

SENSATIONS OF A VERY QUEER SMALL BOY: CHILDHOOD SELVES IN DICKENS'S JOURNALISM AND SHORT FICTION

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Dickens's fascination with telling the story of childhood is apparent in many of his novels. Study of his shorter works reveals that they also contribute much to Dickens's discourse on childhood for in them he frequently examines and celebrates childhood, appealing to the nostalgic impulses of Victorians to idealise, preserve, and recover the conditions of childhood. In "Where We Stopped Growing" Dickens remarks upon the desirability and transience of childhood:

Childhood is usually so beautiful and engaging, that, setting aside the many subjects of profound interest which it offers to an ordinarily thoughtful observer . . . there is a mournful shadow of the common lot, in the notion of its changing and fading into anything else. (Pascoe 30)¹

Though Dickens acknowledges the practical futility of wishing for eternal childhood, he poses the notion of childhood persisting in memory and the potential for the adult imagination or "fancy" to re-engage with childhood through associations formed by childhood reading and the "real people and places we have never outgrown" (30-32). Its use of miscellaneous observations in a chain or "train" (34) of associations to mimic spontaneous reminiscence makes the essay's structure typical of Dickens's nostalgic sketches. Dickens suggests that childhood experiences inspiring the senses or the imagination attain a significance which remains unsurpassed and unadulterated by subsequent experience, and that the memory of them is therefore inextricably linked to their constitutive childhood state. The childhood state he wishes to preserve—characterised by creativity and receptivity, the ability to "always regard with the eye and mind of childhood" and "the capacity of being easily pleased with what is meant to please us"—is one of moral, emotional and intellectual perspective (32, 34).² Where the adult perceives "the whole region of Covent Garden" (32), the eye and mind of childhood fantasise concrete and familiar objects speculating about ghostly inhabitants and palatial interiors.

Dickens attributes an aptitude for recapturing childhood perspective to the literary imagination, its creative exercise opening the eye of childhood. He identifies "we, the writer" as the focus of interchange between childhood and adult perspectives: a documentary subjectivity whose recollection of childhood—elicited as a "list" of "things as to which this individual We actually did stop growing when we were a child"—is

¹ Dickens's journalism referenced in this article to Pascoe was previously published in *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*; original publication dates are recorded in Works Cited at end of essay.

² Dickens claims children possess a "closeness and accuracy" of observation often lost by adults (*Copperfield* 11; *Forster* 1: 4).

brought to fruition by “writing it out” (30). While seeking to share the childhood perspective or perceptiveness associated with specific experiences, the narrator simultaneously claims those experiences as his own and distances himself from them in the role of the mature “thoughtful observer” and writer who renders personal experience universally familiar (30). The essayist’s interest in the ways in which childhood and adult consciousness merge in thought and in literature exhibits a tension between engaging in and observing, or preserving and relinquishing childhood. As much of his journalism, short fiction and personal writings—as well as the better known *David Copperfield*—demonstrate, Dickens is not only concerned with representing childhood but with representing the childhood *self* in relation to the adult self, to which end he explores modes of autobiographical writing, the operation of memory, imagination and sensation, and temporal processes of narrative.

In the light of nineteenth-century views of autobiography Dickens’s literary nostalgia for childhood may be considered as “a conservative form” which “consolidates selfhood and preserves the past in and for the present” (Marcus 28). In 1847 Dickens commenced a memoir which did not proceed far beyond the story of his childhood. Peter Rowland, who in *Charles Dickens: My Early Times* virtually reconstructs Dickens’s early autobiography from Forster’s *Life of Charles Dickens* and reminiscent passages in Dickens’s novels and journalism, cites Dickens’s gallant claim in an 1855 letter to Maria Beadnell that he had burnt the manuscript after having found the task of recounting their youthful romance and separation an insurmountable obstacle to completing his autobiography (21). Fragments of the description of Dickens’s childhood survived with Forster, who echoes Dickens’s letter to Beadnell when he records Dickens’s “first intentions of writing his own life,” but differs in describing the gradual subsumption of the “abandoned” autobiography into *David Copperfield* as an “apt” source of plot incidents (1: 19-29). Forster, who makes specific reference to certain incidents reproduced in *David Copperfield* from Dickens’s memoir, states that the memoir “had all been written, as fact, before [Dickens] thought of any other use for it” (1: 20). Although Forster alludes elsewhere to the cathartic effect of the communication—“he felt the weight upon his memory as a painful burthen until he could lighten it by sharing it with a friend (1: 14)—it is not corroborated as a motive for writing by Dickens’s claim to Beadnell of “intending the manuscript to be found among my papers when its subject should be concluded” (qtd Rowland 21). Dickens’s “first intentions” therefore were autobiographical and conservative.

