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Inclusion and Exclusion in Dickens's Comedy

by

Michael Patrick O'Hea

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of English

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M. O'H

E, 16405 89 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada
T5R 4S1

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Inclusion and Exclusion in Dickens's Comedy* submitted by Michael Patrick O'Hea in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

R. H. McMaster
Dr. Rowland McMaster

Juliet McMaster
Dr. Juliet McMaster

Bruce Stovel
Dr. Bruce Stovel

Alastair Small
Dr. Alastair Small

James R. Kincaid
Dr. James R. Kincaid

December 4, 1995

I think the business of art is to lay all that ground carefully, not with the care that conceals itself-- to show by a backward light, what everything has been working to--but only to *suggest*, until the fulfillment comes. These are the ways of Providence, of which ways all art is but a little imitation.

--Charles Dickens, letter to Wilkie Collins, 1859

Dedication

For Emily, Patrick, Rowan, and--above even them--Susan, who see, understand, and love.

Abstract

The thesis argues the importance of surprise and insight in the comic, and calls attention to their prominence in Dickens's writing.

Chapter One discusses how the comic is effected by a complex interaction between a perceiver and an object of perception, stressing the importance of "turns of thought" in a given comic moment. It argues that investigation of the nature of such turns of thought leads to a better understanding of the comic. Introducing the concept of *enclosure*, "that into which the included has been included and that from which the excluded has been excluded," the chapter presents a tool for analysing comedy. This method, founded on the definition of "turn of thought" as "the sudden recognition and positive revision of enclosures," is then applied to examples of comedy in different media, including examples in Dickens.

Chapter Two examines moments of elucidation in *Our Mutual Friend* and *Hard Times*, pointing to their plots' riddle-like nature and isolating essential qualities of *comic* elucidation. The analysis concludes that Dickens achieves only mixed success in *Our Mutual Friend*, yet creates a model of comic elucidation in the revelation of Mr. Bounderby's true history.

Chapter Three focuses on four hypocritical characters in Dickens: Mr. Squeers, Fanny Squeers, Mr. Pecksniff, and Mrs. Gamp. The tool for analysing the comic is applied to passages in which these characters

perpetrate falsehoods, in order to account for the comic effects of those passages.

Chapter Four examines repetition in Dickens's comedy and its role in causing the reader to experience comic turns of thought. It then focuses on Dickens's presentation of Wilkins Micawber, arguing that repetition prevents readers from including in their construction of Micawber thoughts that would preclude a comic response to him. It suggests that to the extent that repetition causes the reader to be aware of Micawber's status as a fictional entity, comedy is possible.

The thesis concludes that moments of elucidation and enclosure-recognition inform Dickens's writing, and suggests that the analytical model presented in the thesis is an effective tool that yields insightful analyses of instances of comedy.

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Producing this thesis would not have been possible without the support and work of my immediate family, my parents, and my parents-in-law; faculty and staff at the department of English, University of Alberta; Jeannine Green and the staff at the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library; the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the members of my supervisory committee, Juliet McMaster and Bruce Stovel; and finally, Rowland McMaster, who drew me into the field with a virtuoso reading of Chaucer's drunken miller, mirthfully conducted my honours tutorial, and exhibited the virtues of grace and governance throughout the stages of my PhD program--he has always been, in one of Joe Gargery's words, "a-stonishing."

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I. The Turn of Thought, the Enclosure, and Analysing the Comic

> "We go on taking everything for granted, and so we go on, until whatever we do, good, bad, or indifferent, we do from habit. Habit is all I shall have to report, when I am called upon to plead to my conscience, on my deathbed. 'Habit,' says I; 'I was deaf, dumb, blind, and paralytic, to a million things, from habit.' 'Very business-like indeed, Mr What's-Your-Name,' says Conscience, 'but it won't do here!'"
>
> -- Mr. Morfin, *Dombey and Son*

> This experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretence at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (*à l'envers*), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings, and uncrownings.
>
> --Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

The sign "comedy" has much potential to miscommunicate. The reason for this becomes clear when one compares two of the denotations commonly found in dictionaries under the entry "comedy." The first meaning normally found under this entry is akin to the first definition in the *OED* (first edition): "A stage play of a light and amusing character, with a happy conclusion to its plot." One naturally associates the sign "comedy" with a drama, and with the nature of the resolution of the events it depicts. Reading down through the usually long entry under this sign, however, one likely encounters something like definition 2c in the *OED* (second edition): "Humour; humorous invention; the action or quality of being amusing." Similarly, in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, one finds definition

5, which reads, "the comic element (as in a play, story, or motion picture)." In the recently published second edition of the one-volume *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, the two different meanings are in close proximity. Its first definition refers to a work of drama, and its third is "the comic element of drama, of literature generally, or of life."

The potential for confusion thus lies in the fact that one can use the same sequence of letters to refer both to an entity--a particular work of literature--and to an *element* of that entity--a quality that distinguishes it from other entities similar to it (in this case, other genres of literature). The problem would be solved if a separate term were available to distinguish between this quality and the entity of which it is an element. To some extent, such a term does exist. People interested in discussing this kind of literary work have referred to a prominent element in it by using the sign "the comic." This usage is recorded in the second edition of the *OED* under the entry "comic": "quasi-sb. *the comic*: that which is comic; the comic side of drama, of life, etc." This sign for a common element *in* a comedy, however, proves stylistically cumbersome given that, as the *OED* indicates, the better part of the sign falls somewhere between being a true adjective and a true substantive.

As a result, one who wishes to focus more closely on the element itself

than on the work in which it is to be found encounters a challenge when signaling that intention in words that are neither imprecise nor cumbersome. In announcing the subject matter of this dissertation as related to "Dickens's Comedy," I do not mean to raise the expectation that I am writing about the happy endings of his novels, how his external presentation of character renders his prose fiction dramatic, how the novels borrow from fertility rituals, or Dickens's literary debts to Fielding, Sterne, Shakespeare, and so on. Instead, this dissertation has to do with *the comic* in Dickens's prose fiction. One can see, however, the ridiculousness that would arise from replacing the sign "Comedy" as it appears on the spine of this thesis with the sign that has come to denote an element commonly found *in* a comedy. Doing so would result in the ludicrous title, "Inclusion and Exclusion in Dickens's the Comic."

The sign "Comedy" in the title, therefore, intends to announce that the subject matter of this dissertation has to do with "the comic element of drama, of literature generally, or of life" (*Random House Dictionary*, second edition), and assumes that this comic element informs Dickens's art. Moreover, the preposition "in" intends to communicate that the topic of discussion has to do neither with the comic in its entirety, nor with the comic in its entirety in Dickens, but with a particular *quality* of the comic in

Dickens.

That the comic has many qualities is made particularly obvious when one considers a statement to be found in Bohdan Dziemidok's recent study *The Comical: A Philosophical Analysis.*[1] Dziemidok offers the following assertion, which, though somewhat abstruse, is helpful and accurate: "Semantically, the term [the comical] refers not only to some of the natural events, objects and the relations that exist among them, which exhibit no intention of evoking the experiences of the comical, but relates also to a specific kind of creative activity (to be found both in art and everyday life) in which specific configurations of events or specific conceptual or lexical systems are created in order to evoke experiences of a specific order" (3). The experiences Dziemidok refers to at the end of this statement would presumably include amusement, delight, surprise, joy, insight, and frequently laughter. Exactly who the creator of these evocative configurations and systems is, in the case of natural events, Dziemidok's assertion does not specify. As will become evident later in this chapter, I would argue that this unnamed creator--at least of the *relations* among the perceived objects or natural phenomena--may be chiefly the person doing

---

[1]Reading this work makes clear that by "the comical" Dziemidok is discussing what is named by "the comic," as that sign is defined by the *OED* (second edition).

the perceiving.

Indeed, much of my attention will be given to this perceiving person in whom the comic excites the feelings just listed. Nevertheless, it is decidedly not the intention of this thesis to promise an investigation of the many emotions that result when one encounters an instance of the comic in Dickens's fiction. Instead, the following chapters will privilege for investigation and analysis the elements of surprise and elucidation. Such elements are prominent, for example, when Mr. Micawber points out the misery that accrues to those who miss their annual £20 budget targets by sixpence, or when the unnamed long gamekeeper in *Pickwick Papers* dutifully suggests with respect to Mr. Winkle, that "If the gentleman begins to fire [five minutes before the shooting party meets up with the next covey], perhaps he'll just get the shot out of the barrel by the time they rise" (332).

