Errors Like Straws

> Dickens, as we say, was an improvisatore; the practice, for him, was a lawless revel of the imagination.
>
> (Henry James, *Ivan Turgenev*, 1873)

As our introductory chapter has aimed to show, Charles Dickens must have been very much aware of the extraordinary fertility of his imaginative faculty, and for that reason anxious to check and control it. Quite often, what may have started as an attempt at an alternative route in the so far only broadly conceived progress of action is revived at a later stage, at which point it may gain an entirely different function from the one originally intended. In developing the plot of *Dombey and Son*, Dickens had originally meant to let Walter Gay decline into crime, as a letter to John Forster makes evident:

> About the boy, who appears in the last chapter of the first number, I think it would be a good thing to disappoint all the expectations that chapter seems to raise of his happy connection with the story and the heroine, and to show him gradually and naturally trailing away, from that love of adventure and boyish light-heartedness, into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin. (CDL, IV, p. 593)

We are told that Walter's father had incurred large debts, and his own lightheartedness may indeed lead to the same end. It is doubtless in order to anticipate the boy's downfall that the clerk John Carker, or Carker Junior as he is slightingly called at the firm of Dombey and Son, is introduced in the early chapters of the novel. Much attached to the "cheerful looking, merry boy" (DS, ch. 4, p. 38), John Carker watches him "with an inexplicable show of trouble and compassion […] as if he read some fate upon his face, mournfully at variance with its present brightness" (DS, ch. 6, p. 79).

When Dickens, heeding Forster's advice (CDL, IV, p. 658), eventually came to decide against Walter Gay's corruption, he had no further need for the gloomy figure except as an intermittent contrast to his younger

brother, the reckless manager James Carker, who has no regard whatsoever for his fellow human beings. This difference in character offered an opportunity to attach another function to the by now expendable figure. The sympathetic John Carker is eventually revived to offer assistance to Alice Marwood, the manager's discarded mistress (DS, ch. 58). A sister of his, Harriet Carker, is now introduced as a Good Samaritan in whose care the fallen woman dies peacefully. Further irony derives from the issue of James Carker's property, which after his horrible death logically falls to his brother; for the ill-used clerk uses it to lend support to his former master Dombey, who might otherwise have to rely on the generosity of his son-in-law – the now well-established Walter Gay (DS, ch. 62). The circle is now complete: the story-teller has once more succeeded in tying up all the loose ends of his varied weaving.

Needless to say, strategies of rectifying earlier diversions of this kind will mainly apply to plot-lines or thematic clusters that approach the significance of separable entities. What we have but insufficiently considered so far are the many apparently redundant references that seem to answer to no specific purpose apart from adding colour and breadth to an already variegated narration. Many of these point into directions that were never pursued, others seem to exist quite autonomously, comparable to mosaic pieces that could not be accommodated in the overall pattern. Items of this category may be discerned everywhere in Dickens's writings. In many cases a close reading will prove their comparative redundancy, but it will be found again and again that they enhance rather than undermine the fictional world his creative and compositional mind has set up.

What we have called the first mode of Charles Dickens's way of writing, a careful and ordered progress of narration that remains firmly focussed on the general design the author has at least fleetingly envisioned, may often be discerned in the beginnings and endings of his novels. Especially his beginnings, whether they take the form of discursive previews, expository scenes or entrancing overtures that set the atmosphere of the subsequent narrative, have often been lauded as models of their kind. Dickens was quite conscious of the importance which the initial section of a novel, intended for serial publication, must hold for its reception. Conversely, the composition of these parts must have proved exceptionally taxing for a writer who had so far only conceived a general notion of the tale he was going to work out and who could not entirely foresee the diverse patterns that were to develop from it. This may explain why he at times resorted

to an evocative, spellbinding scene which would establish the tone rather than mark out the contours of the narrative that was to follow.

Two introductions in particular have been singled out for praise by appreciative critics. The novel *Little Dorrit* opens with a description of a southern city in the glowing heat of the summer. By way of contrast the narration then moves on to an equally oppressive but gloomy prison cell in which two strikingly contrasted prisoners have languished for quite a while. John Baptist Cavaletto, detained for a petty smuggling offence, shows the candid simplicity and congenial cheerfulness of the Italian pauper, while the other, Rigaud, embodies the stereotype of the deceitful and villainous Frenchman. He is to assume an active function in the narrative at a later stage only, when intrigues and machinations are devised step by step, whereas cheery Cavaletto bears a very minor, in fact mainly passive, role in the following events. As in the introductory scene, he is frequently employed for contrast, and often so with regard to the wicked foreigner, Rigaud.

It is hardly surprising that the first chapter should have so little of an expository function. As Dickens's notes and the occasional admissions in his letters show (CDL, VII, pp. 626, 692; LD, p. xx), the author had become somewhat uncertain about the general plan of the novel he was about to begin, and had to avoid an opening that would commit himself to a closely defined course of action. We may assume that the scene derived from a vague sense of what was to follow rather than from any definite idea. Conversely, it could hardly be mistaken for a mere vignette. In fact, several major concerns of the novel are suggested in the description of the cell and its inmates. One of its leading themes, the view of society as a system of confinement involving various forms of bondage, is emblematically represented through the situation of the two prisoners. Caged in like his cell-mate, Rigaud has nevertheless assumed the position of the master, which the downtrodden Cavaletto would never dare dispute. And yet the two men have been thrown together by pure chance, it would seem, like so many other characters that make their appearance in the novel. One of the inspirations for the book had indeed been the idea of people meeting and parting "as travellers do; and the future connexion between them in the story, not to be now shewn to the reader but to be worked out as in life" (LD, p. 806; cf. p. xviii). While John Forster's opinion that this design was not as fully realised as Dickens might have intended it (Forster, p. 624; cf. CDL, VII, p. 692), cannot be entirely

dismissed, the theme of travellers "journeying by land and journeying by sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and react to one another" (LD, I, ch. 2, p. 26) is brought home to the reader quite frequently. Chance encounters, temporary attachments and abrupt estrangements indeed form important constituents in the confined world of *Little Dorrit*, as they would in reality. In this respect, Cavaletto's attempt to disengage himself from his obtrusive companion is only one of the many instances of idiosyncratic social behaviour in the novel.

Seen from this angle, the prison scene gains the significance of an overture; especially so, as Dickens seems to have endeavoured to relate every detail in the impressive description to the following narrative. Thus, Cavaletto's ability to carve shapes and figures from the bread he is supplied with is taken up afterwards when the destitute immigrant uses his craftsmanship to make a living in a poor quarter of London (LD, I, ch. 25). Only one highly imaginative passage in the scene seems to have eluded Dickens's grasp, until he finally found a way of integrating it into the story. When the two prisoners are to receive their rations, the keeper lets his little daughter, the image of innocence, hand it out to them. As so often is the case, Dickens became so engrossed with this very minor figure that he made far more of the incident than the context would have warranted. Having demonstrated a "divine compassion" for the captives, the sweet girl departs from the grate joining her father and Cavaletto in singing the popular song of "Compagnon de la Majolaine", two stanzas of which are even quoted in full in this context. As might have been expected, the harmless diversion does not meet with Rigaud's approval.