The interruption of the autobiography may reflect Dickens’s miscellaneous style of journalism which, while valuing personal history as a resource for sketches and flexible fictional plots, did not perhaps lend itself to sustained autobiographical composition. Dickens wrote the confessional fragments sporadically. Later, around 1848-49, he “worked them up into a continuous narrative”³ by which time the novel was claiming his attention. Perhaps Dickens’s abandonment of the story of his adult self, initially in favour of David’s childhood which revisited aspects of Dickens’s own, also reflects a greater interest in and capacity for writing about himself as a child than as an adult. The memoir, no matter how it was abandoned, demonstrates both Dickens’s

³ Rowland notes that this autobiographical narrative was shown to Forster on 20 January 1849 (20-21).

desire to represent the childhood self in transition to the adult self and his difficulty in doing so, while *David Copperfield* represents his significant use of fiction-writing as an outlet for the frustrated intentions of the autobiographical fragment. Indeed Forster quotes the memoir along with other correspondence to show how Dickens drew on his “personal history” in “a very complicated interweaving of truth and fiction” for that novel and other works (1: 6-8, 10-14, 17, 19-21).⁴

Dickens seems intrigued by the idea of an author writing about himself as he creates a fictional character. For David, as for Dickens, childhood is the source of the narrative of the self since both adult narrators begin their personal history—the story of how they “turn out to be” (*Copperfield* 1)—with their childhood. The fictional personal history proceeds where an autobiography could not, yet even so anomalies still remain in the resolution of David’s child self into the adult David. In *David Copperfield*’s “Retrospect” chapters David’s transitions from child to youth and (married) man are abridged as a series of external events related as if contemporaneous with narration (18: 217-23; 43: 511-17; 53: 624-28; 64: 714-17). Where narrated and narrating subject should merge, the mature David—“me”—claims to “stand aside to see the phantoms of those days go by me, accompanying the shadow of myself, in dim procession” (511), and so avoids the formation of a cohesive narrative self. The former self which stands thus divided from the narrating subject both in person and tense also occurs in several of Dickens’s shorter works.

A model of the childhood self as a figure present to, and separate from, a remembering adult narrator or subject appears in such works as “The Child’s Story” from *A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire*.⁵ Its narrator “The Child” speaks in the context of a customary exchange of stories during family celebrations implied by the Christmas number’s titular frame. The story depicts a journey through the woods wherein “a traveller” is confronted with a series of diversions and characters. The Child relates that the traveller “travelled along a rather dark path for some little time, without meeting anything, until at last he came to a beautiful child. So he said to the child ‘What do you do here?’ And the child said, ‘I am always at play. Come and play with me!’” (5). A pastoral passage then describes their play, until:

One day, of a sudden, the traveller lost the child. He called to him over and over again, but got no answer. So, he went upon his road, and went on for a little while without meeting anything, until at last he came to a handsome boy. So, he said to the boy, ‘What do you do here?’ And the boy said, ‘I am always learning. Come and learn with me.’ (5)

Their lessons, games and holidays are sketched in up to the next stage when the traveller “loses” the boy (6). The pattern of digression is repeated as the traveller meets and “loses” the romantic youth, the busy man and the father (whose wife and children join

⁴ Rowland quoting 10 July 1849 letter in Forster (20). Forster acknowledges papers such as the *Uncommercial Traveller* series as a source for his biography of Dickens (2: 231; Rowland 22).

⁵ See Glancy for a convenient reference to the Christmas stories.

and leave them as their paths intersect and diverge). The characters encountered are only identified by their age-group (child, boy, youth, man, father, old man), and their activities and preoccupations are determined by the time of life by which they are represented rather than by their personalities. The characters are symbolic figures, embodiments of the successive stages of life. By participating in their pursuits the traveller takes on the same symbolism becoming in turn a child, a boy, a youth, and so on while the forest thickens and thins, ages, and goes through the cycle of seasons in a corresponding natural metaphor for the passage of life. Eventually the traveller comes "to an old man sitting on a fallen tree":

So, he said to the old man, "What do you do here?" And the old man said with a calm smile, "I am always remembering. Come and remember with me!"

So, the traveller sat down by the side of that old man, face to face with the serene sunset; and all his friends came softly back and stood with him. The beautiful child, the handsome boy, the young man in love, the father, mother, and children: every one of them was there, and he had lost nothing. (7)

The old man and the traveller are reunited with former selves through the action of their memory within the imagination of the child-narrator. In their symbolic world remembering negates loss, and childhood—personified—returns to the old man and the traveller. In the world of tale-teller and audience the listening Grandfather, not the narrating Child, has lost childhood. The traveller is the subject of the Child's narrative for it is the traveller whose path and interactions we follow. The Child identifies the traveller as his or her grandfather who is thus the participant as well as the recipient of the story: "And I think the traveller must be yourself, dear Grandfather" (7). "The Child's Story" may be reassessed as the grandfather's story, an allegory of the grandfather's life couched as a third-person disquisition. Presenting the grandfather's past self to him as another person, indeed as the protagonist in a tale, the Child's narration alienates the grandfather from his own experience but also fantasises the resurrection of his lost youth (a resurrection not conventionally located in the next life, but in memory and imagination during this life). "The Child's Story" illustrates Dickens's thematic concern with preserving childhood and a division in his writing between the subject of narrative and the subject's childhood self externalised and objectified as a separate character in the narrative.

