered proper attention to the guests he had invited. She simply ignores his pompous reproaches, disdainfully pointing out to him that there are others (Carker and Mrs. Skewton) present at the interview, and looking at him once they are alone with "intense, unutterable, withering scorn" (p. 520). What is really lacerating *Dombey* at this point—something he cannot fully come to terms with himself, much less express to her—is that Florence has been able to "subdue" (p. 520) his new bride in some way that is totally beyond his emotional resources or even his comprehension. To say that the man feels an impotent jealousy would be to oversimplify the complex emotional experience he is undergoing, but it is clear that—though he talks to Edith during this scene much more than she talks back to him—both of them are concealing their true feelings. It is the narrator, and not either participant, who suggests its real significance, in the last three paragraphs of the chapter.

Several chapters later, after these and similar concerns have been gnawing away at *Dombey* for some time, he seeks to have a showdown with Edith. There is no particular issue on this occasion, merely his uncomfortable sense that he has been quite unable to break Edith's spirit. The charges he hurls at her are vague: she is extravagant, she does not manage the household well, her friends are disagreeable to him, she has not accepted Carker as his confidential agent. But his real point flares out only briefly: "I am to be deferred to and obeyed. . . . I must have a positive show and confession of deference before the world, Madam. I am used to this. I require it as my right'" (40, p. 564).

Again, there is no interaction, no communication, between them. Edith receives Dombey's accusations, for the most part, in silence; when she does talk during the first portion of this confrontation, her interjections are curt and sardonic. After Dombey has spoken his piece—ending with the statement of a man not used to engaging in true dialogue: “‘this concludes what I deem it necessary to say to you at present, Mrs. Dombey’” (40, p. 565)—it is Edith's turn. Her appeal is much briefer and more direct than his, and much more emotional, even though its message is largely based on the lack of emotional ties between them up to this point in their relationship: “‘We are a most unhappy pair, in whom, from different causes, every sentiment that blesses marriage, or justifies it, is rooted out; but in the course of time, some friendship, or some fitness for each other, may arise between us.’” Edith is pleading for a new beginning to their relationship, but Dombey icily declares that he “‘cannot entertain any proposal of this extraordinary nature’” (40, p. 568). His refusal to unbend at all, even as little as she has done, puts an end to this momentary small hope of rapprochement.

Once more Dombey and Edith are talking *at* rather than *with* each other; once more the narrator is forced to intervene constantly, not only providing stage direction-like descriptions of the actors' looks and movements and entering into their thoughts during the repeated silences, but also probing, from his omniscient vantage point, the meaning of what they are saying and doing and thinking.

The third and final confrontation between Dombey and Edith, when he tells her that he has invited guests to the house the following evening in honor of their second wedding anniversary, begins in much the same way. Dombey has made up his mind what he wants to say—“‘I am not accustomed to ask, Mrs. Dombey,’ he observed; ‘I direct’” (47, p. 658)—and pushes ahead, regardless of either her unresponsiveness or her disturbing interruptions.

‘Mrs. Dombey, you know, I suppose, that I have instructed the housekeeper that there will be some company to dinner here tomorrow.’

‘I do not dine at home,’ she answered.

‘Not a large party,’ pursued Mr. Dombey, with an indifferent assumption of not having heard her; ‘merely some twelve or fourteen. My sister, Major Bagstock, and some others whom you know but slightly.’

'I do not dine at home,' she repeated.

'However doubtful reason I may have, Mrs. Dombey,' said Mr. Dombey, still going majestically on, as if she had not spoken, 'to hold the occasion in very pleasant remembrance just now, there are appearances in these things which must be maintained before the world. If you have no respect for yourself, Mrs. Dombey—'

'I have none,' she said.

'Madam,' cried Mr. Dombey, striking his hand upon the table, 'hear me if you please. I say, if you have no respect for yourself—'

'And I say I have none,' she answered.

He looked at her; but the face she showed him in return would not have changed, if death itself had looked. (47, pp. 654-55)

Again, as in the first such scene they have together as man and wife, Dombey ignores her protests that they are not alone, at times deliberately exacerbating her outrage by addressing her through the hateful Carker; again, the narrator elevates the tension with his comments.

She laughed. The shaken diamonds in her hair started and trembled. There are fables of precious stones that would turn pale, their wearer being in danger. Had these been such, their imprisoned rays of light would have taken flight that moment, and they would have been as dull as lead. (47, p. 656)

But this scene—fittingly, in view of the fact that it immediately precedes Edith's escape from Dombey—eventually does rise to emotional heights not scaled in their earlier encounters and is the more effective by virtue of this unprecedented intensity. Edith denounces Dombey in patterned language quite unlike her earlier, terse remarks to him:

'So it is not enough,' said Edith, 'that you know what has passed between yourself and me; it is not enough that you can look here,' pointing at Carker, who still listened, with his eyes cast down, 'and be reminded of the affronts you have put upon me; it is not enough that you can look here,' pointing to Florence with a hand that slightly trembled for the first and only time, 'and think of what you have done, and of the ingenious agony, daily, hourly, constant, you have made me feel in doing it; it is not enough that this day, of all others in the year, is memorable to me for a struggle (well-deserved, but not conceivable by such as you) in which I wish I had died! You add

to all this, do you, the last crowning meanness of making *her* a witness of the depth to which I have fallen; when you know that you have made me sacrifice to her peace, the only gentle feeling and interest of my life, when you know that for her sake, I would now if I could—but I *can not*, my soul recoils from you too much—submit myself wholly to your will and be the meekest vassal that you have!’ (47, p. 657)

Even Dombey briefly displays some feeling, stung by her mention of a separation, and addresses her for once in a tone different from that which he might employ with a refractory clerk in his office, though even in this speech it is the public rather than the private man who is talking.

‘Good Heaven, Mrs. Dombey!’ said her husband, with supreme amazement, ‘do you imagine it possible that I could ever listen to such a proposition? Do you know who I am, Madam? Do you know what I represent? Did you ever hear of Dombey and Son? People to say that Mr. Dombey—Mr. Dombey!—was separated from his wife! Common people to talk of Mr. Dombey and his domestic affairs! Do you seriously think, Mrs. Dombey, that I would permit my name to be handed about in such connexion? Pooh, pooh, Madam! Fie for shame! You’re absurd.’ (47, pp. 658-59)

They both quickly subside, but the atmosphere remains highly charged; and the scene ends, not with passionate speeches by the characters, but with eloquent narrative.

She had better have turned hideous and dropped dead, than have stood up with such a smile upon her face, in such a fallen spirit’s majesty of scorn and beauty. She lifted her hand to the tiara of bright jewels radiant on her head, and, plucking it off with a force that dragged and strained her rich black hair with needless cruelty, and brought it tumbling wildly on her shoulders, cast the gems upon the ground. From each arm, she unclasped a diamond bracelet, flung it down, and trod upon the glittering heap. Without a word, without a shadow on the fire of her bright eye, without abatement of her awful smile, she looked on Mr. Dombey to the last, in moving to the door; and left him. (47, p. 660)

Of course, neither husband nor wife is to be regarded as reprehensible.

We are far beyond any such simplicities in Dickens' depiction of central characters. Dombey and Edith are proud people, around each of whom character and circumstance have erected a thick wall of frosty reserve, and they are meant to be pitied rather than blamed for the emotional frigidity which brings them, as well as others, so much grief. Both of them eventually realize how misguided they have been, but this is late—too late—in their lives, and Edith at any rate is never shown as thawing out fully.

If there is anyone resembling a traditional melodramatic villain in *Dombey and Son*, it is a much less important character, Carker the Manager.³ He is a thoroughly evil man, and his malignity is made more sinister by the fact that it is represented as virtually motiveless. Carker does obviously want to avenge himself on Dombey for all the bootlicking he has done in his service, but to accomplish this by running off with his employer's wife—for whom he is not shown previously as feeling any great passion—seems a strange way to achieve that objective. It would have been easier, and both more appropriate and more profitable, for Carker to get back at Dombey by taking over his business rather than his wife. Indeed, there is much reason to suppose that this escapade is less a piece of villainy on Carker's part than a desperate, and successful, attempt by Edith to hurt him and her husband and liberate herself from Dombey all at a stroke. After she tells Carker, during their stormy scene in Dijon (54, pp. 763-64), why she has consented to his scheme, he looks more like a dupe than an insidious plotter.

But there is a great deal about Carker that seems to qualify him for the villain's role. Though he does not soliloquize like Ralph Nickleby and generally maintains a bland, deferential exterior, it is clear to the reader that the man is up to no good. The feline ferocity that is constantly attributed to Carker is ominous, as is the opposition that springs up so naturally between him and the virtuous young people in the novel. Quite early on, he makes himself into Walter Gay's adversary; and, though Carker ostentatiously fawns on Florence, she instinctively shrinks from him. His viciousness is perhaps best seen in his sadistic treatment of Rob the Grinder (who is of course himself no better than he should be); as in the case of Major Bagstock and his Native, this corrupt man's behavior toward a helpless dependent provides an excellent indication of his true nature.

Villain though he is, Carker is not ordinarily able to taunt Edith into overt displays of feeling, any more than Dombey can. Rather, she generally treats him, as she treats her husband, with a carefully controlled contempt. For example, when he comes to her as Dombey's emissary to warn her not

to pay too much attention to Florence (a scene which takes up all of Chapter 45), she manages to preserve her haughty composure, giving apparently noncommittal, disdainful answers to his insinuations. There is great emotion latent in this interview, but it is carefully kept just below the surface, except for the frequent comments interjected by the narrator and the signs of agitation which Edith shows in her gestures. The dialogue itself is much too guardedly impersonal to be melodramatic.

The most spectacular encounter between Edith and Carker—one of the great climactic scenes in *Dombey and Son*—occurs after he joins her at the hotel in Dijon. Everything seems right for a traditional assignation: the foreign setting; the “air of splendour, sufficiently faded to be melancholy, and sufficiently dazzling to clog and embarrass the details of life with a show of state” (54, p. 755) that pervades the suite; the knowing French servants; the ample supper that is brought in. Carker enters, all ardor, only to be greeted by Edith’s picking up a knife and hissing, “Stand still! . . . or I shall murder you!” (54, p. 759) This time, for once—having most carefully prepared the scene—Dickens pulls all the stops and allows Edith to pour out her heart with all the passion at her command.

‘How many times,’ said Edith, bending her darkest glance upon him, ‘has your bold knavery assailed me with outrage and insult? How many times in your smooth manner, and mocking words and looks, have I been twitted with my courtship and my marriage? How many times have you laid bare my wound of love for that sweet, injured girl, and lacerated it? How often have you fanned the fire on which, for two years, I have writhed; and tempted me to take a desperate revenge, when it has most tortured me?’ (54, p. 760)

‘Too late!’ she cried, with eyes that seemed to sparkle fire. ‘I have thrown my fame and good name to the winds! I have resolved to bear the shame that will attach to me—resolved to know that it attaches falsely—that you know it too—and that he does not, never can, and never shall. I’ll die, and make no sign. For this I am here alone with you, at the dead of night. For this I have met you here, in a false name, as your wife. For this, I have been seen here by those men, and left here. Nothing can save you now.’ (54, p. 764)

What finally puts an end to her relentless denunciations and the threat of

physical violence that hangs over the interview is a sound as chilling in its context as any ever heard in Dickens' fiction.

'Lastly, take my warning! Look to yourself!' she said, and smiled again. 'You have been betrayed, as all betrayers are. It has been made known that you are in this place, or were to be, or have been. If I live, I saw my husband in a carriage in the street to-night!'

'Strumpet, it's false!' cried Carker.

At the moment, the bell rang loudly in the hall. He turned white, as she held her hand up like an enchantress, at whose invocation the sound had come. (54, p. 764)

This scene—which can, I think, fairly be called shattering—owes its effect partly to its being unique in *Dombey and Son*. Had Dickens allowed Edith to indulge routinely in outbursts of this kind, it might more easily be dismissed as shallow melodrama. As it is, however, it is the only time in the novel that Edith, alone with one of the two men she hates, gives free rein to her feelings.

In all of the scenes to which I have referred so far, the narrator plays a very considerable part. He is hardly ever content simply to let his characters engage one another in dialogue. Because of the relative subtlety of their mutual relations, and especially because of their reluctance or their inability to say unequivocally what is on their minds and in their hearts, he feels compelled to intrude himself overtly in one way or another, both qualifying and deepening the impact of what is taking place. In this effort, the melodramatic dimensions of the narrator's language are usually of central importance. There are other scenes in *Dombey and Son* containing no dialogue at all in which emotion is aroused, suspense created, in the reader wholly by melodramatic narrative continuing for long stretches. Perhaps inevitably, these generally deal, more or less directly, with the character in the novel who is himself least able to express feeling, Dombey.

Dickens' first memorable use of extended melodramatic narrative in *Dombey and Son* occurs in the account of Dombey's train journey to Leamington shortly after Paul's funeral (20, pp. 280-82). He is not simply being transported from one place to another: rather, in its diction and movement this passage suggests a complex of feelings which no conventional analysis of Dombey's mind or situation could fathom—feelings about life, about human values, above all about death, one instance of which Dombey has just left behind him but which no man can evade for long.

The very speed at which the train was whirled along mocked the swift course of the young life that had been borne away so steadily and so inexorably to its foredoomed end. The power that forced itself upon its iron way—its own—defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster, Death. (20, p. 280)

The constantly repeated references to the train's shrieking, roaring, and rattling, the insistent succession of participial phrases, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and then, as Dombey nears his destination, complete sentences of mounting complexity—all this, together with the periodic invocation of the "monster, Death," lends tremendous urgency to the narration.

A comparable passage, though the mood evoked is very different, occurs near the end of the novel, in Chapter 59, "Retribution." Dombey is bankrupt, alone with his painful thoughts in his now bare and deserted house. This broken man, who was never capable of facing up to his own feelings, cannot indulge in soliloquy or even in consecutive reasoning: stray ideas wander through his mind until they form—with much help from the narrator—a kind of pattern. Dombey is beginning to grope toward an awareness of what his emotional barrenness has brought him to. The narrator's earlier admonition "Let him remember it in that room, years to come!" keeps reverberating through the early portion of the passage, as do other verbs of cognition: "thought," "heard," "saw," "knew" (59, pp. 838-39). So tenuous has his identity become that the name "Dombey" does not occur, except in a single mention of the firm "Dombey and Son," despite the fact that Dombey is the subject of and the only character in the scene. Dombey is referred to once at the beginning as "the ruined man," and then for four pages as a sort of disembodied "he," the word which is the subject of most of the sentences in this section. Finally, Dombey is seen, as he sees himself, in the mirror over the fireplace, as an object, an "it": "a spectral, haggard, wasted likeness of himself" (59, p. 842). The form as well as the content here movingly suggests how his pride has fallen with his fortune.

A final example of melodramatic narrative in *Dombey and Son*—one of the most powerful in all of Dickens—has to do with Carker rather than Dombey. This depicts the erstwhile Manager's desperate flight from Dijon—across France, across the Channel, across England—to his death beneath the wheels of a speeding locomotive, and it takes up all of Chapter 55.

