

Euphemism and Paternalism in *Our Mutual Friend*

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The catch-cry of Mr Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend* is: "The question about everything was, would it bring a blush to the cheek of the young person?" This has proved a memorable Dickensian joke, and in itself constitutes Mr Podsnap's most vivid trait. In Mr Podsnap we see and hear "the articles of a faith and school which the present chapter takes the liberty of calling, after its representative man, Podsnappery."¹

Podsnappery is as manifest in Podsnap's furniture, his plate, his wife and daughter, as in himself. It is a philosophy which can invest inanimate objects with its own meanings, so penetrating the very grain of the Podsnap furniture, for example, that Podsnap is able to delegate to the furniture the task of imparting Podsnappery to his daughter: "Miss Podsnap's early view of life being principally derived from the reflection of it in her father's boots, and in the walnut and rosewood tables of the dim drawing-rooms, and in their swarthy giants of looking-glasses" (p. 176).

Mr Podsnap is both chief architect and chief edifice of Podsnappery. In chapter 2, he goes to an evening party at the Veneerings, "bran-new" arrivistes on the London social scene. Podsnap's "perpetual freshness" is somehow inimical to their newness, his is a "fatal freshness" which nowadays would suggest the domestic deep freeze or chemical preservatives (only fresh pods will snap). Nothing new can ever enter his vision. His very toilet on the occasion is a closed system, on his "else bald head" "two little light-coloured wiry wings . . . looking as like his hair-brushes as his hair." His wife's appearance complements his, for she is so like a rocking horse to look at, that Dickens dispenses with all of her except "rocking away"—perpetual, unprogressive motion.

This squeezes out of existence the difference between "motion" and "stillness", between "hair" and "hair-brushes", which would allow them to be connected in meaning and function. No mediation is possible between indifferent aspects of a closed system of self-reflection. So Podsnappery is the worship of the literal. Mr Podsnap has opinions on many things, art, literature, education,

1 *Our Mutual Friend*, Penguin English Library (1971), p. 175. All subsequent references are to this edition.

marriage, foreigners, the British Constitution. But he values only literalness. Nothing that he has not "licensed" is permitted to exist: "Nothing else To Be—anywhere" (p. 175). Even literature must reflect with mechanical literalness the dead ritual of money-making which passes for his life: "getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven" (p. 174).

From this blanket denial of the transforming energies of art, Podsnap moves to censor all expression which could "bring a blush to the cheek of the young person." His own daughter is such a young person, and Mr Podsnap aims to extend his paternal authority to all forms of intercourse. Dickens presents us with Georgiana Podsnap in an eternal nonage, "solemnly tooled through the park by the side of her mother in a great, tall, custard-coloured phaeton . . . showing above the apron of that vehicle like a dejected young person sitting up in bed to take a startled look at things in general . . ." (p. 176).

Father is symbolically dominant in the obscene imagery of "tooled", Victorian cant for illicit sexual intercourse. Mother is symbolically dominant in "apron", the phrase "tied to her apron-strings" meaning maternal possessiveness which prevents children from breaking away into sexual maturity and freedom. Both parents combine in the image of the huge bed in which Georgiana was conceived but from which she is not to be allowed to conceive herself. By total imposition of parental consciousness on the daughter she is cut off from a life of her own, and her birth was not a nativity, or beginning of new life.

In Podsnappery Dickens exposes the censoriousness which refuses young people admission into adult knowledge and sexual awareness. He mocks at the futility of trying to suppress totally whatever challenges for the right to exist; as if, he implies, words could rule outright over nature:

And the inconvenience of the young person was, that according to Mr Podsnap, she seemed always liable to burst into blushes when there was no need at all. There appeared to be no line of demarcation between the young person's excessive innocence, and another person's guiltiest knowledge. Take Mr Podsnap's word for it, and the soberest tints of drab, white, lilac and grey, were all flaming red to this troublesome Bull of a young person. (pp. 175-6)

The word-play here is jovial. A Bull is a self-contradictory proposition, so Mr Podsnap is at fault in logic. It is also the farmyard animal which suggests such other homely sayings as "shutting the door after the horse has bolted", and "Driving out

nature with a pitchfork", all ways of saying that young natures will prevail against adult censorship. To see red is to get angry; a bull which sees red, like a bull in a china shop, will give trouble. The passage shows how little Podsnappery can do about the young person.