The song is not reintroduced when Cavaletto and after him Rigaud make their way to London, but when Clennam eventually encounters the intriguer, he hears him sing a "scrap of a French song" (LD, II, ch. 9) which is subsequently cited more fully as "Compagnon de la Majolaine" (LD, II, ch. 10). By this time, the artless ditty has obviously become a signature tune for Rigaud; and it is by means of its melody that Cavaletto eventually identifies the intriguer to Clennam (LD, II, ch. 22, pp. 655f.). Although Rigaud's physical appearance and swaggering gait are strongly marked, Dickens must have deemed it necessary to add yet another conspicuous element to the characterisation. With the text of the already published numbers in front of him, it is highly unlikely that he would have forgotten that the cheerful Cavaletto, not Rigaud, should be associated with the originally so innocent, nearly angelic song. Yet unlike the

demonic intriguer, whose unexpected entries and disappearances lend an air of Gothic mystery to the narrative, Cavaletto is a fairly unimportant figure whose doings are readily accounted for. The reversal of the leitmotif admits of one explanation only: Feeling uneasy about its redundancy in the first chapter, the author must have sought to make up for it through this belated re-introduction despite the obvious inconsistency which the transfer involved. The fact that few if any of his readers seem to have stumbled over the contradiction would go far to justify the alteration.

Whereas critics have not always agreed on the unification of *Little Dorrit*, the coherence of *Bleak House*, another one of the very complex works of Charles Dickens's late period, is generally accepted. John Forster's verdict on the novel would presumably not be disputed, though it does go far to assert a planned consistency of the narrative: "Nothing is introduced at random, everything tends to the catastrophe, the various lines of the plot converge and fit to its centre, and to the larger interest all the rest is irresistibly drawn" (Forster, p. 560).

In particular chapter 1, in which the authorial narrator evokes the depressing atmosphere of a fog-bound, muddy, and polluted London, centring on the futile solemnities of the ponderous Court of Chancery, has often been cited as an exemplary introduction. After all, the main themes of the novel all find a first if metaphorical expression in the haunting description of the blighted city. The Court of Chancery, which is to form the focus of the complex plot, embodies a sluggish, yet coercive legal system that goes far to uphold the oppressive conservatism of an unjust, uncaring society; an inert power structure in which the misery of the dispossessed remains unheeded, while the individual with all his needs and aspirations finds himself inexorably entangled in a network of relations that lie largely outside his control. These ills are here implied rather than fully stated, yet their urgency becomes apparent in a series of haunting impressions whose emblematic function requires little comment. Especially so, where the dark images of the doomed city blend into apocalyptic visions of chaos and decay.

Critical readings of the novel suggest that Dickens may have been inspired by a contemporary scientific debate in adding these highlights to his description. By the middle of the nineteenth century geological discoveries had gone far to undermine the traditional belief in the Biblical history of the world; at the same time, new theories, as for instance the law of thermodynamics, allowed for a more rational conception of

the termination of the universe. Charles Dickens does not wish to affirm or question the myths, doctrines, or scientific theories which men have devised to comprehend the rise and extinction of life on earth. It would rather seem that allusions of this kind derive from an intention on his part to deepen the picture of confusion and despair that is drawn up here.

There is, however, one reference which this explanation cannot account for. Surveying the dismal sight of fog-stricken, mud-coloured London, the narrator envisions a city emerging from the receding Deluge. So much mud has gathered in the streets that the appearance of a veritable Megalosaurus would hardly come as a surprise. Even the clumsy movements of the monster are iconically rendered in this passage, which is somewhat abruptly superseded by more realistic observations. It has been pointed out that a metonymic use of a Megalosaurus would have been sympathetically received in view of the recent reconstructions of fossilised remains; especially so as the odd conjunction of scientific findings with a Biblical event might have lent a flavour of controversy to the description. In addition, the passage is not completely out of tune with the world of *Bleak House*, where the family seat of the Dedlocks appears enclosed by a diluvian environment. Similarly, the cumbersome deliberations of the Court of Chancery (compared to the Dead Sea by Esther Summerson, BH, ch. 37) might be epitomised in the sluggish movements of the beast, which again holds true for the somewhat fossilised figures of Sir Leicester Dedlock and his kinsmen. But all these considerations cannot obliterate the comical note which disrupts the gloomy tone at this point. Why did Charles Dickens introduce the monster in this context, and why, above all, did he lend engaging features to the spectre? It might seem as if the prophetic narrator had briefly changed into the traditional essayist who so often adds a comic touch to his reflections, a touch of the warm humour that pervades the novel in many ways, but seems out of place in its overture where visionary sights blend into savage satire.[1]

True enough, Dickens often yielded to a sense of the grotesque in his descriptions, and not infrequently so by alluding to zoological phenomena for further effect. Thus the scene of James Carker's first meeting with the future wife of his master Dombey is dominated by an ancient tree "on which the obdurate bark was knotted and overlapped like the hide of a rhinoceros or some kindred monster of the ancient days before the Flood" (DS, ch. 27, p. 369). Yet this descriptive detail, adding a picturesque element to the scene painting, might have derived from actual observa-

tion, whereas the metaphorical beast in *Bleak House* is entirely imaginary and too much in focus to blend into the surrounding picture of gloom. Did Dickens realise that he had after all written "at random" (to adopt Forster's phrasing) in this so very relevant section of his novel? But such conjectures can never be answered. Unlike the digression in the otherwise so very consistent first chapter of *Little Dorrit*, the saurian diversion in *Bleak House* is nowhere accounted for.

Charles Dickens may have been thinking of this fanciful digression when he admitted to have "purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things" in the 'Preface' to *Bleak House*. We can hardly doubt that the author was equally conscious of the experimental structuring of the novel and of the consequences of this form of mediation. A tale narrated by two contrasting voices that are meant to complement but must never noticeably contradict each other, required an extra measure of attention. This would go far to explain why Dickens's second mode of composition appears comparatively subdued in this by and large imaginatively written book. Yet despite its careful organisation, this novel too has its share of divagations that would seem to have escaped the watchful control of the author. As might be expected, such inconsistencies are often especially revealing.

Already in the introductory chapter of *Bleak House* we find a reference to the comparatively small number of Jarndyces that might be expected to benefit from a final ruling in the notorious case: "There are not three Jarndyces left upon the earth perhaps" (BH, ch. 1). As the authorial narrator is here arraigning the legal minds who will still dispute a legacy despite its material importance being quite out of proportion to the amount of time and effort that has been invested in it, this rhetorical assessment makes no claim on accuracy. Later we hear about more Jarndyces who are or might be involved in the matter. The philanthropical John Jarndyce would rather assist his relatives than contest their rights. He has voluntarily accepted the guardianship of two minors, Richard Carstone and Ada Clare, who are both presumptive legatees in the case. His generosity to Esther Summerson, on the other hand, whose unacknowledged mother, Lady Dedlock, also takes an interest in the estate, does not seem to have been prompted by feelings of kinship.