From the start, Carker is gripped by panic, and, though he does not dare to give his dread a name, it is clear all along what the end of his frantic attempt to escape from the pursuing Dombey will be. "Some visionary terror, unintelligible and inexplicable, associated with a trembling of the ground,—a rush and sweep of something through the air, like Death upon the wing" (55, p. 767). The kaleidoscopic nightmare aspect of this long journey is emphasized by the succession of prepositional phrases beginning with "of" which occupy almost all of three pages (55, pp. 772-74). Once again, as in the case of Dombey's earlier trip to Leamington, the relentless force, the monstrous aspect, and the cold impersonality of the railway train signify death, and Carker's demise—which, if treated differently, might have been received by the reader with indifference or even relief—is vested with an awesome significance.

We have seen that, though several characters in *Dombey and Son*—Dombey himself, Edith, and James Carker—are either bereft of normal emotion or incapable of expressing freely what they do feel, Dickens endows the scenes in which they participate with considerable emotional power. This is not usually flaunted in blazing melodramatic scenes of the ordinary sort; rather, it tends to smolder just beneath the level of dialogue and comes out primarily in the language employed by the narrator, language that is richly endowed with melodramatic qualities.

The one character in *Dombey and Son* who is given to melodramatic outbursts is among the least important and least successful in the novel. Alice Brown cannot get it out of her head that she is a fallen woman and that James Carker was the agent of her ruin, and she declaims about her bitterness and remorse at every opportunity. (See, e.g., 34, pp. 488-89 and 494-95.) Yet, incredibly, having put Dombey on Carker's trail to France, she has second thoughts about this act of treachery toward her former lover, and—in another passionate scene—beseeches Harriet Carker to warn her brother of his avenger's approach.

'What if I had found out one who knew your brother's secret; who knew the manner of his flight; who knew where he and the companion of his flight were gone? What if I had made him utter all his knowledge, word by word, before his enemy, concealed to hear it? What if I had sat by at the time, looking into this enemy's face, and seeing it change till it was scarcely human? What if I had seen him rush away, mad, in pursuit? What if I knew, now, that he was on his

road, more fiend than man, and must, in so many hours, come up with him? (53, p. 753)

Alice continues at this pitch of intensity for another whole page, as Harriet listens, aghast.

But what about the more admirable characters in *Dombey and Son*: e.g., Florence, Paul, Walter, Solomon Gills, Captain Cuttle? The one quality they appear to have in common is that they are warmly affectionate human beings, anxious to form emotional ties with others and therefore vulnerable to deep hurt and bitter disappointment when such hopes are dashed. They are children or simple untutored souls whose power to express themselves is restricted by their age or condition. Therefore, the possibilities of their being involved in melodramatic scenes, which depend on a high degree of articulateness in the participants, are quite limited.

To be sure, Paul—with his “old-fashioned” wisdom about many things, especially his own debility—seems articulate enough. Not yet five years old, he can nevertheless assess his case in a singularly clear-eyed way.

‘Florence is older than I am, but I’m not as strong and well as Florence, I know . . . but I believe that when Florence was as little as me, she could play a great deal longer at a time without tiring herself. I am so tired sometimes . . . and my bones ache so (Wickam says it’s my bones), that I don’t know what to do.’ (8, p. 94)

But, for all his sensitivity and thoughtfulness, Paul’s habitual state of mind is gentle, curious, and accepting rather than intense. He is singularly free of self-pity or anger, and the emotion which his sad plight arouses is only indirectly related to his own utterances. The reader is invited to exercise his superior understanding on what Paul says, thinks, and does, and on what others say and do in his presence, and the resultant effect is one of quiet pathos. Chapter 14, which recounts Paul’s decline and final departure from Doctor Blimber’s, does not contain one word of explicit authorial commentary. It is clear from what we are told of Paul’s symptoms and his own reactions to them, but especially from the way he is petted and fussed over by everyone in the place, that he cannot be long for this world and that this is generally known—even, at times, by Paul, as when he corrects himself in something he says to Mrs. Pipchin, quickly changing “‘when I —’” to “‘if I grow up’” (14, p. 190). We perceive things essentially from Paul’s restricted point of view here, as we do also in Chapter 16, near the end of

which Paul dies. Except for the last two paragraphs of that chapter, which contain the narrator's solemn thoughts on what has just happened, we see what Paul sees and nothing more, though of course we understand, as Paul cannot, how limited his vision actually is.

All this is very different from the way Paul's sister's situation is handled by Dickens. In Florence's case, as we have already had occasion to notice, the narrator intrudes constantly, calling forth quite unequivocally the reaction which the reader is supposed to feel. Throughout her girlhood, Florence is too passive and too uncomprehending to rise in her own speech to the level of melodrama: the melancholy significance of her position must be underscored by some external means. It is not until the mature Florence returns to her ruined father that she is capable of articulating the requisite fervor, but still she is simple and artless—too simple and artless to sustain the vocabulary and syntax of melodramatic speech:

'Dear Papa, for the sake of my child, for the sake of the name we have given him, for my sake, pardon Walter. He is so kind and tender to me. I am so happy with him. It was not his fault that we were married. It was mine. I loved him so much. . . .

'He is the darling of my heart, Papa. I would die for him. He will love and honour you as I will. We will teach our little child to love and honour you; and we will tell him, when he can understand, that you had a son of that name once, and that he died, and you were very sorry; but that he is gone to Heaven, where we all hope to see him when our time for resting comes. Kiss me, Papa, as a promise that you will be reconciled to Walter—to my dearest husband—to the father of the little child who taught me to come back, Papa. Who taught me to come back!' (59, p. 844)

Somewhat earlier (50, pp. 710-13), Florence does have an emotional interview with Walter Gay during which their relationship changes to that of declared lovers. It is the only such romantic scene in the novel, and the response it arouses—pleasure (if not downright relief) that at last the air is cleared between these two worthy young people—is not typical of the affective power of *Dombey and Son*. In this milieu we are more accustomed to the absence, denial, or suppression of emotion than we are to its utterance. The scene also provides us with one of our very few glimpses of Walter Gay as a man and a lover rather than as a boy.

Like Walter, Solomon Gills is largely prevented from giving vent to his

feelings because—among other reasons—he is removed from the foreground of the action for such a major portion of the novel. His friend Captain Cuttle, however, is very much present throughout, and, despite his habitually good-natured exterior, the eccentric old fellow is frequently seen in the role of victim, abandoned or betrayed by those he has loved or trusted, in dread of being pursued by the one he abjectly fears, the redoubtable Mrs. MacStinger. But his plight is generally viewed more in comic than in pathetic terms, except for the one occasion on which he laments the loss of Walter and Solomon Gills (32, pp. 462-63).

It is clear that characters such as these, who are capable of feeling and expressing (however naively) genuine human emotion, are infinitely better off than those like Carker, Edith, or the unreformed Dombey, whose inner lives are starved and stifled and who lack the means to relate effectively to others. Dickens' use of melodramatic devices in *Dombey and Son*, sparing and carefully controlled as I have indicated, helps to drive home this all-important contrast between the two groups of characters—no easy task.

Among the other devices in Dickens' repertoire is a sardonic kind of comedy, frequently applied to the ghastly Mrs. Skewton, Edith's mother. Affectedly, but with an ironic significance of which she is totally unconscious, she draws, "What I want . . . is heart" (21, p. 289). Of her, as of several others in *Dombey and Son*, the comment might be made: Precisely.

NOTES

1. On Dombey and feeling see Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*, p. 339; Ian Milner, "The Dickens Drama: Mr. Dombey," *NCF*, 24 (1970), 486-87; Julian Moynahan, "Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Firmness versus Wetness," in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, pp. 123-24; and Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, p. 167.

2. Edith is the first, but by no means the last, of Dickens' major characters in the depiction of whose inner life gestures assume great importance. For the importance of gestures and other nonverbal effects in conveying "the melodramatic message," see Chapter 3 of Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*. In the theater, we see gestures; in prose fiction, we read about them. For that reason, the way that they are described in a Dickens novel is more important than the fact that they are described; and it is worth noting that in *Dombey and Son* they are usually rendered in melodramatic narrative and reflected upon in melodramatic commentary.

3. Though Dickens' depiction of Carker has not on the whole had a good press, some critics have seen and praised ways in which it transcends the conventional. See, e.g., Humphry House, *All in Due Time*, pp. 185 and 186; John Lucas, *The Melancholy Man*, p. 157; Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, p. 177.

Chapter 5

David Copperfield

As we turn to a consideration of Dickens' next novel, we cannot help being struck by a further transformation of Dickensian melodrama, one that presents us with an intriguing paradox if we contrast *David Copperfield* with *Dombey and Son*. In *Dombey and Son*, as we noticed, Dickens is no longer concerned with a conventional melodramatic situation, in which a contest pitting good against evil is central to his subject. Also, because several prominent characters in that novel are deficient in what Mrs. Skewton calls "heart," or at any rate cannot or will not wear their hearts on their sleeves, conventional melodramatic speeches are rare and conventional melodramatic scenes almost non-existent. And yet, despite the suppression of overt feeling that is so crucial to *Dombey and Son*, melodramatic language is very much in evidence, though it is to be found chiefly in narrative and commentary.

In *David Copperfield*, by contrast, overt feeling and its manifestations run wild. The world of the novel is rich in passions of various kinds, resulting in deception, disappointment, deprivation, injustice, cruelty, and suffering far more often than in fulfillment. Consequently, as Gwendolyn Needham has shown in an important essay, emotion, "heart," must be brought under control, *disciplined*:

. . . one must learn a higher wisdom of the heart if he would achieve inner strength and peace. The good heart must have no "alloy of self," must love humanity as well as persons. It must be self-reliant and possess constancy and fortitude in order to be strengthened, not conquered or merely softened, by adversity or sorrow. The good heart must learn the nature of "real truth and love" in order to overcome "evil and misfortune in this world."¹

David eventually masters this important lesson, as Aunt Betsey and Annie Strong do. Several characters—such as David's mother, Em'ly, Steerforth and his mother, and Rosa Dartle—do not; and others still have no need to learn it, because their hearts have always been disciplined: e.g., Peggotty, Ham, and Agnes. And yet, in a novel in which overt feeling is so prominent, melodramatic devices of any sort are much rarer than they are in the chilled

atmosphere of *Dombey and Son*, and pathos is virtually absent. Why is this so?

Dickens' decision to tell the story from David's point of view, probably inevitable given the genesis and the nature of *David Copperfield*, not only lends the novel much of its fresh immediacy but also leads to a tight control over the way in which emotion is conveyed. An omniscient narrator, especially one endowed with the sardonic irony that Dickens came increasingly to employ with telling effect in his middle and late novels, would have dealt very differently with the outrages that are recorded here. I am thinking chiefly of the first quarter of the book, concerning young David's formidable sufferings before his arrival at Aunt Betsey's cottage. A fatherless boy with an ineffectual mother, neglected and tyrannized after the Murdstones move in and take over, banished first to Salem House and then—after the death of his beloved mother—to the unspeakable wine and spirits warehouse, forced to flee on foot and without money from London to the Kentish coast, bullied and gulled by confidence tricksters, petty crooks, and other scoundrels, David leads a truly pitiful existence until Betsey Trotwood takes him under her wing.

But the *quality* of the pity which David's plight arouses must be noted. Dickens' fiction is full of suffering children, but nowhere else is this subject treated as it is in David's case. Dickens' narrative method in *David Copperfield* evokes a remarkable blend of feelings in which pity for the unhappy child, and indignation against his tormentors, though certainly present, are not the predominant ingredients.

Dickens employs a double vision, in which young David's clear-eyed but necessarily imperfect perception of what is happening alternates with the mature David's retrospective musings on the significance of these childhood events. In that majority of instances when we see things pretty much as the boy David sees them, a variety of effects is achieved, of which comedy is not the least frequent. We know so much more about life than this stripling that we are able to catch meanings and nuances that elude him, and in the resultant amused superiority that we feel toward David much of the humor of the novel resides. When, for example, Murdstone and his Lowestoft friends make merry over Murdstone's allusion to "Brooks of Sheffield" (2, p. 23), we get the joke (which, regarded objectively, is more cruel than funny) and David does not, and so we smile. Or when, a little later on (5, pp. 66-69), the greedy waiter in the inn at Yarmouth makes fun of David when he is enroute to Salem House, takes advantage of the lad, and

frightens him, we understand exactly what is happening and view the situation as comical rather than threatening.

At other times, David's detailed and occasionally fanciful accounts of his boyhood experiences and impressions, sad though these experiences and impressions may be in themselves, actually modify the pathos of his circumstances and qualify with other emotions the pity that we feel for him. When David bites Mr. Murdstone's hand and his stepfather retaliates by beating him brutally, we are told of David's rage and sense of guilt but hear little about the pain and nothing about any self-pity. As a consequence of his act of rebellion, David is confined to his room—not the "old dear bedroom" he had had before his mother's remarriage, but a different one—for five days, and he stores up his vivid perceptions of that unhappy time like the future novelist he is.

The length of those five days I can convey no idea of to any one. They occupy the place of years in my remembrance. The way in which I listened to all the incidents of the house that made themselves audible to me; the ringing of bells, the opening and shutting of doors, the murmuring of voices, the footsteps on the stairs; to any laughing, whistling, or singing, outside, which seemed more dismal than anything else to me in my solitude and disgrace—the uncertain pace of the hours, especially at night, when I would wake thinking it was morning, and find that the family were not yet gone to bed, and that all the length of night had yet to come—the depressed dreams and nightmares I had—the return of day, noon, afternoon, evening, when the boys played in the churchyard, and I watched them from a distance within the room, being ashamed to show myself at the window lest they should know I was a prisoner—the strange sensation of never hearing myself speak—the fleeting intervals of something like cheerfulness, which came with eating and drinking, and went away with it—the setting in of rain one evening, with a fresh smell, and its coming down faster and faster between me and the church, until it and gathering night seemed to quench me in gloom, and fear, and remorse—all this appears to have gone round and round for years instead of days, it is so vividly and strongly stamped on my remembrance. (4, pp. 59-60)

Because it is anything but maudlin, that paragraph not only evokes pity for David but admiration as well; and the pity it does engender arises from the

situation as David so matter-of-factly describes it rather than from an indignant narrator's clever attempt to call forth stock responses.

On leaving home for Salem House, David weeps copiously, soaking his pocket-handkerchief with his tears. But, as he tells it, this poignant incident is as funny as it is sad.

Having by this time cried as much as I possibly could, I began to think it was of no use crying any more, especially as neither Roderick Random, nor that captain in the Royal British Navy had ever cried, that I could remember, in trying situations. The carrier seeing me in this resolution, proposed that my pocket-handkerchief should be spread upon the horse's back to dry. I thanked him, and assented; and particularly small it looked, under those circumstances.

I had now leisure to examine the purse. It was a stiff leather purse, with a snap, and had three bright shillings in it, which Peggotty had evidently polished up with whitening, for my greater delight. But its most precious contents were two half-crowns folded together in a bit of paper, on which was written, in my mother's hand, "For Davy. With my love." I was so overcome by this, that I asked the carrier to be so good as to reach me my pocket-handkerchief again; but he said he thought I had better do without it, and I thought I really had, so I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and stopped myself. (5, pp. 63-64)

Upset as he is, David is still able to take in details (the "stiff leather purse, with a snap," the "three bright shillings"), and we see his brave efforts to behave like the heroes he has read about in books, and also Barkis' gruff attempts to be kind, in a different light from that in which he perceives them.

