

‘Joyful convulsions’: Dickens’s Comings and Goings

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In the summer of 1842 when Dickens returned home from his six-month tour of America, his eldest son Charley, aged five, told his mother he was ‘too glad’ to be reunited with his parents, and promptly fell into convulsions. ‘Dr. Elliotson told us afterwards that the sudden joy had perfectly turned his brain and overthrown his system, and that he had never seen the like in a child’, Dickens reported, citing his friend, the eminent mesmerist John Elliotson (1791–1868), who acted occasionally as the family doctor.¹ The episode clearly fascinated Dickens, who told the story to several correspondents, lingering on the connection between his son’s excessive joy and the resulting state of physical collapse. Sometimes the story was delivered in a succinct, upbeat summary — ‘I am happy to say that my boy is quite well again. From being in perfect health he fell into alarming convulsions with the surprise and joy of our return’ (*Letters*, III, 254) — while on other occasions Dickens fastened on a detail that intrigued him, noting, for example, that ‘He — that is, Charley — had previously confided to a confidential friend of his (a washerwoman) that he was afraid that when we *did* come home, he should “shake very much”’ (*Letters*, III, 295). The story even found its way into the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* of 1 August 1842, where, under the heading ‘Return of Boz: Dangerous Excess of Joy’, the paper reported Charley’s ‘transport of delight’, his ‘delirium’, and the calling in of ‘several physicians [...] almost despairing of his recovery’.²

This emotional rollercoaster of an episode seemed to provide the perfect finishing touch to the American tour, so far as his new transatlantic admirers were concerned, in terms of its near-deathbed melodrama, its happy ending, and its child hero, stock ingredients of the stereotypical early Dickens novel. For Dickens himself, however, responding as a father as well as a novelist, the episode was more than a curious phenomenon. He craved a scientific explanation, and indeed a way of calibrating when an excess of positive emotion — Keats’s ‘being too happy in thine [or one’s own] happiness’ — might overthrow the body and threaten life itself.³ In other words it took Dickens well beyond the familiar zone of sentimentality in which he had probed human experience in *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39) towards something more like the excess of emotion which seems to kill Gloucester at the end of *King Lear*, as according to his son Edgar, ‘Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, [his heart] Burst

smilingly'.⁴ Moreover, given Charley's own thoughtful commentary on his condition, as reported in the letters, the story acquired further troubling nuances which resonate through Dickens's lifelong recorded difficulties with partings and returns.

Nowhere, in fact, does Dickens more exhibit his concern with the debilitating impact of sudden, overwhelming excitement than in his many records, whether factual or fictional, familial, or comradely, of meetings, partings, and reunions. While many of these scenes in Dickens's life, as well as in his novels, occurred between men as colleagues and professional associates, the aim of this essay is to focus on those within the family, and specifically on the partings and reunions that happen between parents and children. As a father of seven surviving sons and two daughters, Dickens was the head of a perpetually unstable, fluctuating household, as sons were sent away first to school and then to employment abroad. If the children were at home, their parents might be away, sometimes for months at a time. As his daughter Mamie Dickens recalls, even the family dogs were swept into this emotional maelstrom, some coping with it better than others. While the two Newfoundlands behaved much as usual when he returned from his second visit to America, Linda, the St Bernard, Dickens told her, 'was greatly excited; weeping profusely, and throwing herself on her back that she might caress my foot with her great forepaws'.⁵ While Dickens was evidently gratified by this overwhelming display of affection, there is something disquieting about a dog 'weeping profusely' which is of a piece with his profound discomfort around family reunions. The rhythms of coming and going in the Dickens household were incessant without necessarily becoming any easier to manage, whether for animals or humans.

In his novels, the emotions of separating and reuniting parents and children are often further exacerbated by complex histories of estrangement: the instincts on the children's side frequently passionate for reconciliation, while the parents are paralysed by shame and loss of words. Recourse to his letters and his children's memoirs suggests that the language of separation came with difficulty to Dickens the father. As Mamie testified, he had 'such an intense dislike for leave-taking that he always, when it was possible, shirked a farewell'. A silent kiss or waved hand on parting was considered more bearable than the spoken word.⁶ It was therefore easier for him to play down or 'medicalize' the sensations experienced in family partings and reunions, rather than accept them at face value. As a father his own feelings are so difficult to articulate that, as in the episode of Charley's convulsions, they fade into the background, displaced by the phenomenon of the

child's hysteria, of which he becomes both observer and reporter. Later, however, as his sons permanently leave home, the narrative focus in his letters shifts back towards himself in attempts to understand how such departures affected his own peace of mind. With the multiplication of partings and reunions in his novels, the balance of feeling between parents and children see-saws, as Dickens experiments with patterns of silence and agitation, self-blame and recrimination, passing back and forth between the generations. Throughout his life, Dickens explores issues of 'ownership' of these powerful occasions, in the sense of whose feelings — parent's or child's — guide the negotiation of leaving or returning, often in the knowledge that the climactic meeting must be the last.

