The Forms and Functions of Language in David Copperfield

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The forms and functions of language are a crucial problem to address in *David Copperfield* as a novel, but also for David Copperfield, the character and narrator of this fictional autobiography. His existence and identity are closely dependent on language, as he needs words to retrace his progress from non-existence into being; from silence, unconsciousness, and inarticulate life to language, and lastly, from mere existence to selfhood, self-awareness, self-mastery and self-(re)construction through words. Actually, the novel is the story of the adventures of David's consciousness, from the period before his birth, in Chapter I, to the discovery of language and self and the achievement of identity through book-writing. It then becomes clear the novel's dependence on words is two-fold: besides being a *written* work, it is also the literary, retrospective narrative of a dawning *writer's career*, or in other words, a writer is the narrator of his own story, a part of which consists of his successful literary career from Chapter XLIII onwards.

This essay will develop in two major directions. In the first place, it will explore the relations of language with memory, as well as with creation, and self-creation. Language is employed as a tool for retrospection, and for the creation of specific imagery, or of a child-like "idiolect," or of humour and a comic sense. Moreover, it is shown as possessing a life and a power of its own, and it is invested with the ability to shape and create or to destroy the self. Lastly, the novel deals extensively with the problem of verbal and literary creation through a detailed analysis of the way the characters use language — which constitutes both a social indicator and a psychological revelator —, and of the protagonists' command of language. This accounts for different representations of word users and real or would-be writers, successful or failed ones. In this respect, we could establish a gradation from Ham —

using an almost always non verbal, a-linguistic face language —, to Dick and Dr Strong (linguistic impotence when it comes to writing), then on to Peggotty, or Traddles (straightforward, practical use of language), and lastly to the two most articulate characters: Mr Micawber, the word-lover, and David, the writer, two antithetical, if not antagonistic, versions of language.

Of course, language in the book takes on various forms, and appears as an exceptionally rich and protean medium. It is at times poetic and nostalgic, comic and humorous, literal, mimetic, figurative, and representational, that is describing the "present" and the actual. When we hear such unmistakable words as Betsey Trotwood's "Tut, tut, tut," or her praise of Mr Dick (always formulated in the same way), or Traddles using the same phrases to describe his beloved Sophy, we can say the narrator resorts to denotative, representational language to individualise his characters, some of whom have very distinctive features (Traddles's ridiculously unruly hair), or emblematic gestures (Aunt Betsey rubbing her nose). All these idiosyncrasies and pet phrases almost have a synthetic function at times, as if summing up the essence of the character.

But there is also a second direction to explore: the rhetoric of suggestion and concealment, and the relations between language, identity, deception, and masks. Indeed, the suggestive, metaphoric, symbolic, and proleptic powers of language are a key ingredient in *David Copperfield,* affecting and orienting both our dramatic and psychological perception of events and characters. Onomastics for instance enables the reader to get a psychological overview of some characters even before glimpsing them, but also a few proleptic hints of future occurrences or attitudes. The same goes for some portraits, or physical descriptions resting on revealing imagery, and highly significant symbolic elements. Besides, at its most metaphoric, language not only sheds light on the characters but on the narrator — and, why not, on Dickens himself. Although *David Copperfield* is quite controlled and restrained, there are chinks in the armour of respectability, and the novel, although it tries — partly deliberately, and partly unconsciously

— to hide, censure, and repress the unacceptable, sometimes happens to say as much — if not more — through silence and implicit suggestion.

Language, memory, and (self-) creation

Chapter II rests on a very unusual use of language, whereby the time lag between the adult narrator and the child-hero seems to be abolished. The reader can "hear" the little boy, as the grown-up lets him "have the floor," and does not apparently strive to alter, rework, or correct his "voice." "I Observe" provides a wealth of examples revealing a sensuous approach at this early stage in the character's existence: Peggotty's roughened finger, made larger than life when seen by the infant, is compared to a small nutmeg-grater; her firm, ruddy cheeks look like tempting apples that birds could peck at; the poultry and the cock in the yard are perceived as huge and as terrifying as wild game in the toddler's eyes; lastly, we can discover that the child's logic prevails with the association between the red velvet foot-stool and Peggotty's florid complexion.

The same logic is evinced in his unsentimental, no-nonsense, and slightly contemptuous remark about the flower picked by his mother and treasured by Mr Murdstone: "He said he would never, never part with it any more; and I thought he must be quite a fool not to know that it would fall to pieces in a day or two" (29).[1] Likewise, the adult never *explicitly* intervenes to give the right version of facts and to correct David's innocent misperception during the ironically cruel "Brooks of Sheffield" scene in Chapter II. The narrator does not try to tame the child's fertile imagination either, or to normalise his speech, to hush him, or to play down his hyperbolic tendencies, as his fears before leaving for Great Yarmouth show: "it came soon, even to me, who was in a fever of expectation, and half afraid that an earthquake or a fiery mountain, or some other great convulsion of nature, might interpose to stop the expedition" (33).

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[1] The edition used is Penguin Popular Classics.

Eight-year-old David's fresh apprehension of life and of beings also accounts for particularly felicitous, or even masterly images that seem to bear the hallmark of spontaneity, and have a child-like ring to them: Miss Murdstone's handbag snapping shut like jaws — which evokes a bite — and her being called "a metallic lady" (IV, 50). Moreover, the adult narrator sometimes avoids restoring the right chronological succession of facts, the right proportions, or the right — or at least plausible — pace of events; he transcribes the young character's raw perception of time and inadequate sense of duration, without attempting any rational reconstruction. Occasionally, the gaps in memory are not bridged, and the blanks are left unfilled: "And now I see the outside of our house, with the latticed bedroom-windows standing open to let in the sweet-smelling air . . . Now I am in the garden at the back . . . A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. We are playing in the winter twilight, dancing about the parlour" (II, 24-25).

But, most of the time, the narrative poignantly reminds us of the years gone by, and some passages in *David Copperfield* represent what could be termed the "poetry of remembrance." They are characterised by a tone of nostalgic recollection, and the language used in these sentimental journeys into the past has a distinctive ring to it. To achieve this, the narrator resorts to specific imagery: that of angels,[2] childhood, and water (the sea or rivers). The moment when David first meets Agnes Wickfield can provide a good illustration for the first category of image, by showing the idealising and spiritualising treatment many female characters undergo: "I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained-glass window in a church. . . . But I know that when I saw her turn round in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us above, I thought of that window; and that I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Wickfield

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[2] The style is not always at its best when the tone is oversentimental, especially towards the end of the novel, in the case of Agnes. She is presented as selfless, almost sexless, and more sister-like than wife or lover-like, so that she looks too good to be true, and there is something unrealistic and too much disembodied about her. Still, the association with the stained-glass window has beauty, plausibility, and poetic power in Chapter XV.

ever afterwards" (XV, 191). Of course, the same goes for Clara Copperfield, or for Dora Spenlow, her younger alter ego; the mother and the wife are embalmed in memory in their fragile girlish beauty: "I remembered her from that instant as the young mother of my earliest impressions, who had been used to . . . dance with me at twilight in the parlour. . . . In her death she winged her way back to her calm untroubled youth . . ." (IX, 119). Chapter LIII, "Another Retrospect," rests on similar imagery, and uses the same type of words showing that Dora was unfit to resist the harsh actualities of the world here below: "my child-wife," "innocent love and childish beauty," "Little Blossom," etc.