Dickens' account of David's awful period "in the service of Murdstone and Grinby" is handled somewhat differently. We know it was awful because the mature David *tells* us so (and because we know about its real-life analogue), but beyond a rather tame paragraph or two in Chapter 11 he actually *shows* us nothing of its horrors. He renders this stage of his early life with a kind of detachment, almost as if he were writing about another boy. His use of the word "compassion" in Chapter 10 strikes the keynote: compassion, after all, is an emotion we feel toward other people, not ourselves. It is the *memory* of the period, burned into the sensitive psyche of this writer, rather than the sufferings of the child, that we are asked to respond to.

The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, would pass from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more: cannot be written. (11, p. 155)

Or:

I see myself emerging one evening from some of these arches, on a little public-house close to the river, with an open space before it, where some coal-heavers were dancing; to look at whom I sat down upon a bench. I wonder what they thought of me!

I was such a child, and so little, that frequently when I went into the bar of a strange public-house for a glass of ale or porter, to moisten what I had had for dinner, they were afraid to give it me. I remember one hot evening I went into the bar of a public-house, and said to the landlord:

‘What is your best—your *very best*—ale a glass?’ For it was a special occasion. I don’t know what. It may have been my birthday. (11, pp. 160-61)

For whatever reason, Dickens is retreating in passages like these from the directness of the accounts quoted earlier. Might it be that he could not bring himself to have David recount these searing experiences, with all their parallels to Dickens’ own term in Warren’s Blacking warehouse, in comparably vivid detail? Had he done so, the emotional effect might well have been in excess of what he wanted to achieve.

There is nothing intrinsically humorous in David’s desperate journey from London to Dover. His account of that ordeal combines realism with a ready eye for the grotesque (as in the encounter with the “dreadful old man” [13, p. 184] in the secondhand clothing shop), but once again self-pity plays virtually no part. The closest he comes to feeling sorry for himself is during the night he spends outside Salem House, but even here what we have is, rather, the ability of a sensitive young observer to see his particular plight in a wider human, spatial, and temporal context; his capacity to perceive and record concrete details is unimpaired.

Sleep came upon me, as it came upon many other outcasts, against whom house-doors were locked, and house-dogs barked, that night—

and I dreamed of lying on my old schoolbed, talking to the boys in my room; and found myself sitting upright, with Steerforth's name upon my lips, looking wildly at the stars that were glistening and glimmering above me. When I remembered where I was at that untimely hour, a feeling stole upon me that made me get up, afraid of I don't know what, and walk about. But the fainter glimmering of the stars, and the pale light in the sky where the day was coming, reassured me: and my eyes being very heavy, I lay down again, and slept—though with a knowledge in my sleep that it was cold—until the warm beams of the sun, and the ringing of the getting-up bell at Salem House, awoke me. . . . So I crept away from the wall as Mr. Creakle's boys were getting up, and struck into the long dusty track which I had first known to be the Dover Road when I was one of them, and when I little expected that any eyes would ever see me the wayfarer I was now, upon it. (13, p. 182)

One reason the novel changes in character after David leaves Dr. Strong's school is that such narrative and descriptive devices as those to which I have been referring are no longer available to him in quite the same way. He is still the same clear-eyed observer, and he goes on periodically modifying his immediate perceptions in the light of later consideration and judgment; but it makes some difference that it is no longer a fallible and vulnerable child who has these experiences. Not only are such grim episodes as the Em'ly affair and the deaths of Dora, Ham, and Steerforth less susceptible of wryly comic treatment than aspects of his boyhood life, but the point of view from which we see them has altered as David has been maturing.

Nevertheless, the adult narrator David is still given to converting pathos into comedy, for example by calling attention to the self-delusion of such victims of circumstance as the Micawber family and Traddles and to the absurdity of the predicaments in which they find themselves. The comic irony here resides in the discrepancy between the true plight and the fancied situations of these other characters, and not—as was the case earlier—in the inconsistency between what the boy David imagined to be the truth and what we, experienced and worldly readers, know about the real state of affairs.

Even poor Dora, whom Dickens saw fit to kill off, is as much a figure of fun as she is a fated victim. Of course I do not mean simply that we are invited to laugh at her ineptness and her pouting selfishness—nothing in

David Copperfield is that simple; we also laugh *with* David as his “child-wife” tries to cope with her domestic responsibilities, learn about things that matter to her husband, and be of some help to him in his work. It is a curious and marvelous mixture of effects that Dickens gives us: we are amused by Dora’s silliness; we feel sorry for her as we see the shadow of death growing larger upon her; we admire her attempts to become what David would have her be; we deplore David’s stuffiness about her, his inability to fight down his growing sense that he has married someone who is unworthy of him; even as we share his later feelings of remorse at the unfortunate direction which his relationship with her has taken and, ultimately, his rather guilty grief.

In connection with Dora’s passing, it is worthwhile to note that there is no actually represented deathbed scene. Though the chapter in which she expires is of course carefully contrived so as to arouse the right sort of emotional response, Dickens attempts to avoid the obvious and to deflect the reader’s attention from the dying young woman to the remorseful David and, to a lesser degree, to the saintly Agnes. This is one of the retrospective chapters in the novel, in which everything is bathed in the strange light of time suspended which Dickens’ use of the present tense casts over his material. Dora talks of Agnes, wants Agnes, and has Agnes—and not David—by her bedside when she dies. But the reader is with David and Dora’s decrepit dog as they wait downstairs in the parlor.

How the time wears, I know not; until I am recalled by my child-wife’s old companion. More restless than he was, he crawls out of his house, and looks at me, and wanders to the door, and whines to go up-stairs.

‘Not to-night, Jip! Not to-night!’

He comes very slowly back to me, licks my hand, and lifts his dim eyes to my face.

‘Oh, Jip! It may be, never again!’

He lies down at my feet, stretches himself out as if to sleep, and with a plaintive cry, is dead.

‘Oh, Agnes! Look, look, here!’

—That face, so full of pity, and of grief, that rain of tears, that awful mute appeal to me, that solemn hand upraised towards Heaven!

‘Agnes?’

It is over. Darkness comes before my eyes; and for a time, all things are blotted out of my remembrance. (53, p. 768)

Much earlier in the novel, when David's mother dies, there is not, properly speaking, a deathbed scene either. Here too Dickens eschews the obvious potential for pathos in which his material is so rich, and gets his effects in a different way. We first learn of Mrs. Copperfield's death, with David, at Salem House. Mrs. Creakle has received a letter containing the news, and she breaks it to the boy as kindly as she can. Within the space of a very few lines, as the dreadful truth dawns upon David, his reaction escalates from trembling, to a "mist" in his eyes, to "burning tears" running down his face, to a "desolate cry"—all rendered with his customary fidelity to precise detail (9, p. 123). As he broods over his bereavement a little later on, his grief imperceptibly becomes mixed with other—less worthy, perhaps, but intensely human, and even amusing—emotions.

I thought of our house shut up and hushed. I thought of the little baby, who, Mrs. Creakle said, had been pining away for some time, and who, they believed, would die, too. I thought of my father's grave in the church-yard by our house, and of my mother lying there beneath the tree I knew so well. I stood upon a chair when I was left alone, and looked into the glass to see how red my eyes were, and how sorrowful my face. I considered, after some hours were gone, if my tears were really hard to flow now, as they seemed to be, what, in connexion with my loss, it would affect me most to think of when I drew near home—for I was going home to the funeral. I am sensible of having felt that a dignity attached to me among the rest of the boys, and that I was important in my affliction. (9, pp. 123-124)

To be sure, Peggotty does give David an account of his mother's dying moments at the end of the same chapter, but this takes on a special twist of its own as the result of being embedded in a longer narrative in Peggotty's own words and of having been anticipated in Mrs. Creakle's disclosures.

¶ The complex tone created by Dickens' handling of the first-person point of view in *David Copperfield* does not lend itself to the use of melodramatic devices. The emotions of the other characters David observes are generally displayed straightforwardly, in action and in speech unmarked by the elaborate stylizations of melodramatic rhetoric, and David's own strong feeling is profoundly modified not only by being internalized but especially by the

fact that the passage of many years has imbued it with a lyrical, elegiac—yet often wry—quality too gentle for melodramatic expression. Moreover, *David Copperfield* marks a further stage in Dickens' move away from elemental melodramatic situations.

When virtue asserts itself in *David Copperfield*, and this happens rarely, it does so rather quietly. Though we are prepared to believe in David's essential goodness, we can see for ourselves that it is shot through with a very strong sense of his own blindness and inadequacy. When he lets us know how noble he was in certain periods of his life, like the marriage with Dora, we are meant to take these professions ironically. As for the pure Agnes, no matter what David thinks she is never really threatened sexually by Uriah Heep. Though he is in a strong position to exert pressure on Agnes, there is no question of her accepting Heep in marriage, much less in an irregular relationship. Agnes simply tells David, matter-of-factly, to stop worrying about her giving herself to the monstrous Uriah, and that is that.

'There has been no change at home,' said Agnes, after a few moments.

'No fresh reference,' said I, 'to—I wouldn't distress you, Agnes, but I cannot help asking—to what we spoke of, when we parted last?'

'No, none,' she answered.

'I have thought so much about it.'

'You must think less about it. Remember that I confide in simple love and truth at last. Have no apprehensions for me, Trotwood,' she added, after a moment; 'the step you dread my taking, I shall never take.'

Although I think I had never really feared it, in any season of cool reflection, it was an unspeakable relief to me to have this assurance from her own truthful lips. (42, p. 613)

The villains of the piece are similarly muted. Steerforth does most of his dirty work off stage, or through his agent Littimer, and when we do see Steerforth in action our vision is clouded by David's unreasoning affection for him. Jack Maldon is a very sketchy and inconsistent figure indeed. As for the strident Rosa Dartle, she certainly employs the language of melodrama, for example in the scene with Steerforth's mother after David's friend has drowned (56, p. 799-801), but surely she is as much victim as villainess and, by this point in the novel, more than a little demented.² Even in Uriah

Heep's case there are features which significantly qualify the reader's sense of his villainy. For he is, first and foremost, a repellent caricature, and, as I have suggested, it is seriously to be asked if the threat to Agnes he represents is objectively there or if it exists largely in David's jealous imagination.

Certainly Heep refuses to behave like a self-righteously indignant villain when he engages in confrontation with David. When, for example, Heep has attempted to make trouble for Agnes' friend Annie Strong by speaking to her husband of her alleged indiscretion with Jack Maldon, David turns on him furiously and actually strikes him. But Heep declines to retort in kind, and his words are hurt-conciliatory rather than eloquent-justifying.

'Copperfield,' he said at length, in a breathless voice, 'have you taken leave of your senses?'

'I have taken leave of you,' said I, wresting my hand away. 'You dog, I'll know no more of you.'

'Won't you?' said he, constrained by the pain of his cheek to put his hand there. 'Perhaps you won't be able to help it. Isn't this ungrateful of you, now?'

'I have shown you often enough,' said I, 'that I despise you. I have shown you now, more plainly, that I do. Why should I dread your doing your worst to all about you? What else do you ever do?' . . .

'Copperfield,' he said, 'there must be two parties to a quarrel. I won't be one.'

'You may go to the devil!' said I.

'Don't say that!' he replied. 'I know you'll be sorry afterwards. How can you make yourself so inferior to me, as to show such a bad spirit? But I forgive you.'

'You forgive me!' I repeated disdainfully.

'I do, and you can't help yourself,' replied Uriah. 'To think of your going and attacking *me*, that have always been a friend to you! But there can't be a quarrel without two parties, and I won't be one. I will be a friend to you, in spite of you. So now you know what you've got to expect.' (42, pp. 620-21)

And of course the marvelous scene in which Heep's evil deeds are exposed by Micawber is funny rather than melodramatic: in fact, in Micawber's lip-smacking use of absurdly inflated stage diction, it is a prime example of mock melodrama.

‘Then it was that—HEEP—began to favour me with just so much of his confidence as was necessary to the discharge of his infernal business. Then it was that I began, if I may so Shakespearianly express myself, to dwindle, peak, and pine. I found that my services were constantly called into requisition for the falsification of business, and the mystification of an individual whom I will designate as Mr. W. That Mr. W. was imposed upon, kept in ignorance, and deluded, in every possible way; yet, that all this while, the ruffian—HEEP—was professing unbounded gratitude to, and unbounded friendship for, that much-abused gentleman. This was bad enough; but, as the philosophic Dane observes, with that universal applicability which distinguishes the illustrious ornament of the Elizabethan Era, worse remains behind!’ (52, pp. 751-52)

And so on.

There are a number of melodramatic speeches in *David Copperfield*. Fervent and elaborately patterned though these speeches are, however, they are uttered in scenes that do not rise to the degree of emotional fervor required to make *them* genuinely melodramatic.

When, for instance, Agnes tells David her fears concerning her father’s decline in the dual grip of wine and Heep, this is the one speech expressive of strong feeling in an otherwise calm and even bantering conversation.

‘Oh, Trotwood!’ cried Agnes, putting her hands before her face, as her tears started on it, ‘I almost feel as if I had been Papa’s enemy, instead of his loving child. For I know how he has altered, in his devotion to me. I know how he has narrowed the circle of his sympathies and duties, in the concentration of his whole mind upon me. I know what a multitude of things he has shut out for my sake, and how his anxious thoughts of me have shadowed his life, and weakened his strength and energy, by turning them always upon one idea. If I could ever set this right! If I could ever work out his restoration, as I have so innocently been the cause of his decline!’ (25, p. 370)

Or when Wickfield later pulls himself together long enough to lay bare his shameful weakness to David, this is his sole interval of lucidity in a drunken frenzy which Heep has insidiously brought on.

‘Oh, Trotwood, Trotwood!’ exclaimed Mr. Wickfield, wringing his hands. ‘What I have come down to be, since I first saw you in this

house! I was on my downward way then, but the dreary, dreary road I have traversed since! Weak indulgence has ruined me. Indulgence in remembrance, and indulgence in forgetfulness. My natural grief for my child's mother turned to disease; my natural love for my child turned to disease. I have infected everything I touched. I have brought misery on what I dearly love, I know—*You* know! I thought it possible that I could truly love one creature in the world, and not love the rest; I thought it possible that I could truly mourn for one creature gone out of the world, and not have some part in the grief of all who mourned. Thus the lessons of my life have been perverted! I have preyed on my own morbid, coward heart, and it has preyed on me. Sordid in my grief, sordid in my love, sordid in my miserable escape from the darker side of both, oh see the ruin I am, and hate me, shun me!' (39, p. 578)

Both Agnes' speech and Wickfield's do mark natural climaxes of the conversations in which they occur; in their respective contexts they are perfectly suitable and most effective.

Not even the highly emotional scene (45, pp. 656-63) in which Annie Strong tells her husband (and the assembled company) of her great love for him is truly melodramatic, despite the intense passion and the patterned eloquence with which she expresses herself throughout it. Annie has no partner, no antagonist, no one whose speeches rise to the level of hers, in this scene; and the repeated interjections of Aunt Betsey and Mrs. Markleham, as well as Aunt Betsey's and Mr. Dick's comments at the conclusion, considerably dilute its emotional power. If this is melodrama at all, it is decidedly mixed. And if the scene troubles, it is not because Annie is so remarkably proficient in melodramatic speech. Rather, one wonders why Dickens bothered to devote half a chapter to it. Annie, after all, having done no wrong, has nothing to confess, nor does her husband harbor any suspicion that she has misbehaved with her wicked cousin. No public avowal of her powerful feeling for Dr. Strong is called for. In fact, the whole scene is really—in a manner of speaking—staged for David's benefit, because a number of the expressions Annie uses, at least as applicable to David's case as to her own, serve to set up profound and lasting reverberations in his consciousness: "there can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose"; "the first mistaken impulse of my undisciplined heart"; "my love was founded on a rock, and it endures."