I

Convulsions of Feeling

When Charley nearly died of joy at being reunited with his parents, his father's friend and doctor Elliotson had recently written about convulsions in his *Principles and Practice of Medicine* (1839). Based on a series of lectures given at London University, the book had been serialized in the *London Medical Gazette* in 1833, and was thus well established in the public domain by the time Dickens asked for his help. Among the forty-seven references to the term are many allusions to the particular risks run by children, who 'as you know, are very liable to epileptic fits and regular convulsions'.⁷ In his opening sections, however, Elliotson muses more generally on the threats to human health and well-being from the strains of excessive emotion. 'Human nature seems doomed to suffer', he admits in relation to the moral causes of insanity, which he argues is more often triggered by 'joy' than by grief: 'Most of us, every day of our lives, suffer something or other, — little or much; and human nature seems more capable of enduring grief than of bearing joy' (p. 631). Twice more in the text he ponders the strangeness of our ability to bear unhappiness more easily than extreme delight. Passions of the most agreeable kind, he argues, 'excessive joy, for instance, — may have almost as injurious an effect, as those which are of an opposite character' (p. 27). His sober conclusion is that '[h]istory relates many accounts of persons who have died from excessive joy' (p. 29). Reunions, by this reckoning, are thus more dangerous than partings, which require of the participants only patient endurance, rather than an ability to survive the delirious pleasures of homecoming.

Traces of Elliotson's ideas about the risks to health of sudden emotion seem to resurface periodically in Dickens's writing. 'Convulsions', named as such, appear in the earlier Dickens texts more often than the later. For example, in 'The Funny Young Gentleman' from his *Sketches of Young Gentlemen* (1838), the gentleman 'frightened into convulsions a little boy who was sitting up to supper in a high chair, by sinking below the table and suddenly reappearing with a mask on' — another example of a child being frightened by the comings and goings of an adult, albeit within a game.⁸ Transferred to an adult, many years later in *Little Dorrit* (1857) the impact of sudden joy still gives the recipient the shakes. In Chapter 35, both father and daughter are physically prostrated by news of Mr Dorrit's newfound wealth and imminent release from prison. When Arthur Clennam tells Amy Dorrit of the remarkable change in her father's fortunes, she swoons, with her father's name on her lips; while, as Clennam asks Mr Dorrit to prepare himself for unusually happy news, he warns: 'We have all heard of great surprises of joy'.⁹ Mr Dorrit, in response, keeps his hand on his heart, as if bracing himself for news that might kill him, and when the news is broken, 'began to shake as if he were very cold' (p. 469). Jill Matus has recently drawn attention to the way Victorian novelists explored the causes and effects of shock and trauma, a feature of many novels other than those of Dickens. 'The discourse of trauma cohered around studies of the effects of stress or shock on memory and the incapacity of the subject to recollect, narrativize, or articulate overwhelming experience', she explains, adding that hallucinations and flashbacks often signalled 'the presence, yet inaccessibility of the dissociated knowledge'.¹⁰ Where children were concerned, the effects of trauma, scaling off into degrees of 'insanity', were still harder to calibrate. As Sally Shuttleworth has noted, the 1840s 'saw an extraordinary flowering of the literature of child development, as well as the first steps towards establishing the child mind as an area of medical investigation'.¹¹ Like Darwin and Gladstone a close observer of his children's personalities and behaviour, Dickens remained concerned throughout his career with the exploration and expression of trauma in children, often conveyed through confusing dreamlike states, obsessions, and fears. He can therefore be said to be working in parallel with contemporary scientific interests which matured after his death in the second half of the century with the work of the child study movement.