This model for representing the childhood self is elucidated in the first-person narrative of Dickens's "Travelling Abroad" which dispenses with the mediation of a narrator other than the subject. Ostensibly a travelogue, though ultimately redefined as the narrator's daydream, the essay describes the Uncommercial Traveller's "chariot" journey (Pascoe 193) from London to Paris and Geneva, focusing on curiosities of place and personality observed along the way. His first encounter is with a child whom he refers to throughout as the "very queer small boy":

So smooth was the old high road, and so fresh were the horses, and so fast went I, that it was midway between Gravesend and Rochester, and the widening river was bearing the ships, white-sailed or black-smoked, out to sea, when I noticed by the wayside a very queer small boy.

“Holloa!” said I, to the very queer small boy, “where do you live?”

“At Chatham,” says he.

“What do you do there?” says I.

“I go to school,” says he. (193)

This conversation is similar to the formulaic response of the boy “always learning” in “The Child’s Story” (5) which also appears in “Barbox Brothers” (5). The Traveller continues:

I took him up in a moment, and we went on. Presently the very queer small boy says, “This is Gads-hill we are coming to, where Falstaff went out to rob those travellers, and ran away.”

“You know something about Falstaff, eh?” said I.

“All about him,” said the very queer small boy. “I am old (I am nine), and I read all sorts of books. But *do* let us stop at the top of the hill, and look at the house there, if you please!”

“You admire that house?” said I.

“Bless you sir,” said the very queer small boy, “when I was not more than half as old as nine, it used to be a treat for me to be brought to look at it. And now I am nine, I come by myself to look at it. And ever since I can recollect, my father, seeing me so fond of it, has often said to me, “If you were to be very persevering, and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it.” Though that’s impossible!” said the very queer small boy, drawing a low breath, and now staring at the house out of window with all his might. (193-94)

The “queer small boy” is referred to in second and third person by the Uncommercial Traveller but he links the identity of the boy with himself when he says: “I was rather amazed to be told this by the very queer small boy; for that house happens to be *my* house, and I have reason to believe that what he said was true” (194; Dickens’s emphasis). Forster, quoting the passage, refers to Dickens when he states that “the very queer small boy was indeed himself” and “a vision of his former self” (1: 4-5; 2: 187, 207-8, 459 n.20).⁶ Thus historic correspondence of place, Forster’s anecdotal evidence, and the Traveller’s implication of “truth” serve to equate the “queer small boy” not only with the Traveller but with Dickens: the boy is constituted not merely as a *child*, but as

⁶ In drawing this equation Forster acknowledges his use of the essay as “authentication” of Dickens’s childhood ambition to own Gadshill Place which he acquired in 1856. Forster’s anecdote, conversely, seems to authenticate autobiographical content. A reading which did not see the boy as a child self would be antagonistic to Dickens’s work ethic.

an eidetic *childhood self* (simultaneously the childhood self of the narrator and of the author).

Dickens toys with autobiographical modes of composition by writing about his own childhood in the third-person and simultaneously writing about the enactment of autobiography by the Uncommercial Traveller who, in turn, represents the child self as an embodied presence rather than a retailed memory. The adult is the ultimate subject of the narrative, and the childhood self is “he,” another person, a figment of the imagination created out of memory, an object to be studied and catechised. The queer small boy, however, expresses his own hopes and doubts as if laying claim to the narrator’s subjectivity and potential and seems to live on in the adult fancy as a discrete entity. This eidetic representation of the childhood self exemplifies Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation of “the Lacanian notion of the imaginary self”: “the subject can pay for [self] reflection with the loss of his very ontological consistency” (201). The desires of man and boy are divergent; the grownup owner of Gadshill has surpassed his need to gaze longingly at the house of his desire and as a traveller wishes to move on, whereas his childhood desire is bound to that view of the place. Furthermore the coexistence of the Traveller and his imaginary child-self strains the integrity of the narrative’s ostensible realism. In response the Traveller reasserts himself as the narrating consciousness—“Well! I made no halt there, and I soon dropped the very queer small boy and went on” (Pascoe 194)—postponing the ontological crisis until the end of the piece when he is startled from his reverie (203).