As can be noticed, angels and children (the second category of images) share many traits in *David Copperfield.* This aspect has been amply discussed by critics; it nevertheless deserves to be stressed, if only briefly: young women, in Dickens's fiction are either sexless angels (Rose Maylie is also a good case in point in *Oliver Twist*), or monsters of cruelty, like Rosa Dartle, or the almost ageless Miss Murdstone; fallen women like Little Em'ly, Martha, or Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, are victims of their innocence or of society, and are morally redeemed anyway, like latter-day Magdalens. The end of Chapter LIII even concentrates the three types of images with the use of the water metaphor: "Ever rising from the sea of my remembrance, is the image of the dear child as I knew her first, graced by my young love, and by her own" (628). On the whole, beyond its habitual role as a nostalgic reminder of transience, this type of metaphor is employed to describe the workings of memory, and sometimes to try and account for oblivion, with reminiscence presented as a flow, as is illustrated by the particularly fluid and felicitous sentence from the first of the two chapters entitled "Another Retrospect": "Faster than ever the river ran towards the sea, it flashes, darkens, and rolls away" (XLIII, 512-13). Lost or vanished memories are also compared to flotsam and jetsam drifting away on the sea, as if after a shipwreck, with only a few landmark recollections standing out.[3] This is especially true in the case of

[3] The literal and figurative importance of the sea in the novel should be pointed out; Great Yarmouth has a crucial role, first as a haven for David (Chapters III and X), then as the place where disaster occurs: Emily's elopement, foreshadowed by Martha's (their "undisciplined" hearts could be compared to David's);

emotional losses (David's mother, or, as we have just seen, Dora): "All this, I say, is yesterday's event. Events of later date have floated from me to the shore where all forgotten things will reappear, but this stands like a high rock in the ocean" (IX, 117). Oblivion means a loss of control over one's past, hence over one's existence. This can only be compensated for by the almost magic power of language which re-establishes the right sequence of events, and makes up for gaps in meaning and/or chronology. So that writing one's autobiography — although ostensibly fictional — means recapturing the past, regaining lost control through re-interpretation, and getting — or aiming at — a better understanding of oneself, one's acts, one's relatives and friends.

Indeed, in *David Copperfield*, language often means power — to liberate (escape from pain and sorrow being achieved through reading or writing), or to enslave (through the same means). The first ten chapters present two prisons bolstered by the tyranny of words: Blunderstone Rookery after the arrival of the Murdstones (IV and V), and grim Salem House in Chapters VI and VII. When David is still at home, before Chapter V, books (prayer-books, on Sundays; schoolbooks on week-days, in "I Fall into Disgrace") become instruments of torture in the hands of his father-in-law and his sister:

> I could have done well if I had been without the Murdstones; but the influence of the Murdstones upon me was like the fascination of two snakes on a wretched young bird. . . . The natural result of this treatment, continued, I suppose, for some six months or more, was to make me sullen, dull, and dogged (IV, 56).

Language can strengthen oppression: David's mother is gradually deprived of her freedom of movement, of thought, and of speech, through the Murdstones' linguistic tyranny. Moreover, we can see that the language of the oppressors is verbal and authoritarian, so much so that the oppressed are reduced to silence, and have to fall back on signs and body language; David blushes, and so does his mother during the dreaded lessons, both being almost speechless:

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deaths of Steerforth, and of Ham. The sea subsequently resumes its healing power with the Peggottys' emigration to Australia.

> I think my mother would show me the book if she dared, but she does not dare, and she says softly:
> 'Oh, Davy, Davy!'
> 'Now, Clara', says Mr Murdstone, 'be firm with the boy. Don't say, 'Oh, Davy, Davy!' That's childish. He knows his lesson, or he does not know it'. (IV, 55)

Yet, far from being solely punitive, language and books also permit escape and furtively enjoyed happiness, as the narrator highlights the positive influence of "a small collection of books in a little room upstairs," left by his father. The adventures of Smollett's, Fielding's, Goldsmith's, or Defoe's heroes act like a therapy and are the prime cause of David's becoming a writer by fuelling his imagination: "It is curious to me how I could ever have consoled myself under my small troubles (which were great troubles to me), by impersonating my favourite characters in them . . . This was my only and my constant comfort" (IV, 56-57). Likewise, the suffering and pain caused by the Salem House period could be alleviated for David and his schoolmates, by his "story-telling in the dark," the direct result of his many readings at home (VII, 86-87). But, in that school "carried on by sheer cruelty" (87), we can see how violent, evil, and harmful language can be: when, for instance, it is used, or even "wielded," by Mr Creakle's loyal Tungay, faithfully echoing the torturer's hardly audible words in his booming voice for David's edification, repetition heightening the character's terror, and his perception of the prison-like atmosphere (VI, 78); when, also, the master of Salem cracks a joke before beating a boy (VII, 84); or, better still, when David has to carry the humiliating board on his back, literally and obsessively *dogged* by the "*Take care of him. He bites*" warning:

> What I suffered from that placard nobody can imagine. Whether it was possible for people to see it or not, I always fancied that somebody was reading it. It was no relief to turn round and find nobody . . . I recollect that I positively began to have a dread of myself, as a kind of wild boy who did bite. (V, 75)

Words can be escaped altogether, not by resorting to alternative, innocuous, pleasure-giving ones, like those found in novels, but by being replaced by another "language," such as Traddles's mysterious

skeletons drawn to exorcise the pain of caning, and interpreted, half humorously, half in earnest, as "symbols of mortality" and reminders that suffering would not last for ever (VII, 85).

But, on the whole, *David Copperfield* rather focuses on language proper, and the various uses it can be put to. The novel presents variations on the theme of creation, by showing the relations entertained by some characters (lawyers, common "folk," failed writers, or real ones, among others) with words.

What first strikes the reader is the narrator's comic inventiveness and rich verbal mastery. In some cases, comedy resides in situations themselves, and sometimes, too, in the contrast, or even discrepancy, between David's unenviable situation and the humorous context: this happens during the tragico-comic scene of exile from home with Peggotty's buttons flying about (V, 62). The comic mood often springs from a sense of incongruity, as in the case of the Micawbers' almost suicidal despair followed at a moment's notice by hearty eating and drinking (XI, 140; XVII; etc.). But very often, comedy lies not so much in the situation itself as in the language used to depict it; it turns out to be a question of vision and of wording. It is therefore just as tightly dependent on language as on facts themselves. It can be bitter at times, as is the case with David's pathetically innocent, uncritical, naive description of people, seen exclusively through his eyes, without any adult correcting perspective: the "Brooks of Sheffield" scene (II) presented as highly entertaining for the child; the dishonest waiter eating David's dinner, drinking his ale, overcharging a sheet of writing-paper, and called "my friend the waiter" (V); Mrs Crupp's "fits" presented as genuine (XXIV, XXVI).

Mrs Gummidge's maudlin complaints and grievances, and Mr Peggotty's way of accounting for them by mentioning "the old 'un'" (III), reiterated in subsequent chapters (X, among others) are good illustrations of verbal comedy; so is Barkis's tentative proposal and his cryptic "Barkis is willing" for David to act as a go-between (V), also taken up again in Chapter VIII. The phrases, akin to litanies, become catchy and unforgettable, and they represent the distinctive mark of

some characters. In these cases, moreover, comedy is cumulative, as it stems from repetition. Sometimes, hearing a simple recurrent word or phrase is enough for the reader to recognise a character without the narrator having to specify the identity or mention the name of the speaker. Words can then have an emblematic quality, and an iconic function, such as Emma Micawber's recurrent "I will never desert Mr Micawber!" (XII, 149-50). The same goes for Aunt Trotwood's obsession with donkeys, haunting her as far away from home as London:

> 'I am convinced . . . that Dick's character is not a character to keep the donkeys off . . . I ought to have left Janet at home, instead . . . If ever there was a donkey trespassing on my green . . . there was one this afternoon at four o'clock. A cold feeling came over me from head to foot, and I *know* it was a donkey!' (XXIII, 288)

One of the devices generating (verbal) comedy is understatement. It is used in the description of "the young gal's" doings in "My first Dissipation:"

> The "young gal" likewise occasioned me some uneasiness: not so much by neglecting to wash the plates, as by breaking them. . . . she was constantly peering in at us, and constantly imagining herself detected; in which belief, she several times retired upon the plates (with which she had carefully paved the floor), and did a great deal of destruction (XXIV, 299).