It would seem that Dickens wanted to leave the complicated family relationships somewhat vague here in order to enhance the human interest as opposed to the purely legal one. But this understandable restraint

is interrupted in a very special context. John Jarndyce has foreseen the attachment of Richard and Ada from the very beginning and observes the growth of their affection favourably (BH, chs. 6, 13). At the same time, he is obviously quite aware of the hazards which a premature alliance must incur. In such a mood he gives voice to musings on past events that Esther, as the narrator, cannot quite comprehend. "'I think', said my guardian, thoughtfully regarding [Ada], 'I think it must be somewhere written that the virtues of the mothers shall, occasionally, be visited on the children, as well as the sins of the fathers'" (BH, ch. 17). What does this allusion to Jehova's warnings in Exodus 20:5 (or Numbers 14:18) signify? At a first glance it might be understood as an anticipation of dark events to come. The thoughtful guardian possibly foresees Richard's recklessness and its fatal consequences. After his premature death the young widow is indeed left with a child she will have to care for on her own. But this would surely stretch the main point of the statement, an emphatic praise of motherhood, too far. John Jarndyce must be thinking of another mother whose exemplary morality affected the lives of her children profoundly. And his recollection would seem to concern a member of the Jarndyce family, possibly a relation of Ada, since an interference of hers on behalf of Richard prompted the thought. It seems hardly credible then that John Jarndyce above all should know as little about his own relations as he maintains. Yet whatever information he may truly possess about the background of his wards is never revealed.[2]

In Esther's narrative John Jarndyce appears as the image of the good-natured man and equally as a man who can keep his knowledge of the affairs of others strictly to himself. Yet this need not have been Dickens's initial conception of the character. John's unhesitating support of the allegedly orphaned Esther, whose progress he continually observes during her adolescence, might suggest that Dickens intended him to nurse some suspicion at least about her parentage. And it is perhaps not by chance that he should indirectly allude to the same Biblical passage in Esther's presence that her aunt had so cruelly cited against her (BH, ch. 3). True enough, John Jarndyce later on emphatically denies ever having gained any knowledge of his ward's family (BH, ch. 43). It remains inconceivable though that a friend of the Barbary sisters, who are Jarndyces after all, should have remained completely ignorant of their later fate. Especially so since Esther is found to bear a striking resemblance to Lady Dedlock, her unacknowledged mother. At the same time, we have to bear in mind

that a narrative model founded on a mystery, as so often with Charles Dickens, may quite legitimately carry further mysteries in its progress, which even in this allegedly unified novel need not always be susceptible of explanation.

John Jarndyce's allusion to Jehova's curse is taken up once more by Esther herself on a later occasion, and this time with a direct reference to her own situation (BH, ch. 36). But before embarking on these reflections, another prominently placed passage will have to be dealt with, which does not immediately appear to be "irresistibly drawn" to the novel's centre, although it need not have been "introduced at random". Going out one evening shortly before the outbreak of her severe illness, Esther experiences an inexplicable sensation brought on by the eerie sight of the reflection of the city lights in the sky contending with the waning day:

> I had no thought, that night – none I am quite sure – of what was soon to happen to me. But I have always remembered since, that when we had stopped at the garden-gate to look up at the sky, and when we went upon our way, I had for a moment an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was. I know it was then, and there, that I had it. I have ever since connected the feeling with that spot and time, and with everything associated with that spot and time, to the distant voices in the town, the barking of a dog, and the sound of wheels coming down the miry hill. (BH, ch. 31)

Considering that Esther is supposed to write her narrative after the elapse of several years it might seem incongruous that she should hesitate to rationalise her intuitive uneasiness as a proleptic apprehension of the trials she will have to face. Yet such a way of reasoning would hardly correspond with Esther's self-deprecating, above all self-critical personality.

Besides, the subsequent events, whatever their import, fail to rise to the momentary awareness in which the experiencing self feels its identity put in doubt. As is so often the case with Dickens, the illness Esther has to pass through serves as a turning-point, though it cannot be said to reverse the life she has hitherto led. True enough, the disease does leave its marks on her features, yet without unsettling her equanimity. In a similar way, the disturbing disclosure that she is the illegitimate daughter of Lady Dedlock does not alter her outlook or bearing. On the contrary, Esther firmly maintains that her personality did not change to any extent despite having been tested so severely. Reflecting upon these afflictions, the narrator recalls how she convinced herself at the time that she ought to feel happy about their consequences:

For I saw very well that I could not have been intended to die, or I should never have lived; not to say should never have been reserved for such a happy life. I saw very well how many things had worked together, for my welfare; and that if the sins of the fathers were sometimes visited upon the children, the phrase did not mean what I had in the morning feared it meant. I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers. (BH, ch. 36)

As regards the so vividly recollected delusion, she remains, even with hindsight, without a clue of its origin or true significance. All this suggests that the passage in question cannot be dismissed either as a vague foreboding on her part or narrowly construed as an anticipation of future events. What Esther feels and describes with such intensity can only be comprehended as an epiphany which, in the absence of any commenting authority, must remain inexplicable to the narrating as well as the experiencing self. On a wider, structural scale it may be understood as a digression in which Charles Dickens allowed his imagination free play. That he should have permitted a personage habitually bent on ordering and controlling what pertains to her responsibilities to achieve this insight into the heart of things, may seem paradoxical to inveterate critics of the figure of Esther, but in fact adds yet further proof to the psychological truth of Dickens's character drawing. Moreover, there is still another perspective of the passage to be considered. In granting this so very conscientious narrator the chance of transcending her own painstaking presentation, the author may have, perhaps quite inadvertently, reflected on his own labours and inclinations. As an unintended *mise-en-abyme* the short description and its context illustrate the continual conflict between Dickens's first and his second mode of composition.

Portents and forebodings occur not infrequently in Dickens's narratives. They will rouse the reader's interest, may indeed serve as anticipations of future events, or textually function as reminders through which the author fixed a passing idea, scene or image that might be worked out at a later stage. Conversely, a signal of this type may remain a mere variant later found to admit of no further development.

An example of such a variant or dead motif appears in the early part of *Great Expectations* (GE, I, ch. 8), a novel usually regarded as well-structured. Having paid his introductory visit to the eccentric Miss Havisham and her adopted daughter Estella, little Pip is allowed to take a look at the disused precincts of Satis House. It may be due to his bewilderment

at the preceding strange encounters that a disturbing hallucination occurs to him here:

> It was in this place, and at this moment, that a strange thing happened to my fancy. I thought it a strange thing then, and I thought it a stranger thing long afterwards. I turned my eyes – a little dimmed by looking up at the frosty light – towards a great wooden beam in a low nook of the building near me on my right hand, and I saw a figure hanging there by the neck. A figure all in yellow white, with but one shoe to the feet; and it hung so, that I could see that the faded trimmings of the dress were like earthy paper, and that the face was Miss Havisham's, with a movement going over the whole countenance as if she were trying to call to me. In the terror of seeing the figure, and in the terror of being certain that it had not been there a moment before, I at first ran from it, and then ran towards it. And my terror was greatest of all, when I found no figure there. (GE, I, ch. 8, p. 65)

The missing shoe must be perceived as emblematical of the shock Miss Havisham suffered on being told, at the very moment when she was changing into her bridal dress, that she had been jilted. The telling detail is taken up once more and then discarded (GE, II, ch. 10). Whatever may have moved Dickens to include this haunting passage in a narration purporting to record the thoughts of an ordinary little boy, one can hardly doubt that he was playing with an alternative sequence to Pip's relationship with the witchlike recluse he so ingenuously assumes to be his benefactress. In the absence of number notes – only a few memoranda were written for the novel, which appeared in weekly instalments – one can only assume that the idea was eventually abandoned. Years later Pip is startled once more upon walking through the same location, but what unsettles him this time is not the remembrance of the former delusion but a striking similarity between Estella and a woman he cannot identify at that moment. The person he has been thinking of is eventually discovered to be Estella's true mother, a criminal, as it turns out, who narrowly escaped hanging (GE, II, ch. 10; cf. pp. xxii–xxiii). The association – death by hanging meant suspension from a beam by the neck – must have occurred to the author, but was not taken up. It seems as if Dickens was at this point casting about for a coherent continuation of the earlier variant. The wish to bring the suggestive opening to a conclusion may have contributed to the decision to let Miss Havisham suffer a fatal accident. Dickens would have realised that little might be made of her demise otherwise; unless he had intended to let her die from the effects of self-inflicted deprivation and deep remorse. Once more Pip has been summoned to Satis House, yet this time out of a wish for atonement (GE, III, ch. 10). Perceiving at

last what suffering her malicious influence on Estella has brought about, Miss Havisham entreats Pip to let her make amends for her wrongdoing. On his way out, the portent makes itself felt a second time:

> A childish association revived with wonderful force in the moment of the slight action, and I fancied that I saw Miss Havisham hanging to the beam. So strong was the impression, that I stood under the beam shuddering from head to foot before I knew it was a fancy – though to be sure I was there in an instant. (GE, III, ch. 10, p. 398)

In a spirit of uneasiness Pip turns back, just in time to save the old woman from burning. The gloomy return to Satis House, the highly charged dialogue, and the dramatic rescue make for an aesthetically satisfactory chapter. Yet a careful reading of the entire novel reveals the narration to be flawed. Pip's intuitive reactions and the nature of the domestic accident fall by far short of the suggestiveness of the earlier passage, which seemed to point to more momentous consequences.