As these two brief examples suggest, insight and surprise play no minor role in Dickens's comedy, and as a result, descriptions of comedy might be improved were they to grant to the elements of surprise and elucidation the same status accorded to amusement, joy, and mirth. In holding this belief, I am therefore aligning myself with Stefan Szuman, who asserts, "there is no laughter without astonishment, and there is no astonishment outside the realm of knowledge. Astonishment and ensuing

laughter result from having a sudden idea, or from thinking something in a novel way, noticing something new or seeing a familiar object in a new light, spotting an unknown similarity and enjoying a sudden association of the elements of reality which have never been thus associated in thought and imagination" (quoted in Dziemidok 148). Indeed, I think this quality of surprising insight to be so much the prime element in the comic that whether a work should be classified as a comedy depends less on its medium than on the prominence of this element. People experienced moments of comedy long before they began to create rituals, dramas, novels, and films, and descriptions of these forms tell us about sacraments rather than the spirit itself.

A trio of words that comprises succinctly what the perceiver experiences in reading Dickens's comedy is the phrase "turn of thought." Because "turn of thought" is such a common phrase, and because it is a dying metaphor, recalling to life the specific ideas it draws together will show its aptness as a name for the elements of the comic that these pages will highlight.

To begin, "turn" communicates several ideas. The most important is change--substantial change--what might be thought of metaphorically as a hairpin turn rather than a gentle bank. Indeed, what one changes *from* and

what one changes *to* are often related to each other by virtue of a diametrical opposition. Furthermore, I wish to communicate by the words "turn" and "thought" the idea of rapidity. The experience of the comic that I am investigating takes place in a moment, often less than one second. Indeed, the short span of time during which the change takes place is one of the qualities that distinguishes it from similar phenomena to which the word "comic" would not apply.

"Turn of thought" is also meant to call to mind ideas signified by the phrases "bent of mind" and "habit of thought." In doing so, the phrase is aligned with what L.J. Potts seems to mean by asserting that comedy is "a mode of thought" (10). It is a mental disposition to construe as comic not only works of art, but also natural phenomena. Hence, "comic turn of thought" refers both to a specific cognitive moment, and to a perceptual inclination in a certain kind of person, namely someone who tends to discover comedy wherever it is possible to do so. As Dziemidok's description of the comic points out, this inclination on the perceiver's part exists not only when the object of perception is a work of art, but also when it comprises "natural events, objects and the relations that exist among them."

The last two words of the trio, "of thought," are meant to highlight

the extent to which the comic is a psychological event and that the change effected during this cognitive moment is a change in how the perceiver thinks about a given object of thought. As a result, what this thesis will celebrate about the comic artist in general and about Dickens in particular is the ability of their works to compel the perceiver to undertake substantial and unexpected acts of reconsideration. It would be fair, then, to categorize this thesis as reader-response criticism that takes up the cognition of construing comedy, key questions being "What is the reader thinking about when perceiving a given object of perception, and what emotional states do these thoughts excite in this person?" In addition, I wish to ask, "What must take place in the perceiver's mind to render the perceived text comic? Under what psychological circumstances could this text be comic?" Finally, given that particular attention will be given to the qualities of surprise and insight, two questions that will certainly arise are "Whom would Dickens's words be likely to surprise, and whose thinking would be likely to change as a result of reading them?"

Consider the famous drawing in figure 1 (see following page). The lines on the page can be construed in two ways (at least). One image is a tight close-up of a large-nosed woman wearing a kerchief around her face and a heavy coat, into which her rather pointy chin is tucked. The second

Figure 1

image is that of a younger woman wearing a choker and a large feathered hat, her face turned away from the perceiver; at the center of the drawing, one sees the young woman's ear and jaw-line. What this discussion is about is the split-second when the perceiver *first* reconstrues the drawing. At this moment, of course, the perceiver becomes aware that his or her mind chose one image over the other when the drawing was initially construed, and that the construed image exists nowhere except in the perceiver's mind. This experience is what I mean by the phrase "turn of thought."

Not all turns of thought are comic, however. For those to whom this drawing is comic, a key quality of the work is the relationship that they perceive to exist between the two images. This relationship is one of diametrical opposition. In fact, several opposites are possible. One image shows us youth, the other middle (possibly old) age. Applying one standard of beauty, a perceiver could describe the two images as a society belle and a wart-nosed hag. The qualities that one might call to mind here depend entirely on what one understands the sartorial and physiological signs in the two construed images to mean. Most of us would agree, however, that discovering opposites in the ambiguous drawing is part of our response to the picture, and that the experience of perceiving the drawing would be quite different if we were to see, first, a Phillips screwdriver and,

subsequently, a shoebox.

To some extent, of course, we will see what we are expecting to see. Stanley Fish suggests that "formal units are always a function of the interpretive model ones brings to bear" (164). Fish might call our attention to the drawing's title--"MY WIFE AND MY MOTHER-IN-LAW"--and to the magazine in which it originally appeared, *Puck*. If the perceiver knows that *Puck* is a satirical magazine famous for humorous cartoons and if that perceiver is familiar with either the genre of jokes that construct mothers-in-law as witchy shrews, or the jokes that construct marriage as a steady decline insofar as a wife comes to resemble her mother, then what such a person construes will be somewhat different from what is construed by someone who sees the drawing in a psychology textbook. The title of both the drawing and the magazine cater to what Fish has termed an "interpretive community" of readers (171), ones who, in this case, would discover in the lines a confirmation of their own beliefs about beauty, marriage, clothes, and so on. In fact, the cover of the particular issue of *Puck* in which this drawing by W.E. Hill was first published features a painting of a young woman's face dimly and sinisterly lit from below. Underneath this, the following caption is printed: "THE LIGHT THAT LIES IN WOMAN'S EYES / (--and Lies and Lies and Lies)." In this context, the Hill drawing could easily be

construed as falling into the genre of humour that casts young women as deceitful husband-hunters, females whose true nature as hags does not appear until after the marriage has been consummated.

To describe what happens during a *comic* turn of thought, one such as that effected by the Hill drawing, it is helpful to introduce a new term. This term is "enclosure." An enclosure is that into which the included has been included and that from which the excluded has been excluded. A *comic* turn of thought takes place when the existence of an enclosure is suddenly recognized and its contents are subsequently changed for the better. The term "enclosure" itself includes much, given that there is much that can be exclusionary. Among the possible examples are any bounded physical space--a building, a fenced yard, a club meeting room, or a country; a text (given that some words have been printed in it and others have not), such as a list of wedding guests, a newspaper headline, or a copy of *Pickwick Papers*; any framed picture, whether a single photograph, a single still from a film, or the completed film itself.

An enclosure need not, however, be bounded spatially. The term "enclosure," as defined above, would include any mental construct. For example, Angel Clare's idea of a suitable spouse clearly excludes a woman like Tess, who is "Maiden No More." Moreover, what one thinks during a

given period of time constitutes an enclosure in that some thoughts will be included within that cognitive period and others will be excluded. This kind of enclosure is particularly important when considering the act of reading. As one reads for a given length of time, ideas will be included in one's thoughts and assumptions will be made that may undergo profound and unexpected revision as the reader encounters any narrative surprises that the author has placed in the text. *Great Expectations* has rewarded many of its readers with this experience.[2]

I wish to add to this unexhaustive list of examples of an enclosure--of that into which the included has been placed and out of which the excluded is kept--genres, discourses, and paradigms. All three of these entities qualify as enclosures in that they are exclusionary. For example, the paradigm in place during pre-Copernican Europe clearly promoted a paradigm that excluded the possibility that the earth revolves around the sun. One last example that deserves mention is propriety: all codes of conduct, both those that are articulated in writing and the legion that are unwritten constitute enclosures.

One might well wonder at this point what exactly would *not* qualify as

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[2]For a first-rate discussion of this aspect of Dickens's novel, see chapter five of Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*.

an enclosure: if "enclosure" signifies everything, then it means nothing. There do exist, however, at least three qualities of an enclosure that would distinguish it from what is *not* it, for example, what we mean by the words "thing" or "entity," as these words are employed in the broadest sense. The first is the enclosure's finiteness, the second is that it is effected by one or more acts of privileging on the encloser's part, and the third is that it is capable of being revised. Neither anything infinite, nor that which is beyond human ken, nor that which is immutable would fall into the category "enclosure."

It follows from this description of the comic turn of thought as an enclosure's suddenly being changed for the better, that the creation of the enclosure itself necessarily precedes any given comic turn of thought. If comedy is the sudden rethinking of what should or should not be included in a pre-existing enclosure, it is clear that such an act of reconsideration must be preceded by some initially flawed act of erecting an enclosure and *unjustly* excluding some entity from it. Comedy will only be possible, therefore, as long as unjust enclosures continue to be erected, either physically in space or in the minds of people; which is to say, as long as people and space exist. Note, though, that considerable time may elapse between the initial construction of the enclosure and the time when a

change for the better is made. Keep in mind too that, because people will forever disagree about whether any given change is better, comedy is quite subjective. Many would thus agree with Potts's assertion that comedy "depends on the eye of the beholder" (45), although it is difficult to agree with Potts that it does *not* depend "on the character of the object he has in view . . . " (45). The argument can easily be made that the perceiver will often notice an inherent pattern of some sort in the object construed, especially when that object is a work of art, the *sine qua non* of which is the form it possesses as the result of choices made by the artist.