Exaggeration, together with a sense of the ludicrous, obviously reaches the same goal when the narrator describes David's many fruitless attempts to write an adequate letter to Agnes: "It took me such a long time to write an answer at all to my satisfaction, that I don't know what the ticket-porter can have thought, unless he thought I was learning to write" (XXV, 303).

Parody is another of these comic devices; the formal tone of Dora's aunts' letter to David is echoed, in the normally first-person narrative, by the mocking use of the third person in what could be seen as a passage in free indirect speech: "To this favour, Mr Copperfield immediately replied, with his respectful compliments, that he would have the honour of waiting on the Misses Spenlow, at the time ap-

pointed . . . Having despatched which missive, Mr Copperfield fell into a condition of strong nervous agitation" (XLI, 483). Caricature is another comic weapon wielded adeptly by the narrator; the portrait of Mr Spenlow is a case in point: "He was got up with such care, and was so stiff, that he could hardly bend himself; being obliged, when he glanced at some papers on his desk . . . to move his whole body, from the bottom of his spine, like Punch" (XXIII, 292). Then, the name "Punch," used as a burlesque stage direction, punctuates the dialogue that ensues, between the proctor and David. The caricatured description of one of the female guests (Mrs Henry Spiker) at Mr Waterbrook's as like "a near relation of Hamlet's — say his aunt" makes very funny reading, too (XXV, 308). The combined resort to caricature and to the pun on "blood" (play on the literal meaning, hence the presence of "ogre," and on the figurative sense of "lineage") belongs to the same comic strategy (XXV, 310).

What stands out is the original use of language, and the wealth of innovative, or inventive words and phrases. The narrator has a knack for using words differently, with a kind of pristine freshness which is well adapted to the character's youth and inexperience. What strikes us as novel for example is the unconventional association of terms, never yoked together so far: Salem House school is called "a great shivering machine" (VI, 97). Or Betsey Trotwood is first glimpsed by the reader with cotton-wool in her ears that she takes out to hear Dr Chillip, then "cork[ing] herself again" (II). David's first "dissipation" (Chapter XXIV) is also interesting in this respect. First, the use of the third person transforming David into an objective entity, and putting the laughable character at arm's length is a first source of crazy humour: "We went downstairs, one behind another. Near the bottom, somebody fell, and rolled down. Somebody else said it was Copperfield. I was angry at that false report, until, finding myself on my back in the passage, I began to think that there might be some foundation for it" (301). The choice of images and metaphors is also unconventional; when he looks at himself in the mirror, he remarks: "... and my hair — only my hair — nothing else — looked drunk" (301). Then, David, quite drunk when he arrives at the theatre, sees the building "as if it were learning to swim" (301). And the hangover of the next morning

gives rise to the brilliant: "How, as that somebody slowly settled down into myself, did I begin to parch, and feel as if my outer covering of skin were a hard board; my tongue the bottom of an empty kettle, furred with long service, and burning up over a slow fire" (302).

Or words are even occasionally coined, like "daymare" (VIII, 109). Another interesting technique to rejuvenate language is imitation, as is the case with the phonetic transcription of accents. *David Copperfield* presents numerous instances of phonetic writing: mispronounced words through lack of education — indicative of an inferior social status — are transcribed as such: Peggotty's "crorkindills" (II), the Micawbers' little servant's "orfling" in Chapter XI. Likewise, local or regional accents, and idiosyncrasies remain unaltered: Mrs Gummidge's "lorn lone creetur," "everythink goes contrairy with me" in Chapter III; the "pollis case" of Chapter XII; Uriah Heep's ubiquitous use and abuse of "umble," sometimes transformed into "numble;" Mrs Crupp's cockney accent, in Chapters XXIV to XXVI. We can say that the way Ham and Peggotty express themselves is a social marker (fishermen's world, and above all, popular Norfolk society); this is also true for the Heeps' and Mrs Crupp's accents, revealing their working-class background. A last instance of the novel's verbal resourcefulness is David's blurred delivery after heavy drinking, when he asks Agnes "Amigoarawaysoo?" and leaves her with a "Goori!" standing for "Good night" (302).

Language, be it comic or not, is of course a key aspect of *David* Copperfield, which is the story of a writer by a writer. We can then perceive a *mise en abyme,* with the narrator (the writer of the book) telling the story of himself, as a character and as a budding author — whose career is nevertheless only briefly evoked.

The novel offers different representations of writers and writing. First of all, with an obviously mimetic and realistic intention to achieve verisimilitude, several letters are reproduced with a different type (italics) and lay-out from the body of the text: Wilkins Micawber's many bombastic epistles (XVII, XXVIII, XXXVI, two in XLIX, and two in LIV), Emma Micawber's letters (XLII, XLIX), Emily's farewell note (XXXI), and her letters to Ham (XL, LV), the letters between Agnes and

Dora (mentioned in Chapter XLVIII, but not quoted), the correspondence between Agnes and David, away abroad, alluded to, but not quoted either (LVIII).

The book features different types of languages and sometimes jargons: that of the law, and legal texts (as in Chapters XXIII, XXVI, XXXIII, when David is articled at the proctors' Spenlow and Jorkins), that of undertakers (Mr Omer's jargon, in Chapter IX), or again, shorthand, which appears as a parallel language of signs, as cryptic as hieroglyphics, ruled by arbitrariness, which David has to learn to take down notes in Parliament:

> The changes that were rung upon dots, which in such a position meant such a thing, and in such another position something else, entirely different; the wonderful vagaries that were played by circles; the unaccountable consequences that resulted from marks like flies' legs; the tremendous effects of a curve in a wrong place; not only troubled my waking hours, but reappeared before me in my sleep. When I had groped my way, blindly, through these difficulties, and had mastered the alphabet, which was an Egyptian temple in itself, there then appeared a procession of new horrors, called arbitrary characters (XVIII, 447).

But the vision of language presented by *David Copperfield* is usually critical and normative, and it occasionally equates fluency or garrulity and moral depth, as inversely proportional. Indeed, unlike Mr Micawber's, Peggotty's letters, never quoted *verbatim*, and presented iteratively,[4] usually go straight to the point in as few words as possible, and show a type other than verbal fluency — a kind of emotional one, described as more valuable:

> To these communications Peggotty replied as promptly, if not as concisely, as a merchant's clerk. Her utmost powers of expression (which were certainly not great in ink) were exhausted in the attempt to write what she felt on the subject of my journey. Four sides of incoherent and interjectional beginnings of sentences, that had no ends, except blots, were inadequate to afford her any relief. But the blots were

[4] An iterative narrative (according to Genette's terminology) is the single narrative of events or facts that happened several times.