But Dickens does not argue that matters of sexual knowledge are to be conversed about freely, or dealt with freely in literature.

There is little enough anywhere in Dickens's writings to differentiate his views on sexual instruction from those of his time and class. We may be taken aback when, in *Little Dorrit*, Pet Meagles' first appearance after her marriage to the sadistic Henry Gowan is "pale and insensible and borne on a litter after a fall with her mount on her wedding journey in the Alps." But Dickens wants Pet only as victim, not as protest. The attack on Podsnappery in *Our Mutual Friend* concentrates not on the personal damage it inflicts, but on its reduction of literary expression to literalness and on its prevention of new consciousness.

Dickens has two strategies for combating Podsnappery; I have termed them euphemism and paternalism. Both are strategies for mediating or transmitting cultural meanings from one group to another, from the adult and knowledgeable to the uninstructed and uninitiated. Their positive function is to permit new understanding and new social units to form under the benevolent guidance of the established forms. They therefore have the structure of a comedy, as Northrop Frye defined comedy in *Anatomy of Criticism*. Paternalism is the specifically father-centred authority adopted by the novel, altering and broadening the narrow definition of patriarchal authority represented by Mr Podsnap.

Dickens is, of course, soundly based in novelistic procedures when he combines the rhetorical trope of euphemism, or of *not* calling a spade a spade, with the value of paternalism in relations between older and younger generations and between the sexes. He does not need to venture outside norms of social and personal attitudes in order to represent the masculine instructor who initiates the young girl, type of the feminine novice, into maturity.

Euphemism in *Our Mutual Friend* is relevant to its everyday function in Dickens's life and society. It is a function of disguise, of conformity, of evasion. But it also figures in the novel as an imaginative and creative force: it is the force towards allegory.

Euphemism is a trope which substitutes for one term another more palatable or acceptable, but without altering the reference of the statement. It is conventional language, relying on a silent

agreement to understand what is not named. It merges with the obscene as soon as a shift in manners occurs. So, the euphemism "limb" instead of "leg", when it was the leg of a table or chair that was meant, appears obscene to a later generation which no longer regards the human leg as indecent. Euphemism has its familiar counterpart, nicknaming. Hamlet scourges Ophelia because women "nickname God's creatures": this is the fear of women's knowledge, its kinship with the obscene.

There are two main areas of knowledge which are formulated euphemistically in *Our Mutual Friend*—sex and death. I do not add the third category, crime, though it attracts a great deal of evasive language, misleading formulations, and cant. Crime in *Our Mutual Friend* is connected with sex and death, and in spite of the avowed interest of Dickens in crime and the criminal mentality, the crimes in the novel are really in the nature of deadly sins, and are all punished by retributive destiny, not by the laws of society.

Angus Fletcher in his *Allegory: the Theory and Structure of a Symbolic Mode*, canvasses a Freudian interpretation of allegorical structure. Sublimation is a mechanism by which, according to Freud, instinctual aims are deflected on to socially and personally acceptable objects of gratification. The pageant of personifications in an allegory enacts the fruitful illusion of the individual's progress through life, choosing and ratifying his choice of objects through the process of naming or terming which links them in a continuous line with his first instinctual choices. Freud's diagnostic bias led him to prefer sublimation, which is the imaginative grooming of substitute loves for their important role in the individual's life, to repression, which obliterates the original and prevents any sense of imitation or lending of a likeness to the retained image. These Freudian distinctions might assist us to separate euphemism, which entails a contract to pass off separate things as the same or equal, from allegory, which preserves the difference between an original and an enactment.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, euphemism sets up various relations between writer and reader, which in turn depend on the kind of communication going on between the character or narrator and the implied reader, his audience in the novel. If the speaker and his audience are agreed on the unspoken which may not be named, euphemism is straightforwardly conventional. Even so, it is not literal; Bella Wilfer telling her husband, "there is a ship upon the ocean" (p. 756) is using a metaphor euphemistically, for

she reminds her husband first that the ship was agreed between them as a sign of future happiness, and the traditional metaphor of the pregnant woman, "a ship in full sail" is neatly turned to her purposes.