Even Dickens's first reviewers took it upon themselves to reveal inconsistencies in his writings. One hundred and fifty years of criticism have accordingly yielded a long list of incoherences and contradictions, ostensibly caused by oversight. While the majority of these defects may be dismissed as accidental errata, others should better be regarded as imaginatively conceived variations that the author had been unable to take up or modify at a later stage in his work. Thus it has been pointed out that the author of *Dombey and Son* seems undecided about the street lighting in the capital, alternately referring to gas lamps or torches.[3] Conversely, candles are occasionally mentioned as a means of indoor lighting. On the whole, the pervasive light effects in the novel are hardly traceable to specific illuminative devices, possibly because technicalities of such a kind were thought to diminish their picturesque nature or thematic import. In the climactic scene of Walter Gay's return to the house of his uncle, where Florence Dombey has found refuge, the latter becomes aware of his presence through the shadow his figure casts upon the wall (DS, ch. 49). Yet the narrator is not concerned about the source of light that causes the reflection.

The unexpected return of the young man, who had been believed drowned, is unquestionably one of the many moving scenes in *Dombey and Son*, which may go far to mitigate the inconsistencies that are found in it. It is hardly credible that the hardened seafarer should take fright at the barking of a dog inside the house, that he should so awkwardly delay his appearance until the inhabitants have been forewarned, and above all

that in looking for accommodation he should throw himself upon a certain Mr Brogley, anything but a friend of the family (DS, chs. 48, 49). Yet this circumstance in particular may again derive from the wish to rectify an earlier digression. In the early part of the novel Uncle Sol's monetary difficulties, which arose from a debt he incurred to support Walter's father, reach a critical stage when the broker Brogley claims the shop by way of an execution. As Walter can obtain a loan from Mr Dombey through little Paul's intervention, the action is stopped in time and seemingly put to rest (DS, ch. 10, p.136). Somewhat unaccountably Sol is even enabled to clear the debt before Walter's departure from England (DS, ch. 25).

Yet this need not have been the course of action Charles Dickens had originally conceived. Considering his brief and entirely subsidiary role, rather too much is made of Mr Brogley in this context. In fact, the descriptive passages granted to him might well suggest that the moneylender was to have turned into a far from insubstantial, though still minor, character. To be sure, an imbalance between characters as entities and their functions is by no means unusual, indeed virtually characteristic of Dickens's way of composition. In such a case, the narrator seems to be veritably engrossed in a particular figure, which is accordingly described in loving detail. At the same time, one may well ask whether it was really necessary to dwell to such an extent on the vast accumulation of property that Brogley, "a moist-eyed, pink-complexioned, crisp-haired man, of a bulky figure and an easy temper" (DS, ch. 9, p. 116), has hoarded in pursuit of his business. Especially so, as the catalogue of goods (unlike Dombey's furnishings offered for sale after the bankruptcy) does not become a tangible part of the narration, as if it had been listed by a distant observer only.

It seems likely that Dickens had originally thought of an alternative plot-line in introducing Brogley. In due time he came to regard the variation as unwarranted, yet had advanced so far in his writing that a renewed and stronger involvement of the moneylender and his affairs must have become nearly impossible. Conversely, a brief reference to the figure would have seemed acceptable. This then may have been the cause of Walter's approaching Brogley for accommodation rather than an unidentified neighbour. Admittedly an insufficient and inconsistent follow-up to a somewhat fanciful digression, yet Dickens may have engaged his imagination so intensely in the description of Walter Gay's return that some of the accompanying contingencies had to be given short shrift.

Charles Dickens's second mode of composition is often so thoroughly integrated that only minor imaginatively conceived details may break through the quite regularly proceeding narrative. In the extensive first person narration embedded in *Our Mutual Friend* (III, ch. 13) John Harmon, otherwise known as Rokesmith, tries to order his fragmentary impressions with a view to obtain evidence for his survival after a murderous attack. Despairing of the exact timing and location of the events, he is still able to attain a chronological sequence of their occurrence. Only one striking detail deviates from the "literal and exact" (OMF, III, ch. 13) account. Quite incapable of reconstructing the number of people who assailed him, John Harmon feels nevertheless convinced that a black man was among them. He also recalls a brown or dark-brown curtain, but the figure of the black, who avoided his sight, must certainly count as more evocative. This is not to say that Dickens's presentation becomes unduly romantic at this point. As Harmon begins to feel the effects of poison and the accompanying loss of consciousness, an intensified recollection of one or two still clearly perceived objects would, after all, seem psychologically accurate.

But why choose a black man, unless his fancy had wilfully sought some inspiration from the Gothic tradition in this connection? It might be added that the black man, despite his conspicuousness, is never identified, while John Harmon's false friend, the mate George Radfoot, and the villainous Rogue Riderhood meet with their deserved punishment, death by water.

Charles Dickens proved equally fanciful in a completely different context, in which Florence Dombey's maid Susan Nipper once again proves her devotion to her mistress as well as her emphatic assertiveness (DS, ch. 12). Asked to buy some textbooks for Florence, who wishes to help her brother Paul with his school work, the little servant immediately takes steps to obtain them:

> The books were not easy to procure; and the answer at several shops was, either that they were just out of them, or that they never kept them, or that they had had a great many last month, or that they expected a great many next week. But Susan was not easily baffled in such an enterprise; and having entrapped a white-haired youth, in a black calico apron, from a library where she was known, to accompany her in her quest, she led him such a life in going up and down, that he exerted himself to the utmost, if it were only to get rid of her; and finally enabled her to return home in triumph. (DS, ch. 12, p. 164)

This is the kind of conduct the reader has come to expect from this energetic and entirely dauntless personage. One might still wonder why

the young helper she so imperiously enlisted had to be "white-haired", as if to mark a contrast to his entirely unconventional black calico apron. Once again the author has given way to his imaginative flights, visualising the vigorous little woman's chase through the world of books, which after all had to involve a subordinate companion whose slightly bizarre appearance matches his lack of fibre. In the context in which it is embedded, the little vignette makes for little, might even be considered redundant; as an independent narrative unit, however, it demonstrates Dickens' imaginative power.