As even his warmest admirers must admit, the Inimitable Dickens was not always able to bring off his artifice, and this oddly ad hoc and ad hominem scene is a case in point; but Annie's soaring rhetoric is not the reason it fails to carry conviction.

Given the strongly comic flavor of so much of *David Copperfield*, the prevalence of mock melodrama in the novel is not surprising. Micawber's denunciation of Heep, as we have already noticed, falls nicely into this category, as do some of the flights of fancy in which Dora's romantic friend Julia Mills indulges. And one way Dickens endows David's misguided courtship of Dora with its lighter aspect is through a judicious use of this device. As David discovers, it simply will not do to address her in the exalted language of the noble young lover of melodrama.

'Is your heart mine still, dear Dora?' said I rapturously, for I knew by her clinging to me that it was.

'Oh, yes!' cried Dora. 'Oh, yes, it's all yours. Oh, don't be dreadful!'

I dreadful! To Dora!

'Don't talk about being poor, and working hard!' said Dora, nestling closer to me. 'Oh, don't, don't!'

'My dearest love,' said I, 'the crust well-earned—'

'Oh, yes; but I don't want to hear any more about crusts!' said Dora. 'And Jip must have a mutton-chop every day at twelve, or he'll die!' . . .

' . . . But, Dora, my love, if you will sometimes think—not despondingly, you know; far from that!—but if you will think—just to encourage yourself—that you are engaged to a poor man—'

'Don't, don't! Pray don't!' cried Dora. 'It's so very dreadful!'

'My soul, not at all!' said I cheerfully. 'If you will sometimes think of that, and look about now and then at your papa's housekeeping, and endeavor to acquire a little habit—of accounts, for instance—'

Poor little Dora received this suggestion with something that was half a sob and half a scream.

'—It would be so useful to us afterwards,' I went on. 'And if you would promise me to read a little—a little Cookery Book that I would send you, it would be so excellent for both of us. For our path in life, my Dora,' said I, warming with the subject, 'is stony and rugged now, and it rests with us to smooth it. We must fight our way on—'

ward. We must be brave. There are obstacles to be met, and we must meet them, and crush them!

I was going at a great rate, with a clenched hand, and a most enthusiastic countenance; but it was quite unnecessary to proceed. I had said enough. I had done it again. Oh, she was so frightened! Oh, where was Julia Mills! Oh, take her to Julia Mills, and go away, please! So that, in short, I was quite distracted, and raved about the drawing-room. (37, pp. 540-42)

But purely melodramatic devices are used most sparingly in *David Copperfield*. To say this is neither to condemn the devices nor to commend the novel: it is simply to acknowledge that in the unique emotional climate of *David Copperfield* Dickens saw, quite properly, that there was very little appropriate use for them.

NOTES

1. Gwendolyn Needham, "The Undisciplined Heart of David Copperfield," *NCF*, 9 (1954), 86. As anyone familiar with the busy and not uncontentious world of Dickens criticism would expect, Needham's widely admired interpretation of the novel has been challenged. Though Barbara Hardy recognizes the importance of the theme Needham identifies, she denies that it is "a source of strength," asserting that "it is not so much the moral and psychological study of the heart and its training, which gives *David Copperfield* its strength and vitality, as the intense and local shafts which strike deep as human insights, honest revelations, and dramatic communications" (*The Moral Art of Dickens*, p. 129). James R. Kincaid, going further, argues that David's attempt to bring his emotions under control "is priggish, escapist, ugly, and narrow, that it denies the values that count—those of Dora, the Micawbers, and Mr. Dick—and that this 'disciplining' is partly a euphemism for desensitizing, falsifying, sentimentalizing" (*Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, p. 163). Though I agree with Kincaid's view that much of the novel's power rests in David's ambivalence about the innocent and irresponsible characters whom, in one way or another, he puts behind him, I do not see why theirs should be, exclusively, "the values that count." Robin Gilmour takes a position similar to Kincaid's in "Memory in *David Copperfield*," *Dickensian*, 71 (1975), 30-42.

2. John Lucas points out that we must not be unduly put off by the "shrill vein of melodramatics" in Rosa Dartle's speech to Mrs. Steerforth or fail to notice that "what lies beneath Rosa's words has a proper relevance to the theme of untrammelled or warped growth, disciplined and undisciplined hearts" (*The Melancholy Man*, p. 180).

Chapter 6

Bleak House

Just as the first-person point of view does much to affect the emotional impact of *David Copperfield*, so Dickens' use of Esther Summerson as narrator for approximately half of the chapters of *Bleak House* significantly modifies our responses to key aspects of that novel. As is the case in *David Copperfield*, this narrative method tends to subdue rather than to heighten the emotional power of what is being rendered and to rule out appreciable recourse to melodramatic devices. Esther's sensibilities, like David's, are keen, and she gives way to tears even more often than he does. But whereas there is no doubt regarding the centrality of David's role and David's feelings in what is after all explicitly his story, Esther is generally anxious not to obtrude herself, and she is not always very clear, in her own mind or in her own words, as to what her feelings actually are or how they originate.¹

"I try to think about myself as little as possible" (9, p. 112), Esther says, typically, at one point. Her self-deprecation is remarkable. She makes no claim to be clever (3, p. 15) or to understand people, "having so little experience or practical knowledge" (6, p. 80). She lives according to the dictates of duty, determined not "to muse over by-gones, but to act with a cheerful spirit and a grateful heart" (*ibid.*). She does not press John Jarndyce for information about her past, trusting that "if there were anything I ought to know, or had any need to know, I should not have to ask you to tell it to me" (8, p. 99). Even the loss of her beauty after a siege of smallpox does not appear to disturb her equanimity unduly: she dismisses it as "that little loss of mine" (36, p. 507) and goes on about her busy life of service to others.

Those who hurt Esther during her unhappy childhood do not receive the censure they deserve from her. Her tyrannical godmother-aunt, Miss Barbary, raising her in a stern and utterly loveless setting, is in Esther's eyes "a good, good woman" (2, p. 15). Esther views the tightlipped satisfaction which the housekeeper takes in her departure from Miss Barbary's house as something entirely different: "Mrs. Rachael was too good to feel any emotion at parting" (2, p. 22).

When, as a young woman, Esther comes into contact with various spectacularly fraudulent or feckless individuals, she is equally reluctant to judge them harshly. Having coined a marvelous phrase, "rapacious benevolence," for Mrs. Pardiggle's aggressive works of mercy among the helpless but

resentful poor, she immediately softens it by the apologetic insertion of the parenthetical "if I may use the expression" (8, p. 100). After hearing Caddy's bitter account of the domestic confusion and distress at the Jellybys', Esther does venture to blame the offending party, but only in very mild terms and almost hesitantly: "I must confess that I could not help feeling rather angry with Mrs. Jellyby, myself" (14, p. 186). She understands how old Turveydrop exploits Prince and Caddy, and sees right through his blatant insincerity, but is "half ashamed of not entirely believing in him" (23, p. 334; cf. 14, p. 195). Shrewd enough to grasp that Skimpole's child-like sponging is almost welcomed by Jarndyce as a kind of comic relief, she nevertheless stops short of drawing the obvious conclusion: "I should be sorry to imply that Mr. Skimpole divined this, and was politic: I really never understood him well enough to know" (15, p. 204). Having just offered a perceptive analysis of Richard Carstone's defects of character, Esther reduces much of its sting by adding: "I write down these opinions, not because I believe that this or any other thing was so, because I thought so; but only because I did think so, and I want to be quite candid about all I thought and did" (17, p. 227).

Even more striking than this unwillingness of Esther's to set herself up as a judge whose opinions of other people should be heeded is her habitual evasiveness about the reasons for her own emotional responses. Sometimes these startle even her, as when she weeps at Jarndyce's benevolence ("I said to myself, 'Esther, my dear, you surprise me! This really is not what I expected of you!'" [8, p. 94]), or after Guppy's solemn avowal of his love ("I surprised myself by beginning to laugh about it, and then surprised myself still more by beginning to cry about it" [9, p. 126]). At other times she resorts to a distressing coyness concerning her feelings and the reasons for them. For example, after a scene during which she has observed Richard's irresponsibility, Jarndyce's concern about it, and Ada's devotion to Richard despite the young man's totally unrealistic outlook on life, Esther tells us that, instead of retiring for the night, "I sat up working. It would not be worth mentioning for its own sake, but I was wakeful and rather low-spirited. I don't know why. At least, I don't think I know why. At least, perhaps I do, but I don't think it matters" (17, p. 235). This tendency to forsake her ordinarily well constructed style and lapse into broken syntax becomes most prominent when her subject is Allan Woodcourt (see, e.g., 13, p. 181; 14, p. 202; 17, pp. 238-40; 30, pp. 411-15; 44, p. 612; and 45, pp. 623-24).

Though Esther is presented as a character with a rich inner life, she refuses to let her feelings about others dominate her narrative or to wallow in her own emotions for the sake of the reader's titillation. As a result, scenes which might with different handling have borne a heavy charge of melodrama become almost bare in their effect.

Early in the novel, she is a witness, with Ada, to the death of a poor brickmaker's baby. Esther's account is factual, almost reportorial: she is far more concerned with depicting the reactions of those present, especially Ada, than with investing the infant's passing with any pathetic significance:

Ada, whose gentle heart was moved by its appearance, bent down to touch its little face. As she did so, I saw what happened and drew her back. The child died.

'O Esther!' cried Ada, sinking on her knees beside it. 'Look here! O Esther, my love, the little thing! The suffering, quiet, pretty little thing! I am so sorry for it. I am so sorry for the mother. I never saw a sight so pitiful as this before! O baby, baby!'

Such compassion, such gentleness, as that with which she bent down weeping, and put her hand upon the mother's, might have softened any mother's heart that ever beat. The woman at first gazed at her in astonishment, and then burst into tears.

Presently I took the light burden from her lap; did what I could to make the baby's rest the prettier and gentler; laid it on a shelf, and covered it with my own handkerchief. We tried to comfort the mother, and we whispered to her what Our Saviour said of children. She answered nothing, but sat weeping—weeping very much.

When I turned, I found that the young man had taken out the dog, and was standing at the door looking in upon us; with dry eyes, but quiet. The girl was quiet too, and sat in a corner looking on the ground. The man had risen. He still smoked his pipe with an air of defiance, but he was silent. (8, pp. 108-09)

Esther's powers of observation and analysis extend to the class aspect of this moving episode. The bereaved mother's friend—like her unprepossessing, "poorly clothed," bearing "upon her face and arms the marks of ill-usage"—rushes in to comfort her. Esther grasps, very sensibly, that for all her sympathy her ability to understand what she is seeing is limited by the difference between her own background and that of the principals:

I thought it very touching to see these two women, coarse and shabby and beaten, so united; to see what they could be to one another; to see how they felt for one another; how the heart of each to each was softened by the hard trials of their lives. I think the best side of such people is almost hidden from us. (8, p. 109)

When Esther herself participates in scenes of great intensity, rather than merely being present at them, she characteristically minimizes her involvement in such a way as to reduce their melodramatic quality. For example, she has a stormy encounter with Richard Carstone in *Deal*, at a point in that unfortunate young man's career when his great expectations have come close to destroying him, during which he angers her by casting aspersions on their common benefactor, John Jarndyce. But her wrath is brief; she makes no speech.

'Richard!' I cried out, rising hastily, 'I will not hear you say such shameful words!' I was very angry with him indeed, for the first time in my life; but it only lasted a moment. When I saw his worn young face looking at me as if he were sorry, I put my hand on his shoulder, and said, 'If you please, my dear Richard, do not speak in such a tone to me. Consider!' (45, p. 621)

A little later, when Richard has confided to her his insane scheme to sell his commission, bargain with usurers, and put himself entirely in the hands of the unscrupulous lawyer Vholes, she upbraids him sharply (and no doubt eloquently), but we never learn what he says. She tells us only that "I will not repeat what I said to Richard. I know it was tiresome, and nobody is to suppose for a moment that it was at all wise. It only came from my heart" (45, p. 622).

Esther is similarly restrained in her reporting of scenes which intimately affect her own fortunes. There are several of these in the novel, each capable of being a blockbuster but deliberately kept from manifesting such high explosive force.

First, when Esther learns from Lady Dedlock that this woman—the grand wife of a haughty baronet to whom she has felt powerfully drawn since their first meeting—is her mother, the business is done quickly and with a minimum of fuss. The actual disclosure takes up just two sentences, and the impact of Esther's response to Lady Dedlock is considerably moderated by being cast entirely in indirect discourse:

I looked at her; but I could not see her, I could not hear her, I could not draw my breath. The beating of my heart was so violent and wild, that I felt as if my life were breaking from me. But when she caught me to her breast, kissed me, wept over me, compassionated me, and called me back to myself; when she fell down on her knees and cried to me, 'Oh my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! O try to forgive me!'—when I saw her at my feet on the bare earth in her great agony of mind, I felt, through all my tumult of emotion, a burst of gratitude to the providence of God that I was so changed as that I never could disgrace her by any trace of likeness; as that nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us.

I raised my mother up, praying and beseeching her not to stoop before me in such affliction and humiliation. I did so in broken incoherent words; for, besides the trouble I was in, it frightened me to see her at *my* feet. I told her—or I tried to tell her—that if it were for me, her child, under any circumstances to take upon me to forgive her, I did it, and had done it, many, many years. I told her that my heart overflowed with love for her; that it was natural love, which nothing in the past had changed, or could change. That it was not for me, then resting for the first time on my mother's bosom, to take her to account for having given me life; but that my duty was to bless her and receive her, though the whole world turned from her, and that I only asked her leave to do it. I held my mother in my embrace, and she held me in hers; and among the still woods in the silence of the summer day, there seemed to be nothing but our two troubled minds that was not at peace. (36, pp. 509-10)

The structure of the whole encounter between mother and daughter, and of the chapter in which it appears, is worthy of comment. Their conversation quickly turns to a discussion of Lady Dedlock's fear of exposure—a danger that is far more closely related to the plot of *Bleak House* than is the nature of the secret itself, which most readers will have guessed by this point in the novel—and this takes up much more space than the revelation itself. The climax of the chapter does not occur until after the question of Esther's parentage has been abandoned entirely, when Ada—Esther's "dear girl"—sees the disfigured Esther for the first time after her illness and all is well. By refusing to turn Lady Dedlock's confession and Esther's reaction

to it into a melodramatic recognition scene, indeed by doing everything possible to play down that portion of their interview, Dickens keeps the action moving forward, the suspense concerning Lady Dedlock's future fate high, and the novel's emotional priorities undisturbed. (It is a fact that Ada, on the whole, means much more to Esther than Lady Dedlock does.)