In describing the comic turn of thought as the recognition of an unjustly exclusionary enclosure and its revision for the better, I hope to build on comments by James Feibleman which I find compelling. He writes that comedy depends on "the derogation of what-is in favor of what-ought-to-be" (146). Feibleman thus sees the comic as a movement towards an ideal state of affairs, as a striving for "something better and again for something still better" (214). It "calls for the girding up of loins and the pressing ever forward toward fresh values and original organizations, demanding new victories and new achievements for the human race" (215). What Feibleman calls "fresh values," "original organizations," and "new achievements" I would describe as modified enclosures, in which term I

mean to comprehend not only changes in what people *think* but also the changes in our laws, institutions, buildings and societies that such rethinking brings about. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that human beings could ever achieve a consensus about what is better and what is not. No matter how compelling the justice of an enclosure-revision may be, even to a vast number of kindred-spirited and well-intentioned people, there will always be dissenters, and it simply may not be possible for us to tell whether those dissenters are led by true or false prophets.

Returning to figure 1, W.E. Hill's famous cartoon from *Puck*, I would describe what happens to most perceivers of the drawn lines as follows. First, there occurs an initial act of enclosing as the perceiver "loads" into the enclosure of conscious thought one of the two possible images. The reader who sees the young woman, for example, does not see the old woman--her image has been excluded from the enclosure of conscious thought. The word I will use for this placement of one entity into an enclosure and the simultaneous exclusion from that same enclosure of one or more other available entities is the transitive verb "privilege." This word is apt in that it does not necessarily imply a deliberate act of choosing, but can refer to an act of including and excluding that the agent is not altogether aware of. On the other hand, the word does not necessarily rule out deliberate action

either. As a result, I intend to use "privilege" to refer both to a relatively unconscious act of enclosing--such as what happens to most who perceive the Hill drawing--as well as to what takes place when, for example, "Blacks" are excluded from membership in an all-"White" country club. Along with the obvious socio-economic connotations of this verb, I also mean to imply that being within the enclosure is often desirable.

In the case of the Hill drawing, then, I would say that the person who initially perceives the young woman has privileged her image over that of the old woman by including the image of the young woman in the enclosure of conscious thought and simultaneously excluding the image of the old woman from that enclosure. If it is true that this act of privileging is unjust, then we have what might be called *latent* comedy. This comedy will be realized at the moment when the perceiver reconstrues the drawing and sees for the first time the image of the old woman, thus including her in the enclosure of conscious thought as well as including her in what the perceiver now understands to be the nature of Hill's drawing.

This moment signals another key event, namely, the perceiver's recognition that s/he has erected an enclosure in the first place. Much of what we might call comic insight has as much to do with the revelation that an act of exclusion has taken place *at all* as it has to do with revising the

enclosure to include what has been previously and unjustly excluded. This sudden awareness of the existence of a dividing line that the erector of the enclosure has been unaware of up until the moment of revelation is related to what the Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky has termed "ostranenie," which is usually translated into English as "defamiliarization" (24). The very best comedy offers profound insight into the seemingly endless acts of enclosure-construction that human beings engage in, and the unfair exclusions that often result from these acts. The very recognition of an enclosure's existence is therefore a step towards comedy and sometimes comedy itself.

One of these conditions is the recognition and/or revision of *several* enclosures simultaneously. Turning to the Hill drawing yet again, it is fair to say that the moment one becomes aware of the enclosure erected when the lines were first construed leads to the simultaneous modification of several other enclosures, among which one might mention "the nature of human perception," and "the nature of signs." Learning of the existence of such a drawing almost certainly forces one to alter what one has included in his or her idea of the nature of visual art and human perception. In my own experience, encountering Hill's drawing produced a feeling akin to joy, an emotion not at all remote from the psychological state effected by what has

been described as comedy. What accounts for this feeling of peculiarly and acutely joyful insight--a feeling that differs from mere amusement-- is the simultaneous revision of several enclosures in one or two remarkable seconds of cognition.

Understanding that the *quantity* of the enclosures revised in a short period of time is a factor in comedy and that "enclosure" comprehends entities as different as a sonnet, a stable, and a stream of consciousness helps give one an idea of just how complex comedy can be. What makes so remarkable the experience of finally and suddenly registering in the Hill drawing, say, the image of the older woman, is that in having this experience, one gains insight into the object of perception (the work of art), the creator of this object (W.E. Hill), a previous act of perceiving (what happened in the split second one's eye's first registered one of the two available images), what the drawing matches up with in what we perceive in the real world (the women who existed in Hill's time and culture), and so on. Theorists of the comic, including Dziemidok, now understand that by "the comic" we are referring to a highly complex set of relations between the perceiver and the perceived, particularly when the perceived is a work of art and especially when the subject matter of that work of art includes the nature of art/perception itself.

This approach of accounting for comic effects by identifying enclosures and the positive changes made to them works well when applied to phenomena that are a bit more commonplace than Hill's ingenious drawing. Consider the following riddle:

Question: What do you do with a blue monster?

Presenting the answer to undergraduate university students, in my experience, has usually created a relatively long pause, followed by ahas and groans, as members of the class get the joke. (The answer, now that you have had time to mull the question a bit, is "Cheer him up.") According to the approach to analysing the comic that has been presented in the previous pages, one would describe the state of latent comedy as coming into being as soon as a reader places in the enclosure of conscious thought the meaning of "blue" that refers to colour. The comic turn of thought takes place in the split second after the riddle's answer is either heard or read. Initially, the answer makes no sense, but once the perceiver of the riddle realizes that s/he has privileged the meaning that refers to colour over the meaning "low-spirited," a comic turn of thought occurs. Not only does one replace "the colour of the sky on a cloudless day" with "depressed," one also recognizes that an initial act of exclusion took place when the meaning of the riddle's question was first construed. Such cognitive acts of enclosure recognition/

revision are the meat and potatoes--the tofu and rice--of riddles.

Moreover, as is the case with particularly "good" or "clever" riddles, more than one enclosure is changed for the better. The narrative of the riddle centres on the reformation of the "monster" and its being welcomed into a group that includes the generic "you" whom the riddle's question addresses. Notice, however, that such an inclusion works only for those liberal-minded perceivers who understand a monster to be corrigible--for those who define "monster" otherwise, the riddle disappoints. Notice also that for some readers the riddle's effects will depend on initially placing only hostile responses into the enclosure of possible reactions to a monster. For such readers, the riddle may serve as a reminder that threats need not be met with antagonistic or belligerent behaviour.

The riddle's success also has to with what Northrop Frye calls "The theme of the comic," namely, "the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 43). Indeed, it is this quality that Frye isolates as that which distinguishes "Tragic Fictional Modes" from "Comic Fictional Modes" (*ix*). To which of the five comic fictional modes this riddle belongs would, in Frye's system, depend on the extent to which the monster is superior or inferior to men, a determination impossible to make here. Of course, Frye is categorizing

fictions and not riddles and applying his system to a riddle is a misuse of it. Nevertheless, the idea of integration is useful even here, and pointing out the extent to which Frye's classification system relies heavily on the perceived narrative in general and the central "somebody" whose doings make up the narrative's plot helps one to be aware that Frye is focussing more on the nature of the work of art, the perceived, rather than the state of mind of the perceiver during the reading of the work. Notice that Frye does not call attention to the linguistic trickery that often plays a major role in a narrative's success. By seeing society as one kind of enclosure and the split-second construction of an ambiguous sign's meaning as a second kind of enclosure, I hope that what I am offering can account for a comedy's effects better than Frye's theory can on its own. In the case of the blue monster riddle, then, enclosure-revision is involved in both the short narrative that the riddle presents (the monster is welcomed into a society) and in the means by which the perceiver assimilates the narrative (the meaning "sad" replaces the meaning that refers to colour).

Note, however, that comedy of the sort I am describing is only possible for those who are able to choose between the meanings that the sign "blue" signifies. If, in this case, the perceiver of the riddle is only acquainted with a single meaning of "blue," s/he will not get the joke. At this

point, I would like to introduce the term *menu* to refer to the "place" where the potentially included reside, that is, the "list" from which the included is chosen and the excluded is not chosen. For many perceivers of the question "What do you do with a blue monster?" the sign "blue" is a menu that contains both the meaning "sad" and the meaning that refers to colour. What we might say of someone who does not get the joke when perceiving "Cheer him up" is that that person's menu is different from--sparser than--the menu of a person who gets the joke. It follows, then, that the *comic* turn of thought is possible only for those who have entities to choose *from* when the content of an enclosure is initially determined.