When the writer draws the reader into complicity over a polite or palatable term which masks a reality difficult or imprudent to acknowledge, there is irony in euphemism. There is irony in the phrase "the friendly move", which is Silas Wegg's cant term for his scheme against Noddy Boffin. The irony arises from the complicity of the reader in the knowledge that Wegg's partner, who is the only one who understands the phrase, has gone over to the other side.

When there is agreement to mask a problematic reality from a third party by language which seems to mask the facts in a socially acceptable guise, but which actually leads conventional judgment astray, we have a situation which proclaims hypocrisy. But here Dickens interprets instances in very different ways. Wegg is certainly a hypocritical humbug, but there are other cases of euphemism used to blind judgment, which Dickens treats as examples of paternalism, where those with superior wisdom use it to guide a novice blindfold through a maze.

If we look back to the blush of the young person, we see that Dickens dismisses the ambition of Podsnappery to "file down and fit the universe" to the propensity of the young person to blush. There is no denial of responsibility towards the young person, however, and the activity of filing and fitting may be that of the artist as well as the orthodontist, perhaps. Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* stands for paternalistic responsibility in the imparting of knowledge to the young.

Characteristically, his most vivid presentations of responsibility are to be elicited dialectically from represented irresponsibility, and Bradley Headstone, the headmaster, is a striking example of "How Not To Do It". But the principle of positive responsibility is shown to be, not the withholding of knowledge, but responsible preparation of the ground, so that it can be received. In other words, Dickens opposes to Mr Podsnap's repressive literalness which would preclude initiation, the idea of a novitiate which defers it until the time is ripe.

In *Our Mutual Friend* there is most concern with the initiation of young girls. Mr Headstone, the headmaster, is not so forceful nor so instinctive a moulder of young boys as were Mr Murdstone or Fagin in the early novels of Dickens. There are two pairs of

young girls in the novel, who undergo their initiation into adult experience, as in part an awakening to sexuality, and in part a brush with death. One pair, Bella Wilfer and Georgiana Podsnap, are protected by middle-class mores and institutions, as well as by special protectors and guardians. The other pair, Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren, have already received a strenuous induction into the evil of the world before their particular trial comes upon them.

Bella Wilfer and Lizzie Hexam successfully negotiate the crisis; and Georgiana Podsnap and Jenny Wren are broken by it. Though their lives expose them to different shocks and ordeals, a constant in the experience of all four is the interposition of a man as interpreter to them of their own experience. This is not unequivocally desirable, as we have already seen in Georgiana's case; nor is it always undesirable, as I shall hope to show for Bella Wilfer; but, either way, it is as far as the novel is concerned, inevitable.

Before I proceed to their stories, there is another woman, Sophronia Lammler, whose career throws light before it on the destinies of the others. First introduced as the "mature young lady" (p. 52) with powdered shoulders and face who tries to captivate Alfred Lammler at an evening party chez Veneering, she appears at first to be a "troublesome Bull", because "mature" and "young" are self-contradictory. In fact, as we find out through the description of her wedding to Lammler, she is without the apparatus of male protectors and respectable antecedents that would entitle her to be seen as young at all, in Mr Podsnap's eyes. And she uses cosmetics, not only to hide her age, but to simulate the fluctuations of complexion which are the unconscious duplicity of youth. Dickens is hard on her unblushing condition.

Newly married, the Lammlers appear on the sands at the Isle of Wight wrangling (p. 168). This is no honeymoon tiff, but a dangerous confrontation. They have married under false pretences, each thinking the other to have money. Dickens brandishes the commercialized phrases of the honeymoon, "abode of bliss", "happy pair", and plays them off against the euphemisms of the courtship phase, "mature young lady . . . complexion lights up when well powdered—as it is" (p. 52). The clichés about marriage function euphemistically, by substituting for a disagreeable couple an agreeable "happy pair". But the savage contrast between expectations and discoveries is contained in the same device; for only in ironic tones can they be termed "happy pair".