Adults remembering and yearning for childhood by interacting with the former self as a contemporary but alienated vision recur in Dickens’s writing. His narrators portray the childhood self as odd, a stranger, an object of inspection, or something apart; such as the comical description of the childhood self constrained by the imposition of juvenile fashion as “this object of just contempt and horror to all well-constituted minds” (Pascoe, “New Year’s Day” 53). Or similarly the use of the indefinite second person by the frame narrator of *Somebody’s Luggage* to explain his childhood induction into the “calling” of waiter: “Under the combined influence of the smells of roast and boiled, and soup, and gas, and malt liquors, you partook of your earliest nourishment” (“His Leaving it till called for” 1). Master Humphrey channels the self-pity—arising from his traumatic realisation in childhood that other people, even his mother, regard him as disfigured—into the less disturbing pathos and propriety of detached mature recollection: “now my heart aches for that child as if I had never been he” (“Master Humphrey’s Clock” 254).⁷

Such detachment occurs where the loss of childhood innocence commences in the progress to maturity and worldliness: Copperfield’s schooldays are encapsulated in his realisation as a “condescending” older boy of his alienation from his earlier child self: “That little fellow seems to be no part of me; I remember him as something left behind upon the road of life—as something I have passed, rather than have actually

⁷ See also Jaffe 50-1, 58-9. Raina notes speculative narratorial self-detachment in Pip’s “antithetical voice” in *Great Expectations* through which “with Pip, Dickens . . . is a wide-eyed witness to himself and simultaneously, to a whole culture” (109).

been—and almost think of him as of some one else”(*Copperfield* 220).⁸ Unlike character doubling, which serves to articulate unconscious or unacknowledged aspects of character, child selves split from the introspective adult manifest conscious loss. Like Master Humphrey’s, Dickens’s autobiographical and reminiscent works are an admixture of pathos and nostalgic pride at having negotiated the trials of maturation. Forster’s biography and the autobiographical material provide many examples of Dickens assuming a detached perspective and describing his former self, “a strange little apparition,” in terms of difference and spectacle (1: 23; see also 5-6, 10, 25-9, 33). In short “the adult Dickens is watching his earlier self with an eagle eye and trying to gauge the effect that his appearance and activities would have had upon other people. He is constantly wondering what they could have made of ‘a little chap like me’” (Rowland 23-24), or seeing himself as another, as other people might: “They used to say I was an odd child, and I suppose I was. I am an odd man perhaps” (Pascoe, “Gone Astray” 35-44).⁹

Where oddity might understate the adult’s alienation, Dickens portrays loss of childhood as a death; association of split selves with a motif of the dead child has been noted in the novels (Watkins 45-46; Andrews 158, 166-68). In “Dullborough Town” the Uncommercial Traveller expresses his sudden awareness of estrangement from his childhood perceptions and environment in terms of mortality when he describes a conversation with renewed acquaintances: “We spoke of our old selves as though our old selves were dead and gone, and indeed they were—dead and gone as the playing-field that had become a wilderness of rusty iron, and the property of S.E.R. [the railway]” (Pascoe 72). The narrator of *The Haunted House* pursues the legendary “ghost of Master B.” into childhood dissipations “marvellously changed”:

I was myself, yet not myself. I was conscious of something within me, which has been the same all through my life, and which I have always recognised through all its phases as never altering, and yet I was not the I who had gone to bed in Master B.’s room. (“The Ghost in Master B.’s Room” 28)

Dickens envisages the childhood self as a distinct being—or state of being maintained and encapsulated “within” the adult consciousness—reconstituted as moral and creative “purity” when the narrator confesses he is haunted, not by supernatural agency, but by “the ghost of my own childhood, the ghost of my own innocence, the ghost of my own airy belief” (30-31). The playful child within invoked by the ghost of Master B. demonstrates how the association of the child (as split-self) with death may evince yearning and reverence for childhood rather than dread or remorse. Although concepts

⁸ See similar journey metaphor of the detached “innocent romantic boy” (*Copperfield* 137) and the “ragged way-worn boy” (706). See also Andrews *Grown-up Child* (166-70).

⁹ The split self, emanating from introspective fascination, may extend to a generally divided subjectivity; compare the Uncommercial Traveller’s declaration of being “accustomed to observe myself as curiously as if I were another man” in “A Fly-leaf in a Life” (346).

of the childhood self as both dead and coexisting with the adult seem contradictory, one may be a function of the other.

Representation of the childhood self as dissociated from the ego allows the adult mind to assimilate the vast, imperceptible transformation from child to adult, described in a *David Copperfield* "Retrospect" as "the silent gliding on of my existence—the unseen, unfelt progress of my life—from childhood up to youth" (217). A transformation which might be comprehended as death rather than growth when perceived as a fall from grace. Furthermore if the childhood self is dead it can be resurrected in the adult's imagination as a vision, apparition or ghost, entire and inviolate. The consequence of Dickens's representation of a distinct, idealised childhood self is indicated in Malcolm Andrews's account of the influence on Dickens's thought of Charles Lamb's "Elia" essays: "The high valuation [of childhood] is vividly conveyed by the way Lamb has alienated and objectified his small, former self: 'that "other me", there, in the background' has detached itself from the adult"; so that for Dickens "it is as if that boyish figure exists as a palpable contemporary of the adult essayist—his *alter ego*" (*Grown Up Child* 69-70).¹⁰