> more expressive to me than the best composition; for they showed me that Peggotty had been crying all over the paper, and what could I have desired more? (XVII, 210)

Likewise, taciturn, and brave-hearted Ham hardly needs to open his mouth to convey his feelings, as his face speaks for him more eloquently (XXXI, 373; XXXII, 376). Actually, the inability to control and to tame language, so as to write coherently, sometimes seems to reveal nothing worse than immaturity, and almost pathological oversensitiveness. Dora's pathetic inability to work out sums, or to make sense out of cookery books, or to keep accounts in a "housekeeping-book" (all of them mentioned in Chapters XXXIX, XLI, and XLIV), as if words and figures had a magic life and will of their own, and could move of their own accord, is an indicator of her vulnerable nature, and a sign of her innocence, rather than of her lack of moral worth: "But the Cookery Book made Dora's head ache, and the figures made her cry. They wouldn't add up, she said. So, she rubbed them out, and drew little nosegays, and likenesses of me and Jip, all over the tablets" (XLI, 495). It should also be noted that she changes David's name into "Doady," which sounds better adapted to refer to a baby than to an adult man, additional evidence of her childish relation to language. The fact she is only content to hold David's pens when he writes his novels shows a feeling of inferiority, subservience, and awe towards adult language (XLIV).[5]

The cases of Traddles, Dr Strong, and Mr Dick are also interesting. Traddles's approach to language is rather straightforward and simple; it is used either as a means to communicate — with no ornaments, flourishes, or formal elegance, but with much sincerity and efficiency — or as a bread-winner — copying legal documents, making abstracts, compiling, as assistant author for an encyclopaedia. One could go as far as saying that his talent as a copyist and compiler, as it

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[5] In fact, words represent an obstacle between David and Dora who do not speak the same language. Words are perceived as violent and threatening, like the evil beings of fairy tales, by Dora. The linguistic inequality between husband and wife is responsible for the breakdown of their married life. Death finally puts an end to this and resolves the deadlock.

requires humility and faithfulness, testifies to his worth, honesty, and earnestness as a man:

> I was fortunate enough, too, to become acquainted with a person in the publishing way, who was getting up an encyclopaedia, and he set me to work . . . I am not a bad compiler, Copperfield . . . but I have no invention at all; not a particle. I suppose there never was a young man with less originality than I have (XXVII, 335).

Although, like Traddles, they are embodiments of moral goodness, we go a step further with Dr Strong, or Mr Dick, who are both unable to carry their written work to completion. As a matter of fact, it is no coincidence they quite like each other, and can be seen walking together on Wednesdays, when Mr Dick visits David, and Dr Strong's school in Canterbury. Oddly enough, despite their learned nature, Mr Dick can invest the arid words intended for the unfinished dictionary — "the most delightful book in the world" (XVII) — with beauty, poetry, and magic:

> As I think of them going up and down before those school-room windows — the Doctor reading . . . and Mr Dick listening, enchained by interest, with his poor wits calmly wandering God knows where — I think of it as one of the pleasantest things, in a quiet way, that I have ever seen (XVII, 215).

Dr Strong's dictionary,[6] ever in progress and doomed to incompleteness (in spite of David's help, from Chapter XXXVI onwards) is first mentioned in Chapter XVI: "I was informed of the time this Dictionary would take in completing, on the Doctor's plan, and at the Doctor's rate of going. . . . it might be done in one thousand six hundred and forty-nine years, counting from the Doctor's last, or sixty-second, birthday" (202). The dizzying time-span — almost reminiscent of the endless toil carried out in Inferno in Greek mythology — points to

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6 The *opus magnum* might foreshadow Casaubon's engrossing, life-long research, in G. Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72), although Dr Strong, for all his loss of contact with reality, is deeply humane, and warm-hearted; moreover, Annie sincerely and deeply admires and loves him, unlike Dorothea, disappointed in the husband she thought would teach her so much.

the character's overreaching ambition, not out of pride or a wish for self-aggrandisement, but through lack of realism, lack of method and a warped valuation of proportions, of the useful and the superfluous. Dr Strong, although kind-hearted, is a misfit, and presents multiple symptoms of short-sightedness, or even blindness, both in the "scientific," and the sentimental fields. His inability to see the sheer sterility and inadequacy of his work[7] is paralleled by his incapacity to see the intense suffering Annie goes through, until Chapter XLV. Like Mr Dick, though to a lesser extent, of course, the Doctor is out of touch with reality, as his writing methods show; the Dictionary cannot be completed because its making is dependent on loose, disconnected, disorderly bits of paper, as David discovers in Chapter XXXVI: "His pockets were as full of it as his head. It was sticking out of him in all directions" (429-430).

Simple-minded Mr Dick,[8] another failed writer figure because of his permanent inability to write the Memorial owing to his obsession with King Charles I, also resorts to fragmented writing when he flies his kite, which is covered all over with strips of paper from the miscarried Memorial, "disseminating the statements pasted on it, which were nothing but old leaves of abortive Memorials" (XV, 185):

> He showed me that it was covered with manuscript, very closely and laboriously written; but so plainly, that as I looked along the lines, I

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[7] In Chapter XLV, the "Old Soldier" stresses the theoretical usefulness of Dictionaries, in terms too unreservedly laudatory to be truthful, only to insist on their complete practical lack of interest (for Annie): "'What a useful work a Dictionary is! What a necessary work! The meaning of words! Without Doctor Johnson, or somebody of that sort, we might have been at this present moment calling an Italian-iron a bedstead. But we can't expect a Dictionary — especially when it's making — to interest Annie, can we?'"(532).

[8] Mr Dick's real name (mentioned by Aunt Betsey in Chapter XIV) is, aptly enough, Richard Babley. Onomastics, as often in Dickens's novels, is quite illuminating. Whichever way we turn the problem, the name implicitly refers to impossible communication because of speech disorders. "Babley" evokes both "babble" (baby's talk — a possible allusion to the character's mental retardation — or confused speech and/or delivery), and "Babel," that is the multiplicity of different languages making men unable to understand one another and communicate.

> thought I saw some allusion to King Charles the First's head again in one or two places (XIV, 175).
>
> Every day of his life he had a long sitting at the Memorial, which never made the least progress, however hard he laboured, for King Charles the First always strayed into it, sooner or later, and then it was thrown aside, and another one begun . . . What Mr Dick supposed would come of the Memorial, if it were completed; where he thought it was to go . . . he knew no more than anybody else (XV, 185).

The recurrence of fragments can probably be read symbolically. It stands for the (actual or virtual) fragmentation of the alienated self[9] trying to piece himself together as well as he can through (abortive, or successful) writing. Indeed, the sad fate of Charles I is a literal representation of the split self, with his head severed from his body. David, as a writer, manages to ward off the dangers of disintegration, and lack of direction. We could establish a kind of gradation from Ham (almost always non verbal, using an a-linguistic face language), to Dick and Dr Strong (linguistic impotence when it comes to writing), then on to Peggotty, or Traddles (straightforward, practical use of language), and lastly to the two most articulate characters: Mr Micawber, the word-lover, and David, the writer, two antithetical, if not antagonistic, versions of language.