The drift of euphemism towards irony shows when Dickens again reverts to the powder on Sophronia's face: "The mature young lady has mighty little need of powder, now, for her downcast face, as he escorts her in the light of the setting sun to their abode of bliss" (p. 173). Her face is white enough (ashen with chagrin) to need no whitening; red enough in the borrowed light of the setting sun to need no blush, so no powder to conceal the lack of same.

Behind this incident, but by no means weakening its impact, is the sexual situation, never mentioned, which has led to it. The emphasis throughout their brief and violent quarrel has been on money, marriage for money, and what they must now do to get the money marriage has not brought with it. The string of conventionalities about marriage includes "this hopeful marriage contract . . . signed, sealed, and delivered," and the inflexion of "contract" eked out by the irony of "hopeful", falls on the cash nexus.

The older version of the marriage contract stands behind this modern mercenary one, and in that the money came from the men—husband and bride's male guardians—and her part of the contract was her signed, sealed, and delivered virginity. The unspoken component in Alfred Lammle's fury and Sophronia Lammle's chagrin is that a "mature" young lady who powders is seen as not offering the older version of things, but the modern, i.e. money. He stands over her as the enraged male who finds his wife not a virgin in the marriage bed, and she with her mouldy technical virginity and no money has doubly cheated him, while he is doubly a dupe since he had thought he read through the surface presentation, but only to find that powdered maturity masked poverty and chastity.

Alfred Lammle has read Sophronia's self-presentation wrongly, because he believes, like Podsnap, that male watchdogs (euphemistically, "good family" or "good background") are necessary to maintain female innocence. He has substituted for Sophronia's actual case a wished version of her value in negotiable terms, cash in lieu. The pitfalls set for him and her by euphemism are like those in the case of Riah, the gentle Jew who fronts for the usurer, Fledgeby. When Riah says he is only the agent for a principal, no one believes him, because in the commercial world truth cannot be told apart from a lie in extenuation.

Sophonria, however, is deceived about Lammle because women must be deceived about men's intentions towards them, unless a

man provides them with the correct interpretations of sexual and financial interests. She is not said to have been deceived as to his nature, for Dickens does not disallow womanly intuition there. But she mistakes his interest in her, taking his greed for her (non-existent) money to be desire to possess her (offered) person. Later in the novel, Georgiana Podsnap is also deceived by Lamble acting as pander for Fledgeby. Since women are kept in ignorance of sexual and financial realities alike, their inability to defend either their sexual or their financial interests comes about through the deliberate confusions of language and substitution of indifferent terms for very different matters.

When Jenny Wren the doll's dressmaker puts Bradley Headstone the headmaster to an inquisition by the doll she calls Mrs Truth, she decorously makes the doll a married woman, for she knows that her own exposure to evil is the reverse of respectable for an unmarried girl. Jenny Wren has constructed a toy household, reversing the roles of parent and child with her drunken father, and as the "person of the house" setting herself up to oversee affairs and command secrets. In her background is a grandfather, whom Lizzie Hexam calls "the terrible drunken old man, in the list slippers" (p. 277), who is responsible for her deformity. When she acquires a protector in Riah, the old Jew, she evades the familial model, calls him "fairy godmother", and plays at being dead in the world they have set up together. She has elaborated a defence against incest and betrayal. She and Mrs Truth put Bradley Headstone through an ordeal which forces him to confront the truth, while still preserving before the young women his stance as a respectable man.

The unmarriageable Jenny Wren discerns Headstone's barely suppressed passion for Lizzie Hexam, because she lives outside the circle of masculine censorship. However, the eligible Lizzie is misled by his decorous circumlocutions. She accepts his statement that he speaks only on her brother's behalf, and is offering her a kind of chaperonage. Headstone has to put a very severe restraint on his speech and gestures before Lizzie, because even remarks fit for feminine ears might not fit the extraordinary story that he comes as an elder brother and guardian. Consequently, when he does break down and admit passion, he gives vent to a lurid version of repressed aggression, and accuses Lizzie of luring him by a fatal attraction "to any death" (p. 455).