Though the childhood self in "The Ghost in Master B.'s Room" arises as a ghost in a dream or period of introspection, Dickens's encounters with children and childhood selves often occur as meetings during literal and figurative journeys including glimpses in *David Copperfield* of the alienated child self in the course of David's metaphorical life-journey (137, 220, 511, 517, 706). Many of Dickens's protagonists call themselves, or are, essentially "travellers" as diverse as the Uncommercial Traveller, the narrator of *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, and Little Nell and her grandfather (*Old Curiosity Shop* 102 passim; Watkins 100-02). Even Master Humphrey is given to "wanderings by night and day, at all hours and seasons, in city streets and quiet country parts" (*Master Humphrey's Clock* 1: 255). Associated with Dickens's figurative use of the journey, particularly the foot-journey, is a motif he defines in "Gone Astray" as the "vignette of Infancy leading Age" (35-44); another example is Little Nell "who seemed to exist in a kind of allegory" leading her grandfather (*Old Curiosity Shop* 20, 103, 186; Watkins 100-02).

Adult travellers are linked repeatedly to children whose influence restores their goodwill and capacity for innocent enjoyment. The solitary traveller in "Barbox Brothers" was deprived of his childhood and consequently of his sense of self: "I am, to myself, an unintelligible book with the earlier chapters all torn out, and thrown away. My childhood had no grace of childhood, my youth had no charm of youth, and what can be expected from such a lost beginning?" (9). He has even given up his own name for that of his business. The imminent anniversary of his birth inspires wanderlust and introspective pathos. He is only "travelling from [his] birthday . . . to try to crush the day—or, at all events, put it out of [his] sight" (9) until the bedridden Phoebe, who strives to "keep children about" her (8), stimulates his "goodwill and earnest purpose" (10) to bring her stories from the seven railway lines of Mugby Junction. On his first excursion he is found by Polly, a lost child. He initially fails to "adapt himself to her level" but in an amusing reversal of the catechistic encounters already mentioned Polly

¹⁰ Andrews relates Lamb's influence to "Where We Stopped Growing" (*Grown-up Child* 69-70).

proceeds to question Barbox, order him about, and test his ability to recite a story about a bursting boy (12-13). Through his willingness to engage with the child Barbox, transforming himself into “Barbox Brothers and Co.,” learns to play, forgive, and be “joined at will to all sorts of agreeable places and persons” (16). Dickens proposes that engaging with children, childish pursuits and perspectives is the key to moral and social redemption; rediscovery of childhood is implicated in the attainment of self-knowledge.

However, a confrontation between the narrator or subject and his/her child *self* contests both the conceit of life as a linear journey and its underlying assumption of the linearity of narrative (Kincaid 57-59; Marlow 125-26). In “The Child’s Story” the life-path may be imagined in anticipation by the child-narrator leading the listener or retraced in memory by the grandfather. One might simply say that imagination is the forward or “proleptic” (Marlow 125-6) vector and memory the backward vector in the narrative of the self; but in Dickens’s writing the position of subject and narrator relative to childhood is ambiguous, creating for the reader a sense of chronological and ontological complexity. Memory acknowledges the linear strictures of time but the Child’s imagination subverts them. Ostensibly naïve, the Child narrates with an assurance and hindsight more appropriate to the grandfather. For instance the Child’s ownership of this narrative of “a magic journey” is reinforced by rhetorical features such as sentences beginning with “So” and formulaic repetition which signal its oral delivery and folk and fairy-tale ancestry. However, allusions to death and stoic acceptance of mortality (such as the comment that the life journey would seem to the traveller “very short when he got half way through”) point to the more mature insight of the subject/recipient grandfather (5). Figuratively and stylistically youth coexists with age in the narrative. In “Travelling Abroad” the adult and his childhood self coexist and briefly compete as narrators of their life story (193-94). These narrative transgressions of chronological linearity and ontological boundaries drop us, as the Uncommercial Traveller “dropped” the very queer small boy (194), into a paradox. Dickens’s fascination with paradoxical encounters between child and adult selves also appears in “New Year’s Day” (Pascoe 53) when he appropriates William Wordsworth’s concept “the Child is father of the Man” (“My Heart Leaps Up”) to describe himself, an ill-dressed young boy, as “this exceedingly uncomfortable and disreputable father of my present self”.

In *Charles Dickens: The Uses of Time* James Marlow argues that “that which funds the belief in mechanical succession—the idea that the perception of one unique event inevitably brings about another, like a linked chain—is everywhere blurred in Dickens’s works. By severing—or, perhaps, better said, by looping—so as to disengage the consequent from antecedent . . . Dickens created in his fiction a sense of timelessness” (45, 214). The confusion or “fluidity” (236) afforded by temporal looping in narratives about the childhood self evokes an *ever-presence* of all times and stages of life akin to the rejuvenated philosophy of Scrooge’s oft-quoted resolution to “live in the Past, the Present, and the Future” (*A Christmas Carol* 74). The concept of ever-presence is encapsulated in the advice Dickens offered in a letter to Charles Knight concerning Knight’s “Shadows” column in *Household Words*:

Will you look carefully at all the earlier part, where the use of the past tense instead of the present a little hurts the picturesque effect? I understand each phase of the thing to be *always a thing present before the mind's eye*—a shadow passing before it. Whatever is done, must be *doing*. Is it not so? For example, if I did the Shadow of Robinson Crusoe, I should not say he *was* a boy at Hull, when his father lectured him about going to sea, and so forth; but he *is* a boy at Hull. There he is, in that particular Shadow, eternally a boy at Hull; his life to me is a series of shadows, but there is no “was” in the case. If I choose to go to his manhood, I can. These shadows don't change as realities do. No phase of his existence passes away, if I choose to bring it to this unsubstantial and delightful life, the only death of which, to me, is *my* death, and thus he is immortal to unnumbered thousands. (27 July 1851 Dickens and Hogarth 1: 259-260)

Here Dickens manipulates tense rather than person or the subject-object dichotomy to demonstrate that the impact of literary representation is subject to the temporal structure imposed upon narrative. It is in just this manner that Dickens, with the Uncommercial Traveller in “Travelling Abroad,” insists that he *is*, not was, a boy at Gadshill (193-94). The technique is also seen in the “Retrospect” chapters of *David Copperfield* where David assumes the present tense to “pause” (511) in “the journey of [his] story” (517) and refers to himself and his companions as they were in the past as “the shadow of myself” (511) and “faces . . . in the fleeting crowd” (714). Dickens is always concerned in these texts with what the childhood self is *doing*—that it “must be *doing*,” that because it is “doing,” it *is*. In this sense also, the child as a separate entity, an objectified character, a dead self, or a “shadow,” lives on in the adult fancy “always a thing present before the mind's eye.” Dickens's advice to Knight may be regarded as a statement of both ideology and technique. Dickens articulates the selves of memory and imagination in literature, crystallising moments or stages from a continuum of personal history as “immortal” “shadows.” While Dickens obviously intends a broader application of the technique in directing this advice to Knight, it is significantly boyhood that Dickens hypothetically recreates and “manhood” he dismisses. Embodying childhood in narrative by turning the powers of imagination upon memory indulges the writer's impulse to pursue a form of immortalisation and retain the viability and visibility of the childhood self.

The advice to Knight registers Dickens's enthusiasm for conveying an immediacy of experience, for making contact with the reader through the re-creation of a shared response. Common childhood reading such as *Robinson Crusoe* and fairy tales frequently serves to evoke childhood in Dickens's writing, for he believed that “the fairy literature of our childhood . . . has greatly helped to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown with weeds, where we may walk with children, sharing their delights” (“Frauds on the Fairies” 566). Dickens's desire—and indeed capacity—to make contact with the reader is expressed in other aspects of his writing such as his nostalgia for a rural childhood common to readers in a period of increasing migration to the city (Andrews *Grown-up Child* 43). In

“Time, Place, and Dickensians” Andrews describes the inclusion of real places in Dickensian topography as designed to create “sites of shared contact . . . where we might be stimulated to acts of creative repetition” (212). Marlow ascribes to the realism or “referentiality” of Dickens’s texts an intention of making “contact” in order to demonstrate the shared context of the reader and the “world of words” (23-24). Similarly Dickens appeals to the universality of nostalgic yearning for childhood as intrinsic to mortality, “the common lot” (Pascoe, “Where We Stopped Growing” 30).

Dickens’s challenge in writing about childhood was to make the child seem present in order to bring readers back into contact with their childhood, to encourage them to emulate his occasional introspective return to childhood and childhood values. Dickens’s structural strategies convey the ever-presence of the childhood state but maintain a split self which implies lingering adult suspicion of, or incapacity for, the child’s influence. For what the child represents—what it “must be *doing*”—is indulging in sensation and fantasy, as we may see from “The Child’s Story” where the traveller and the child-figure are consumed with the “fresh scents” of rain, the “hush” of snow, the colours and sounds of nature, and the novelty of play; whereas the man must always be “busy” (5-6). Dickens overcomes resistance by immersing the reader in the sensations and pursuits of an idealised childhood, epitomised by popular festive occasions such as Christmas, New Year and birthdays. “A Christmas Tree,” “What Christmas is, as we Grow Older,” and “Where We Stopped Growing” employ the expansive authorial and editorial “we” to induct readers into Dickens’s personal perspective of childhood characterised by intense sensation and limited perception—limited in the sense of lacking an adult’s contextual and practical knowledge, social awareness and hindsight, not in the sense of receptivity.

The Christmas stories are saturated with sensation for Dickens considered Christmas to be a time when adult indulgence in “fancy” and childish pursuits becomes permissible as a means to reinforce social ties and moral values. At Christmas, admits the adult narrator of “A Christmas Tree,” his “thoughts are drawn back by a fascination which I do not care to resist, to my own childhood” (289). Luscious visions, tastes and scents abound in these stories. In “A Christmas Tree” Dickens evokes childhood in memories of “waking in two hours, with a sensation of having been asleep two nights”, the “fragrant smell of orange-peel and oil”, and the child’s visual fixation on toys and books (292). The narrator of “The Schoolboy’s Story” revels to excess in feasting upon “fowls, tongues, preserves, fruits, confectionaries, jellies, neguses, barley-sugar temples, trifles, crackers—eat all you can and pocket what you like” (4).