In both of these samples the author's creative urge went for character, though the figures were to remain stunted in the given context. In other cases, a particular scene may be so closely visualised that extraneous or even incongruous elements have entered the description. In ch. 33 of *Dombey and Son* the author chooses to further unfold the character of James Carker by showing him at home, in the ambience he has set up for himself. The manager of Dombey and Son lives in a small but elegant house on the outskirts of London, where everything is attractively arranged and carefully maintained. The observant narrator is still displeased, noting an air of subdued voluptuousness that verges on the sinister. Particular attention is given to a picture of a beautiful woman who bears a close resemblance to Edith Dombey. The figure is apparently mythological, but its features recall certain traits of her personality: the stateliness of Juno perhaps, or the frigid aloofness of a nymph. Conversely, the painting might also represent the Biblical wife of Potiphar, whom the reader will identify as a very sensual, frustrated woman determined to betray her husband with his servant.

One would hardly doubt that Carker has obtained the picture for its likeness to Edith, were it not for the introduction of a new character in the same chapter, fittingly entitled 'Contrasts'. This is the vagrant Alice Marwood, related to Edith through her illegitimate descent and apparently very like her in appearance, but now sick and impoverished. The similarity between the two women, who were both forced to sell themselves yet belong to different social spheres, is emphasised several times, at one point even in a direct confrontation between them:

> And yet, however far removed she was in dress, in dignity, in beauty, Edith could not but compare the young woman with herself, still. It may have been that she saw upon her face some traces which she knew were lingering in her own soul, if not yet written on that index. (DS, ch. 40, p. 550)

Inveighing against the social system that has exploited her, Alice Marwood harbours a personal wish to harm Dombey's wife and in particular his servant. She was once Carker's mistress, whom he discarded without lending assistance when her situation became desperate. Could he have forgotten her entirely, or did he retain at least some memory of her features which he then unknowingly rediscovered in Edith? There is no clarification offered on this point. What remains indisputable though is that Carker is attracted by a female image which he discovered in the picture, and which he now pursues in Edith Dombey. That he should eventually be destroyed by her as he ruined her double, is exactly the kind of retribution that Charles Dickens was wont to inflict.

There is then some indication that the mysterious picture was to have assumed greater relevance. But the matter was not further developed. The painting is actually introduced once more, but in a far less suggestive function. Carker has invited Dombey for what nowadays might be called a working breakfast without taking the precaution of removing the tell-tale object (DS, ch. 42). Yet Dombey is so wrapped up in his own affairs that he remains completely unaware of the likeness. The short scene shows once again how the proud man has isolated himself from his surroundings. Or has the picture lost its magic? Was the similarity obvious to Carker only? Hablot Browne, who drew the illustrations for the serial, seems to have understood the scene differently. In his drawing a distant and self-absorbed Dombey is seated against the wall on which the painting is displayed, apparently oblivious of its existence. The picture itself, on the other hand, seems ready to spring to life. Yet its subject expresses an overbearing coldness without a touch of seductiveness. There is no eye-contact between the woman and Carker, who seems cringingly bent on his master. As Dickens always examined the drafts of the illustrations before they went into print, he must have approved of a pictorial reading that anticipated the eventual outcome of the entanglement. James Carker is finally repelled by Edith Dombey. Paralysed by fear of his master, he falls victim to a horrible accident.

In many cases the artistry and impressive liveliness of a special episode will work so strongly on the reader that its comparative redundancy may remain unnoticed. During his London years the hero of *Great Expectations* is twice moved to attend a dramatic production in which Mr Wopsle, the oratorially gifted parish clerk of his home village, has a leading part. On the second occasion Wopsle appears in a nautical melodrama followed

by a spectacular pantomime (GE, III, ch. 8). Despite his grave concern for the safety of his benefactor, the ex-convict Abel Magwitch, Pip gains considerable amusement from the performance. But the all too brief comic relief vanishes, when he is told that a man similar in appearance to Magwitch's enemy Compeyson was seated behind him. In Pip's precarious situation danger seems apparently nearest when least expected. The small occurrence, which is never completely accounted for, obviously serves as a forewarning of the outcome of the escape attempt in which Magwitch is finally apprehended.

While this incident is closely linked to the plot, an earlier evening at the theatre has no bearing whatsoever on the action (GE, II, ch. 12). Here too, the entertainment is sought out to gain distraction: "we blew out our candles, made up our fire, locked our door and issued forth in quest of Mr Wopsle and Denmark" (GE, II, ch. 11, p. 252). Pip is as yet unaware of the danger caused by Magwitch's illegal return to England, but grieves over Estella's coldheartedness. While a performance of *Hamlet* might well accord with mournful feelings, the amateurish presentation in which Wopsle singularly fails in the leading part, offers much unintended entertainment. Especially so, as the bloody-minded audience greets every move with coarse ridicule. Dickens may have recalled an episode in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* where the same play arouses incongruous feelings among the onlookers (XVI, ch 5). What is attained here is not only a skit on incompetent dramatic productions but a genuine parody of Shakespeare's tragedy, foregrounding its most precarious theatrical moments. At the same time, the author made little effort to involve his hero in the digression. Pip in his function as the satirical narrator, who shows himself more knowledgeable about dramatic literature than one might have given him credit for, remains passive throughout. Covering exactly one chapter unit the exuberant little piece relies entirely on itself. This admits of little doubt that the author had given vent to one of his imaginative flights in this case.[4]

As the novel advanced and the impending catastrophe began to occupy his mind, Dickens seems to have felt the need for an intervening episode which would add a further element of mystery and increase the suspense of the narration. This may have been the reason for the second evening at the theatre. In this context another, the first visit to the theatre, might have suggested itself. Having established Wopsle as a ham actor in London, Dickens would have seen no need for further figures and a new loca-

tion to occupy Pip's mind. In addition, the second evening at the theatre goes far to justify the previous digression. As it is, only a close analysis of the text will reveal the tenuous connection between the two episodes. It seems very unlikely then that the reincarnation of plain Mr Wopsle as a London actor derived in any way from an elaborate plan to involve him in an eerie encounter leading up to the climactic catastrophe. But this is not to say that the author did not harbour a sense at least of the potential of the character when dwelling on Wopsle's theatrical disposition in the early chapters of *Great Expectations*.

In other cases, an imaginatively conceived detail may prove so effective that its alien quality verging on expendability escapes notice. Once again a comparatively well-structured novel like *Bleak House* offers an example. Chapter 40, aptly entitled 'National and Domestic', is conducted by the authorial narrator, whose wide-ranging, discursive observations are exclusively mediated in the present tense. The account begins with a satirical survey of the state of the nation before an election, after which the focus narrows in on a family gathering at Chesney Wold, the ancestral seat of the Dedlocks. Mr Tulkinghorn, the trusted family lawyer, is expected, who may have news of the outcome of the event, when all of a sudden a gun shot interrupts the agitated conversation. This prompts the otherwise so aloof Lady Dedlock to an improbably familiar remark: "'A rat,' says my Lady. 'And they have shot him'" (BH, ch. 40).

Nothing more is heard of the disturbance, since Tulkinghorn arrives immediately afterwards with the news that Sir Leicester Dedlock's party has indeed been routed at the hustings by a populist faction. This causes extreme consternation, whereupon Tulkinghorn begs leave to entertain the company with the story of a highly placed Lady who disgraced her husband's family. The tale, involving a premarital affair and an illegitimate child, is obviously directed at Lady Dedlock as a form of blackmail. She can now be certain that the scandal may be brought to light at any moment of Tulkinghorn's choosing. Doubtless, she has some reason to wish the intriguer dead, and suspicion does indeed fall upon her when Tulkinghorn is found dead, shot by an unknown assailant.