Such author comments as "the poor stricken wretch sat contending with himself in a heat of passion and torment" (p. 401),

represent the level of penetration of Jenny Wren and her persona Mrs Truth. But Lizzie only responds to the carefully vetted version of Headstone's emotions which he is consciously putting across: "some of us are obliged habitually to keep it down. To keep it down" (p. 400). Lizzie seizes on no clue here; she has been conditioned to accept masculine advances in mufti.

Headstone's job as schoolteacher is a mutual oppression of master and pupil. He censors their knowledge, including knowledge of his own nature. The disjunction of the heavily censored schoolmaster image and the emerging nature of the man is shown as a case of possession:

. . . he had been ridden hard by Evil Spirits in the night that was newly gone. He had been spurred and whipped and heavily sweated. If the record of the sport had usurped the places of the peaceful texts from Scripture on the wall, the most advanced of the pupils might have taken fright and run away from the master. (p. 618)

Headstone has been worked, and sported with, by Eugene Wrayburn, one of those instructive instances of masculine behaviour which the "peaceful texts" do not convey. Headstone's pupils, like Charley Hexam, may be "advanced", in a career of "self-advancement", but they are not initiated into secrets of this kind.

The name and calling of Mr Venus is another good example of euphemism covering sex and death. Venus assembles and articulates skeletons and other dead organisms, treating the *disjecta membra* as interchangeable units of a mechanical system. When we first meet him, it is through Silas Wegg, whose amputated leg forms part of Venus's stock in trade. Wegg has assembled a mechanical apparatus which more than compensates for the missing limb, and this *ad hoc* structure of organically unrelated elements in both Wegg's and Venus's version offers itself as a paradigm of life in society. Wegg is not just fixed, but wedged into his place by the contraption he has made, and he is the most abased character in the novel.

Venus is smitten with Pleasant Riderhood, who reads through the euphemism of his name and at first rejects his suit, because: "I do not wish," she writes in her own handwriting, "to regard myself, nor yet to be regarded, in that boney light" (p. 128). Pleasant Riderhood's name is a complicated euphemism, combining a sexual allusion (Pleasant Ride) with the pun on Robin Hood in her father's name. Rogue Riderhood (given name Roger, another sexual term) is a revanchist like Old Orlick in *Great Expectations*. The class revenge he exacts from Bradley Head-

stone is one of the many ironies that stare down Headstone's social-climbing ambitions. Pleasant Riderhood is abused by her father yet she shrinks from a match which draws so cramped an equation between love and death as merely alternative ways of fixing the self into its inescapable place.

Other names contribute to the euphemistic gloss on taboo subjects. "Bradley Headstone" is one example. Less often noted is the name of the very unjolly riverside pub, the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters. These are certainly pallbearers, and the irony in Fellowship, like that in *Venus*, is that a society which condemns the self to fixity and mechanical repetition is a community in death only. Also remarkable is the use of nicknames, a habit of Dickens's in real life. Miss Peecher, the schoolmistress, draws the attention of her pupil, Mary Anne, to the distinction between nicknames and Christian names. This is a timely warning to a girl whose Christian names lend themselves to innuendo.

"Our Mutual Friend" is itself a euphemism for death, the mutual friend of all mankind. When Dickens used the phrase in private life of himself it was when he was acting as go-between and matchmaker for a marriage. The phrase is attached to John Rokesmith/Harmon in no friendly spirit but it could apply to several men who act as go-betweens and matchmakers. Noddy Boffin, nicknamed the Golden Dustman, is the matchmaker for Bella Wilfer and John Harmon. Charley Hexam tries to make a match between his sister and Bradley Headstone. Alfred Lamble panders for Fledgeby, nicknamed Fascination.

Bella Wilfer has two nicknames, "the lovely woman" and "the boofer lady". The first is Bella as her father's mistress, a joke she makes when they spend the day together in Greenwich, in the chapter, "In Which An Innocent Elopement Occurs". "The lovely woman" is equivalent to "an unknown fair" in a newspaper report of matrimonial scandal. It is a phrase concocted by Bella, not to flatter her own good looks, but to connive at her father's dread of her mother. It is her mother who would be the jealous rival of any "lovely woman" with whom Mr Wilfer eloped to Greenwich. When Bella does marry, the wedding journey to Greenwich takes place in good earnest. Her "innocent elopement" with her father is not only a rehearsal of the real event, but a practical demonstration to her father and herself that he cannot initiate her into marriage. Of course, a father cannot initiate his daughter into sexual knowledge, which is why the elopement is "innocent". But this particular father, Mr Wilfer,

cannot steer his daughter into the right matrimonial path, which is why this is an "elopement", i.e. a runaway match, unsanctioned by parental authority. He cannot be the needed "mutual friend" because he is under his wife's thumb, and that is what "the lovely woman" signifies.