As both the Hill drawing and the blue monster riddle show, latent comedy only comes into being when a perceiver limits his understanding of the object of perception by erecting a construct that unjustly excludes qualities of the perceived entity that were initially available to the encloser's perception. What is more, the intensity of the comic turn of thought is proportionate to the degree to which the perceiver is unaware of his or her misconstruction. In other words, the more a perceiver takes for granted that what s/he has seen is *all* there is to see, the more surprised that perceiver will be upon discovering that there is more to the perceived than has met the mind's eye. Thus the comic turn of thought depends heavily on the

perceiver's having only a limited understanding of the perceived entity, yet somehow inclining towards a belief that s/he understands that entity quite well. Comedy is greatly facilitated, then, by the tendency of the human mind to form assumptions about what it perceives, and to form them hastily enough that misperception occurs.

In "Art as Technique," Shklovsky writes:

> After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it--hence we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automism of perception. Here I want to illustrate a way used repeatedly by Leo Tolstoy, that writer who . . . seems to present things as if he himself saw them, saw them in their entirety, and did not alter them.
>
> Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects. For example, in "Shame," Tolstoy "defamiliarizes" the idea of flogging in this way: "to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches." (24)

In making assertions about all art here, Shklovsky is probably going too far, and I would question whether *any* writer sees things "in their entirety." Instead, I would argue that defamiliarization involves privileging attributes of the perceived that previous namings have failed to privilege. On the other hand, I find Shklovsky's comments on the automism of perception, which he elsewhere in the essay calls "Habitualization" (24), very similar to what I

have been calling "latent comedy." As Shklovsky's work suggests, great writers frequently remind us that we tend to be complacent about our powers of perception, that we are, as Mr. Morfin observes in *Dombey and Son*, creatures of mental habit, and that we all too frequently forget that our constructs are always based on a partial view of what we perceive.

A strong connection exists between the phenomenon that Shklovsky is describing and the comic. For example, in a recent touring production of *The Phantom of the Opera*, many members of the audience laughed at a relatively simple instance of visual humour involving the elephant prop that is used early in the play. The audience is watching the members of the opera company rehearse a scene from *Hannibal*, a performance which is interrupted by an on-stage accident. As soon as the director calls for the cast to take a break, the large, ornate elephant prop is wheeled around, at which moment the audience realizes that the elephant is really only half an elephant, and that in its hollowed interior sit a pair of stage hands who are sharing lunch. As the entire prop (semi-elephant, munching stage hands, and all) is rolled off-stage, the repast carries on uninterrupted, and the audience laughs to discover not only that they have jumped to several wrong conclusions about what was in front of their eyes, but that, however elaborate the surroundings, the basic human need for a pint and a potato

must be met. As is so often the case, the visual joke reminds us how we tend to oversimplify the objects of our acts of perception and thus exclude much from our construction of what we are perceiving. The sight-gag would work particularly well for audience members who have had some experience with the shortcuts that can be taken by all illusionists, whether they are Hal Prince, Steven Spielberg, or Penn and Teller. Such a perceiver would certainly have a sense that s/he ought to have known better than to construct the stage prop elephant as having any more to it than what the audience could see from their seats.

On the other hand, if we made no assumptions about what we perceive and jumped to no conclusions in labeling an entity based on only a limited perception of that entity, we would be so many Hamlets condemned to inaction by our unceasing puzzlings and cogitations. In *Comedy and Culture: England 1820-1900*, Roger B. Henkle, writing of Sartre, sums up nicely the state that exists for one who makes no provisional constructions whatsoever: ". . . the reality of a life without any patterns imposed upon it was ultimately 'nauseous' to [Sartre], for it left man in the viscous, changing, amorphous flow of contingency, where human matter and human consciousness were subjected to disorienting chaos" (10).

A happy result for comedy, then, is the balance that exists between a

person's tendency to jump to conclusions about what s/he perceives and the ever present possibility that such a jump will lead to a sprawling pratfall. For those of us perceivers who habitually remain aware that our conclusions about the perceived are subject to subsequent revision, we know to expect the turn of thought that takes place as the perceived entity is more fully understood. Nevertheless, just when that moment of comic elucidation will come can not be known. As a result, the perceiver on the lookout for the comic turn of thought finds him or herself in a position not unlike that of Peter Sellers's Inspector Clouseau in *Return of the Pink Panther*. Each time he returns home in that film, he must be ever-prepared for one of his servant's ingenious ambushes. The comic turn of thought, I would suggest, lurks as patiently as Kato in Clouseau's refrigerator, lying in wait for the inevitable moment when we lapse into comfortable mental complacency.

Henkle puts this point well, drawing on Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* to do so. Henkle writes:

> Kermode adopts a term, "fictions," from Hans Vaihinger that I find valuable in discussing comedy. He defines the term not in the more limited sense of literary creations, but as notions that people invent to live by, or concepts that they consciously employ in order to explain or structure portions of their everyday lives and activities. These notions or concepts are "fictive" because they are temporary "working beliefs" that are understood (at some point at least) to be *created* for convenience in organizing or imaginatively grasping human

> activities. . . . It is only when they are no longer provisional, no longer treated as fictive visions, that they become ossified into what Kermode calls "myths," that is, beliefs that people begin to accept as true or permanently desirable. (10)

I would describe the ossification of the fiction as the perceiver's forgetting that an enclosure has been constructed and that this construction includes only a limited understanding of the initially perceived entity. It is the perceiver's diminished consciousness that the initial act of construing the perceived is a provisional one, and the increasing sense of complacency that the perceiver experiences if s/he begins to think that s/he possesses a full understanding of the perceived entity. This state of latent comedy is what Henri Bergson seems to be getting at in his famous description of comedy as "*Something mechanical encrusted on the living*" (37), although his association of the machine with the negative and the living with the positive is a bit crusty itself.

What Henkle and Kermode are getting at relates interestingly to Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach to the reading process. Iser describes reading as follows:

> . . . each intentional sentence correlative opens up a particular horizon, which is modified, if not completely changed, by succeeding sentences. While these expectations arouse interest in what is to come, the subsequent modification of them will also have a retrospective effect on what has already been read. This may now take on a different significance from that which

> it had at the moment of reading.
>
> Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections. . . . The new background brings to light new aspects of what we had committed to memory; conversely these, in turn, shed their light on the new background, thus arousing more complex anticipations. Thus the reader, in establishing these interrelations between past, present, and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections. (278)

What Iser calls a "horizon" is an enclosure in that the reader's anticipation of what is yet to come in the text almost certainly will not include all possibilities open to the writer. We probably anticipate what we are accustomed to, based on the interpretive model that we bring to bear on the perceived text. When our anticipations turn out to be wrong and to have been unjustly exclusionary, we may well experience a comic turn of thought.

Someone who understood this well was the director/comedian Buster Keaton. A case in point is one of his most famous film sequences from one of his best-known films, *The General*. The title refers to a locomotive run by the Buster Keaton character, Johnnie Gray, an engineer in the Civil War South. After the General has been stolen by Union spies, Gray single-handedly gives chase in a Confederate army locomotive, to which he has attached a small car with a cannon on it. Having decided to fire a volley

over the borrowed locomotive and down the tracks at the stolen General, Gray jumps from the locomotive to the cannon car. He then packs the cannon with an entire canister of gun powder, attaches and lights the cannon's fuse, and leaps from the cannon car back onto the locomotive pulling it. Unfortunately, in leaping from the trailing cannon car to the locomotive, Gray catches his foot on the hitch joining the two units of the train together, and inadvertently releases the cannon car, which slowly and joltingly drops off the pace. At the same time, the cannon itself begins to angle down and, rather than aiming skyward, points directly at both Johnnie and his borrowed locomotive (see figure 2.1 on the following page).