Language for its own sake should not be cultivated, as is exemplified by Mr Micawber's verbal and epistolary outpourings, and linguistic complacency. He literally seems to feel a deep relish for

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9 Mr Dick (when first glimpsed by David making faces at the window on the first floor in Chapter XIII) cannot but be compared to the madman living in Blunderstone Rookery, after the death of Clara Copperfield, and the departure of David, and the Murdstones. Moreover, the new occupant lives in the room, on the first floor, that used to be David's: "There were great changes in my old home. The ragged nests, so long deserted by the rooks, were gone . . . The garden had run wild, and half the windows of the house were shut up. It was occupied, but only by a poor lunatic gentleman and the people who took care of him. He was always sitting at my little window, looking out into the churchyard; and I wondered whether his rambling thoughts ever went upon any of the fancies that used to occupy mine" (XXII, 267). Could not the madman be seen as David's potential alter ego?

bombastic terms "as if the words were something real in his mouth, and delicious to taste" (XI, 148). The same metaphor is taken up again in Chapter LII where "Mr Micawber read on, almost smacking his lips" (616). The character is a source of comedy, and shows some undeniable abilities as a "wordsmith," when, for instance, he creates the famous pun, "You HEEP of infamy" (LII, 613). Yet, he stands for a negative standard or norm; his style is rather depicted as what should be avoided than what should be imitated, as when David out-Micawbers Mr Micawber: "I informed her that my reason was tottering on its throne, and only she, Miss Mills, could prevent its being deposed. I signed myself hers distractedly; and I couldn't help feeling, when I read this composition over . . . that it was something in the style of Mr Micawber" (XXXVIII, 455). Miss Mills herself is another victim of Micawberism: "Miss Mills had a wonderful flow of words, and liked to pour them out. I could not help feeling, though she mingled her tears to mine, that she had a dreadful luxury in our afflictions" (455).

In fact excess, verboseness, and grandiloquence turn out to connote some form of insincerity, dishonesty and shallowness — Miss Mills secretly gloats over her friends' misfortune, and Mr Micawber's probity is not absolute...[10] Furthermore, the irrepressible garrulousness of the latter constitutes an obstacle to effective, genuine communication; his pretentious wording, roundabout formulations, pompous phrases, and circumlocutions often have to be translated — sometimes even by himself! — into plain English to be fully understood:

> 'Under the impression,' said Mr Micawber, 'that your peregrinations in this metropolis have not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the arcana of the modern Babylon in the direction of the City Road — in short,' said Mr Micawber in another burst of confidence, 'that you might lose yourself — I shall be happy to call this evening' (XI, 138).

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[10] Still, "redemption" finally comes, thanks to his kind heart, and his world-wisdom; he works his way up in Australia and becomes a District Magistrate, even mentioned and quoted in the local paper: "I found, on glancing at the remaining contents of the newspaper, that Mr Micawber was a diligent and esteemed correspondent of that journal" (LXIII, 712).

> 'The twins no longer derive their sustenance from Nature's founts — in short,' said Mr Micawber, in one of his bursts of confidence, 'they are weaned' (XVII, 218).

The narrator also provides us with a few reading clues: "I am not sure whether I have mentioned that, when Mr Micawber was at any particularly delicate crisis, he used a sort of legal phraseology: which he seemed to think equivalent to winding up his affairs" (XXVIII, 354).[11] His many long-winded letters deserve close attention as well, especially their closing formulas, such as the one concluding Chapter XXVIII. The misuses of language in Mr Micawber's mouth give rise to more widespread criticism by the narrator condemning wholesale all forms of opacity as a contemporary failing, and as a kind of social snobbery:

> Again, Mr Micawber had a relish in this formal piling of words which . . . was, I must say, not at all peculiar to him. I have observed it, in the course of my life, in numbers of men. It seems to me to be a general rule. In the taking of legal oaths for instance, deponents seem to enjoy themselves mightily when they come to several good words in succession, for the expression of one idea . . . We talk about the tyranny of words, but we like to tyrannise over them too; we are fond of having a large superfluous establishment of words to wait upon us on great occasions; we think it looks important, and sounds well (LII, 616).

The universal indictment partly exculpates Mr Micawber whose garrulity is, anyway, justified, if not required, by his comic status.

In *David Copperfield*, David is the only embodiment of the successful writer. He is not only able to tap the languages of memory and of the heart, but also able to learn that of the law, as well as hieroglyphic shorthand, so as to note down parliamentary debates, just

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11 The phrase "a sort of legal phraseology" presents the adulterations Mr Micawber imposes on language: the one he uses is a kind of idiolect, and a hybrid mixture of standard English, and legal jargon. But what is also striking are the almost magic powers the character attributes to words, which he seems to regard as synonymous with deeds, as if speaking meant acting, and sometimes exorcising. Despite his fluency, his relation to language has something primitive.

as Dickens had to, for a living. David's linguistic proficiency is quite remarkable. However, maybe because it is regarded as parallel text, hence more or less irrelevant, his literary career is never dealt with at great length, but only evoked in a few lines or a few pages at most. David's progress is first described in detail in Chapter XLII, especially the fact that his steadfast efforts were bound to be rewarded in the shorter or longer run. His promising literary career itself is presented *in medias res* in "Another Retrospect:"

> I have taken with fear and trembling to authorship. I wrote a little something, in secret, and sent it to a magazine, and it was published in the magazine. Since then, I have taken heart to write a good many trifling pieces. Now, I am regularly paid for them. Altogether, I am well off (XLIII, 513).

We later learn that David "was beginning in a small way to be known as a writer" (XLIV, 528), and that he was writing a book in Chapter XLVI, as "success had steadily increased with (his) steady application" (544). The reader hears about the first stages of the hero-narrator's literary fame through a dialogue with Mrs Steerforth (XLVI); the narrative presents his first novel as "very successful" and earning him "praise" (564), but the title, nature, genre, and content of the work, as of the others to come, are never specified: "It is not my purpose, in this record, though in all other essentials it is my written memory, to pursue the history of my own fictions. They express themselves, and I leave them to themselves. When I refer to them, incidentally, it is only as a part of my progress" (XLVIII, 564). Still, behind these methodological claims and warnings, the implicit assumption is that virtue could not but be rewarded, sustained work and efforts were bound to yield good results. Moreover, "the written memory" is the direct outcome of the successful literary career: we would not be able to read the autobiography, if the fiction-writer had not first succeeded on the literary scene.

"Absence" (after the deaths of Dora, Ham, and Steerforth) shows that David's fame inspired pride and pleasure in Agnes, who "so looked forward to its augmentation, well knew that I would labour on" (LVIII, 666); this is yet another implicit way of highlighting the moral value, strength, and fortitude of the character, still keeping up his

endeavours in the grip of sorrow and adversity. So that, to some extent, David's literary career is not mentioned for its own sake but as an illustration of his psychological make-up, a moral lesson, and a self-glorification. The next and last stages of his "progress" are stardom at home, as "notoriety began to bring upon me an enormous quantity of letters from people of whom I had no knowledge" (LXI, 690), and even international fame, even as far away as Australia (LXIII, 712).

The strategy of suggestion, allusion, and deception; language and masks

Yet, the narrator, although a successful and talented writer, is at times powerless to express some emotions, especially intense suffering. *David Copperfield* is certainly concerned with language, but it also rests on the rhetoric of silence, suggestion, and speechlessness. The list of sentences starting by "I cannot say," "I cannot express," "It is not in my power to," "nobody can imagine," etc., would probably be surprisingly long.[12] This professed inability to state facts, and describe feelings adequately shows that, however far-ranging and thorough the study of language, the novel also explores the role of the unspeakable, and of the unspoken. *David Copperfield* sometimes happens to say as much through silence and implicit suggestion as through words.

As a matter of fact, language combined with "silence" and with visual elements, is used very cleverly for characterisation and portraiture, through imagery, symbolism, and onomastics.