Understanding the emotions of adults who found themselves locked in a disturbing dialogue with traumatized children was even more uncharted territory. Among the most

recurrent of sudden changes in Dickens's fiction is the unexpected departure or return of a family member: the very stuff of melodrama which attracted him as a rising young writer. While melodrama — 'the mode of excess', as Peter Brooks calls it — works as the predominant method of representing climactic reunions and farewells in his novels, in his letters he often sought a deeper understanding of their nuances, whether by repeatedly telling the same story to different correspondents, or by seeking a scientific or medical explanation for his experiences.¹² When Dickens addressed emotional trauma in parent figures, finding a language which expressed the full range of feeling without descending into cheap sentimentality remained a challenge. His fictional fathers are often silent and awkward as they confront the moment of parting from, or being reunited with, a child, while his mothers resort to the language of melodrama. Of the three, it is generally the child who puts his or her case the most persuasively, by a combination of anguish and body language. If the result seems crude to modern tastes, Brooks reminds us not only that the 'desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode', but also that the characters 'assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions'.¹³ The next sections of this essay will therefore look first at the biographical context of these 'psychic roles' in letters and family memoirs, before considering the ways in which the passion of children, peaking in partings and reunions, challenges parental inhibition in key scenes of his novels.

II

Dickens's Farewells

'Dickens hated goodbyes', Robert Douglas-Fairhurst suggests in a new study of Dickens's earliest years as a professional writer, adding: 'Dickens's fiction is full of scenes in which this pain is either deferred as long as possible, or drawn out in a way that allowed him to play the roles of both torturer and victim.'¹⁴ Douglas-Fairhurst's choice of words here is telling: farewells 'tortured' those involved, and Dickens exploited their melodramatic potential to the full. In order to be better understood, the episode of Charley's convulsions needs to be contextualized in the culture of separation anxiety, specifically of partings and returns, which was very much a feature of Dickens's relationships with his friends and family. Starting with sixteen-year-old Walter in 1857, the next two decades saw a constant shuttling to and fro of sons in search of careers in distant locations: Sydney becoming a

navy cadet in 1860, Frank sailing for India in 1864, Alfred for Australia in 1865, followed by Edward, known as 'Plorn', his youngest, three years later. Even anxious Charley went to Hong Kong for a few months in 1860 to investigate the tea trade. This was quite apart from all the leavings for school in France and Germany, which were a regular feature of the household, and all the farewell dinners and speeches held first as an inevitable part of Dickens's second visit to America in 1867–68, and then as he ended his programme of public readings. For a man who hated farewells he was constantly saying goodbye, and frequently in public. As Dickens observed in 1857, perhaps the 'best definition of man may not be, after all, that he is (for all his sins) a parting and farewell-taking animal'; a view he repeated a decade later to 'Plorn', on the eve of his son's departure for Australia: 'this life is half made up of partings, and these pains must be borne'.¹⁵

Underlying or overshadowing all these comings and goings was of course the final departure of all. Rosemarie Bodenheimer argues that Dickens was fascinated by 'in-between' states: hence his interest in mesmerism, which he learnt to practise from John Elliotson, but also inexplicable spiritual experiences (for example in 1844 when he told John Forster a dream of his seventeen-year-old sister-in-law Mary Hogarth).¹⁶ Partings and reunions are another obvious in-between state, where the unspoken awareness of death blights all cheerful promises to meet again. The deepest shock of Dickens's life, as has been widely documented, was Mary's sudden death in May 1837, after a family evening at the theatre. As the worst of traumas, sudden death, in Dickens's life and in his novels, haunts much of what he wrote about parting, with the prospect of reunion necessarily configured (never very heartily) in religious terms as a coming together in the afterlife. So far as Mary was concerned, his preoccupation with her grave, where he hoped to be buried himself, was a way of focusing on the eventual possibility of physical reunion. 'It seems like losing her a second time', he complained to Forster in October 1841 when the grave was reopened to admit the body of her brother George who had also died young and suddenly.¹⁷

Perhaps Dickens's trip to America in 1842 followed too closely this second Hogarth family tragedy. Either way, his determination to make the American journey, notwithstanding separation from his children and his wife's bursting into tears whenever the trip was mentioned, is mooted briskly in a series of letters to friends through the autumn of 1841. As the arrangements fell into place, he confessed to Forster an odd mixture of emotions, by which his departure was already overtaken in his imagination by

his return: ‘I feel so amiable, so meek, so fond of people, so full of gratitude and reliance, that I am like a sick man. And I am already counting the days between this and coming home again’ (*Letters*, II, 393). His male friends, especially, figured in the recounting of passionate meetings, both anticipated and actual, especially when he was away on longer tours. To Forster, he was especially open in his emotions. ‘Oh for news from home!’ he lamented from New York in February 1842:

I think of your letters so full of heart and friendship, with perhaps a little scrawl of Charley’s or Mamey’s, lying at the bottom of the deep sea; and am as full of sorrow as if they had once been living creatures. (*Letters*, III, 96)

Forster, in turn, in his biography, remembered a snatched week’s return from Italy in December 1844, when the two friends were briefly reunited. As so often in his novels, reunion was tainted from the start by the shadow of another parting:

There was certainly no want of animation when we met. I have but to write the words to bring back the eager face and figure, as they flashed upon me so suddenly this wintry Saturday night that almost before I could be conscious of his presence I felt the grasp of his hand. It is almost all I can find it possible to remember of the brief, bright meeting.¹⁸

In each of these passages, words and paper first recall faces, figures, hearts, and hands, followed by waves of feeling, but as Dickens began to leave home for longer periods of time, and made new friends in other countries, he needed to develop a vocabulary for simultaneously missing those he was leaving behind and those he was looking forward to seeing again. ‘The ocean can no more divide you and me, than darkness can shut out Heaven from a blind man’, he assured Jonathan Chapman, Mayor of Boston in June 1842 (*Letters*, III, 248), which triggered an equally emotional response from Chapman in the form of a six-stanza farewell poem. ‘After we cut loose from you,’ Chapman admitted of their New York parting, ‘I gazed upon your ship until every vestige of her disappeared and I could not really say in my heart “good bye” until the last line vanished’ (*Letters*, III, 301n). Anticipating the mournful ship images from *In Memoriam* (1850), Chapman’s language here indicates the emotional intensity of even the more superficial relationships in Dickens’s professional life with other men. To Forster, the friend to whom he most freely expressed his feelings, Dickens, writing from Canada in May 1842, described himself as getting ‘FEVERED with anxiety for home’. The one word ‘home’ is then repeated seven times, the last in large capitals, followed by eleven exclamation marks (*Letters*, III, 248). Clearly, the whole experience of prolonged separation from friends as

much as family in the early 1840s pushed to the limits Dickens's powers of emotional expression, especially in terms of his relationships with other men. His language finally breaks down altogether in the face of a desperate longing for return to his own world.

As he grew older and most of his sons left home to seek their fortunes elsewhere, Dickens became the one who stayed at home waving others off on dangerous sea voyages, and dealing with the blank spaces and empty rooms where his children had once been. His role as a father bidding goodbye to his children (he rarely says anything about his wife's feelings on these occasions) repeatedly troubles him as he struggles to articulate his own feelings while underestimating his sons'. Walter's situation is a case in point. In July 1857 Dickens travelled to Southampton to see his second son off to India. Peter Ackroyd disputes any evidence that 'Dickens was particularly upset about Walter's departure for Walter's own sake; his lament is generalised, and his own response to seeing his son leave was to think of himself at a similar age'.¹⁹ Indeed Dickens seems arrested by his own thoughts about himself as a father, as he ponders in a letter to Edmund Yates, 'I dont [*sic*] at all know this day how he comes to be mine, or I, his' (*Letters*, VIII, 380). 'I don't write to say this', he adds, 'or to say how, seeing Charley and he going aboard the Ship before me just now, I suddenly came into possession of a photograph of my own back at 16 and 20, and also into a suspicion that I had doubled the last age' (*Letters*, VIII, 380). Two sons thus become two images of their father, who is disturbed to find himself aged forty-five, when presumably he still feels as vulnerable as a young man. In other letters he hastened to assure everyone that Walter was not unduly upset. 'He was cut up for a minute or so when I bade him good bye', he admitted to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 'and also yesterday morning when he took leave of them in town, and also on Saturday when he left his little brothers at Gad's Hill; but on all three occasions he recovered directly, and conducted himself like a Man' (*Letters*, VIII, 380–81). Was this the clue to Dickens's insistence on well-conducted leave-takings? Arguably, Walter struggled manfully with his feelings on three separate occasions, which his father downplayed. Although in these letters Dickens constantly refers to his son as 'the poor fellow', and 'the poor boy', he bluffly persuaded himself that Walter, by then at Gibraltar, was man enough to have forgotten home, and 'does not seem, as yet, to have a backward glance or regret' (*Letters*, VIII, 422).

A similar drama was played out with his fifth son, Sydney, nicknamed 'the dear admiral', in honour of his joining the navy. Though he looked 'very small aboard a great ship' when Dickens saw him off in September 1860, the father insisted that the son was

‘as little overcome as it was possible for a boy to be, and stood waving the gold-banded cap, as we came ashore in a boat’.²⁰ When his turn came in 1868, the youngest son, ‘poor Plorn’ was more visibly distressed: ‘He was pale, and had been crying, and (Harry said) had broken down in the railway carriage after leaving Higham station.’ Notwithstanding several more outbursts at each stage of the journey, Dickens assured his daughter Mamie at home, that ‘he went away, poor dear fellow, as well as could possibly be expected’ (*Letters*, XII, 188).