The small incident at Chesney Wold may be understood as a portent or as an anticipation of forthcoming events. At the same time, one may well wonder that the somewhat bluntly worded practical explanation of the disturbance should have been offered by the haughty Lady Dedlock, of all people; especially as the remark is not followed by any confirmation

or denial. Or did the author wish to show how nervous agitation might lead even her to lose her otherwise impenetrable composure? The omniscient narrator is not disposed to clear the matter up. From a structural point of view an imaginative touch has been introduced into a satirical description. Yet the mysterious occurrence remains out of tune with its polite context unless its disruptive impact was conceived to be thematically significant. The world of crime and squalor has now entered the privileged sphere.

Conversely, numerous cases might be cited from the other novels where a similar detail, presumably added to heighten an effect, could not be accommodated in the continuing narration. When Nicholas Nickleby departs from Dotheboys Hall after a violent showdown with the brutal schoolmaster Squeers (NN, ch. 13), the Squeers family unanimously maintain that he stole a valuable ring, though stopping short of pressing a formal charge against him (NN, ch. 15). Nicholas denies the accusation but remains strangely unconcerned about the slander. In fact, the matter is only dealt with several chapters later, when the hero at last admits having found the ring, which must have been put inside his valise to incriminate him, claiming to have returned it to the Squeers forthwith (NN, ch. 20). This leaves at least two points unaccounted for. As Nicholas's leave-taking occurred on the spur of the moment, there would have been no way of placing the object among his belongings. On the other hand, the accused would have acted more than carelessly in simply sending the ring back to his enemies, who might still wish to formally accuse him. How did he know that it belonged to the Squeers in the first place?

This is not to say that Dickens did not realise that he had deviated too far from the course of his narration. He may have felt that the dramatic turn in the fortunes of his hero was accompanied by so many diverse circumstances that a complete adjustment was no longer called for. As shown above, the text of *Nicholas Nickleby* abounds in other inconsistencies.

Incoherences of a similar kind occur often, and especially in the early novels of Charles Dickens. Not infrequently, the narration proceeds at such a lively rate that even a substantial inadequacy may escape the reader's detection. A very striking case of this kind is found in the last chapters of *Oliver Twist*, in which the mystery is solved and Fagin and his gang are brought to justice. The poetic justice of his death is so overwhelming that the flimsiness of the legal side of the punishment may be overlooked.

Dickens himself seems to have felt uncertain about the line of action he ought to pursue. In a letter to John Forster he mentions the difficulty of disposing of Fagin, "who is such an out and outer that I don't know what to make of him" (CDL, I, p. 441). The fact that several extant draughts of illustrations show Sikes rather than Fagin in the death cell (OT, p. xxii) must go far to corroborate this statement. Undoubtedly, only the maximum retribution would fit the arch villain, whose iniquity is so profound that he is often compared to the devil by his own companions. Conversely, Fagin has cautiously avoided involvement in any genuinely indictable offence. It even appears that he is wont to turn his followers over to the authorities once they have served their turn; not unlike the receiver Peachum, who functions as a comic figure in *The Beggar's Opera*. His immoral activities notwithstanding, there is scant evidence to justify Fagin's conviction, as at least one contemporary reviewer pointed out at some length.[5] It is quite possible then that the author thought of letting him die in an accident, which, as in the case of Sikes, might be construed as an act of divine justice. He might even have thought of letting him escape to whatever fearful destination the reader's imagination might conjure up for him.

Nevertheless, Fagin is arrested and indicted. Contradicting an earlier instance where a very unfavourable impression of their competence is conveyed (OT, ch. 31), the police act efficiently and speedily in this case. How the authorities were able to link Nancy's murder to Fagin's whereabouts is not explained, nor do we learn on what charge the arrest is made. Ironically, it seems to have been Noah Claypole who incriminated his master by turning King's evidence against him (OT, chs. 50, 53); the same Noah Claypole who spied on Nancy on Fagin's behalf, betraying the girl's secret meeting with Brownlow and Rose Maylie at London Bridge (OT, ch. 46). Presented in direct speech, the agitated talk is here recorded from the listener's perspective, who at one point even warms to the sympathetic sound of the young lady's voice. Nevertheless, Claypole offers an invidious account of Nancy's mission to his master, just as he must have gone out of his way to accuse Fagin of complicity in her murder on being questioned by the law. After all, the latter had urged Sikes to avoid violence against the girl (OT, ch. 47). Whatever the circumstances of Claypole's testimony, next to nothing is heard about the indictment itself. So impressively is the scene in court described that the reader may fail to notice that the actual proceedings are not included. It might be argued that a full version of

the trial would have weakened the effect of the narration, as this and the following scenes are mediated from Fagin's point of view. Yet there can be no doubt that Dickens's artistry has gone a long way to cover up a series of incoherences traceable to his own uncertainty.[6]

Quite often an accompanying incident or detail providing amusement on account of its apparent grotesqueness, may derive from a not entirely comic idea which Dickens found himself unable to develop at greater length. We may laugh at Noddy Boffin's well-meaning plan to broaden his own uncultured mind by having the pauper Silas Wegg read to him from Edward Gibbon's *History* of *the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and will not fail to respond similarly to the ignorant ballad-monger's misapprehension that he is in fact dealing with the waning of the "Rooshan" Empire; a misunderstanding equally shared by the ingenuous Boffin (OMF, I, ch. 5). It is only at his first reading that Wegg corrects the title to its proper "Roman Empire". Conversely, neither he nor Boffin are aware of a difference between these two appellations; in fact Boffin misunderstands most of what is read to him by the equally ignorant Wegg. This results in what one might regard as a comic parody of the great classic. But is there not a more serious side to these misunderstandings? After all, the Czar's vast realm must have seemed more important to British people in the late nineteenth century than the records of an ancient civilization which held significance for the educated classes only. A man deeply concerned about his country's social and political future might well hope for the downfall of a foreign empire that threatened the interests of Britain in Europe as well as in Asia. As the narrative goes on to prove, the illiterate Boffin is anything but a simpleton. On a higher level, a reflective mind might at this time have become sceptical about Gibbon's biological metaphor for the dissolution of a statehood, which still enjoyed general currency. Assuming all this to be the case, would a novelist so actively engaged in advancing his narrative have felt compelled to articulate doubts of such a kind in the given context; especially so when his readers' approval had assured him that the distortions of Gibbon's classic work were received as a broad joke by most of them? It is more than probable that Dickens discarded a tentative critique of the tradition of the *Decline and Fall* as soon as it occurred to him.

In focussing on these and numerous other details and references in the texts, we must not overlook that a realistic novelist, and Dickens basically still adhered to this fictional tradition, will always enrich his

descriptions through the inclusion of various items seemingly chosen at random. When little David Copperfield tramps along the Dover road on his way to gain help from his great-aunt Betsey Trotwood, he is struck by the sight of ruddy apples in the orchards, an evocative observation which is not taken up in the following account (DC, ch. 13, p. 159). Or could the narrator have intended to link this tempting impression to the fruit in his mother's garden that he still remembers as "riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden"? (DC, ch. 2, p. 13). However, Dickens may have had second thoughts about the consequences these suggestive impressions might entail.

This may once again have been the case with a later reference to ripening peaches in Doctor Stone's garden in Canterbury, except that the attractive fruit is here obviously introduced to emphasise the effect of dryness conveyed by two hardened aloes set in tubs. The narrator's comment that the plants have become symbolical for "silence and retirement" (DC, ch. 16, p. 195) to him ever since adds further significance to the contrast. The reader can hardly fail to associate the aloes with the old scholar, whose so very young wife seems as incongruous beside him as the lush peaches do next to the desiccated plants. The passage would add proof to the assumption that Dickens was thinking of a break-up of the marriage between the old man and his young wife at this point.