Visual symbolism is an effective and economical technique enabling the narrator to do without explicit, discursive descriptions of characters. It represents what could be viewed as short cuts through language thanks to the visual power of suggestion, association, connotation, sensuous imagery, metaphors, or similar devices. The very

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[12] They are particularly numerous in Chapter XI, for example, which is no coincidence: "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sank into this companionship . . . The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now . . . cannot be written" (XI, 136-37).

numerous descriptions of Uriah Heep are a rich case in point. The very first time when he is shown foreshadows his evil, almost lethal influence (XV, 187). He looks death-like, more like a corpse or a skeleton than a living boy ("cadaverous face," "quite as cadaverous as it had looked in the window," "bony," "dressed in black," "long, lank, skeleton hand"); further descriptions regularly insist on his sinister fleshlessness, the feel of which is shudderingly felt as soiling, and its coldness contagious: "what a clammy hand his was! as ghostly to the touch as to the sight! I rubbed mine afterwards, to warm it, and *to rub his off*" (XVI, 192); "[he] was sure, with his shadowless eyes and cadaverous face, to be looking gauntly down upon us from behind" (XXV, 309). Indeed, Heep also seems to have been left as if unfinished ("hardly any eyebrows, and no eyelashes, and eyes of a red-brown, so unsheltered and unshaded"), but this peculiarity in his face, although it initially seems to imply the character's vulnerable nature, turns out to reveal his exceptional natural gift at spying. His eyes are "unsheltered" to enable him to see even better, and to be ever watchful.

The portraits of Heep cast him as non-human, or even subhuman, as the recurring fish, amphibian, or reptilian imagery indicates: his wet finger leaves snail-like "clammy tracks along the page" when he reads (XVI, 199); his hand feels like a fish in the dark (XVI, 201), or he is said to have "damp fishy fingers" (XXXIX, 471), or "a damp cold hand," feeling "like a frog" (XXV, 313). He writhes, contorting into "snaky twistings" (XVI, 201); or Aunt Betsey calls him an "eel" in exasperation: "'I am not going to be serpentined and corkscrewed out of my senses!'" (XXXV, 425), or the reader sees him "writhing himself into the silence like a conger-eel," and "undulating all over" (XLII, 505). Heep sometimes looks like a more overtly frightening animal, or a predator: a giant vulture hovering round David and Agnes, to "gorg[e] himself on every syllable," as if he were a vampire after blood (XXVI, 319); or mother and son are compared to "two great bats hanging over the whole house, and darkening it with their ugly forms" (XXXIX, 469). Their influence over the Wickfield household is depicted as a moral blight, and a pestilence in LIV: "We passed the night at the old house which, freed from the presence of the Heeps, seemed purged of a disease" (639). Imagery sometimes stops short of stressing offensive

animal characteristics altogether, by showing the character is neither human, nor animal — even the most repulsive, slimy, or cold-blooded specimen — but bloodless and inanimate, which emphasises his inhumanity: "I was so repelled by his odious behaviour . . . that I turned away without any ceremony; and left him doubled up in the middle of the garden, like a scarecrow in want of support" (XLII, 499); "Mr Micawber . . . caught his advancing knuckles with the ruler, and disabled his right hand. The blow sounded as if it had fallen on wood" (LII, 613).

From the very beginning, metaphors and imagery brand Uriah Heep as someone disturbing, frightening, and possibly evil.[13] But, visual suggestion and symbolism being more subtle than a purely discursive delineation of the character, he keeps arousing mixed feelings in the reader, who, like David, constantly and perplexedly fluctuates between uneasy fascination and horror, attraction and repulsion, amusement and fear: "I really had not been able to make up my mind whether I liked Uriah or detested him" (XVII, 215).

The connotative potentialities of language are also brilliantly exploited. Even before we read the novel, onomastics permit an insight into some of the characters, especially female ones, and orients our vision. "Rosa Dartle" makes interesting reading, because Rosa conjures up the image of flowers and beauty, possibly fragility, but we cannot fail to see "dart," too. Does this odd combination convey the idea that there is no rose without thorns, in other words, that the passion of love can hurt? The character is literally and figuratively as sharp as a dart, or possibly (as venomous as) an arrow, too. "Dora" might suggest the

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[13] Still, Uriah Heep could also be regarded as a kind of scapegoat, or sacrificial figure, in that there is a definitely sadistic streak in the way he is treated by both narrator and character. To some extent, the secret gloating we feel when David says he would gladly have scalded him (XXV, 313), or when he actually slaps his face (XLII, 508) affords us vicarious excitement, and may after all cater for our hidden cruelty! After all, too, what should there be an Uriah Heep for in the novel, but to embody and circumscribe evil (just as when it is materialised by the Devil), hence to make it look destructible, and less terrifying, or at least to show it can be foiled.

French "*doré*," hence the suggestion of "golden," possibly of golden age, just as the mother's name, Clara, (which is also Peggotty's) evokes light, as opposed to the forces of darkness embodied by Miss Murdstone, "that Murdering sister of a woman" (XXIII, 288), just as the brother is "a Murderer — or a man with a name like it" (XIII, 170), according to Betsey Trotwood. Moreover, their name holds implications of inhuman, stone-like hardness, and heartlessness. On the contrary, the suffix "wood" probably emphasises Aunt Betsey's obstinacy, but does not sound negative. There is even something funny about the crisp sonorities of the name whose prefix makes us think of David's aunt's energy, dynamism, and drive, as if the character were forever bustling and pottering about ("to be on the trot"). Is not this prefix a humorous reminder of Betsey's obsession with donkeys trotting about her front garden lawn? Furthermore, with a very slight spelling alteration, "trot" can become "troth," that is faith, loyalty, and truth (to her former husband, to Mr Dick, to David). "Sophy," of course, means "wisdom" (that of philosophers), and Traddles's wife fully deserves her name, owing to her patience, thrift, and ability to cheerfully make the most of the little she has: "She had the most agreeable of faces, — not absolutely beautiful, but extraordinarily pleasant, — and is one of the most genial, unaffected, frank, engaging creatures I have ever seen" (XLIII, 515). There might be two reasons accounting for "Peggotty:" first, a "peg" is a measure of spirit or wine (a humorous reminder of the servant's liking for port, and of her ruddy complexion?), but also a place allotted to somebody to fish from (usually marked by a numbered peg), which may tell us of her background. " — otty" sounds like an endearing suffix, almost like baby talk.

Biblical and Christian connotations and symbolism are also present: Martha (Emily's forerunner in "sin") was Mary and Lazarus' sister, hence a possible suggestion of purity, in spite of her fall. Indeed, in the *Gospels* (St Luke's parable of Lazarus and the rich man), Lazarus symbolises man suffering from poverty and disease on earth, but rewarded for his ordeals in the world beyond, whereas the rich man is doomed to everlasting torment in hell. Lazarus is also the patron saint of lepers — Martha, as a fallen woman, is a moral leper — and of hospitals. But there is another Lazarus in the Bible that was resurrected

from the dead by Jesus, and that was Martha's brother. Agnes is a name whose root is "Agnus." The lamb is a symbol of resurrection (at Easter); but it can also be the sacrificed lamb — Agnes sacrifices her happiness for her father's sake, then for David's sake by acting as his sister and his *confidante* — surrounded by wolves (the Heeps). Furthermore, Agnes was a Christian martyr, and the lamb is her attribute.[14] "Daniel" (Uncle Peggotty's name) and "David" are obviously Biblical, too, and illuminate the meaning of the novel. Daniel was one of the four prophets, who was thrown into the lions' den, but was found miraculously unharmed the next day; Daniel is also associated with the story of chaste and beautiful Suzanna and the two old men, sentenced to death for accusing her of committing adultery. In spite of her fall, Emily is still loved by Mr Peggotty as if her virtue were untainted, and Steerforth has to expiate his crime. David, both a poet and a prophet, was the king of Judaea and Israel, and conquered Jerusalem that became the centre of his empire. Because of his victory over Goliath, the giant, he is viewed as prefiguring the victory of Christ over Satan. Messiah has always been regarded as issued from David's "house" and lineage; Jesus is called "son of David." David also symbolically triumphs over the forces of evil at the end of the novel.