Henry Fielding Dickens’s recollection of this episode in his memoirs is quite different. This sixth and most successful of the sons (the ‘Harry’ mentioned above), writing in 1928, remembered only an emotional farewell at Paddington station: ‘My father openly gave way to his intense grief quite regardless of his surroundings, and I do not think I had ever fully realized till then the depth of his affection towards his children.’ Returning to the subject in more recollections of 1934, Henry noted that his father’s normal state of reserve made him ‘afraid of “letting himself go”’. In saying goodbye to ‘Plorn’, however, his son ‘never saw a man so completely overcome’.²¹ As we have seen from Dickens’s own version of the scene, the father’s instinct was to play down the emotions on both sides. All he would say repeatedly to correspondents was that the parting had been ‘hard’ or ‘sad’, and that he himself had been ‘shaken’ or ‘not himself’ (*Letters*, XII, 189–92). No tears of his own were explicitly mentioned: only that ‘Plorn’ ‘seemed to me to become once more my youngest and favourite little child’ (*Letters*, XII, 189). As with the farewell to Walter, a historical flashback returned the father to a period of childhood when there was no need for anyone to say goodbye.

Ever ready to underestimate his children’s emotions where it suited his view of events, Dickens was regarded very differently by his children, who repeatedly find emotion in his dealings with them where he himself denied it. His children, in fact, testified generally in their memoirs to moments when they were surprised or touched by his unguarded reaction to them. Mamie Dickens, for example, remembers his ‘truly womanly sympathy’ with children, ‘in all their childish joys and griefs’.²² She also recalls the strangeness of seeing him weep when flowers were brought on the death of his baby daughter, Dora. ‘It is always very terrible to see a man weep’, she comments, ‘but to see your own father weep, and to see this for the first time as a child, fills you with a curious awe’.²³ Many of the memorable stories retold about Dickens’s home life commemorate an emotion that was unsettling to him or his children because it was out of kilter in some way

with the expected course of events or with the normal atmosphere of the household. What might be seen as the most traumatic breakup of all, however — the separation of the Dickens parents in 1858 — he describes as being more difficult, paradoxically because the children had never been attached to their mother. ‘If the children loved her, or ever had loved her, this severance would have been a far easier thing than it is’, he tried to explain with convoluted logic to Burdett-Coutts (*Letters*, VIII, 559). As Ackroyd argues, ‘[o]n the evidence of the children themselves, all this was quite untrue’ (p. 856). Nevertheless, as Dickens saw it, the very absence of feeling in his children (allegedly) where it should have occurred perhaps made the separation arrangements mechanical and empty, where weeping would for once have seemed more natural.

What we see in Dickens’s family letters over three decades is a determination to handle separations by avoiding a ‘scene’ which would make him appear weak or ‘unmanly’. Nevertheless, a tension persists in many of these episodes between the child’s greater readiness to express emotion and the father’s equal anxiety to suppress it. The bearableness of all partings (and indeed reunions) hinges on the knife-edge balance between each person’s concern for himself and his solicitude for the other. For the sake of the son, the father must maintain his self-control; equally, the son must take care not to upset his father, or behave like a child too immature to be sent out into the adult world. The result is a determination to avoid emotive language or elaborate descriptions, like the one supplied by his son Henry. Dickens was himself aware of this effort at self-control, which he referred to as a ‘habit of suppression’, dating back to the time of his unrequited infatuation with Maria Beadnell, his first love. This explanation he confided in 1855 to the now-married and no longer appealing Maria (*Letters* VII, 543). Possibly, memories of his being sent away to the blacking warehouse or Charley’s collapse when his parents returned from America were just as powerful in reinforcing Dickens’s dislike of excessive displays of feeling. As a habit it was, however, in direct conflict with his lifelong pleasure in writing scenes his readers would find emotionally draining.

III

Meeting and Parting, Laughing and Crying

Being somewhere between laughing and crying was for many years Dickens’s stock rendition of extreme emotion, as Sally Ledger noted in this journal some years ago,