Three men—Guppy, Jarndyce, and Woodcourt—propose to Esther during the course of *Bleak House*. Leaving Guppy's fatuous declaration for later treatment, we should note that neither of the two serious offers of marriage Esther receives is directly represented. Jarndyce's is in the form of a letter, and not a word of it is quoted (44, pp. 610-11). Esther bursts into tears after reading it, and this is one of the occasions when she does not help the reader understand why she behaves as she does.

Still I cried very much; not only in the fulness of my heart after reading the letter, not only in the strangeness of the prospect—for it was strange though I had expected the contents—but as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me. I was very happy, very thankful, very hopeful; but I cried very much. (44, p. 611)

The really important offer of marriage, Woodcourt's, is given even shorter shrift. Esther's account suggests that it occurs almost by accident, and it is over in an instant.

We were standing by the opened window, looking down into the street, when Mr. Woodcourt spoke to me. I learned in a moment that he loved me. I learned in a moment that my scarred face was all unchanged to him. I learned in a moment that what I had thought was pity and compassion, was devoted, generous, faithful love. (61, pp. 832-33)

In this case, the emotional temperature does become rather warm: the scene between Esther and Woodcourt is protracted beyond the actual declaration, but it goes nowhere because Esther is under the impression that, having promised to become the mistress of Bleak House, she is not free to marry Woodcourt. Protestations of mutual esteem, when there seems to be no likelihood of a romantic outcome, are not by themselves the stuff of melodrama.

There is, of course, much more to this suppression of emotion than Esther's habitual self-effacement, for she must not be viewed as the pro-

tagonist of even "her" portion of *Bleak House* in the same way that the developing narrator is the protagonist of *David Copperfield*. Her roles as observer, as confidante, as part of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces are human fates, are much more important than her role as heroine. Even if Dickens had been tempted to endow the scenes in which Esther takes part with greater fervor, his unremitting concern for the architectonics of this superbly crafted novel would have stayed his hand.²

One final point about Esther's narrative needs to be made in passing. Like David's, it is retrospective, set down after she has been married to Woodcourt for seven years (67, p. 877). But there is in it very little of the double vision which is constantly employed in *David Copperfield*. With a few insignificant and uninformative exceptions, Esther never explains or judges an action, a character, or a thought in the light of knowledge acquired later. Though her narrative is in the past tense, she does not bring to bear on it the discoveries of maturity. This gives it a freshness that is sometimes missing when the experienced and chastened David comments on his early adventures, but, more important, it preserves the atmosphere of mystery that is essential to the effect of *Bleak House*.

As we see even more clearly in the chapters given over to the omniscient narrator, *Bleak House* is a novel about the way in which order, design, connection has been obscured in a world full of physical and spiritual fog, smoke, darkness, dirt, and mud. Groping our way through this world, we seem to encounter nothing but confusion: the alternating employment of two very different and at first apparently unrelated narrative lines, the several subplots, the multiplicity of settings and characters—all this and more, including of course the symbolism and the imagery, contributes to the reader's sense of ambiguity and chaos. Naturally, he grasps early on that the Chancery case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce constitutes a nucleus around which everything, or nearly everything, revolves, but it is only slowly that he comes to understand that the incredible disorder he perceives is far more apparent than real, that in fact this is an intricately structured world with as many weblike connections among its members as the society of George Eliot's Middlemarch.

It is important for Dickens' purposes to heighten as much as possible this false feeling of disjunction in *Bleak House*, for the more powerful it is the more surprising and aesthetically pleasing will be the reader's gradual discovery that a remarkably coherent design actually underlies all the obvious confusion. And so the novel is full of characters striving for knowl-

edge and truth in attempts that are doomed to failure, though they sometimes do come tantalizingly close to success and bring about unexpected and unintended consequences.³

There is Guppy, who for all his clownishness nearly manages to discover Lady Dedlock's secret. He knows that there is some connection between her and Esther, he learns that Miss Barbary was Esther's aunt, and he establishes that the law-writer who has just died in poverty was Esther's father. In revealing this much to Lady Dedlock, he is unwittingly making two other disclosures: he confirms her suspicion that Nemo was really Hawdon, and he shows her that Esther is her daughter as well as the dead man's. Nevertheless, though persistent enough to ferret out a number of important facts, Guppy lacks the intelligence or the imagination to combine them into a coherent whole and apprehend the total picture.

Guppy's efforts and his failure are typical. They resemble, for example, Krook's dogged and futile attempts to teach himself to read. As Jobling says to Guppy, "He can make all the letters separately, and he knows most of them separately when he sees them; he has got on that much, under me; but he can't put them together" (32, p. 450). Unlike Guppy or Krook, Jo the crossing sweeper is too passive and uncomprehending even to try sorting out the stubbornly disparate facts of experience. The omniscient narrator all but tells the reader by his rhetorical questions that they *are* linked, but poor dull Jo does not grasp this: indeed, he could hardly care less.

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!

Jo sweeps his crossing all day long, unconscious of the link, if any link there be. He sums up his mental condition, when asked a question, by replying that he 'don't know nothink.' He knows that it's hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty weather, and harder still to live by doing it. Nobody taught him, even that much; he found it out. (16, p. 219)

Another seeker, Mrs. Snagsby, is like Guppy in trying to make sense of troubling incidents that impinge on her little sphere of interest. Convinced

that Snagsby looks out for Jo because that waif is his natural son, "she has pursued her object of detecting and confounding her false husband, night and day," a quest which, she hopes and believes, will "terminate in Mr. Snagsby's full exposure and a matrimonial separation" (54, p. 734). Like Guppy, too, she not only fails in her endeavor but also brings about important results that she could not have foreseen when she began her investigation: she puts Tulkinghorn in touch with the Chadbands, she informs him of Guppy's activities, and she helps to enlighten Sir Leicester Dedlock about his wife's past. As Bucket observes, "that little pickled cucumber of a Mrs. Snagsby has been used by all sides of the speculation, and has done a deal more harm in bringing odds and ends together than if she had meant it" (54, pp. 735-36). To put it another way, Mrs. Snagsby plays a part in tightening the noose around the neck of Lady Dedlock, whom she has never even seen.

All kinds of surprising connections come looming up at the reader out of the fog. In addition to those already alluded to, we might recall the following: George turns out to be Mrs. Rouncewell's son; Mrs. Smallweed is Krook's sister; the housekeeper at Esther's first home reappears as Mrs. Chadband; Boythorn is shown to have been engaged long ago to Esther's aunt. Such relationships emerge only slowly, which is hardly surprising, for the inhabitants of the world of *Bleak House* are often singularly oblivious to what is going on around them. Even the Argus-eyed Tulkinghorn fails to see the disguised Lady Dedlock passing by his window, on her way to search out Jo (16, pp. 222-23). No wonder, then, that Mrs. Rouncewell does not recognize her son in Tulkinghorn's waiting room (34, pp. 482-83), or that Sir Leicester has no idea of his wife's mental agony, even though they are under the same roof.

Words, sobs, and cries, are but air; and air is so shut in and shut out throughout the house in town, that sounds need be uttered trumpet-tongued indeed by my Lady in her chamber, to carry any faint vibration to Sir Leicester's ears; and yet this cry is in the house, going upward from a wild figure on its knees. (29, p. 410)

In its movement from apparent chaos to genuine order, *Bleak House* is a mystery novel par excellence. That being so, Dickens cannot allow his omniscient narrator to give away anything prematurely, any more than Esther does. Unlike his earlier counterpart in *Dombey and Son*, that narrator carefully refrains from going beneath surfaces in order to explain

authoritatively the feelings that lead to speech and action. Indeed, he explicitly disavows any intention or ability to read minds, though it is certainly possible for the reader to draw inferences about feelings and motives from what he does tell and from the broad hints he drops. There is, for instance, the conclusion of Chapter 12, following one of the periodic sparring matches between Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock:

They meet again at dinner—again, next day—again, for many days in succession. Lady Dedlock is always the same exhausted deity, surrounded by worshippers, and terribly liable to be bored to death, even while presiding at her own shrine. Mr. Tulkinghorn is always the same speechless repository of noble confidences: so oddly out of place, and yet so perfectly at home. They appear to take as little note of one another, as any two people, enclosed within the same walls, could. But whether each evermore watches and suspects the other, evermore mistrustful of some great reservation; whether each is evermore prepared at all points for the other, and never to be taken unawares; what each would give to know how much the other knows—all this is hidden, for the time, in their own hearts. (12, p. 166)

On another occasion, the narrator's commentary is qualified by a recurring "it may be":

Mr. Tulkinghorn comes and goes pretty often; there being estate business to do, leases to be renewed, and so on. He sees my Lady pretty often, too; and he and she are as composed, and as indifferent, and take as little heed of one another, as ever. Yet it may be that my Lady fears this Mr. Tulkinghorn, and that he knows it. It may be that he pursues her doggedly and steadily, with no touch of compunction, remorse, or pity. It may be that her beauty, and all the state and brilliancy surrounding her, only gives him the greater zest for what he is set upon, and makes him the more inflexible in it. Whether he be cold and cruel, whether immovable in what he has made his duty, whether absorbed in love of power, whether determined to have nothing hidden from him in ground where he has burrowed among secrets all his life, whether he in his heart despises the splendour of which he is a distant beam, whether he is always treasuring up slights and offences in the affability of his gorgeous clients—whether he be any of this, or all of this, it may be that my Lady had better have five

thousand pairs of fashionable eyes upon her, in distrustful vigilance, than the two eyes of this rusty lawyer, with his wisp of neckcloth and his dull black breeches tied with ribbons at the knees. (29, p. 402)

The omniscient narrator's habitual way of recording crucial dialogue is to have the speakers keep their guard up, refusing to concede or reveal anything until it becomes absolutely necessary, so that it is difficult for the reader to be certain what their thoughts really are. Except on rare occasions, the omniscient narrator does not indulge in melodramatic narrative or melodramatic commentary in the manner of his counterpart in *Dombey and Son*; rather than arousing or heightening any specific emotion, his portentous, elliptical remarks are designed to maintain and augment the mysterious atmosphere so crucial to the effect of the novel. Especially in the omniscient narrator's half of *Bleak House*, Dickens makes liberal use of the melodrama of mystery, and this can be very puzzling indeed until the figure in his carpet begins to become visible.

The best examples occur in those confrontations between Lady Dedlock and Tulkinghorn, especially the two earliest ones, before he knows her story, and before she knows that he knows it. Like Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock has learned to maintain a severe reserve, as the omniscient narrator points out, somewhat needlessly, fairly late in the novel. He says about Lady Dedlock that she has been

so long accustomed to suppress emotion, and keep down reality; so long schooled for her own purposes, in that destructive school which shuts up the natural feelings of the heart, like flies in amber, and spreads one uniform and dreary gloss over the good and bad, the feeling and the unfeeling, the sensible and the senseless; she had subdued even her wonder until now. (55, p. 755)

(This explicit, eloquent, and elaborately structured account may *look* like melodramatic narrative, but it certainly does not *sound* like it.) At this point, the omniscient narrator is justifying, successfully, Lady Dedlock's anaesthetized reaction to Mrs. Rouncewell's appeal to help her son George, under suspicion of murder; with its repeated emphasis on the extinction of feeling in Lady Dedlock, it serves to explain as well the tightly controlled way she responds to other crises.

For different reasons, Tulkinghorn too holds himself in close check. Just as habit, cultivated by overwhelming necessity, will not permit Lady Ded-

lock to indulge in public displays of emotion, so Tulkinghorn's professional circumspection leads him to speak and act with extreme caution, keeping his feelings entirely to himself. It is clear that far more passes between these two than can find overt expression in their words, and the narrator's words are not much more revealing. The reader knows from the start that their encounters must be significant, or they would not be represented; but what their meaning might be is disclosed only gradually, with a minimum of explicit intervention by the narrator.

At their initial meeting in the novel, Lady Dedlock spies a document which Hawdon has copied and is momentarily jarred out of her customary languor.

'Who copied that?'

Mr. Tulkinghorn stops short, surprised by my Lady's animation and her unusual tone.

'Is it what you people call law-hand?' she says, looking full at him in her careless way again, and toying with her screen.

'Not quite. Probably'—Mr. Tulkinghorn examines it as he speaks—'the legal character which it has, was acquired after the original hand was formed. Why do you ask?'

'Anything to vary this detestable monotony. O, go on, do!' (2, p. 14)

That the scene has an overwhelming impact on Lady Dedlock is not apparent from her words, only from her unwonted vivacity and from the fact that she feels faint as soon as she takes in the possible meaning of what she has seen and heard.

By the next time Lady Dedlock and Tulkinghorn are shown together, he has taken it upon himself to investigate the identity of the law-writer whose hand had aroused her interest, and he is able to tell her that he has discovered the man's corpse. Their interview is factual, almost offhand. Besides reproducing their words, the omniscient narrator indicates, through his terse reporting of externals and some laconic speculation as to causes, that there is more going on than meets the eye, but his voice never rises to anything like melodramatic pitch (12, 164-66).

As to the voices of the participants in these conversations, they too remain carefully regulated. The scenes in question, on the surface far too subdued to be called melodramatic, clearly arouse tremendous emotion in Lady Dedlock, but it is all internal. And at these early stages of her dealings

with Tulkinghorn, neither Lady Dedlock nor her husband's lawyer does much to enlighten the reader as to the nature of the issue that draws them together in this way. Also mysterious, though much more informative, is the scene between Guppy and Lady Dedlock in which he reveals the results of his inquiries concerning Esther and Hawdon. Guppy stops short of making the most important disclosure of all, that Esther is Lady Dedlock's daughter, because he has not been able to deduce this for himself; but he provides the reader with enough information as he goes along to enable him to draw the crucial conclusion just when Lady Dedlock does. She responds hardly at all to Guppy's chattering, which combines shrewdness and silliness, and it is not until she dismisses him that her pent-up emotion bursts out, a brief but passionate conclusion to a superficially quiet, and at times a comic, chapter: "'O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me; but sternly nurtured by her, after she had renounced me and my name! O my child, O my child!'" (29, p. 410).

Lady Dedlock makes this discovery less than half way through *Bleak House*, and she shares it with Esther a hundred pages later. But the suspense is far from over. The reader is concerned about how, and how widely, the relationship between Lady Dedlock and Esther will become known, and with what effect on the principals; and, later, about the identity of Tulkinghorn's murderer. The omniscient narrator allows the reader to learn the answers to these questions gradually, in scenes that are represented dramatically. Though they could be acted on the stage with very little modification, they are not conventionally melodramatic: rather than owing their effectiveness to eloquent expression of emotion, they entail rapid alternation of moods, the building up and subsequent exposure of false expectations, strategically timed entrances by key characters, and above all, perhaps, surprise.

By withholding information until its disclosure will be most effective, and by manipulating with supreme skill the foibles of the actors, Inspector Bucket more than any other character—because he, virtually alone among the dramatis personae of *Bleak House*, is able to establish connections—becomes Dickens' agent in orchestrating a highly successful melodrama of mystery. The best case in point, surely, is Chapter 54, "Springing a Mine." The detective begins by telling Sir Leicester that he has solved the mystery of Tulkinghorn's death: the killer is not George, whom he has arrested for the murder, but a woman. Bucket has come very close to persuading the horrified baronet that Lady Dedlock is the criminal when his presentation is

interrupted by the arrival of Smallweed, Mr. and Mrs. Chadband, and Mrs. Snagsby. Each of them has information which serves to indict Lady Dedlock, not for murder but for having harbored the secret of her liaison with Hawdon, and each of them tells his or her story, encouraged by Bucket, as Sir Leicester listens stunned and unwilling to comprehend. After Bucket ushers out this pack of would-be blackmailers, he returns to the question of the murder: he rings for Hortense, arrests her, and demonstrates conclusively that he has all the evidence necessary to convict her. Though Bucket addresses most of his remarks incriminating the Frenchwoman to Sir Leicester, that gentleman is in a state of shock and has lost his powers of speech by the time the scene ends. As she makes her defiant exit, Hortense contemptuously dismisses Tulkinghorn, Lady Dedlock, and Sir Leicester, all together.