As so often happens in comic works, the protagonist thus finds himself in a predicament out of which there seems to be no escape. At such a point in the narrative, I would suggest, the perceiver of the work erects an enclosure of conscious thought--what Iser calls a "horizon"--into which s/he places possible outcomes of the perceived predicament. Latent comedy will exist if that perceiver unjustly excludes during this period of anticipation the ultimate outcome that the narrative offers. In his film sequence, Keaton lets the tension build for almost a minute as we watch Johnnie Gray struggle up onto the engine, and as we see from a point behind the cannon that it is aimed directly at him as he does so. After a short sequence in which Johnnie

Note: Because of copyright restrictions, pages 31 and 32, containing figure 2, have been removed. Figure 2 reproduces stills from Buster Keaton's *The General*. These stills can be found in *The Best of Buster: The Classic Comedy Scenes Direct from the Films of Buster Keaton*, edited by Richard J. Anobile (New York: Darien, 1976). See in particular pages 243-44.

tries to improve his chances by throwing a piece of wood at the cannon (which he hits dead on), Keaton then cuts to a shot of the stolen General just up the tracks from the pursuing locomotive (figures 2.2 and 2.3). After this brief shot, the film cuts back to Johnnie Gray, whom we see climbing down onto his locomotive's cowcatcher to be out of the cannonball's path. Apparently, he has gotten himself at least partially out of the predicament (figures 2.4 through 2.6). In an ingenious turn of events, however, the cannon fires just at a point where the train track curves, so that the cannonball not only misses Gray's borrowed locomotive (which has just entered the curve) but narrowly misses his rivals on the stolen General, which has exited the curve uptrack and thus entered the path of the fired cannonball (see figures 3.1 through 3.6 on the following pages). Virtually all viewers of the sequence would have excluded this possibility from the enclosure erected during the minute or so they had to anticipate what would happen. Moreover, Keaton is careful during this minute of suspense to cut away from Johnnie and to cut to a shot of The General, which is seen from exactly the point along the track that the ingenious climactic frame is shot from. The reason that the audience does not privilege the curve in the track while viewing this shot (figures 2.2 and 2.3) is that they are distracted by the movements of the Union spies on the roof of the stolen train. The spies'

Note: Because of copyright restrictions, pages 34 and 35, containing figure 3, have been removed. Figure 3 reproduces stills from Buster Keaton's *The General*. These stills can be found in *The Best of Buster: The Classic Comedy Scenes Direct from the Films of Buster Keaton*, edited by Richard J. Anobile (New York: Darien, 1976). See in particular pages 247-50.

movements simultaneously keep the viewer from seeing the point further down the line where the General will be when it is almost struck by the cannon ball in the sequence's climactic shot (figure 3.4). Thus, the viewer who falls for Keaton's visual trickery is guilty of excluding the uptrack curve from the frame showing the spies running along the roof of the pursued General. Instead, the viewer assumes that what lies in the distance behind the running men is simply bush. As so often happens to establish latent comedy, the perceiver incorrectly fills in the information that his or her limited point of view keeps from being perceived directly. In effect, the perceiver messes up in doing the unavoidable job of filling in the narrative gaps that are inevitable in any text. As a result, the comic turn of thought explicitly calls the reader's attention to his or her own agency in creating the construed work and to his or her own fallibility in engaging in this act of imagination.

Now, it would be wrong to suggest that *all* reconsiderations of a previously construed piece of text are comic, and to argue that what Iser describes when discussing reading in general and what Henkle is getting at in discussing comedy in particular are identical phenomena. It would be very odd indeed to describe as comic what happens when one first reads the final sentence of "A Rose for Emily," and realizes both that Emily Grierson

has been lying with Homer Barron's corpse, and that the mention of Emily's hair colour a page or two earlier was no minor detail, but in fact a set-up for the story's sensational conclusion. Most comic theorists would agree that the comic response to a text will be prevented if the construed text appals or genuinely saddens the perceiver. We hardly rejoice to reconstruct Emily Grierson as not just a murderer, but also a kind of necrophiliac. It is important to emphasize here that comedy depends not just on revising the contents of a given enclosure or on the perceiver's becoming aware that s/he has indeed erected an enclosure, but also on there being a direct relationship between that which is initially placed in the enclosure and that which is initially excluded from it. Much more of a turn takes place in the Keaton sequence, for example, when we substitute the nearly successful hit against his enemies, for Johnnie Gray's merely avoiding personal injury. It is fair to say that the diametrical opposition between what most viewers anticipate will happen and what really does happen has much to do with the comedy here, as of course does the fact that the change to the enclosure is a change for the better--unless one happens to be an inveterate despiser of things Confederate, Johnnie Gray included.

It would also be wrong to suggest that the comic turn of thought will necessarily lead the perceiver to feelings of inadequacy as a reader.

Curiously, just the opposite is often true. Consider figure 4, a *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon by Bill Watterson (see following page). The cartoon works well because of the many enclosures it calls attention to and modifies. Among these are the prohibition on discussing certain bodily facts and functions in public discourse. Much contemporary comedy has been made possible by the gradual relaxing of these prohibitions in the last 30 years or so, and, very recently, the successes of the permissive Fox network in the U.S. have caused the censors at the big three U.S. networks to allow sitcoms to deal with previously taboo subject matter. In addition, the writers may now include words in their scripts that have been traditionally forbidden from American primetime. Moreover, the cartoon is part of an older movement that allows for the experiences of children to be included in public discourse, particularly behaviours that challenge the codes of conduct imposed on children by the adults who decide what is and is not decorous. Dickens, of course, made supreme contributions to this movement, particularly in the descriptions of Pip's experiences as a child in *Great Expectations*.[3] In our century, writers as diverse as L.M. Montgomery and Charles Schultz have scored tremendous comic successes by giving

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[3]The one critic whose understanding of this aspect of Dickens outshines the many who have taken up the importance of the child's vision to the novelist's is Paul Schlike. See in particular chapter two of his *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*.

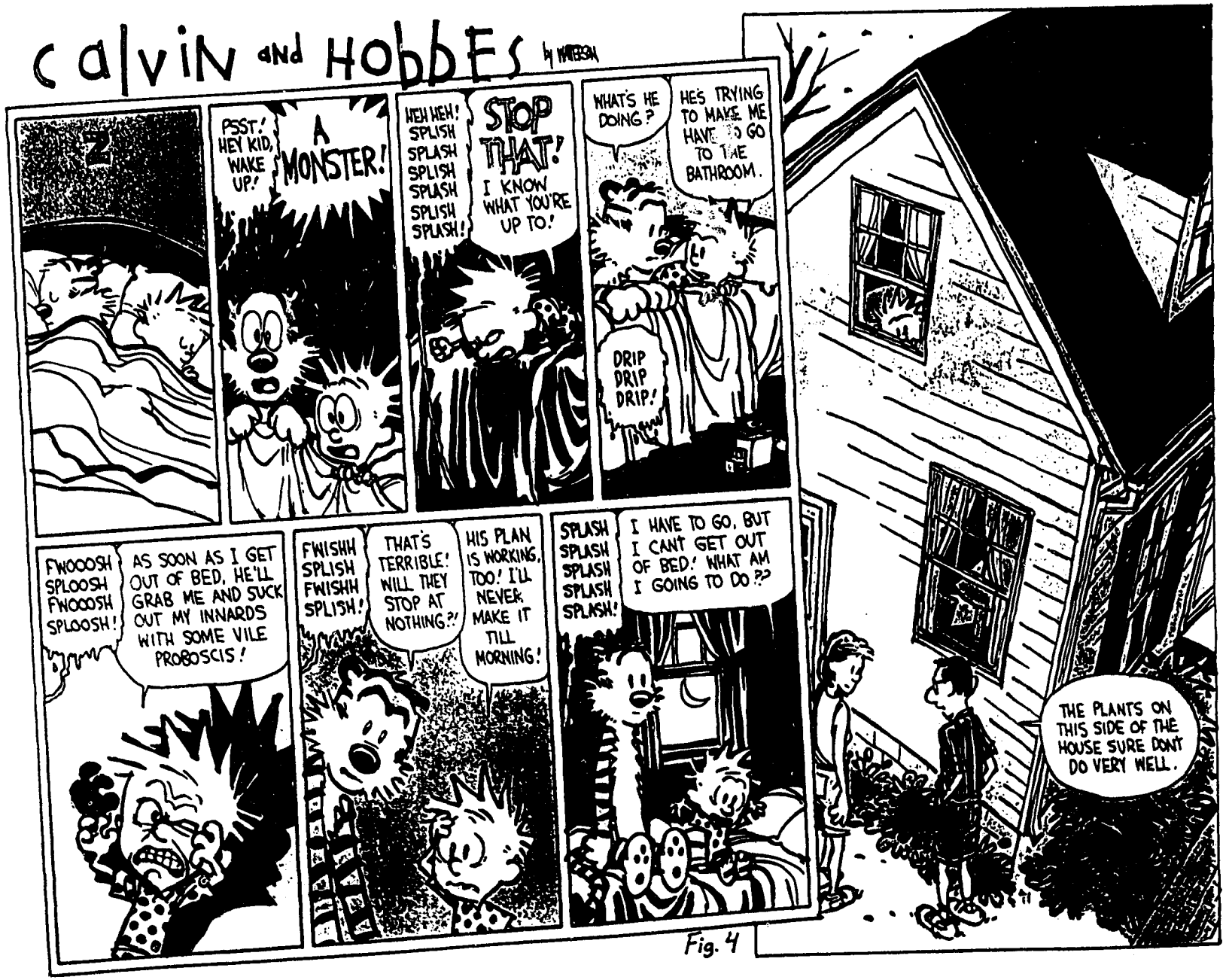
calvin and hobbes by watterson
2
PSST! HEY KID, WAKE UP!
A MONSTER!
HEH HEH! SPLISH SPLASH SPLISH SPLASH SPLISH SPLASH!
STOP THAT! I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE UP TO!
WHAT'S HE DOING?
HE'S TRYING TO MAKE ME HAVE TO GO TO THE BATHROOM.
DRIP DRIP DRIP!
FWOOOSH SPLOOSH FWOOOSH SPLOOSH!
AS SOON AS I GET OUT OF BED, HE'LL GRAB ME AND SUCK OUT MY INNARDS WITH SOME VILE PROBOSCIS!
FWISHH SPLISH FWISHH SPLISH!
THAT'S TERRIBLE! WILL THEY STOP AT NOTHING?!
HIS PLAN IS WORKING, TOO! I'LL NEVER MAKE IT TILL MORNING!
SPLASH SPLASH SPLASH SPLASH SPLASH!
I HAVE TO GO, BUT I CAN'T GET OUT OF BED! WHAT AM I GOING TO DO??
THE PLANTS ON THIS SIDE OF THE HOUSE SURE DON'T DO VERY WELL.