Next, Bella becomes "the boofer lady". This is a nickname bestowed on her by a child who cannot say "beautiful". It means "that beautiful lady" and the child, John Harmon the third of that name, directs John Rokesmith/Harmon to kiss "the boofer lady", and then dies (p. 386). The child becomes the first of the male interpreters of Bella to read her correctly and make her marriage with John Rokesmith/Harmon. The first John Harmon, the dead miser, who willed poor Bella to his son, John Harmon (later Rokesmith), "like a dozen of spoons", had not interpreted her correctly, for he saw her whipping her father with her bonnet-strings and devised this infant Xanthippe as a scourge for his rebellious son. But Bella has been initiated into her proper roles as her father's wife, mistress and mother (in jest, naturally), so that by the time John Rokesmith accepts the commission to kiss "the boofer lady" she is already aware of feminine versions of herself.

John Rokesmith and Noddy Boffin are in collusion to make the match between Rokesmith and Bella on their own terms, not the terms of the elder John Harmon's will. They set it up in such a way that Bella thinks she is rejecting Boffin's mercenary values and renouncing her position as his rich foster daughter by marrying a poor man. Boffin pretends to be a miser, and so forces upon Bella this ugly image, that she changes her view of the desirability of a match for money.

When the plot is revealed, after Bella and Rokesmith have already married and produced a child, different versions of what happened are put forward by Noddy Boffin and by Bella. Mr Boffin represents the plan as a chance for Bella to show out in her true nature, which he reads as golden hearted (p. 843). Bella maintains that Boffin has cured her by acting the miser for her benefit and so keeping "a glaring instance . . . before her" (p. 846). Barbara Hardy, noting that Dickens liked to apply "moral homeopathy" of this sort, favours Bella's explanation.²

But neither Bella nor Boffin get at the truth which was that Boffin was neither a miser nor Bella a mercenary wretch, but that

2 Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (1970), pp. 49-53.

Bella was to marry money thinking it was love. The values of Boffin and Harmon are disguised from Bella throughout, for when Boffin playing the hateful miser attacks Rokesmith for his poverty, he is conspiring with Rokesmith to marry Bella to wealth, while persuading her, whether by example (as she later believes) or provocation (as he says), to marry into poverty.

By what principle do Boffin and Rokesmith take over the government of Bella Wilfer's understanding? They substitute a play, a fiction, for the facts, and in fairy-tale fashion it all works well, and ends well. Even more significantly, they employ a euphemistic language for the realities behind the facts and protect Bella from knowledge of herself and others as well as from hardship and poverty. In the unmasking scene, they take no account of this. The saving grace to be won from suffering is in this scheme reduced to a period of teasing, in which fictitious trials of spirit are laid on Bella. Boffin's paternalistic intervention has saved Bella Wilfer from unhappiness but at the cost of her complicity in her own ignorance.

Mr Boffin catches another person with the same scheme, which shows how much depends on the interpretation of the same facts, for with Bella "moral homeopathy" was beneficial. The one who falls into this trap is Silas Wegg. Wegg calls himself a literary man which is the first point to note, for the women who receive instruction are blessedly free from literariness. Indeed, Lizzie Hexam had to learn to read and write, and this was her particular case of a male interpreter interposing between her and experience.

Wegg's vaunted literariness is really again literalness. He repeats verses by rote, and applies them to his own situation in a way to rob both them and it of real meaning. He is "in danger of breaking down" (p. 103) when asked what the difference is between the Roman and the "Rooshan" empire, for he can tell only the difference between the letters on the page. Like the reciters of romance he has invented a fictitious pedigree or line of attestation for his "House", which is really Mr Boffin's house. Even this, "Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker" (p. 350) is derived from Tom Cobby.