stressing both the ‘staged, performed nature’ of his public readings, and the shared affective response of his listeners.²⁴ Among his characters, this shared response can be similar in adults and children, or in both blended together, as at the end of *Oliver Twist*, when Oliver is finally united with Mrs Maylie and Rose in a storm of joy and grief. By *David Copperfield* (1849–50), however, the rhythms of leaving and returning have become more complicated, troubled as they are by issues of jealousy and possessiveness. Moreover, although there are still occasions for shared gales of tears and laughter, as in Chapter 7 when David is reunited at Mr Creakle’s school with Mr Peggotty and Ham, and they all three laugh until David is on the verge of tears again, Dickens becomes increasingly interested in the solitary, scarcely comprehended emotions of the child which cannot be shared. While David’s return home in Chapter 3, after staying with the Peggottys, to find he has a new ‘Pa’, begins familiarly enough with the flinging open of the door, and David’s looking for his mother, ‘half laughing and half crying in [his] pleasant agitation’, his emotions constantly compete with his mother’s self-centred defensiveness, which is always her way of responding to criticism from the Murdstones.²⁵ On his second return home, this time to find he has a new baby brother, David has become all too aware of the emotional cross-currents and tensions in the household, of which he is largely the cause, much as Pip will be in *Great Expectations* (1860–61), albeit for different reasons, once his money has created a divide between himself and the rest of his humble household.

‘The pain of parting is nothing to the joy of meeting again’, Nicholas Nickleby promises his mother and sister at the start of the novel as they prepare to go their separate ways (p. 87); yet joyful reunions between parents and children are rarer than one might imagine in Dickens’s novels.²⁶ Those that exist are often stilted and awkward, marred either by a mutual awareness of a troubled history, or by an atmosphere of shame and humiliation. When adult children are reunited with their parents after a long period of separation, Dickens’s language becomes still more strained and uncertain as the child uncovers the existence of an incomprehensible guilty passion in the parent, emanating from their secret past. The weight of emotion becomes in effect so unsustainable that it frequently cuts off any future for the relationship. Laughter largely disappears from the scene, to be replaced by the rhetoric of accusation or a begging for forgiveness, whether from the child or the parent. Only in the mysterious, more individual emotional behaviour of young children, or the recovery of such in young adults, can Dickens find an outlet for

the pains of separation which can eventually be reconciled with a continuance of normal domestic life, even if this has to be deferred for many years.

In several notable cases, the history is so irredeemable that the reunion is little more than another parting, briefly preceded by explanation and reconciliation. Edith Dombey's 'We meet to-night, and part to-night' — thrown contemptuously at Carker in Dijon — becomes a kind of epigraph for many of the brief encounters of family members, as well as estranged lovers in Dickens's novels.²⁷ The question of why so many family reunions trigger permanent partings, via a cathartic outburst of emotion, is one that needs to be addressed in the broader context of Dickens's ideology of the family. As several critics have recently attested, most notably Holly Furneaux, Dickens tends to favour new, young configurations, especially 'families of choice', over the deadening, conformist structures of the previous generation. Though many of his novels end with the beginnings of a new, apparently conventional family, such as Florence and Walter Gay's, David and Agnes Copperfield's, or Esther and Allan Woodcourt's, these new families are rarely formed without some confrontation with the old, and a discarding of its failed components: the 'child wife', or the tyrannical father, to take two obvious examples. The family reunion that segues unstoppably into another parting becomes a way of challenging and rejecting the objectionable elements that in terms of Dickens's personal ideology cannot be subsumed invisibly into the new family.

In most episodes the child is the innocent party and the parent the one with the most to atone for, as in *Dombey and Son*, where the now-married Florence (a mother herself) travels from her father's sickbed to a combined reunion and parting with her stepmother, Edith. Although relations with Edith, who even at this late stage Florence addresses as 'Mama', have always been cordial, even a false hint of Edith's 'fallenness' is enough to make a fresh start impossible. The two initially look at each other, unable to speak. 'On each face, wonder and fear were painted vividly; each so still and silent, looking at the other over the black gulf of the irrecoverable past.' Florence, as the first to speak, bursts into tears and asks: 'Oh, Mama, Mama! Why do we meet like this? Why were you ever kind to me when there was no one else, that we should meet like this?' (p. 964). Edith's silence persists until Florence has explained her reconciliation with her father, the phrase 'She answered not a word' marking the pauses between each of Florence's timid summaries. In trying to reconcile with her father's estranged wife as well as her father, Florence is given an impossible task. As they both recognize, the restoration

of order in the Dombey home must permanently exclude Edith, even though she is technically innocent of adultery. Even a long-winded interruption from Cousin Feenix does little to mitigate Edith's stern determination to concede only the most meagre comfort; moreover, Florence's role as self-appointed go-between seems to override her desire to reconcile with Edith as a mother figure. The scene exists to make some kind of peace between husband and wife, itself part and parcel of the reconciliation between father and daughter, only at the very end offering solace to Florence as a daughter, albeit as a harmonious parting rather than as a reunion. As happens more than once in Dickens's novels — the meeting/parting between Pip and Estella at the end of *Great Expectations*, for example — one person desires a continuance, while the other firmly closes down the likelihood of any further meetings:

‘To meet again!’ cried Florence. ‘Never again! Never again! When you leave me in this dark room, think that you have left me in the grave. Remember only that I was once, and that I loved you!’ (p. 969)

Five years later, Dickens revisited the scenario of the guilty mother and innocent daughter attempting reconciliation. In *Bleak House* (1853), Esther Summerson, having blamed herself for her childhood banishment at the hands of Mrs Rachael, tries to make peace with her mother, Lady Dedlock. Between these two key scenes comes a more positive farewell from Miss Donny's school, where Esther, like Jane Eyre at Lowood, has spent a period of healing, recovering from an unloving upbringing, and gaining the respect of her peers. Like all school farewells it has to be permanent, as Esther moves on to adult life, but for the first time she is the centre of a loving community, where ‘all surrounded me with their parting presents, and clung to me weeping, and cried, “What shall we do when dear, dear Esther's gone!”’²⁸ Thus experienced in reciprocated affection, Esther approaches her reunion with Lady Dedlock in Chapter 36, her heart beating wildly as her mother gives her a passionate embrace and on her knees pleads for forgiveness. With Esther more than willing to forgive, the signs look promising, but as with Edith and Florence, the relationship ends before it has begun. “‘My child, my child!’ she said. “For the last time! These kisses for the last time! These arms upon my neck for the last time! We shall meet no more”’ (p. 568). Again, past sexual misdemeanour — of which Esther is the result — is too insuperable an obstacle, combined as it is with a marriage of convenience to Sir Leicester Dedlock. The stage melodrama of this and the Florence/Edith

reunion scene testifies to the impossibility of reabsorbing these relationships into the novels' other strand of stoical domestic realism.

With fathers, however, the prospects are significantly better, as Florence is permanently reconciled with Mr Dombey, and Louisa Gradgrind with her father, to take two comparable examples. Though Chapter 59 of *Dombey* is called 'Retribution', it contains the long-awaited reunion of Florence with her father, mooted once again in the standard gestures of theatrical reconciliation: 'Yes. His daughter! Look at her! Look here! Down upon the ground, clinging to him, calling to him, folding her hands, praying to him!' (p. 939). This time the child asks forgiveness of the father — 'Asking *his* forgiveness!', as the narrator scornfully interjects. Notably, the father hardly speaks. Only one outcry — 'Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very much!' — is spoken by Mr Dombey, before he is led away by his daughter to undergo the necessary penitential illness before he can resume a new life with his reconstituted family. Mr Dombey's repentant silence is perhaps more telling than any conventional speeches might have been, but it also indicates Dickens's difficulty in finding a convincing register for the confession of twenty years' paternal neglect. What can he say, at this stage, to make up for a lifetime of ignoring and rejecting his daughter's loving overtures? On the other hand, being guiltless of any sexual indiscretion that might make him an unfit companion for the pure-minded Florence, Mr Dombey is eligible for complete readmission into the family.

The situation in Mr Gradgrind's family in some ways resembles Edith's with Florence, in that Louisa, like Edith, is not technically guilty of adultery, but has come close to contemplating it. Younger and more naive than Edith, she is saved at a turning point in her life when she might have been tempted to ruin herself — ironically, by the intervention of Sissy Jupe, whose father has permanently abandoned her. Instead, like Florence, Louisa takes the lead in the showdown reunion with her father, taxing him with all the shortcomings of her upbringing in the rhythms of confrontational melodrama as she asks: 'How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death?'²⁹ Like Mr Dombey, Gradgrind has little to say in his own defence. He is dumbfounded into a stunned repetition of 'No, no, my poor child' (p. 240) before the scene closes with his laying her down, 'an insensible heap, at his feet' (p. 242). As with Charley's convulsions, it is the child, with many years of life ahead of them, who normally pays the price for a traumatic reunion with an absent parent.