Fig. 4

expression to the perceptive child's view of an adult world that often makes little sense. Watterson, in calling our attention to the relatively harmless fact that the sound of running water exacerbates the problem of someone who needs to pee, and by calling attention to the major role that irrational fears play in the lives of all children, but especially of imaginative ones such as Calvin, falls squarely in this tradition of child-championing writers.

The enclosure that interests me most in this strip, however, is the one that a perceiver may erect just after assimilating the second-last panel. Once again, we have a protagonist in a predicament, the solution to which will almost certainly be excluded from the enclosure of conscious thought by those readers who have forgotten how children think. Such readers will create a state of latent comedy as soon as they attempt to solve Calvin's dilemma by confining themselves to a code of conduct that permits one to urinate only in porcelain toilets. When these readers take in the last panel and realize how Calvin has bested the monster under his bed, they are forced to include what they have unjustly excluded in anticipating the strip's climactic panel. Notice also that, just as Keaton made available to our perception the ultimate twist that both the train track and narrative would take in the sequence from *The General*, so too does Watterson make Calvin's solution to his problem somewhat available by placing the window of

Calvin's room smack in the middle of the second-last panel. Moreover, the window itself and the fact that it is one that communicates with the outside is made obvious by the yellow crescent moon that commands the centre of the frame. Because Watterson has drawn the panel this way, our chances of not excluding the ultimate solution are increased and we have more of a sense, after assimilating the whole strip, that we have excluded what ought not to have been excluded.

Watterson's genius really shines, however, in the effects he achieves by the last panel he has drawn and by the conspicuous absence of the panel that he *has not* drawn. The perceiver of the cartoon must draw the punch line for him or herself and in so doing become aware of his or her failure to privilege Calvin's unusual behaviour as s/he anticipated what solution the final panel would offer. On the other hand, although the reader may experience a mild reminder of the human inclination to be overly limiting as a perceiver, such feelings are counterbalanced in this strip by the reader's sense of superiority to Calvin's parents, neither of whom is in on the solution to the mystery. Despite having just committed an act of unjust exclusion by not foreseeing how Calvin would thwart the monster's scheme, we can experience some satisfaction, given that our state of knowledge is superior to that of Calvin's parents and, no less important, that our state of

knowledge is superior to those benighted souls who could not draw for themselves the panel that Watterson only implies.

Indeed, comedy often implicitly targets narrative incompetents--people who are not our equals at engaging texts and who, not surprisingly, often end up being the same people who insist that the world would be better off if everyone simply stuck to literal utterances and if courses that require students to read Jane Austen and William Shakespeare were replaced with business communication classes. Watterson's cartoon thus allows us to relish our own competence as co-producers of the construed text and our membership among the sapienti to whom relatively few words are sufficient. Asked to prove to someone outside of our circle that Calvin's solution is what it is, there is relatively little we could say for certain. As Stanley Fish explains:

> If everyone is continually executing interpretive strategies and in that act constituting texts, intentions, speakers, and authors, how can any one of us know whether he is a member of the same interpretive community as any other of us? The answer is that he can't, since any evidence brought forward to support the claim would itself be an interpretation. . . . The only proof of membership is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could ever prove to a third party: "we know". I say it to you now, knowing full well that you will agree with me (that is, understand) only if you already agree with me. (173)

By not drawing the climactic panel, Watterson counts on there being a community of like-minded readers all of whom get the joke and many of whom will relate to what the strip articulates about childhood. Moreover, by excluding what Calvin does from our sight, Watterson manages to retain enough decorum to avoid appalling his readers, many of whom would resist the notion of full-frontal nudity in the Sunday funnies.

Bringing together Bill Watterson, Buster Keaton, and Charles Dickens may strike some as a bit unorthodox, yet the latter two at least are strongly linked in that each man's art was profoundly influenced by an early childhood immersion in "illegitimate" theatre, specifically vaudeville and pantomime. Keaton himself, at the age of four, was the star of his parents' vaudeville act, "The Three Keatons." This act was not pantomime, of course, in that there appeared on stage neither Harlequin nor Columbine, nor Pantaloon, nor Clown. Nevertheless, the Keatons' act certainly depended on what would later be termed "slapstick" comedy, chiefly little Buster's being buffeted about the stage by his father. Keaton himself described what a spectator who watched "The Three Keatons" would be witness to: "'I'd just simply get in my father's way all the time and get kicked all over the stage'" (Dardis 2). True pantomime, of course, offered plenty of this kind of physical comedy--like Keaton, the great pantomime Clown Joseph Grimaldi

(whose memoirs Dickens edited) was an accomplished and gifted acrobat/stunt man.

Moreover, much of silent film comedy owes a profound debt to English pantomime and vaudeville. English stage actor George Harris, who eventually was recruited to work in America for Mack Sennett, recalls in an interview:

> When I first got on to the Sennett lot, Mr. Sennett said to me, "I'd like you to go up into Story department." And I said, "But Mr. Sennett, I've never ever written for the screen, never done anything but--" "No. Just sit with the boys, and if you hear them talking about something that reminds you of something *you* had seen in an English pantomime or vaudeville sketch, you mention it to them." (*Comedy: A Serious Business*)

Much of what Harris had seen and what Sennett was after, were visual jokes that depended on causing the audience to experience a sudden turn of thought upon witnessing an unexpected twist of visual events.

Dickens himself described well this form of sight gag in an early essay entitled "The Pantomime of Life." In the following passage, he describes a key element of the role of Harlequin:

> Strange tricks--very strange tricks-- are also performed by the harlequin who holds for the time being the magic wand which we have just mentioned. The mere waving of it before a man's eyes *will dispossess his brains of all the notions previously stored there, and fill it with an entirely new set of ideas*; one gentle tap on the back will alter the colour of a man's coat completely; and there are some expert performers who, having this wand held first on

> one side and then the other, will change from side to side, turning their coats at every evolution, with so much rapidity and dexterity, that the quickest eye can scarcely detect their motions. Occasionally, the genius who confers the wand, wrests it from the hand of the temporary possessor, and consigns it to some new performer; on which occasions all the characters change sides, and then the race and the hard knocks begin anew. (emphasis added, 506)

Obviously, the words I have italicized here aptly describe what I have been calling the comic turn of thought.

Dickens's medium, of course, is neither the comic strip nor the silent film. Nevertheless, strongly influenced by the *trompes d'oeil* of pantomime, he propels his reader through turns of thought on almost every page, and many of those turns could be described fairly as comic. Consider the following passage, one that I perceive to be typical of him. At the opening of chapter 22 of *Pickwick Papers*, Tony Weller watches his son as the latter prepares for another of his master's peregrinations:

> "THAT 'ere your governor's luggage, Sammy?" inquired Mr Weller of his affectionate son, as he entered the yard of the Bull inn, Whitechapel, with a travelling bag and a small portmanteau.
>
> "You might ha' made a worser guess than that, old feller," replied Mr Weller the younger, setting down his burden in the yard, and sitting himself down upon it afterwards. "The Governor hisself'll be down here presently."
>
> "He's a cabbin' it, I suppose?" said the father.
>
> "Yes, he's a havin' two mile o' danger at eight-pence," responded the son. (379)

The comic turn of thought that interests me here relates to Sam's description of cabbing. When presented with the menu "a cabbin," many readers will erect an enclosure that will exclude the aspects of taking a cab in 1830s London that Sam's description privileges. As he often does, Dickens is poking fun at those who assign the wrong value to an entity. In this case, middle-class gentlemen such as Pickwick have wrongly included a two-mile cab ride through London in the category of that which is worth paying 8 pence for. To persist in this thinking, Sam reminds us, requires banishing from one's thoughts the hazardous driving practices that London cabbies were apparently guilty of. What I also see as a factor in the comedy here is the fact that the joke is about a spacial and social enclosure, the cab. The remark Sam makes could be taken to be a wry comment on the act of unjust exclusion that would be taking place if a gentleman were hiring the cab merely to keep the street-bound rabble out of his personal space and/or to consume conspicuously what his perceived social inferiors might not be able to afford to consume themselves. Dickens himself, of course, did not hesitate at all to rub shoulders with London's pedestrian masses, even when doing so involved entering the most disgusting quarters of the city.