‘Listen then, my angel,’ says she, after several sarcastic nods. ‘You are very spiritual. But can you restore him back to life?’

Mr. Bucket answers ‘Not exactly.’

‘That is droll. Listen yet one time. You are very spiritual. Can you make a honourable lady of Her?’

‘Don’t be so malicious,’ says Mr. Bucket.

‘Or a haughty gentleman of *Him*?’ cries Mademoiselle, referring to Sir Leicester with ineffable disdain. ‘Eh! O then regard him! The poor infant! Ha! ha! ha!’

‘Come, come, why this is worse Parlaying than the other,’ says Mr. Bucket. ‘Come along!’

‘You cannot do these things? Then you can do as you please with me. It is but the death, it is all the same. Let us go, my angel. Adieu, you old man, grey. I pity you, and I des-pise you!’ (54, p. 743)

The melodrama of mystery in this chapter is unlike that in the initial conversations between Lady Dedlock and Tulkinghorn—or, to take an example from an earlier novel, that in the nocturnal interview between Mrs. Bumble and Monks in *Oliver Twist*, discussed in Chapter 2 of this study—inasmuch as the reader is left in no doubt at the end of the scene as to the significance of what the omniscient narrator has displayed before him. On the contrary, the reader is skillfully led from ignorance to knowledge, not without first being mischievously lured down some blind alleys, marveling along the way at Dickens’—and Bucket’s—adroitness. In its

movement from confusion to enlightenment the chapter reproduces the basic pattern and distills the essence of the whole novel.

Another variant of the melodrama of mystery occurs during the scene in Chapter 40 when Tulkinghorn lets Lady Dedlock know for the first time that he is aware of her shame. Rather than having it out in a full-blown melodramatic confrontation, they engage in one of their elaborate games—only this time Tulkinghorn, bent on revelation rather than concealment, makes his point very clearly to the one person he is trying to reach while all the others present in the drawing room at Chesney Wold have no idea of the real import of what he is saying. As Lady Dedlock sits in dim light which hides her reactions, Tulkinghorn tells a made-up story about a wealthy and beautiful woman in circumstances exactly like hers. So remote is the situation from Lady Dedlock's apparent station in life that no one else gets the point, and yet so close is the genuine parallel that she herself understands exactly what he is doing. "Why have you told my story to so many persons?" (41, p. 575) she asks him quietly in the next chapter, as soon as she is able to see him in private. Their subsequent conversation is almost businesslike, certainly—again—anything but melodramatic. Histronics between them would be as pointless as they would be uncharacteristic. As Lady Dedlock says to her tormentor, "Of repentance or remorse, or any feeling of mine . . . I say not a word. If I were not dumb, you would be deaf" (41, p. 577).

Even though the unusual narrative method of *Bleak House* allows neither narrator to lay on spectacular melodramatic scenes, the novel is by no means devoid of emotion. Lady Dedlock's passion is almost always kept hidden, as we have observed, but it is no less powerful for that. There are articulately angry minor characters, like Gridley and the brickmaker. And the omniscient narrator's tone is sardonic much of the time: for all his impersonality, he makes it abundantly clear that he feels deeply about the story he is telling and the issues it raises. He is not above arousing the reader by resorting to melodramatic narrative at times, as when Tulkinghorn's journey from his last interview with Lady Dedlock to his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields (and, as it turns out, his death) is punctuated by warnings of "Don't go home!" (48, p. 662), and his voice even at calmer moments is almost perpetually grim and tense.

Pathos does occur more often—oddly enough—in the omniscient narrator's account than in Esther's. Only occasionally is it included gratuitously,

for the mere sake of wringing a tear from the reader, as for example in the omniscient narrator's reflections on Hawdon's dead body:

If this forlorn man could have been prophetically seen lying here, by the mother at whose breast he nestled, a little child, with eyes upraised to her loving face, and soft hand scarcely knowing how to close upon the neck to which it crept, what an impossibility the vision would have seemed! O, if, in brighter days, the now-extinguished fire within him ever burned for one woman who held him in her heart, where is she, while these ashes are above the ground! (11, p. 150)

Far more frequently, pathos is used to further Dickens' social purpose, as in his treatment of Jo's plight; or it is combined with comedy, as in his depiction of the demented Chancery suitor Miss Flite. Occasionally, it rises to heights of true nobility, as in the transformation of Sir Leicester Dedlock from a smug and stuffy object of satire to a pitiable human being who is all but destroyed by the accusations against his wife, by her subsequent disappearance, and by her ultimate death. The old man is touchingly in love with Lady Dedlock, and nothing—not the certain evidence of her guilty past, not the loss of most of his faculties, not even her death—can diminish his attachment to her. Dickens does allow himself to be carried away as far as the most susceptible reader by this character's sad decline, for it is about Sir Leicester that the ordinarily inscrutable and detached omniscient narrator makes one of his few explicit moral judgments.

His noble earnestness, his fidelity, his gallant shielding of her, his general conquest of his own wrong and his own pride for her sake, are simply honourable, manly, and true. Nothing less worthy can be seen through the lustre of such qualities in the commonest mechanic, nothing less worthy can be seen in the best-born gentleman. In such a light both aspire alike, both rise alike, both children of the dust shine equally. (58, p. 794)

The occasional use of mock melodrama supplies an effective contrast to the predominantly grim mood of *Bleak House*. Guppy—who, we are told, is inordinately fond of theater-going (13, pp. 171-72)—couches his proposal to Esther in his own absurd version of a stage lover's high-flown diction.

'Cruel miss,' said Mr. Guppy, 'hear but another word! I think you must have seen that I was struck with those charms, on the day when I waited at the Whytourseller. I think you must have remarked

that I could not forbear a tribute to those charms when I put up the steps of the 'ackney-coach. It was a feeble tribute to Thee, but it was well meant. Thy image has ever since been fixed in my breast. I have walked up and down, of an evening, opposite Jellyby's house, only to look upon the bricks that once contained Thee.' (9, p. 125)

And old Turveydrop is a parody of the virtuous father of melodrama in his hypocritical reaction to the news of Prince's engagement to Caddy Jellyby (23, pp. 327-29).

Bleak House, then, is a novel in which melodramatic devices play a very limited role. Good and evil are not clearly defined—nor, indeed, is much of anything else until the mysteries on which the action turns begin to unravel. Neither narrator is constitutionally given to the depiction of melodramatic confrontations or to indulgence in melodramatic narrative or melodramatic commentary. And yet the melodrama of mystery does contribute a great deal to the powerful grip that the novel has on the reader: to showing him, first of all, how profound is the disorder in which the characters find themselves at the beginning; and to the progressive revelation, later, that this apparently random and mindless world does make a kind of sense, even if the reader's understanding of its coherence can be as disturbing as his initial bewilderment. Gridley is right: there is an inexorable "system," and it produces pain far more often than pleasure.

NOTES

1. A sizable critical literature has grown up in recent years dealing with the character of Esther Summerson and her function in *Bleak House*. See, e.g., William F. Axton, "The Trouble with Esther," *MLQ*, 26 (1965), 545-57, and "Esther's Nicknames: A Study in Relevance," *Dickensian*, 62 (1966), 158-63; James H. Broderick and John E. Grant, "The Identity of Esther Summerson," *MP*, 55 (1958), 252-58; Crawford Killian, "In Defence of Esther Summerson," *DR*, 54 (1974), 318-28; Tom Middlebro, "Esther Summerson: A Plea for Justice," *QQ*, 77 (1970), 252-59; Mary Daehler Smith, "'All Her Perfections Tarnished': The Thematic Function of Esther Summerson," *VN*, No. 38 (Fall 1970), 10-14; and Alex Zwerdling, "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated," *PMLA*, 88 (1973), 429-39.

2. W. J. Harvey believes, as I do, that in *Bleak House* Dickens deliberately controls his exuberant imagination and carefully avoids unwanted emotional excesses ("Chance and Design in *Bleak House*," in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, pp. 145-57, especially pp. 147 and 149).

3. J. Hillis Miller, in viewing such failures of vision as ultimate rather than temporary, places more stress on the unsuccessful or imperfect attempts in *Bleak House* to bring order out of chaos than a view of the novel in toto seems to me to warrant (*Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959], pp. 171-78). Trevor Blount is much closer to the truth in his perception of a "technique of parallelism and thematic cross-patterning" in *Bleak House* ("Sir Leicester Dedlock and 'Deportment' Turveydrop: Some Aspects of Dickens's Use of Parallelism," *NCF*, 21 [1966], 149-65).

Chapter 7

Hard Times, Little Dorrit, A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, Our Mutual Friend

In Dickens' last five completed novels, he makes even more sparing use of melodramatic devices. (The unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood* is so steeped in obfuscation and intrigue as to render all but impossible the unambiguous language essential to melodramatic presentation whether in narrative or speech or scene, though John Jasper's ardent affirmation of his passion for Rosa Bud [19, pp. 219-23] is one of the most vehement utterances of this sort to be found anywhere in Dickens' work.) By this time, Dickens' successive narrative strategies, uniquely different in each novel, are such as to rule out either melodramatic narrative or melodramatic commentary: even in *Great Expectations*, about the narrative technique of which I will have more to say, and certainly in the four others, the narrator is too concerned with establishing significances by one kind of indirection or another to arouse the reader's feelings through such straightforward means. As the following quite different but fairly representative examples, each taken from an initial chapter, will indicate, Dickens' handling of narration has become considerably subtler, more oblique, more figurative, more ironic, less uncompromisingly assertive of moral or psychological states.

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. (*Hard Times*, I, 1, p. 1)

A blazing sun upon a fierce August day was no greater rarity in southern France then, than at any other time, before or since. Everything in Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and been stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there. Strangers were stared out of countenance by staring white houses, staring white walls, staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road, staring hills from which verdure was burnt away. (*Little Dorrit*, I, 1, p. 1)

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes, that things in general were settled for ever. (*A Tale of Two Cities*, I, 1, p. 1)

Allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state, this boat and the two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did, and were seeking what they often sought. Half savage as the man showed, with no covering on his matted head, with his brown arms bare to between the elbow and the shoulder, with the loose knot of a looser kerchief lying low on his bare breast in a wilderness of beard and whisker, with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat, still there was business-like usage in his steady gaze. (*Our Mutual Friend*, I, 1. pp. 1-2)

A great deal could be said about each of these passages, and many others, in the four novels, but one point should be clear: no novelist who writes like that is likely to revert to the declamatory narrative style, reminiscent of melodramatic speech, of an earlier Dickens. Features of that earlier Dickens do appear in the dialogue of the last novels, but here too the emphasis and the tone of each one are such as to yield some noteworthy changes.

The soil of *Hard Times* is certainly too impoverished to nurture melodramatic scenes. Coketown and the philosophy of Mr. Gradgrind are deliberately designed to rule out wonder, fancy, imagination, poetry—in short, feeling. The lesson the novel teaches is that human emotion cannot be choked down indefinitely without grave harm, a truth most vividly to be learned from the case of Louisa Gradgrind. Constrained from infancy to live according to the dictates of fact and reason, she is nevertheless endowed with a strongly passionate nature that finds no adequate outlet in the sterile atmosphere in which she leads her life. To be sure, Louisa's situation does contain melodramatic elements. The sexual exploitation that merely threatens Kate Nickleby and Madeline Bray becomes a degrading reality for her, and the fact that she is driven to marriage with Bounderby by the spurious logic of her well-meaning father and by her wish to be useful to her scapegrace brother only makes her submission more appalling.

When Gradgrind calmly lays before his daughter Bounderby's offer of

matrimony, everything conspires against an emotional scene between them: his dessication, her outward lifelessness, the forbidding aspect of the "stern" room in which they converse, "with a deadly statistical clock in it, which measured every second with a beat like a rap upon a coffin-lid" (I, 15, p. 96). And yet it is clear from the way Louisa's eyes keep straying toward the factory chimneys plainly visible through the window that intense passion smolders beneath the apparently placid surface of her bearing: "'There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when the night comes, Fire bursts out, father!'" (I, 15, p. 100). Some of Louisa's latent anguish blazes up momentarily when Gradgrind asks her if she has ever entertained any other proposal, but the poor man completely misses the point of her reply, taking as a compliment Louisa's eloquent indictment of his system of child rearing.

'What do *I* know, father,' said Louisa in her quiet manner, 'of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?' As she said it, she unconsciously closed her hand, as if upon a solid object, and slowly opened it as though she were releasing dust or ash.

'My dear,' assented her eminently practical parent, 'quite true, quite true.'

'Why, father,' she pursued, 'what a strange question to ask *me!* The baby-preference that even I have heard of as common among children, has never had its innocent resting-place in my breast. You have been so careful of me, that I never had a child's heart. You have trained me so well, that I never dreamed a child's dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child's belief or a child's fear.'

Mr. Gradgrind was quite moved by his success, and by this testimony to it. 'My dear Louisa,' said he, 'you abundantly repay my care. Kiss me, my dear girl.' (I, 15, pp. 101-02)

Louisa is considerably more at ease with her brother Tom, and there is never more emotion between them than in the scene in which she beseeches him to tell her if he knows anything about the bank robbery of which Stephen Blackpool is suspected (II, 8, p. 189). But the young lout is unwilling to grasp what Louisa is driving at, and his surly responses do not begin to rise

to the level of intensity of her appeals. There can be no mistaking Louisa's meaning when the distraught girl goes to her father after she has become involved with Harthouse and bitterly berates Gradgrind for having brought her up as he has and for having married her to a man she despises. Her elaborately patterned reproaches continue for four pages (II, 12, pp. 215-19), but Gradgrind is too astonished at her unwonted display of feeling and too unfamiliar with the language of emotion to respond in kind.

There are three women in *Little Dorrit*—Tattycoram, Miss Wade, and Mrs. Clennam—who resemble Louisa in having seethed for a very long time with violent passions that normally find no adequate outlet. These passions do burst out furiously on a few occasions, and bathe in an uncharacteristically lurid light a novel which, by and large, is remarkable for its drabness of tone.

The orphan servant girl Tattycoram is in ill-concealed agony at the role she is made to play in the Meagles household. Much of her inner turmoil comes out in gesture rather than in speech.