There is yet another fruit image in the novel which somewhat discordantly seems to point into an entirely different direction. When David Copperfield tries to gain the consent of Dora Spenlow's aunts, who have taken her under their protection after the father's death, he is pleasantly surprised to find that the sisters even harbour some sympathy for his plight. Yet the two ladies are not disposed to let the lovers proceed untested. In their oracular opinion –

> mature affection, homage, devotion, does not easily express itself. Its voice is low. It is modest and retiring, it lies in ambush, waits and waits. Such is the mature fruit. Sometimes a life glides away, and finds it still ripening in the shade.
>
> (DC, ch. 41, p. 510)

This is hardly the fruition a young lover desires or is willing to accept. It seems natural then that the misgivings of the two old spinsters soon give way under the intensity of his devotion to Dora. Yet the inherent truth of the somewhat factitiously articulated adage eventually becomes apparent. David has married in haste following "the first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart" (DC, ch. 48, p. 595) and comes to question his

impatience. Considerable space is allotted to the various marital problems of the young Copperfields and the husband's growing awareness of their incompatibility; yet his deep affection for his child-wife, as Dora knowingly calls herself, remains unchanged.

It must be conceded that the four passages cited above are separated by many pages. It would surely go too far to assume more than a loose connection between them. And yet we can hardly doubt that the fruit image weighed on the mind of the author of *David Copperfield*, even though he did not give free rein to its suggestive overtones. In considering seemingly unrelated references in Dickens's writings we must not overlook the possibility that details of such a kind were deliberately included as markers. Whereas the number plans at best contain only broad outlines of the plot structure the author was considering at the time, markers or reminders may introduce subordinate components for further deliberation. An example of this type of narrative strategy may be found in the sixth chapter of *Dombey and Son*, where little Florence Dombey, having lost her way in the busy streets of London, is taken up by a fearsome old hag. The extreme ugliness of the woman, the squalor of her lodgings, and the threats she utters, make the child imagine that she is in the power of a witch. Willingly she submits to have her clothes exchanged for rags and feels relief at finally being released unhurt. The harrowing episode has an important function in the plot, since it allows Walter Gay, acting as a rescuer, to introduce his master's daughter to the 'Little Midshipman' run by his uncle Sol Gills. As for the old woman, she will appear again as a mischief maker working evil on the Dombey family.

It will hardly surprise a reader accustomed to Dickens's narrative presentation that the author should go to considerable lengths to describe the abductor as well as her dwelling, which will equally reappear in a different context. A few details are, however, worth considering. Although Florence's tormentor must be aware of committing an act of felony, she is careless enough to disclose her wonted name, whether real or assumed, as Mrs Brown. The narrator also lets her smoke a short black pipe, adding another special attribute to the characterisation. More striking is the revelation that the so-called "Good Mrs Brown" has "a gal", a daughter somewhere over the sea, for whose sake she stops short of depriving Florence of her beautiful long hair. The first two attributes may help the reader to identify the figure whenever she is introduced again. The reference to a dear daughter, on the other hand, will hardly be retained, as she only en-

ters the novel at a much later stage (DS, chs. 33, 34). It would seem more probable that Dickens included the short passage as a reminder to himself that far more might be made of the character of the old woman. In the event, Mrs Brown and her daughter Alice Marwood will serve as figures of contrast to the mercenary Mrs Skewton and her proud daughter Edith, whom the former literally sells to the rich Mr Dombey. The similarity between the upper-class duo and their underworld counterparts, each party representing youth at variance with old age, is dramatically emphasised in a nearly allegorical confrontation. Alice's parting threat "We had need to know each other when we meet again!" (DS, ch. 40, p. 554) is not accounted for though. It had best be regarded as an optional anticipation of events to come or a textual marker that proved redundant.

Previous to this, the vagrant Alice and the old beggar woman have vowed to revenge themselves not only on the evil James Carker, but also on the entire Dombey family against whom he has been intriguing (DS, ch. 34). The intention of acting as a Nemesis to the Dombeys, for which some explanation, though little justification, is ever offered, must have occurred to Mrs Brown before her daughter's return to England however. Here an earlier reference will have to be considered. Chapter 31 is entirely devoted to a satirical description of Paul Dombey and Edith Granger's wedding, wealth uniting itself with beauty. Yet an ominous note is struck up as the wedding party is about to enter the bride's official residence. Two of the guests are at this point reminded of earlier and by no means auspicious impressions:

> And why does Mr Carker, passing through the people to the hall-door, think of the old woman who called to him in the grove that morning? Or why does Florence, as she passes, think, with a tremble, of her childhood, when she was lost, and of the visage of Good Mrs Brown? (DS, ch. 31, p. 431)

Nothing else is said about the woman, whom the two apparently descry or whose presence among the crowd of onlookers they intuitively sense. Charles Dickens's illustrator Hablot Browne, possibly at the author's instigation, sketched the figure of an evil-looking old woman into his scenic depiction of the festive event, which would not have been lost on an attentive peruser, even though he had failed to grasp the accompanying textual insertion. One may still wonder whether these proleptic references linking Mrs Brown's first entry with a later encounter at Leamington Spa where she professes to tell Edith's fortune (DS, ch. 27) were primarily directed at the reader or at Dickens himself, who wished for a

marker at this point. It does not seem improbable that the author was as yet undecided what possible mischief the witch might work on her victims. As it turns out, Carker's hideous death is at least indirectly brought about by her machinations. Conversely, nothing is made of any of the threats levelled against Florence. In fact, the girl is never again brought face to face with her erstwhile persecutor. The eventual wind-up of this strand of action, in the course of which the old woman finally discloses her daughter's noble descent on the latter's deathbed, has no longer any bearing on the affairs of the Dombey family.

While some of the cited examples might be explained as proleptic signifiers which Dickens included to foreshadow events to come, other passages can only be conceived as markers through which the author reminded himself of the fictional potential of a specific turn in the narrative. Even the number plans, in which only the bold outlines of the plot are advanced, contain occasional question marks indicating Dickens's temporary irresolution. In many cases direct forewarnings can be differentiated from less straightforward indications of authorial indeterminacy without difficulty. The frequent portentous noises and various references to the precarious condition of Mrs Clennam's house were obviously intended to anticipate the collapse of the building, as Dickens himself pointed out to some superficial readers of *Little Dorrit*, who had censured the abruptness of the catastrophe.[7] Similarly, Mr Pancks' threatening remarks about Mr Casby's patriarchal hair-style in the same novel (LD, II, ch. 9 , p. 525) are anticipations of his eventual retaliation against his inhuman employer, when he cuts off "the sacred locks that flowed upon his shoulders" (LD, II, ch. 32, p. 780). On the other hand, the ominous forecast of Emily's seduction in *David Copperfield*, which was discussed in the introductory chapter, can hardly be construed as a definite anticipation of her fate, as she is indeed saved from destruction by her uncle Peggotty. We had best regard it as a marker indicating the possibility of alternative developments of the plot. A similar uncertainty on behalf of the author can be traced in the various references to Edith Granger's, the later Mrs Dombey's future fate in *Dombey and Son*. Soon after her first encounter with Dombey an as yet diffuse warning is uttered by the narrator. On a visit to Mrs Skewton and her daughter, Dombey is described as listening indifferently to some musical entertainment offered by the young lady. The conventional genre picture, an at home for the benefit of a potential suitor, is somewhat abruptly interrupted:

Edith Granger, any song but that! Edith Granger, you are very handsome, and your touch upon the keys is brilliant, and your voice is deep and rich; but not the air that his daughter sang to his dead son! (DS, ch. 21, p. 291)

The flashback to the farewell party at Dr Blimber's at Brighton where Florence did indeed sing some unidentified piece to little Paul Dombey (DS, ch. 14), which is eventually recalled in chapter 61, does little to clarify the narratorial aside; unless we conceive it as a purely emotional appeal, from which Mr Dombey, who was not present at the event, is necessarily excluded. However, the following sentences seem to direct the warning to Florence rather than against Edith, and once again in a vague and rather disconnected way:

Sleep, lonely Florence, sleep! Peace in thy dreams, although the night has turned dark, and the clouds are gathering, and threaten to discharge themselves in hail!
(DS, ch. 21, p. 291)

Charles Dickens may have been deliberating to set Edith up against her stepdaughter-to-be or to inculpate the latter in her eventual transgression. As the completed narrative shows, a different resolution was found for an entanglement, which at this stage might have taken a somewhat different course. When the "thunderbolt" falls, as Dickens chose to paraphrase Edith's flight, one of its immediate consequences is in fact the release of Florence from her familial bondage. Discarded by her father, she can finally transfer her attachment to the Little Midshipman, where Walter Gay returns just in time to offer her his loving support.

After the first ominous interference, subsequent narratorial forewarnings are no longer addressed to Florence but always focus on Edith. The rhetorical mode in which these markers are cast might indicate that Dickens took pains to persuade himself that the proud lady must inevitably come to grief. This would seem a plausible way of accounting for the frequency and the emphatic tone of these repeated insertions, which differ significantly from the ironically tinged tropes through which Mrs Sparsit's expectations of the moral downfall of Louisa Bounderby find expression in a climactic part of *Hard Times* (HT, II, chs. 26–28). As in the case of Little Emily, Edith Dombey is apparently bent on a course that can only end in a fate commonly said to be worse than death, or at least in a misery that far transcends her present condition:

Oh Edith! It were well to die, indeed, at such a time. Better and happier far, perhaps, to die so, Edith, than to live on to the end! (DS, ch. 30, p. 410)

Again and again, grave warnings of this import are inserted in the narration, as Edith seems to be advancing towards the "brink of a deep precipice" (DS, ch. 47, p. 624). Can we doubt that the still undecided Dickens was addressing these signals to himself rather than to the reader, who might have deemed himself in no further need of guidance at this point regarding the direction in which the tale was seemingly proceeding.

In some cases the irresolution felt by the author can be detected in the convoluted style in which an argument is advanced. In *Little Dorrit* the spectacular downfall of the financier Merdle, which renders Arthur Clennam, among many others, a bankrupt, is forecast in various evocative images which are yet at variance with one another –

> That it is at least as difficult to stay a moral infection as a physical one; that such a disease will spread with the malignity and rapidity of the Plague; that the contagion, when it has once made head, will spare no pursuit or condition, but will lay hold on people in the soundest health, and become developed in the most unlikely constitutions; is a fact as firmly established by experience as that we human creatures breathe an atmosphere. A blessing beyond appreciation would be conferred upon mankind, if the tainted, in whose weakness or wickedness these virulent disorders are bred, could be instantly seized and placed in close confinement (not to say summarily smothered) before the poison is communicated. (LD, II, ch. 13, p. 553f.)

Widening his view to a perspective that would comprehend a large section of mankind at least, the narrator reflects on the diffusion of a moral decline that will contaminate increasing numbers of human beings as rapidly as an epidemic does. Expatiating on the progress of contagious diseases, he even adds the impression of a conflagration whose roaring noise can be heard over wide distances. A reader slightly confounded by this admonitory overture to a chapter headed 'The Progress of an Epidemic' (LD, II, ch. 13) might be forgiven to expect specifically one of these afflictions to be treated at some length in the following narration. Yet this is by no means the case. Dickens has resorted to several forceful metaphors to lend emphasis to an assessment of economic and social ills, of which moneymaking by enterprise is to serve as an example. People's wish to secure and possibly increase their property through financial transactions, in this case through investments in the business ventures of a Mr Merdle, is here held up as a striking case of wrongdoing.

Yet why should the investment of honestly gained wealth count as a wrongdoing in nineteenth-century England? Why should the ill-advised be ostracised as "wicked" and hence liable to severe punishment? It seems

as if Charles Dickens himself had felt somewhat uneasy on this issue. As a matter of fact, the moral judgement on financial transactions is no longer sustained as the narration proceeds. Conversely, the disease imagery receives further emphasis as the credulous savers transform into "patients" or are even dismissed as "the infected". It might seem paradoxical that the overly cautious Arthur Clennam, the least likely person to have sought financial gain, should be singled out as a particularly striking case of the impairment. After all, Clennam's motivation arises from the desire to serve his business partner as well as he possibly can. Having deliberated over the issue for a considerable time, the selfconscious man begins to blame himself for his habitual wariness, a reaction which the narrator deems especially morbid: "Such symptoms, when a disease of the kind is rife, are usually the signs of sickening" (LD, II, ch. 14, p. 568). Once the downfall of Merdle, involving the impoverishment of numerous investors, has occurred, a receding of the clinical imagery can be observed. Apart from an occasional reference to the "fatal mania" (LD, II, ch. 26, p. 692) of financial enterprise, metaphors of this import are no longer employed.

And yet the degradation the bankrupt undergoes might well have been described in the former mode; especially so, as the distraught Clennam accuses himself of moral failings rather than of plain foolishness. This, however, would not have corresponded with the progress of the narrative in the course of which the imprisoned debtor turns into a veritable invalid. Self-neglect and deprivation bring on a wasting fever from which Clennam will only recover when Little Dorrit comes to his assistance. Stylistically, at the very least, the text would have suffered under a confluence of figurative and denotative references. Dickens may well have thought that the disease metaphor could no longer be used once the actuality of sickness or personal, tangible suffering had taken over. This still leaves the question open as to why the author should have introduced imagery of this nature in anticipating a seemingly unfortunate turn of events that will even prove conducive to the final denouement. It seems unlikely that the author intended his anti-hero to decline into crime or to sustain irreparable injuries from his error, even though the number plans for chapter 13 'The Progress of an Epidemic' point to "Clennam's course downward", which is here already expressed in terms of "infection and sickening". There is no way of telling whether the brief entry was meant metaphorically or was to have anticipated a bout of fever that would even-

tually attack the prisoner. Only the notes for chapter 29 refer distinctly to the latter: "Clennam Ill". We would do best to understand the frequent references to disease in the text as a reflection of the author's intention to let his irresolute hero pass through a period of intensive suffering from which he will recover through the redeeming power of love. There can be little doubt that Dickens was aware of the unsettling effect the disturbing imagery might exert on the reader. At the same time it seems more than probable that here again he was yielding to an inclination to insert signals in the text as a way of marking out directions along which the plot might proceed.

Whatever solution we arrive at for such variations in the narration, the imaginative response we bring to bear on this and similar textual constellations must once again confirm the strength of Dickens's creative faculty which again and again broke through whatever restraints he himself imposed on his writing. Numerous other examples might be mentioned from his narratives, also involving uncertainty about social affairs or aspects of the sexual sphere, where Charles Dickens even tried to erase or at least put a different interpretation on an earlier reference. More may be achieved, however, at this point in focussing on individual works of his, some of which will indeed be analysed more fully in the following chapters.