In his Christmas books *The Haunted Man* and *A Christmas Carol* Dickens illustrated that without memory, or the willingness to engage, the spirit is divested of moral foundation and must degenerate. To Dickens Christmas as “a noticeable milestone on the track” of life should inspire introspection (“What Christmas is, as we Grow Older” 1). In such papers as “Where We Stopped Growing” (34), “New Year’s Day” (54) and “Birthday Celebrations” (Pascoe 111) Dickens portrays anniversaries, particularly New Year—“its power in reproducing the Past is admirable”—as appropriate occasions for introspective, imaginative and sensory indulgences of childhood, forging a chain of annual associations back to infancy. To return to childhood in memory, to revive aspects of one’s childhood self in imagination or by

means of permissible festive self-indulgence, is to embrace the idealised condition of innocence, content, potential, and unaffected morality that Dickens equated with childhood, representing a spiritual rejuvenation of the adult—to have “a grey head” but “a child’s heart” (“A Christmas Tree” 295). Dickens idealises childhood in its pure form prior to institutional adulteration of childish innocence of the kind he portrays in boarding schools: the way for example the gastronomic enthusiasm of schoolboys in “Birthday Celebrations” is overshadowed by the incipient self-interest of fair-weather friends and bullies (113).

Sensory memory may operate regardless of institutional or conscious permission, spontaneously reactivating childhood experience as it generates, and is generated by, narrative of the self. In “Dullborough Town” Dickens’s *Uncommercial Traveller* recalls his childhood coach-journey away from home more for its pungency than its poignancy:

Through all the years that have since passed, have I ever lost the smell of the damp straw in which I was packed—like game—and forwarded, carriage paid, to the Cross-Keys, Wood-street, Cheapside, London? There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I had expected to find it. (Pascoe 64)

Corresponding to Dickens’s own childhood departure from Chatham (Forster 1: 9-11), this scene remains sufficiently compelling for him to employ it in this account written in 1860 and refer to it again soon after in *Great Expectations* (187), despite his previous use of it in 1855 for “The Guest” in *The Holly-Tree Inn* (2). Dickens’s autobiographical fragment records more instances of unwonted and sometimes unpleasant childhood associations arising from olfactory impressions. Unwelcome memories of his isolating employment at Warren’s blacking warehouse would be forcibly and vividly recalled in later years by “the smell of hat-making” (Forster 1: 28) or the smell of cement: “For many years, when I came near to Robert Warren’s in the Strand, I crossed over to the opposite side of the way, to avoid a certain smell of the cement they put upon the blacking-corks, which reminded me of what I once was” (Forster 1: 33).

Sensory memory is dynamic and, like the displaced eidetic child self, anachronic. A sensation re-encountered can recreate an event or state of mind, but the endeavour to recall childhood incidents can also reactivate the related sensory impression. Dickens exploits this dynamic to realise childhood in his writing and perhaps to stimulate the reader’s realisation of childhood. Marlow discusses a comparable operation of “expressive symbols” in Dickens’s work where “a material object, even a sound—contiguous or contemporaneous with an intense human experience—somehow absorbs some of the excess affectivity of the experience. Whenever an individual finds the object within his or her perception again, it radiates—sometimes quite unexpectedly—the retained affects of that experience” (211-14). The interiority of sensory memory imports a threateningly divisive potential to the subject since its retained affects are not only unexpected and involuntary but self-imposed and self-generated. Dickens’s most strikingly described memories of childhood concern

terrors that retain the child's combined sense of inexplicability and unreasoned certainty, such as "the Mask" brought out at Christmas:

When did that dreadful Mask first look at me? Who put it on, and why was I so frightened that the sight of it is an era in my life? . . . The mere recollection of that fixed face, the mere knowledge of its existence anywhere, was sufficient to awake me in the night all perspiration and horror, with 'O I know it's coming! O the mask!' ("A Christmas Tree" 289-290)

Similarly the "prodigious nightmare . . . so exceedingly indistinct, that I don't know why it's frightful—but I know it is" ("A Christmas Tree" 291), a compelling slippage from the past tense into the present, and the "bad dreams" in "Chatham Dockyard," "frightful, though my more mature understanding has never made out why" (Pascoe 236), show the adult mind returning to the child's sensation of uncomprehending terror. In "Lying Awake" Dickens is disturbed anew by recollections of a drawing of a man "chalked upon a door":

I suppose . . . that it is still vaguely alarming to me to recall (as I have done before, lying awake) the running home, the looking behind, the horror, of its following me; though whether disconnected from the door, or door and all, I can't say, and perhaps never could. (26)