A sullen, passionate girl! Her rich black hair was all about her face, her face was flushed and hot, and as she sobbed and raged, she plucked at her lips with an unsparing hand

She looked up suddenly, with reddened eyes, and with her hands suspended, in the act of pinching her neck, freshly disfigured with great scarlet blots

. . . It was wonderful to see the fury of the contest in the girl, and the bodily struggle she made as if she were rent by the Demons of old. (I, 2, pp. 25-26)

The "scornful" and "repressed" (I, 27, p. 327) Miss Wade, seeing in Tattycoram's situation a resemblance to her own, encourages her to leave the Meagleses and come to her, but their "two natures," as Arthur Clennam is shrewd enough to observe when he sees them together in Calais, constantly tear each "other to pieces" (II, 20, p. 661). On this same occasion, Clennam asks Tattycoram if, as he has been told, she has really returned to Twickenham to look at the Meagleses' house. Before the girl has a chance to reply, Miss Wade answers for her: "'She has never been near it.'" That is enough to set Tattycoram off, and in a moment she and Miss Wade are raging at each other, making each verbal blow tell (II, 20, p. 661). But there is something far more complex than the controlled stateliness of melodramatic speech on display in this and other scenes involving Tattycoram and Miss Wade: these are two tormented human beings, each of whom uses the other

as a target for her pent-up frustrations. The women are distraught and—despite the superficial symmetry of some of their utterances—quite irrational.

Mrs. Clennam's case is more complicated. For over forty years she has nursed terrible secrets in "vindictive pride and rage" (II, 30, p. 775), and her powerful Evangelical self-righteousness is insufficient to suppress entirely her feelings of guilt. When Arthur Clennam, on his return from China, pleads with her to tell him if there is anything in the family's past dealings for which reparation needs to be made, he inadvertently strikes a raw nerve, and Mrs. Clennam upbraids him eloquently for his suspicion. Thrusting a Bible at him, she says, "in a threatening way":

'In the days of old, Arthur, treated of in this commentary, there were pious men, beloved of the Lord, who would have cursed their sons for less than this: who would have sent them forth, and sent whole nations forth, if such had supported them, to be avoided of God and man, and perish, down to the baby at the breast. But I only tell you that if you ever renew that theme with me, I will renounce you; I will so dismiss you through that doorway, that you had better have been motherless from your cradle. I will never see or know you more. And if, after all, you were to come into this darkened room to look upon me lying dead, my body should bleed, if I could make it, when you came near me.' (I, 5, p. 50)

Mrs. Clennam's speeches are certainly melodramatic, but this scene as a whole is at most mixed melodrama: Clennam is too subdued and Jeremiah Flintwich, who joins the conversation, is as yet too obscure a character to emulate her impassioned diction.

Dickens' handling of emotion in the relations between the two principals, Little Dorrit and Clennam, is considerably more restrained. Both of them have borne too much disappointment and adversity, under conditions in which complaint would have been futile, to be accustomed to giving vent to melodramatic eloquence; however, unlike Tattycoram, Miss Wade, and Mrs. Clennam, they have not been warped by their harsh experiences. Until nearly the end of the novel, their intercourse is marked by a quiet sadness. Only when Little Dorrit goes to see Clennam at the Marshalsea does the true state of their feelings emerge. Though this meeting works up to a powerful peak, it begins with simple, subdued, almost bare, dialogue and narrative, and this continues for three pages before the scene reaches what is in *Little Dorrit* a most unusual height of fervor. No theatrical declaration

is made, or required, between this man and this woman who understand each other and sympathize with each other so deeply; rather, the climax of their conversation turns on Little Dorrit's offering Clennam her fortune in order to release him from the burden of debt which has brought him to prison and on his resolute refusal. Both of them state their cases eloquently and structure their arguments elaborately.

'I have no use for money, I have no wish for it. It would be of no value at all to me, but for your sake. I could not be rich, and you here. I must always be much worse than poor, with you distressed. Will you let me lend you all I have? Will you let me give it you? Will you let me show you that I have never forgotten, that I never can forget, your protection of me when this was my home? Dear Mr. Clennam, make me of all the world the happiest, by saying Yes? Make me as happy as I can be in leaving you here, by saying nothing to-night, and letting me go away with the hope that you will think of it kindly; and that for my sake—not for yours, for mine, for nobody's but mine!—you will give me the greatest joy I can experience on earth, the joy of knowing that I have been serviceable to you, and that I have paid some little of the great debt of my affection and gratitude. I can't say what I wish to say. I can't visit you here where I have lived so long, I can't think of you here where I have seen so much, and be as calm and comforting as I ought. My tears will make their way. I cannot keep them back. But pray, pray, pray, do not turn from your Little Dorrit, now, in your affliction! Pray, pray, pray, I beg you and implore you with all my grieving heart, my friend—my dear!—take all I have, and make it a Blessing to me! . . .

' . . . If, in the by-gone days when this was your home and this was your dress, I had understood myself (I speak only of myself) better, and had read the secrets of my own breast more distinctly; if, through my reserve and self-mistrust, I had discerned a light that I see brightly now when it has passed far away, and my weak footsteps can never overtake it; if I had then known, and told you that I loved and honoured you, not as the poor child I used to call you, but as a woman whose true hand would raise me high above myself, and make me a far happier and better man; if I had so used the opportunity there is no recalling—as I wish I had, O I wish I had!—and if something had kept us apart then, when I was moderately thriving, and

when you were poor; I might have met your noble offer of your fortune, dearest girl, with other words than these, and still have blushed to touch it. But, as it is, I must never touch it, never!' (II, 29, pp. 759-60)

A parallel scene occurs in the final chapter of the novel, but that one culminates in Little Dorrit's disclosure that, like Clennam himself, she has been ruined by the collapse of Merdle's financial enterprises (II, 34, pp. 817-18): there is no "fortune" and all Little Dorrit can give Clennam is herself. Such melodramatic scenes between them are as effective as they are rare; they are so effective not only *because* they are rare but also because they arise so naturally out of the changing relationship between Amy and Arthur.

The scenes in which Little Dorrit's father participates might have been melodramatic if he were not so much given to maudlin self-pity. In view of his unfortunate circumstances, Dorrit's outrageously egotistical posturing is sad, and it could easily have turned into mock melodrama (like that in which old Turveydrop performs in *Bleak House*) if his daughter were not always so quick to defend and praise him, thereby inevitably altering our perceptions in his favor. Oddly enough, this wreck of a man seems even more pitiful after his release from prison, moving as he then does in a lofty social sphere whose members take advantage of him and make fun of him. There is nothing in Dickens, or anywhere else, quite like the rambling speech Dorrit makes, shortly before he dies, at Mrs. Merdle's dinner party, fancying himself—his mind gone—back in the Marshalsea (II, 19, pp. 647-48). No critical or generic term exists to do justice to the mixture of effects which that unforgettable occasion arouses: certainly melodrama, or any of its variants, will not do as an acceptable label.

Two of these variants are employed, with results that are less than happy, elsewhere in *Little Dorrit*. The conversation among Rigaud, Flintwinch, and Mrs. Clennam in Chapter 30 of Book the First is a good example—one of several in this novel—of the melodrama of mystery; indeed, the mystery here is carried so far that the scene makes no sense at all on first reading, which may well be too much of a good thing.¹ And in Chapters 30 and 31 of Book the Second Dickens reverts to an unfortunate practice in which he had indulged as early as *Oliver Twist*: using melodramatic speeches (this time principally by Mrs. Clennam) and melodramatic scenes chiefly for purposes of exposition. It is by this tedious device that we finally learn the

secrets of the house of Clennam and that the relationship between Mrs. Clennam and Little Dorrit is clarified.

Steeped in its atmosphere of violence and great social evil, *A Tale of Two Cities* is far more emotionally fervid than *Little Dorrit*, or for that matter any other of Dickens' late novels.² Passion runs amuck and finds powerful expression as various articulate individuals are swept up in the circumstances leading to the French Revolution and in the Terror. On occasion, the resulting melodramatic effects are not smoothly woven into the fabric of the novel. The characters who employ ardent, elaborately patterned diction are not invariably those from whom such language is to be expected, nor do they always indulge in it at appropriate moments in the action. For instance, Chapter 10 of Book the Third consists of a long narrative written by Doctor Manette during his incarceration in the Bastille. It is the painful story of the wrongs he has endured, read aloud at Charles Darnay's last trial much to that young man's disadvantage. The whole document, however, strains the reader's credulity. We are asked to accept that after ten years' confinement, working under great adversity "at stolen intervals," dipping a "rusty iron point . . . in scrapings of soot and charcoal from the chimney, mixed with blood" (III, 10, p. 303), Manette is able to set down a coherent and minutely detailed account of his experiences, reproducing verbatim numerous speeches, some of them quite lengthy. The most striking of these is that delivered by Madame Defarge's brother as he is at the point of death. Neither his physical nor his social condition (he is a serf) keeps him from roundly and effectively denouncing the St. Evrémondés, Charles's father and his twin brother. Just before he draws his last breath, the boy's three-page indictment culminates in this eloquent curse:

"Marquis, . . . in the days when all these things are to be answered for, I summon you and yours, to the last of your bad race, to answer for them. I mark this cross of blood upon you, as a sign that I do it. In the days when all these things are to be answered for, I summon your brother, the worst of the bad race, to answer for them separately. I mark this cross of blood upon him, as a sign that I do it.'" (III, 10, p. 310)

The various rhetorical flights of Lucie, Charles, Doctor Manette, and, at times, Sydney Carton are far less jarring. Not only is the reader better prepared to accept melodramatic language from speakers of their social and educational background; but, more often than not, their meticulously ar-

ranged speeches are firmly embedded in scenes which are no more than mixed melodrama. Dickens thus gains the best of two worlds: the soaring rhetoric of such characters puts the reader in touch with the primal concerns of melodrama, at the same time that the presence of other characters throws a strong realistic cast over those scenes. For example, when Charles heatedly reproaches his wicked uncle for the crimes committed by the St. Evrémonte family (II, 9, pp. 117-18), he cannot penetrate the Marquis' sang-froid and provoke a passionate response, any more than, in *Barnaby Rudge* (another novel about social wrong and mass rebellion), Sir John Chester's sons can crack his cold, hard shell. Earlier, Lucie Manette delivers one of the most elaborately patterned speeches in all of Dickens when she is brought to the amnesiac Doctor Manette in his garret hideaway in the Saint Antoine district of Paris. Five times in succession, with mounting fervor and syntactic complexity, she directs at her wreck of a father appeals beginning with "If," each one culminating in the injunction, "'weep for it!'" This heavy verbal artillery finally achieves its intended effect when it smashes through the armored shell with which the Doctor has learned to defend himself against a hostile world: "'I feel his sacred tears upon my face, and his sobs strike against my heart. O, see! Thank God, for us. thank God!'" (I, 6 pp. 44-45) The impact of this climactic speech is much greater than it might have been had Dickens not constructed the scene of which it is a part with great care and restraint. The narrator's terse contributions and Doctor Manette's feeble incomprehension help to control the reader's emotion, as does the fact that the two witnesses to the reunion between father and daughter, Defarge and Jarvis Lorry, have long since learned to keep their feelings to themselves. ("Feelings! I have no time for them, no chance of them'" [I, 4, p. 21], Lorry says, not quite truthfully.)

When it suits his purpose, Dickens declines altogether to represent scenes that might have had great melodramatic power. On the morning of his marriage to Lucie Manette, Charles Darnay tells his future father-in-law that he is the son and nephew of the St. Evrémonte brothers, who inflicted so much suffering on the Doctor (and, of course, on many others as well). Dickens, however, is not yet ready to share this information with his readers, and so we are not allowed to overhear the conversation. All we learn about it at the time is that it causes a grave psychological shock to Doctor Manette.

The most exciting confrontation in *A Tale of Two Cities* is the one between Miss Pross and Madame Defarge in the penultimate chapter of the novel, which culminates by accident in the Frenchwoman's fatal shooting

with her own weapon. This is a classic struggle between, as Dickens puts it, "love" and "hate" (III, 4, p. 350), but action is much more significant in it than dialogue, since neither participant can understand the language of the other. In the absence of speeches which tell upon the character at whom they are directed, it cannot be a melodramatic scene. The reader's overriding concern throughout is: Will Miss Pross be able to detain Madame Defarge long enough to keep her from turning in the alarm that would result in the capture of Lucie, the drugged Charles, Manette, and Lorry? What the two women say to, or rather at, each other, the one in English and the other in French, has very little bearing on this question.

In *Great Expectations*—as in *David Copperfield* and the Esther Summer-son half of *Bleak House*, though with an important difference—the first-person point of view vitally affects the melodramatic aspect of the novel. The adult Pip is able in retrospect to see his situation as a young protagonist in melodramatic terms, far more than either David or, especially, Esther; but he has acquired this capacity long after the events in question, with the wisdom that is born of experience and disillusionment.

One of the most gripping and superbly constructed scenes in *Great Expectations* takes place when Magwitch returns from transportation and makes himself known to Pip as his benefactor. Magwitch's language is direct, sincere, and crude. To the extent that the youthful Pip—at first puzzled and apprehensive, and subsequently horrified at Magwitch's disclosures—is able to speak at all during this interview, his remarks are empty and rather foolish.³ However, the mature Pip, looking back on this searing revelation scene, typically structures his response to it in melodramatic language, organizing his thoughts much more artfully than he could have done at the time.

Nothing was needed but this; the wretched man, after loading me with his wretched gold and silver chains for years, had risked his life to come to me, and I held it there in my keeping! If I had loved him instead of abhorring him; if I had been attracted to him by the strongest admiration and affection, instead of shrinking from him with the strongest repugnance; it could have been no worse. On the contrary, it would have been better, for his preservation would then have naturally and tenderly addressed my heart. . . .

Miss Havisham's intentions towards me, all a mere dream; Estella not designed for me; I only suffered in Satis House as a convenience,

a sting for the greedy relations, a model with a mechanical heart to practise on when no other practice was at hand; those were the first smarts I had. But, sharpest and deepest pain of all—it was for the convict, guilty of I knew not what crimes, and liable to be taken out of those rooms where I sat thinking, and hanged at the Old Bailey door, that I had deserted Joe. (39, pp. 307-08)

Powerful though it undeniably is, the actual scene is not melodramatic: Pip *feels* his reaction rather than expressing it; and even if Pip had been able to articulate it in the terms he devises much later in his life, Magwitch would have been no fit audience for his grievous reflections on his lot.

Pip makes his one truly melodramatic speech in the novel when, having decided to shed his “expectations,” he comes to say good-bye to Estella and Miss Havisham at Satis House. He tells Estella, now that there is apparently no chance whatever of a match between them, that he loves her, and, inflamed by her indifference and by Miss Havisham’s remorse, he builds up gradually to the climactic farewell with which the scene ends.

‘ . . . You are part of my existence, part of myself. You have been in every line I have ever read, since I first came here, the rough common boy whose heart you wounded even then. You have been in every prospect I have ever seen since—on the river, on the sails of the ships, on the marshes, in the clouds, in the light, in the darkness, in the wind, in the woods, in the sea, in the streets. You have been the embodiment of every graceful fancy that my mind has ever become acquainted with. The stones of which the strongest London buildings are made, are not more real, or more impossible to be displaced by your hands, than your presence and influence have been to me, there and everywhere, and will be. Estella, to the last hour of my life, you cannot choose but to remain part of my character, part of the little good in me, part of the evil. But, in this separation I associate you only with good, and I will faithfully hold you to that always, for you must have done me far more good than harm, let me feel now what sharp distress I may. O God bless you, God forgive you!’ (44, p. 345)

Estella and Miss Havisham are two more Dickensian women in whom true feeling has been suppressed and thereby perverted: in Estella as a result of Miss Havisham’s careful training, and in Miss Havisham as a result

of her bitter matrimonial disappointment. Estella characteristically denies all human emotion, but Miss Havisham is easily stimulated to outbursts of frenzy on the subject of sexual passion, as when she maliciously urges Pip to "‘Love her, love her, love her! If she favours you, love her. If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces—and as it gets older and stronger it will tear deeper—love her, love her!’" (29, p. 226). But such fragmentary exclamations, however heartfelt, lack the expansiveness that would qualify them as genuinely melodramatic. Nor does Miss Havisham’s guilty recognition, near the end, that she has gravely erred in her cruel manipulation of Estella and Pip lead her to melodramatic utterance. Though deeply moved, she is quite inarticulate, and it is left to Pip—again the grown-up Pip looking back, and expressing himself in thought rather than in speech—to reduce her hysterical self-laceration to some semblance of order.