The conversation between the Wellers, father and son, carries on, and takes another interesting turn:

> "How's mother-in-law this mornin'?" [asked the son.]
>
> "Queer, Sammy, queer," replied the elder Mr Weller, with impressive gravity. "She's been gettin' raythe in the Methodistical order lately, Sammy; and she is uncommon pious, to be sure. She's too good a creetur for me, Sammy. I feel I don't deserve her."
>
> "Ah," said Mr Samuel, "that's wery self-denyin' o' you."
>
> "Wery," replied his parent, with a sigh. "She's got hold o' some inwention for grown-up people being born again, Sammy; the new birth, I think they calls it. I should wery much like to see that system in haction, Sammy. I should wery much like to see your mother-in-law born again. Wouldn't I put her out to nurse!" (379)

Once again, the turn of thought that I wish to call attention to is the one at the end of the passage as quoted. Here, the joke involves metaphor, for the use of which Dickens is justly famous. The link between comedy and metaphor should come as no surprise, given the nature of metaphors and how perceivers read them. As the philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain in their essay "Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language":

> The metaphorical structuring of concepts is necessarily partial , and is reflected in the lexicon of the language--including the phrasal lexicon, which contains fixed-form expressions such as "be without foundation". Because concepts are metaphorically structured in a systematic way, e.g., THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS, it is possible for us to use expressions (*construct, foundation*) from one domain (BUILDINGS) to talk about corresponding concepts in the metaphorically defined domain (THEORIES). . . . The parts of the concept of a building which are used to structure the concept of the theory are the foundation and outer shell. The roof, internal rooms,

> staircases, and hallways are parts of a building that are not used as part of the concept of a theory. Thus the metaphorical concept THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS has a "used" part (foundation and outer shell) and an "unused" part (rooms, staircases, etc.). (307)

In declaring that he will put his born-again wife "'out to nurse,'" Tony Weller is pressing into service one of the "unused" parts of the metaphor that draws a Christian such as Mrs. Weller into association with a newborn. In having the senior Weller do so, Dickens is once again calling his reader's attention to an act of exclusion. When we construe the metaphor CHRISTIAN=NEWBORN in such a way that we will create the meaning that the Stigginsites who use it desire, we must privilege only some attributes of the two entities that make up the metaphor. However, there is nothing in the metaphor itself that *necessitates* that we privilege some of the entities' attributes over others. Latent comedy is therefore possible whenever we construe a metaphor, given that we privilege some of an entity's attributes over others that are nevertheless available to our perception. The comic turn of thought will occur when we are made to place in the enclosure of conscious thought any attributes that we have unjustly excluded when first construing the metaphor. In this case, Tony Weller's joke depends on his privileging those attributes of a baby that cause its parent to wish it away. In doing so, he is using a figure of speech called

"asteismus," in which "a speaker replies to another, using the first man's words in a different sense" (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*). Here, of course, the first man is no man at all, but Mrs. Weller, who has called herself "born again." It is a bit difficult to determine whether Mr. Weller *willfully* misunderstands his wife's meaning, but it is plain that he does resist participating in the construction of the meaning desired by her.

Latent comedy will also exist when we structure a concept by using a metaphor, but--over time--forget that we have done so. Lakoff and Johnson's essay sheds much light on this phenomenon (although they do not seem to be aware of the implications of their argument for comic theory). Drawing on the example of ARGUMENT IS WAR, they write:

> . . . ARGUMENT is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of WAR. The concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and consequently, the language is metaphorically structured.
>
> Moreover, this is the *ordinary* way of having an argument and talking about one. The normal way *for us* to talk about attacking a position is to use the words "attack a position". Our conventional ways of talking about arguments presuppose a metaphor we are hardly ever conscious of. (289)

Later in the essay, in a section entitled "Metaphorical Systematicity: Highlighting and Hiding," Lakoff and Johnson call attention to an observation by Michael Reddy, namely, that we habitually and unconsciously conceptualize language by means of what Reddy calls the

"conduit metaphor." This metaphor involves treating ideas as objects, linguistic expressions as containers, and communication as placing these ideas in containers and sending them off to another person. As Lakoff and Johnson point out, "This is so much the conventional way of thinking about language that it is sometimes hard to imagine that it might not fit reality. But if we look at what the conduit metaphor entails, we can see some of the ways it masks aspects of the communicative process" (293). When such aspects are unmasked, when we are made aware of the act of privileging we have engaged when "highlighting" some aspects and "hiding" others by conceptualizing an entity metaphorically, I would argue that we may well experience a moment of insight that is at least somewhat comic. Once again, however, I think that whether such a moment is genuinely comic or not has to do with other factors, including the relationship between what is initially excluded from the enclosure and what is initially included. In Tony Weller's utterance, for example, the aspects of being a newborn that he calls attention to are negative, whereas those aspects that we habitually call to mind in giving a lenient construction to the metaphor are positive. Moreover, the joke's success also relates to the fact that it targets a group of people, "born-again" Christians, who may be perpetrating their own acts of unjust exclusion if they conceive that only people like themselves belong in

the category "pleasing to God."

The elder Weller's vow to deprive his missus of those mammary founts that Nature has apparently supplied him with, highlights other features of Dickens's comedy that analysing enclosures can enlighten. One of these is Dickens's unmatched talent for *reductio ad absurdum*. Many of us, when presented with a premise that is not true, will lack the imaginative talent to break out of our understanding of the world as we already know it and recreate the world that would exist if the premise *were* true. Presented with "If x is true, then _____" the list of possibilities that the less imaginative will place into the enclosure of conscious thought will be sparser than that of the person who is able to exit from the habitual avenues of thought along which others will continue to travel. Dickens excels at filling the blank with that which has not occurred to the habitual-minded, but which the premise by no means rules out. For example, given the premise that the children at Dotheboys Hall lack feelings, Mrs. Squeers behaves altogether appropriately when, "having called up a little boy with a curly head, she wipe[s] her hands upon it" (154). In the same way, Trabb's boy hilariously pursues the premise that Pip is a formidable personage by "tremb[ling] violently in every limb, stagger[ing] out into the road, and cry[ing] to the populace, 'Hold me! I'm so frightened!' . . . " (266). As Swift

does in "A Modest Proposal," Dickens often authors a fictional world whose operations, though outrageous and bizarre, are nevertheless principled.

Dickens's method of challenging the behaviour and attitudes of those with minds less keen than his own is often to put into words an unforeseen yet possible implication of an assumption that his opposition has adopted. Finding themselves unable to endorse the implication, his opponents are forced to abandon their endorsement of the premise on which the implication is founded. The opening sentence of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is an instance of Dickens's talent in this rhetorical sport:

> As no lady or gentleman, with any claims to polite breeding, can possibly sympathise with the Chuzzlewit Family without being first assured of the extreme antiquity of the race, it is a great satisfaction to know that it undoubtedly descended in a direct line from Adam and Eve; and was, in the very earliest times, closely connected with the agricultural interest. (51)

Dickens, in this instance, is tackling the premise that the criterion which qualifies a family for public notice is its antiquity. With the skill of a World Cup fullback, Dickens deftly sends his opponent flying, wins control of the ball himself, and sets off in the opposite direction--all without committing a foul. To do so, he merely shows that, because all people descend from the same couple, they all merit consideration for inclusion in public discourse. Surprisingly, it is the very criterion by which snobs have excluded their

perceived inferiors, antiquity of race, that qualifies those same inferiors, the descendants of Adam and Eve, for inclusion in the snobs' thoughts and discourses. In our time of relatively free speech, it is easy to forget that Dickens had to fight for the chance to write about almost whomever he chose, regardless of their socio-economic status, and to have his works included in the category "Literature" nevertheless.