This memory inspires a series of bloody visions of hanged convicts, suicidal lunatics and corpses from the Paris Morgue which can only be stopped by breaking out of introspective thought (and therefore breaking off the narrative) into a burst of physical activity (26-29). Integral to the initial sensation is the speaker's unavailing recognition of the irrationality or groundlessness of the fear which manifests to him his lack of self-knowledge, rendering "the child, half-scared and half-amused, a stranger to itself" (*The Haunted Man* 281). Because the child's sensation is excessive and essentially incomprehensible, it is irreconcilable with self-possession; its potency remains unmitigated by mature reasoning, defeating the adult narrator's desire to rationalise the terror. Thus childhood is momentarily relived as sensation becomes palpable to the adult, as it is to the narrator of "Gone Astray": "The child's unreasoning terror of being lost, comes as freshly on me now as it did then" (Pascoe 35).

Extremes of fantastic childhood sensation, indulged out of place as opposed to the permissible guilty thrill of telling "Ghost Stories . . . round the Christmas fire," threaten to disrupt the rationality that properly belongs to maturity, the "real life" ascribed exclusively to adulthood ("A Christmas Tree" 293). Terrors and horrors endemic to childhood are particularly intrusive and despotic when inappropriately indulged by the adult imagination. In the latter part of "Travelling Abroad" the Uncommercial Traveller visits the Paris morgue in hot weather where he indulges his ghoulish curiosity and is thereafter plagued with sickening sensory impressions of a drowned corpse he had viewed (Pascoe 196). This horror, like memories of childhood terrors in other Dickens stories, strikes him as "unreasonable" but is nonetheless gripping (197). Sensation rules

reason, capriciously departing without becoming “a whit less forcible and distinct” (198). The experience concludes with the Traveller expatiating upon the need for adult sensitivity to the impressionability of children and the futility of trying to reason with “a fixed impression”:

At that impressible time of life, [a child’s observation] must sometimes produce a fixed impression. If the fixed impression be of an object terrible to the child, it will be (for want of reasoning upon) inseparable from great fear. Force the child at such a time, be Spartan with it, send it into the dark against its will, leave it in a lonely bedroom against its will, and you had better murder it. (198)

The Traveller associates compelling fear with the childish aspect of his personality. His anguish results from childish indulgence and makes him vulnerable like a child. Dickens’s strategy is to combat disruptive impressions in the essay by asserting his control of the narrative. First the macabre is leavened by comic and ironic observations of the bizarre, indeed childish indulgences of others: a mother and child eat sweets while they sate their appetite for horrors at the morgue; a shopkeeper and a soldier inexplicably descend from outward professional respectability into spitting, quarrelling and futile gesturing; and the sophistication of Parisian bathers, “who walked up and down arm in arm, drank coffee, smoked cigars, sat at little tables, conversed politely with the damsels who dispensed the towels,” is subverted by their supercilious “striped drawers of various gay colours” and their periodically “pitch[ing] themselves into the river head foremost” (196-200). Second the Traveller is reminded of his authority as narrator, the fall-back position of the ontological boundary between him and the childlike terrors and mysteries of the imagination, when he is jerked out of his expeditionary reverie by the coach salesman (203). His earlier “dropping” of his displaced child self, akin to the “losses” of child-figures in “The Child’s Story,” prefigures the Traveller’s ability as narrator to experience yet arbitrarily confine otherwise overwhelming sensations to the realm of imagination and, ironically, to force the child self into the dark.

Thus, in “Travelling Abroad,” “The Child’s Story,” and other texts, Dickens represents the childhood self as displaced from the subjective adult and conventional operations of memory into the narrative imagination. The split-off child self seen in much of his autobiographical and nostalgic writing expresses a sense of loss and alienation of the child and its values. As a literary model his displacement of the child—keeping it “always a thing before the mind’s eye”—facilitates mature reclamation of a Romanticised ideal of intrinsically moral yet hedonistic childhood, but remains anxious about the anarchic potential of childhood sensation in its association with nostalgic indulgence. While Dickens welcomes the disturbing as well as the pleasant recollections of childhood for their very vibrancy and power to make the adult (albeit in terror) momentarily relive the child’s perception, his narrative stance is wary of surrendering to such moments and feelings. The nostalgic sketches and personal histories vacillate between embracing childhood through sensation and displacing it into narrative. The very adult narrators and subjects who yearningly describe their former selves as

something apart—Dickens in his memoir and occasional pieces, the *Uncommercial Traveller*, *David Copperfield*—do so with a degree of scepticism about the eidolon of childhood; their depiction of former selves as queer, odd, dead, and so on contains an element of disparagement of childhood naiveté and self-indulgence. Ultimately Dickens's adult narrators of personal history exert control over the narrative and confine their childhood selves—which threaten to overwhelm rationality and linearity—within the realm of the imagination; just as Dickens suggests that Victorian society, while longing to recoup the morality with which it invested childhood, limited its celebration of childhood sensation, sentimentality and indulgence to appropriate festive occasions.

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