‘What have I done! What have I done!’ She wrung her hands, and crushed her white hair, and returned to this cry over and over again. ‘What have I done!’

I knew not how to answer or how to comfort her. That she had done a grievous thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride found vengeance in, I knew full well. But that, in shutting out the light of day, she had shut out infinitely more; that, in seclusion, she had secluded herself from a thousand natural and healing influences; that her mind, brooding solitary, had grown diseased, as all minds do and must and will that reverse the appointed order of their Maker, I knew equally well. And could I look upon her without compassion, seeing her punishment in the ruin she was, in her profound unfitness for this earth on which she was placed, in the vanity of sorrow which had become a master mania, like the vanity of penitence, the vanity of remorse, the vanity of unworthiness, and other monstrous vanities that have been curses in this world?

‘Until you spoke to her the other day, and until I saw in you a looking-glass that showed me what I once felt myself, I did not know what I had done. What have I done! What have I done!’ And so again, twenty, fifty times over, What had she done! (49, pp. 377-78)

Only once, in Chapter 38, are Estella and Miss Havisham depicted as

baring their feelings to each other. Miss Havisham furiously reproaches Estella for not showing her any love; the older woman speaks and gestures in bursts of passion throughout this confrontation, but Estella, though she justifies herself eloquently in rhetorical questions and patterned sentences, maintains her icy composure throughout.

‘Mother by adoption,’ retorted Estella, never departing from the easy grace of her attitude, never raising her voice as the other did, never yielding either to anger or tenderness, ‘Mother by adoption, I have said that I owe everything to you. All I possess is freely yours. All that you have given me is at your command to have again. Beyond that, I have nothing. And if you ask me to give you what you never gave me, my gratitude and duty cannot do impossibilities.’

‘Did I never give her love!’ cried Miss Havisham, turning wildly to me. ‘Did I never give her a burning love, inseparable from jealousy at all times, and from sharp pain, while she speaks thus to me! Let her call me mad, let her call me mad!’

‘Why should I call you mad,’ returned Estella, ‘I, of all people? Does any one live, who knows what set purposes you have, half as well as I do? Does any one live, who knows what a steady memory you have, half as well as I do? I who have sat on this same hearth on the little stool that is even now beside you there, learning your lessons and looking up into your face, when your face was strange and frightened me!’

‘Soon forgotten!’ moaned Miss Havisham. ‘Times soon forgotten!’

‘No, not forgotten,’ retorted Estella. ‘Not forgotten, but treasured up in my memory. When have you found me false to your teaching? When have you found me unmindful of your lessons? When have you found me giving admission here,’ she touched her bosom with her hand, ‘to anything that you excluded! Be just to me.’

‘So proud, so proud!’ moaned Miss Havisham, pushing away her grey hair with both her hands.

‘Who taught me to be proud?’ returned Estella. ‘Who praised me when I learnt my lesson?’

‘So hard, so hard!’ moaned Miss Havisham, with her former action.

‘Who taught me to be hard?’ returned Estella. ‘Who praised me when I learnt my lesson?’

‘But to be proud and hard to *me!*’ Miss Havisham quite shrieked,

as she stretched out her arms. 'Estella, Estella, Estella, to be proud and hard to *me!*'

Estella looked at her for a moment with a kind of calm wonder, but was not otherwise disturbed; when the moment was passed, she looked down at the fire again. (38, pp. 290-91)

Though rich in emotion of various kinds and degrees, *Our Mutual Friend* contains very little in the way of melodramatic speech or melodramatic scenes. For the feeling characters in the last of Dickens' completed novels either tend to express themselves simply and naturally, or else they are so consumed by their passion as to be virtually inarticulate.

In many respects, Lizzie Hexam is Dickens' ideal heroine. Deeply concerned for the well-being of others, even when—as in the cases of her father and her brother Charley—they are quite unworthy of her solicitude, Lizzie is the perfection of pure selfless goodness. She is also totally incapable of striking melodramatic poses, always speaking her mind quite straightforwardly. When she decides that Charley must leave their home, she explains to him matter-of-factly what he is to do.

' . . . Go straight to the school, and say that you and I agreed upon it—that we can't overcome father's opposition—that father will never trouble them, but will never take you back. You are a credit to the school, and will be a greater credit to it yet, and they will help you to get a living. Show what clothes you have brought, and what money, and say that I will send more money.' (I, 6, p. 73)

Gaffer Hexam flies into a rage when he learns of his son's departure, and he waves his knife around menacingly, but a few words from Lizzie quickly calm him down.

Somewhat later, Charley is incensed because his sister has spurned the advances of his mentor and patron, Bradley Headstone. Selfishly, Charley urges Lizzie to reconsider, but she refuses to use his impossible behavior as a pretext for the eloquent tongue lashing he so richly deserves. Rather, Lizzie remains silent until driven to speak.

' . . . All that need be done to set it right is for you to tell me at once that I may go home and tell Mr. Headstone that what has taken place is not final, and that it will all come round by-and-by.'

He stopped again. The pale face looked anxiously and lovingly at him, but she shook her head.

‘Can’t you speak?’ said the boy sharply.

‘I am very unwilling to speak, Charley, but if I must, I must. I cannot authorise you to say any such thing to Mr. Headstone: I cannot allow you to say any such thing to Mr. Headstone. Nothing remains to be said to him from me, after what I have said for good and all to-night.’

‘And this girl,’ cried the boy, contemptuously throwing her off again, ‘calls herself a sister!’

‘Charley, dear, that is the second time that you have almost struck me. Don’t be hurt by my words, I don’t mean—Heaven forbid!—that you intended it; but you hardly know with what a sudden swing you removed yourself from me.’

‘However!’ said the boy, taking no heed of the remonstrance, and pursuing his own mortified disappointment, ‘I know what this means, and you shall not disgrace me.’

‘It means what I have told you, Charley, and nothing more.’ (II, 15, p. 403)

Lizzie is similarly restrained when faced with the pleadings of the two men who love her, Bradley Headstone and Eugene Wrayburn. Headstone—driven to the point of madness by a combination of psychological and social pressures, and violently jealous of Eugene—is engaged in a perpetual struggle to keep his furious passion under control, a struggle that is generally unsuccessful. Far from making melodramatic speeches, Headstone habitually expresses himself with a kind of strangled frenzy. We see this for the first time when he warns Wrayburn to stay away from Lizzie. By the end of the scene, he does manage, briefly, to achieve a degree of eloquence:

‘I scorn your shifty evasions, and I scorn you. . . . In the meanness of your nature you revile me with the meanness of my birth. I hold you in contempt for it. But if you don’t profit by this visit, and act accordingly, you will find me as bitterly in earnest against you as I could be if I deemed you worth a second thought on my own account.’ (II, 6, p. 293)

But that is the best he can do. During most of the conversation, Headstone is almost totally inarticulate, and Wrayburn’s languid indifference only makes his wrath more acute.⁴

As a suitor, Headstone is hopeless, in both senses of the word. When

he declares his love for Lizzie, he gesticulates wildly and berates himself fiercely for his ineptness, but, though his words have a certain undeniable power, this is hardly the conventional nineteenth-century expression of romantic feeling.

‘. . . You draw me to you. If I were shut up in a strong prison, you would draw me out. I should break through the wall to come to you. If I were lying on a sick bed, you would draw me up—to stagger to your feet and fall there.’

The wild energy of the man, now quite let loose, was absolutely terrible. He stopped and laid his hand upon a piece of the coping of the burial-ground enclosure, as if he would have dislodged the stone.

‘No man knows till the time comes what depths are within him. To some men it never comes; let them rest and be thankful! To me, you brought it; on me, you forced it; and the bottom of this raging sea,’ striking himself upon the breast, ‘has been heaved up ever since.’

‘Mr. Headstone, I have heard enough. Let me stop you here. It will be better for you and better for me. Let us find my brother.’ (II, 15, p. 396)

The scene has a counterpart, much later in the novel, when Wrayburn makes his declaration to Lizzie. Though he begins insouciantly enough, almost playfully, this young idler is soon more deadly serious and more sincere than he has ever been in his life.

‘Lizzie! I never thought before, that there was a woman in the world who could affect me so much by saying so little. But don’t be hard in your construction of me. You don’t know what my state of mind towards you is. You don’t know how you haunt me and bewilder me. You don’t know how the cursed carelessness that is over-officious in helping me at every other turning of my life, WON’T help me here. You have struck it dead, I think, and I sometimes almost wish you had struck me dead along with it.’

She had not been prepared for such passionate expressions, and they awakened some natural sparks of feminine pride and joy in her breast. To consider, wrong as he was, that he could care so much for her, and that she had the power to move him so!

‘It grieves you to see me distressed, Mr. Wrayburn; it grieves me to see you distressed. I don’t reproach you. Indeed I don’t reproach

you. You have not felt this as I feel it, being so different from me, and beginning from another point of view. You have not thought. But I entreat you to think now, think now!

'What am I to think of?' asked Eugene bitterly.

'Think of me.'

'Tell me how *not* to think of you, Lizzie, and you'll change me altogether.' (IV, 6, pp. 692-93)

To be sure, there is eloquence in Wrayburn's speech, but—under the influence of Lizzie's simple directness—it is the eloquence of realistic plain-speaking rather than of melodramatic artfulness.

As for the other romantic attachment in *Our Mutual Friend*, that between John Harmon and Bella Wilfer, it too is handled with a minimum of melodramatic embellishment. Harmon goes out of his way to avoid exploiting the special place he occupies in Bella's life by virtue of his father's will and his own situation in the Boffin household, and it is almost through inadvertence that he makes a brief and businesslike "honest declaration of an honest devotion" (II, 13, p. 376) to her. She irritably deflects it, and no more is said between them on the subject until Boffin, playing to the hilt his assumed role of flint-hearted miser, turns the Secretary out. Maintaining his composure under Boffin's verbal blows, Harmon seizes the opportunity to avow his continuing passion for Bella and retreats as gracefully as the undignified circumstances permit. Bella allows him to kiss her hand on his way out, and when he is gone she turns on Boffin with a defiant denunciation that is part mock melodrama, part spontaneous confession of her love for Harmon—and wholly delightful.

'I shall never more think well of *you*,' cried Bella, cutting him short, with intense defiance in her expressive little eyebrows, and championship of the late Secretary in every dimple. 'No! Never again! Your money has changed you to marble. You are a hard-hearted Miser. You are worse than Dancer, worse than Hopkins, worse than Blackberry Jones, worse than any of the wretches. And more!' proceeded Bella, breaking into tears again, 'you were wholly undeserving of the Gentleman you have lost.'

'Why, you don't mean to say, Miss Bella,' the Golden Dustman slowly remonstrated, 'that you set up Rokesmith [Harmon] against me?'

'I do!' said Bella. 'He is worth a Million of you.'

Very pretty she looked, though angry, as she made herself as tall as she possibly could (which was not extremely tall), and utterly renounced her patron with a lofty toss of her rich brown head.

'I would rather he thought well of me,' said Bella, 'though he swept the street for bread, than that you did, though you splashed the mud upon him from the wheels of a chariot of pure gold.—There!' (III, 15, p. 599)

We have come a long way from the simple moral polarities of the early novels. Strong feeling is still to be found in the work of the mature Dickens, of course, and his characters are still capable of expressing themselves in language of great power; but no scene involving subtle and complex characters like Lizzie Hexam, Bradley Headstone, Eugene Wrayburn, John Harmon, or even Bella Wilfer can be expected to display elemental passion as uncompromisingly as do any number of encounters in, say, *Oliver Twist* or *Nicholas Nickleby*. Dickens has not abandoned melodrama in his late work: as was the case throughout his career, with certain exceptions that we have noted, he has kept it under careful control, tailoring it at virtually all times to serve, in conjunction with other devices, the artistic ends he is trying to achieve.

NOTES

1. The one character in *Little Dorrit* who has been labeled "melodramatic" is Rigaud. But critics seem to be uneasy with this designation, especially if they are accustomed to using "melodramatic" as a term of abuse, because, somewhat grudgingly, they concede that there is real power and relevance in his depiction. See, e.g., H. M. Daleski, *Dickens and the Art of Analogy*, p. 218; and especially Harvey Peter Sucksmith, "The Melodramatic Villain in *Little Dorrit*," *Dickensian*, 71 (1975), pp. 78 and 82. Though there is obvious theatricality in Rigaud's arch-villainy, and though he contributes to the melodrama of mystery in the novel, he does not characteristically express himself in melodramatic terms.

2. The subject of melodrama in *A Tale of Two Cities* has given rise to remarkable disagreement among critics, for the usual reason that, insofar as they mean anything at all by the term, they are talking from different premises about different things. Sylvère Monod, for instance, who has written on *A Tale of Two Cities* on several occasions, does not attempt to conceal his relatively low opinion of it, which is largely based on what he considers its melodramatic excesses. See *Dickens the Novelist*, pp. 458-59; "A Tale of Two Cities: A French View," in *Dickens Memorial Lectures 1970* (London: Dickens Fellowship, 1970), pp. 24-26 and 29; and "Some Stylistic Devices in *A Tale of Two Cities*," in *Dickens the Craftsman*, ed. Robert B. Partlow, Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 170 and 185-86. Other critics take the opposite view and hold that in writing *A Tale of Two Cities* as the sort of stripped down novel that weekly serialization demanded Dickens forsook many opportunities for melodrama. Earle Davis, who deplores what he takes to be the melodramatic features of Dickens' earlier novels, regards this as a good thing (*The Flint and the Flame* [Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1963], p. 245). Angus Wilson, on the other hand, regrets the resulting leanness of the novel (*The World of Charles Dickens*, p. 267).

3. Peter Brooks is struck by the silence of the scene as a prime example of the effectiveness of "the text of muteness" in melodramatic representation (*The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 80). It would be giggling to object that the scene is not silent at all—what is more to the

point I try to make is that the scene in effect takes place twice: once as Pip represents, reportorially, the actions and words of the participants in it; and a second time as he retrospectively structures his emotional response to it.

4. Reviewing *Our Mutual Friend* in the *Nation* in 1865 at the age of twenty-two, Henry James spectacularly misread this encounter between Wrayburn and Headstone: the “friction of two *men*, of two characters, of two passions, produces stronger sparks than Wrayburn’s boyish repartees and Headstone’s melodramatic commonplaces” (*The Dickens Critics*, p. 52). Obviously, I fail to see either the “boyish repartees” or the “melodramatic commonplaces,” and I wonder what James thought of this marvelously subtle dialogue forty years later, after he had learned a few things about how characters in conversation can be made to strike “sparks” by a novelist of genius.