Wegg's defence of himself when confronted with his villainy is in terms of one kind of literalness, but we have seen it taking place in other terms, still literal. He claims that he has been corrupted by reading aloud the books on and by misers which were part of Mr Boffin's pretence. The written word has a magical efficacy for Wegg, and he believes that the effect of lit-

erature is direct and unmediated: "It's not easy to say how far the tone of my mind may have been lowered by unwholesome reading on the subject of Misers" (p. 861). Actually, the document that has corrupted Wegg is the Harmon will, and then only because of his mental set over written words.

Wegg finds a will which cuts Boffin out of the Harmon estate, and such is the literal power of the written form of words for him, that he thinks this will settle all his scores against Boffin. He begins to look upon the dust heaps as excrement, as deposits of filth which all but he regard as spent, waste matter, but in which he will find the talisman gold. Incidentally, Humphry House calls the dust heaps "a euphemism" for dung heaps,³ and they are certainly that for Wegg. It does not occur to Wegg that there may be several wills, all cancelling each other, as later proves to be the case. Just as he insists that his fictional "House" have prior rights over Boffin, so he regards the document in his possession as the sole authenticating Word.

Wegg's attitude towards literature complements Podsnap's. Both are literalists, who would if they could lock the author out of the book. Both use literal repetition, which is their own mode of uncreative existence, to threaten others, and to deprive them of free, conscious agency. Wegg is thrown on to a dung cart in the end, because he stood for the excremental vision of the world, the present as the end-product and waste product of the past. This is parallel with Podsnap's view of art as literal repetition, the endless regression of reflecting his own existence. Dickens deals with Wegg's attempts to fix history in repetition with the same gusto as he showed in demolishing Podsnap.

Silas Wegg's concept of writing is of an exclusive shaping of events to take precedence over alternative or contending versions. His metaphor of grinding Boffin's nose on a grindstone shows that he believes in inescapable conclusions, believes too that he wields the fixed decree of fate. Such a concept is diametrically opposed to the concept of fiction which emerges in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens has deliberately moved inevitability closer to predictability in *Our Mutual Friend* than ever before, as part of the novel's realization of the human structures of will and belief which manifest themselves in events. And predictions may be frustrated or overturned.

This means that we cannot trust the tale to carry out the full intention of the teller, and in such instances as the Boffin-Roke-

3 Humphry House, *The Dickens World*, 2nd edn (1941), p. 167.

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smith conspiracy, we must abide the disclosure of the truth, and be guided to an assessment of value, as Bella Wilfer is. Salient features of the narrative and rhetorical organization of *Our Mutual Friend* point to open possibilities in experience, to the merging of opposites and the inversion of logical relationships.

One way of suggesting "what might have been" as a residue of unresolved potential within "what is the case", is to duplicate happenings and then at the last moment give them different outcomes. This is most strikingly shown in the two near deaths and two actual deaths by drowning in the novel. Dickens goes as far as narrative reliability will allow in presenting the drownings of Rogue Riderhood (the first time) and Eugene Wrayburn as fatal. These near deaths are offset by actual deaths which are recounted in terms almost identical: "All's over" (p. 801) for Dolls, who is dead: "all was done" (p. 767) for Eugene Wrayburn, who is not.

The pursuit of literal certainty is met with a dusty answer, but I have been concerned to show that, assuming this limitation on all the strivings after heaps of dust, Dickens indicates that for some people a benevolent disposition of fortune may occur. He does this by exploiting the paradox in Podsnappery. The blush of shame presupposes the guilt of knowledge, and since Mr Podsnap cannot do away with Original Sin, he can only control the utterance of guilty knowledge. His pretensions are to control language, through manipulating a powerless cipher, the young person to whom everything must be formulated in the negative.

The assumption of authority by Mr Podsnap is the incurred loving responsibility of Mr Boffin and John Rokesmith. They exercise paternalistic authority, and formulate a version of things, a cast of thinking, which they have the power to bring about, as well as the authority to originate. On this aspect of authority—the ability to shape circumstances into an uttered version—the novelist reflects on his own art in *Our Mutual Friend*.