IV Conclusion

Although we have perhaps moved some distance from Charley's convulsions, which triggered his father's helpless watchfulness and need to retell the story until he had fully possessed and understood it, they symbolize an extreme stage of Dickens's lifelong engagement with the disturbing emotions of parting and returning, which he addressed in his personal letters as well as his fiction. In his letters, he writes more freely of his feelings as a traveller to friends such as Forster than he does about parting with his young adult children. This suggests that as a father he found it necessary to cultivate emotional restraint in front of his sons in the interests of maintaining standards of 'manliness' and self-control. As we have seen, his farewell to 'Plorn' was the hardest of these partings, reported more uninhibitedly by Henry Dickens than by his father, though it is clear from Dickens's reports home that his sons were tearful as they joined their ships for what was often a long-drawn-out departure awaiting favourable winds and tides to set sail. In his fiction, the barely comprehended comings and goings of parent figures, the nature of whose relationships remain opaque to pre-adolescents, are usually rendered in dreamlike language from the child's point of view. Where young adults, such as Esther and Florence, are reunited with parent figures, the reunions with errant mothers shade off almost immediately into permanent partings. The sexual nature of their misdemeanours makes it impossible, as in stage melodrama, for them to rejoin the mid-Victorian, middle-class domestic family. For fathers, however, there is more hope. Dickens shows how the prospects of reunion between once errant daughters and unforgiving fathers are ultimately more hopeful than those between errant mothers and forgiving daughters. Untainted by personal immorality, those not irredeemable fathers, such as Mr Dombey and Mr Gradgrind, whose chief crime is to deprive their children of reciprocated and demonstrative feeling, are offered a second chance, albeit at the cost of temporarily reducing them to a stunned silence as they are made to recognize their emotional shortcomings as parents.

This conclusion makes things sound neater than they are, however. Evidence suggests that Dickens never fully came to terms with the strains of parting and returning, which in his letters and fiction alike figure as distillations of all that was troublesome in the wider emotional relations of parents and children. Determined to reinforce in his

letters the impression of manly self-control, he allows his novels to employ an altogether more vociferous register of accusation, exhortation, and silence. The child is here given the moral advantage and a freedom of speech lacking in Dickens's accounts of his own sons' climactic moments of high drama with their father. Above all, the novels' tense, unpredictable scenes of meeting and parting give the children sudden insight into their parents' previously hidden emotional history, which for Dickens's children remained withheld. The episode of Charley's convulsions bridges this divide as recording an instance where reunion verged on death, language ceased for a while, and a child's collapse into fits all but rendered his father senseless.

¹ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), III, 302. Further references are given after quotations in the text. Before he left for America, Dickens had asked Elliotson, who became the leading exponent of animal magnetism, to be on standby for any emergency calls out to his children (*Letters*, III, 8).

² Cited in *Letters*, III, 272n.

³ John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 371, line 6.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1980), V. 3. 195–98.

⁵ Mamie Dickens, *My Father as I Recall Him* (New York: Dutton, 1897), pp. 108–09.

⁶ Mamie Dickens, *My Father*, p. 137.

⁷ John Elliotson, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* (London: Butler, 1839), p. 473.

⁸ 'The Funny Young Gentleman,' *Sketches of Young Gentlemen* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1838), online at <http://www.classicbookshelf.com/library/charles_dickens/sketches_of_young_gentlemen/7/> [accessed 22 March 2012].

⁹ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by John Holloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 468.

¹⁰ Jill L. Matus, 'Mary Barton and North and South', in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 27–45 (p. 43). Matus explores these ideas more fully in her *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹ Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 2.

¹² Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

¹³ Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011), p. 329.

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- ¹⁵ *Letters*, VIII, 382; *Letters*, XII, 187.
- ¹⁶ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 6. The dream of Mary Hogarth is recounted in *Letters*, IV, 196, where Dickens recalls waking ‘with the tears running down my face, and myself in exactly the condition of a dream’.
- ¹⁷ *Letters*, II, 410.
- ¹⁸ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1927), I, 353.
- ¹⁹ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Minerva, 1991), p. 829.
- ²⁰ *Letters*, IX, 316.
- ²¹ *Memories of My Father by Sir Henry F. Dickens KC, Common Sergeant* (London: Gollancz, 1928), p. 23; *The Recollections of Sir Henry Dickens, KC* (London: Heinemann, 1934), p. 36.
- ²² Mamie Dickens, *My Father*, p. 4.
- ²³ ‘Charles Dickens at Home, with Especial Reference to his Relations with Children. By his Eldest Daughter’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 4 (1885), 32–52 (p. 38).
- ²⁴ Sally Ledger, “‘Don’t be so melodramatic!’: Dickens and the Affective Mode”, in *Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality*, ed. by Nicola Bown (= *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007)), p. 2 <<http://19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/view/456/316>> [accessed 27 April 2012]. Ledger also draws attention to the passage in Chapter 17 of *Oliver Twist* defending the contiguity of tears and laughter in ‘all good, murderous melodramas’.
- ²⁵ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Trevor Blount (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 91.
- ²⁶ Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. by Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 87.
- ²⁷ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 856.
- ²⁸ Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971), p. 75.
- ²⁹ Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. by David Craig (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 239.