Male characters' names are not always so easily deciphered. The name Micawber, apart from its pleasant sonority, does not seem to yield much at first sight, unless the prefix "mic" evokes "mickle," an archaic adjective and name meaning "much, great" or "a great amount of," something quite relevant to the character's garrulity! One could say tentatively that the name "Creakle" evokes a harsh, unpleasant sound ("to creak;" in addition, "creaky," when it refers to a practice, or an institution, means "decrepit," or "outmoded"), and its ending "kle" might also be that of "trickle" (like blood, or tears, after whipping?). Could Dr Strong's name be an ironic proleptic representation of his weakness towards Jack Maldon, and Annie's mother, and of his inability to understand his wife's struggle? "Wickfield" sounds rather puzzling, if not oxymoronic: indeed, "field" evokes the unadulterated purity and

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14 Agnes is also the name of Oliver Twist's erring and unfortunate mother, dying after giving him birth, and redeemed through her suffering and death.

beauty of nature, but what about the prefix "wick?" Does it connote wickedness (which may well be the case, since Agnes is a victim of her father's mad grief at being widowed), or only country-life, by being associated with the term "wicker," or with the word "wick?" Its dialectal meaning refers to a town, hamlet, or district/or a dairy farm; its more common meaning is related to candles, fire and burning, that is, symbolically, it may refer to what secretly consumes Mr Wickfield. "Uriah Heep" evokes nothing in particular — unless the colloquial meaning of its homonym "heap," as "an old or dilapidated thing," is taken into account — and seems to have been invented on purpose to enable Mr Micawber to coin his masterly pun on "heap/heep" (613); yet, this name sounds quite unattractive, rather frightening (are there not echoes of "Harry" — the devil — in the name?), and even ominous. We can safely say that Steerforth is a symbolic name, whose proleptic function (pointing to his headstrong, wilful personality — "forth" — and linking the character with the sea and sailing, hence prefiguring his drowning) is established thanks to the mistake made by Daniel Peggotty in Chapter X: "'You said it was Rudderford', observed Ham, laughing."

> 'Well?', retorted Mr Peggotty. 'And yer steer with a rudder, don't ye? It ain't fur off' (126).

Could Dickens have known the French *maldonne* (used in its literal sense for faulty dealing during card-playing), that means either "misdeal" (literally), or "misunderstanding" (figuratively), when he invented the name "Jack Maldon?" We must admit there is both a misdeal (Dr Strong does not have all the cards required to understand Maldon's dishonest game, and to "play" adequately), and a misunderstanding. Moreover, "Jack" was probably not chosen at random as it is a court card figure, with a picture of a man — a soldier, a page, or *a knave*. Besides, a "*Jack*anapes," (archaic) used to refer to a pert or insolent fellow.

The relations between language and the unconscious should not be overlooked. Because of censorship and repression, because of (deliberate, or involuntary) selections and erasures, the language of the unspeakable, blanks, gaps, and silences take on as much meaning as the

explicit message, and maybe more. It should be said that *David Copperfield* was a way for Dickens to recreate his identity, to compensate for the past (the traumatic experience at Warren's blacking warehouse, felt as degradation and orphanhood), and to build his "heroic" identity. Some parts of *David Copperfield* can then be read as oblique self-revelations, or veiled "confessions."

In the first place, the wound inflicted by working-class life at Warren's when he was 12 never healed, and he resented so much his parents' role in what he felt was the tragedy of his earlier years (especially his mother's insisting on his going back after he was taken away from the blacking firm by his father) that in *David Copperfield*, the young boy *must* be orphaned, fatherless at birth, then motherless from Chapter IX onwards. Otherwise, how could the monstrous heartlessness of sending him away from home, and apprenticing him at Murdstone and Grinby's be justified, otherwise than by the wanton cruelty of a stepfather, very much like those in fairy-tales?[15] As a matter of fact, partial or total orphanhood is endemic and generalised in the book, in which *no* character whatsoever has both his or her parents. [16]

Censorship (that is verbal and linguistic repression) is not only authorial, but narratorial: that is, obscure sexual tendencies or relations are suggested (metaphorically, or indirectly), but never stated as such. But to what extent is this achieved deliberately? And what is the

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15 Indeed, the end of Chapter X, and Chapter XI, sound so intensely true because they are Dickens's real autobiography, hardly altered when we compare it to the famous letters about life at Warren's published in John Forster's biography and quoted as "The Autobiographical Fragment" in the *Norton Critical Edition* of *David Copperfield* (766-72). The precise details (about places, the food the young boy could afford, prices...etc.), the definiteness and sharpness of visual impressions, and the emotional strength of these "fragments" (sometimes used verbatim in the novel) directly led to many elements in Chapter XI.

16 Except Sophy (Traddles's girl-friend or *fiancée*, then wife), who, moreover, is the sole representative of blissful family life with both her parents (though her mother is an invalid), and her nine brothers and sisters in Devonshire. We do not know about Aunt Betsey's past, or Daniel and Clara Peggotty's; that is, the reader is never told whether they knew their parents.

comparative share of unconscious censorship in this strategy of the implicit and the oblique? Of course, we know about the taboos and restraints of Victorian society; but what exactly about the author's? Should the fear of mature, adult heterosexual relations evinced by David be put down to contemporary views of women (both in life and in literature, as either angelic and sexless, or evil and sensuous), or to Charles Dickens's secret fears? Clara Copperfield (the sister-like, and doll-like mother), or Dora Spenlow (the sister-like and pet-like "child-wife," as she calls herself in Chapter XLIV) undoubtedly evoke children and playmates rather than anything else. Even adult, sedate, thoughtful Agnes Wickfield, the union with whom represents an advance in terms of maturity, is regarded as a sister throughout the better part of the novel, and has nothing aggressively feminine about her. What chiefly stands out is her moral worth.

On the other hand, Steerforth's powerful physical and intellectual fascination are often set out, as he arouses passionate feelings in David, Rosa Dartle, Emily, and his own mother. But indeed, cannot homosexual overtones be heard in David's admiration, and even "love" for Steerforth, or in his comparing himself to a submissive female character, Scheherazade, reading to the sultan ?[17]

> I thought of him very much after I went to bed, and raised myself, I recollect, to look at him where he lay in the moonlight, with his handsome face turned up, and his head reclining softly on his arm. He was a person of great power in my eyes; that was, of course, the reason of my mind running on him. (VI, 82) [18]

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[17] The cruelty of the character of *The Arabian Nights* killing all the young virgins he made love to is equalled by that of Steerforth (in his treatment of Rosa Dartle, and of Emily, as he symbolically "kills" them after using them; as he also symbolically — after his elopement with Emily — "kills" David who feels almost unbearable disappointment), and above all by Creakle whose "delight in cutting at the boys, which was like the satisfaction of a craving appetite" (VII, 83) appears as overtly sadistic, and sexual for a twentieth-century reader.

[18] Two very odd things deserve closer attention. First, David's nocturnal contemplation of Steerforth occurs just after the latter told him about his wish that David had a sister who would have been "a pretty, timid, little, bright-eyed sort of girl" (82). Secondly, the end of the quotation, that is to say the second

> ... to disappoint or to displease Steerforth was of course out of the question. In the morning too, when I felt weary, and should have enjoyed another hour's repose very much, it was a tiresome thing to be roused, like the Sultana Scheherazade, and forced into a long story before the getting-up bell rang; but Steerforth was resolute . . . I admired and loved him, and his approval was return enough. It was so precious to me, that I look back on these trifles, now, with an aching heart (VII, 86).

Strangely enough, too, the male character is feminised even before his birth, first by his aunt counting on the arrival of a baby-girl in Chapter I, then by Steerforth — first at Salem House (Chapters VI and VII), then in London, when he nicknames David "Daisy" (XIX, 243); because of the polysemy of the word, used twice (once with capital letters), Steerforth seems to have only the flower in mind (a symbol of freshness and innocence), but we also think of a girl's name. As a matter of fact, Aunt Betsey finally manages to make her dream half come true by re-christening David "Trotwood:" "Thus I began my new life, in a new name, and with everything new about me" (XIV, 184).[19] The narrator's subtle strategy of allusiveness is also evidenced in the field of family relations. His stance is never (consciously?) quite clear as to the nature of the (almost incestuous) relations between Mr Wickfield and Agnes (surrogate wife), Steerforth (surrogate husband) and his mother; and lastly Peggotty and his passionately loved niece.

Some characters themselves are living "cases" (in the pathological sense) of linguistic self-censorship and repression. Uriah Heep's continual self-imposed restraint is quite remarkable, and is above all verbal. He speaks the coded language of self-abasement, and his life is

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part of the second sentence, especially the "of course" sounds rather superfluous, hence suspicious. Why did the narrator, as if having an afterthought, find it necessary to vindicate the innocence of his attachment for his school-fellow?

[19] We know that names almost have a magic power of their own, and are able to erase or to generate identity: "'Brooks of Sheffield' is a denial of David's real name, a symbolic endeavour to suppress him, get rid of him as Clara's son, and finally 'kill' him. 'Brooks of Sheffield' stands for David's *persona* at Murdstone and Grinby's" (II, 31; X, 133). To some extent, although more positively, the same thing could be said for his new start in life under a new name — a girl's — as a new boy (184).

ruled by a linguistic strategy of self-erasure, whose main tool is the proliferation of the adjective "umble" (together with "umbly" and "humility"), used 13 times over one and a half pages in Chapter XVII (215-16), together with other similar words and phrases (quotations, stage directions, or free indirect speech): "lowly state," "a person like myself had better not aspire," "writhing modestly," "apologised," "lowly as they were," etc. Even his laughter is suppressed and kept within: "Uriah . . . doubled himself up with laughter. With perfectly silent laughter. Not a sound escaped from him" (XLII, 499). There are of course chinks in the armour as Heep's inquisitive face is said to be "leering . . . like a mask" (XXXV, 426), and we can sense a smouldering violence, and pent-up resentment. He sheds his mask in the aptly named chapter "I Assist at an Explosion;" the explosion refers to Mr Micawber's, and to Uriah Heep's fiercely showing his true colours, for once resorting to verbal aggressiveness, and coarse, vulgar words:

> Though I had long known that his servility was false, and all his pretences knavish and hollow, I had had no adequate conception of his hypocrisy, until now I saw him with his mask off. The suddenness with which he dropped it, when he perceived that it was useless to him; the malice, insolence, and hatred he revealed; the leer with which he exulted, even at this moment, in the evil he had done — all this . . . at first took me by surprise(LII, 611-12).

But, for all the character's spite and active malice, David's condemnation presents symptoms of a superiority complex, and social racism. All this is borne out by Heep himself describing the humiliating education he got at the "foundation school" for the parish poor, first evoked in Chapter XXXIX (471), then in Chapter LII (621). By partly accounting for Heep's behaviour by social factors, cannot we say that Dickens (and not really David) implicitly (and cleverly) blames it on the contemporary attitude to the poor, and the inadequate relief policy?

Strangely enough, linguistic repression[20] carried to such extremes is only seen in social inferiors in *David Copperfield*. Littimer's

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[20] It protects the inner self so tightly, but at the same time it is so very difficult to keep up that the self is always betrayed, somehow, by outer signs: Heep's regular writhing and wriggling; or Rosa's scar swelling, and changing colour.

empty language has more to do with Uriah Heep's fake self-serving humility (to some extent only, as Heep is also a victim), than with Rosa's vagueness (the sign of terrible inner torments); the morning ritual with David only rests on sham respect, set phrases, with as much regularity and predictability as clockwork (XXI, 250-52). His linguistic restraint is just a mask put on to achieve dishonest ends. Littimer's does the same in "I am shown two Interesting Penitents," in the prison run by Creakle. His false professions of repentance and grief (echoed by Heep's, the arch-villain and hypocrite) are only lip-service, but pull the wool over everybody's eyes (LXI).

Rosa Dartle's verbal constraint is another case in point. In Chapter XX, when David first meets her, she is presented as never ending her sentences, letting them peter out; never making them explicit or quite significant enough: "It appeared to me that she never said anything that she wanted to say, outright; but hinted it" (246), a puzzling propensity that the rest of the page fully illustrates. The physical portrait immediately preceding the description of Rosa's speech disorders emphasises the importance of the scar on her face, and her wasted look, as if she were burning from within. Instead of a blunt "diagnosis," the images of the house, of the fire, and the unprepared allusion to marriage, as if out of the blue, indirectly point to a form of hysteria (245-46). As a victim of poverty, subservience (like Uriah Heep), and of Victorian propriety, Rosa has to smother what she feels for Steerforth, but her outbursts are all the more violent; the first — and mildest — one occurs in Chapter XXIX: "And she had struck (Steerforth), and had thrown him off with the fury of a wild cat, and had burst out of the room" (359-60). The second one is triggered off by the announcement of Mr Peggotty's visit to Mrs Steerforth: "Such a concentration of rage and scorn as darkened her face, and flashed in her jet-black eyes, I could not have thought compressible even into that face," with its flushed, throbbing, tell-tale scar (XXXII, 387); the third one, in Chapter L, takes place during a cruel confrontation between Rosa and Emily; the fourth and final one, in "The New Wound and the Old" is caused by the announcement of Steerforth's death, and gives an explicit clue to her past and present attitude (LVI, 53-655).

The linguistic strategy of *David Copperfield*, whereby words are sometimes turned into images, is, among so many others, one of the attractions of this novel which makes the most of all the potentialities and resources of language, from the most representational and literal, to the most figurative, metaphoric and complex. Although it is a nineteenth-century classic, it should also be read as a profoundly innovative and modern in-depth study of language. It is no exaggeration to say that *David Copperfield* is *a novel about language*. But its essential originality lies in the fact that its approach is of course not a theoretical one. Instead, the exploration of language, under all its different forms, and the analysis of the various speaking and writing disorders we find in the book, is a dramatisation, and not an *exposé*. It deals with the personal relations between language and its (mis-)users, as well as with the links between language and creation. In this respect, Mr Dick occupies a central position as an illustration of language disorders (an endemic problem in the novel), as well as a symbol of alienation and fragmentation. These are the constant dangers threatening to disrupt the self, words and syntax, the writer and his creation. So that the figure of the writer shines like a beacon, standing for a norm, for sanity, for control over life and words. David, as the successful narrator of his own life-story, is the embodiment of the long and hard battle fought for meaning and wholeness to get the better of linguistic and existential chaos.

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