Notice also in the sentence that opens *Martin Chuzzlewit* that Dickens creates a state of latent comedy by inviting us to misread his narrator as a peerage groupie. This narrative persona, whose voice we hear from the opening of the sentence until we reach "Adam and Eve," is someone whose value system would be just the opposite of that which Dickens would have us endorse by the time we reach the end of his sentence. In effect, Dickens is clever enough to string together a sequence of signs that, until "Adam and Eve," will support the groupie voice and the value system that it implies, to wit, one that promotes the idea that some families are superior by virtue of their antiquity. With the appearance of "Adam and Eve," however, this same sign sequence turns out to refer to a value system diametrically opposed to the first. The opening sentence of *Martin Chuzzlewit* thus depends for its effects on the reader's being made aware that, until the sign sequence "Adam and Eve," s/he may have been excluding from conscious

thought the meaning that the words up to that point ultimately support once they are integrated with "Adam and Eve," namely, that all humans merit consideration for inclusion in public discourse. Of course, no reader who knows Dickens well will altogether fail to suspect that he is being facetious, especially as those readers recognize the linguistic markers of verbal irony that Dickens is careful to place along the reader's way as s/he travels the route from "As" to "Adam." The true voice is thus available to our perception much earlier than the appearance of "Adam and Eve," just as the voice of a good friend on the telephone is always recognizable at some level of consciousness even if that friend is pulling a prank by disguising his or her own voice and pretending to be someone else.

Comedy is also achieved in the sentence, however, by a strategy that D.H Monro has termed "universe changing." He describes this comic technique as "shattering . . . mental structures by obtruding the inconvenient, inappropriate fact" (46). He goes on to describe this phenomenon as "the imparting into one sphere of something belonging to another" (62), a description which calls to mind Schopenhauer's famous definition of the ludicrous as the "unexpected subsumption of an object under a conception which in some respects is different from it" (Lauter 359). What Monro describes as a mental structure is what I would call generally

an enclosure and, in this case, a discourse. I would hesitate, however, to suggest that what is obtruded is "inappropriate" to the enclosure or that it necessarily "belongs" in a different enclosure. Nor would I describe what happens as a *changing* of universes. Instead, I would describe the phenomenon of which the first sentence of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is an instance as moving into one discourse a sign that *has* been residing in, but need not be *forced* to reside in a second discourse. When Dickens brings the signs "Adam and Eve" and "agricultural interest" into each other's company by ushering them into the same sentence, and when in so doing he makes the point that a family's claim to public notice should be its antics rather than its antiquity, he is promoting the same cause that Thackeray is promoting when he invites Colonel Newcome into the Bryanston Square drawing room of Mrs. Hobson Newcome, and thus into the drawing rooms and consciousnesses of all the contemporary readers of *The Newcomes*.

Moreover, unlike Schopenhauer, I would hesitate to privilege one of the sentence's guests over another by describing the ludicrous as an object being *subsumed* under a conception. Even though the peerage history discourse walks on stage first in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and even though it ends up having more lines (literally, words) than the Biblical discourse, nevertheless the opening sentence of the novel performs an act of literary

criticism on each of these specific discourses at the same time that it comments on contemporary notions of public discourse. By the time we are finished with Dickens's sentence, we are made aware that Biblical discourse avoids phrases such as "connected with the agricultural interest" in favour of, for example, "the Lord God took the man, and put him in the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (Gen. 2: 15). Similarly, we become conscious of the acts of linguistic privileging that writers of family histories engage in when they choose Latinate phrases such as "extreme antiquity" over words that are probably less pretentious--"old age," for example.

In calling our attention to the nature of each of these discourses by making us aware of the kinds of words each includes and excludes, Dickens is undertaking a project quite like that which one of his fans, George Orwell, would undertake a century later in his famous essay "Politics and the English Language." In that essay, Orwell achieves a comic effect when he offers an example of the kind of writing that results when one is guilty of the linguistic "swindles and perversions" that Orwell criticizes in the essay. He writes:

> I am going to translate a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort. Here is a well-known verse from *Ecclesiastes:*
>
> "I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to

> the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all."

Here it is in modern English:

> "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account." (133)

Like all good parodists, Dickens and Orwell make fun of the parodied discourse by privileging to an exaggerated degree in their own texts what the writer of the parodied text has singled out for inclusion in what s/he has written--for example diction such as "agricultural interest" rather than "farming."

In addition, insightful parodies will often pointedly include that which the parodied text has plainly excluded. Monty Python's comment on Biblical discourse, *Life of Brian*, raises a laugh from many when it has the Mary-like mother of Brian respond to a query about her virginity by inviting the enquirer, in decidedly un-Biblical language, to "piss off." If one were to parody Dickens's own writing, one would be sure to include what Dickens himself may be guilty of overprivileging (virtuous children come to mind), what Dickens unjustly excludes (for example, young women who are

admirable *because* of their sexual knowledge), and perhaps even what Dickens has *justly* excluded (obscene language, perhaps). In the productions of Chaucer, Rabelais, Cervantes, and Sterne--of Dickens, Joyce, Monty Python, and Robin Williams--the subject of comedy is as often the nature of the discourses which record human activities, as it is human nature itself.

As the discussions of these various texts have begun to show, surprise and elucidation are by no means minor elements in the comic. Though not the *only* sine qua non of comedy, the turn of thought may be one of three or four elements the absence of which would preclude comedy. Moreover, what the concept of the enclosure hopes to offer the study of comedy is the opportunity to merge in one description both what is comic in the happenings of the comic text's imagined world and what is comic in the happenings of the mind of the perceiver as s/he comes to know of that imagined world. By understanding that the intensity of the comic moment depends on the quantity of acts of enclosure recognition and by understanding that this intensity increases when the relationship between the *initially* included and *ultimately* included is a relationship of diametrical opposition, we may dramatically improve our ability to communicate with the comic spirit.

II. Narrative Mysteries, Comic Catastrophes, and the (Re)cognition of Enclosures

> Mr Inspector declined eating, but assented to the proposal of a glass of brandy and water. Mixing this cold, and pensively consuming it, he broke at intervals into such soliloquies as that he never did know such a move, that he never had been so gravelled, and that what a game was this to try the sort of stuff a man's opinion of himself was made of! Concurrently with these comments, he more than once burst out a laughing, with the half-enjoying and half-piqued air of a man, who had given up a good conundrum, after much guessing, and been told the answer.
>
> --*Our Mutual Friend*

A Dickens novel often presents its reader with a host of mysteries. What Edgar Allen Poe wrote of *Barnaby Rudge* applies to much of Dickens's writing: "Every point is so arranged as to perplex the reader, and whet his desire for elucidation" (*Essays and Reviews* 232). When that moment of elucidation comes, readers of Dickens will often experience a comic turn of thought. In some cases, Dickens's words will leave an experienced reader in the dark for only a very short time. Applying the terminology from the previous chapter, one would say that the state of latent comedy does not last long. On the other hand, the solution to one of Dickens's narrative riddles may elude the reader literally for months. In some cases, moreover, the reader is not even aware that s/he is in the dark until Dickens lights up the narrative with one of his famous, and sometimes ingenious, plot revelations. In this case, we would have a reader who, in construing the text, has erected an enclosure without being aware of it, and perhaps unjustly excluded a

construction of Dickens's words that will turn out to be the "correct" construction once the plot revelation has occurred. This chapter focuses on these states of darkness and light, of not knowing and knowing, and the turn of thought that occurs when the reader moves from one state to the other. When are these moments comic and when not? What does the model reader, the kindred reader, include or exclude in his or her mind to construct this comic text? What must Dickens include *in* or exclude *from* his written text in order for the reader to experience a *comic* turn of thought? Finally, what can happen to short-circuit the whole enterprise of comic elucidation?

In order to qualify as comic turns of thought, moments of elucidation would involve the following: the reader's rapid recognition and revision of multiple enclosures; a menu of entities from which the reader will initially privilege for inclusion that which will not ultimately be included; a diametrical relationship between the initially included and ultimately included, and between the initially excluded and ultimately excluded; and, finally, emotions of joy and amusement, each a common element of the comic.

The works I have privileged for discussion in this chapter are, chiefly, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Hard Times*. Admittedly, these may strike one as odd

choices, given that neither novel has had a reputation for happy plot revelations of the sort we find, say, in *Tom Jones,* in which the hero turns out *not* to have been sleeping with his own mother, and to be a blood relation of his benefactor. In the case of *Our Mutual Friend*, this reputation is well-deserved indeed; in the case of *Hard Times*, I will argue, the reputation is decidedly unfair: as I hope to show, the work contains one of the most successful and comedic[1] plot revelations that Dickens ever produced. Returning to *Our Mutual Friend*, there are several reasons for it to be included. First, the scholarship of Earle Davis has demonstrated that Dickens borrowed quite heavily for the novel's plot from the hit comedy of 1832, Sheridan-Knowles's *The Hunchback*. In part from Davis's work, it is clear that Dickens intended to achieve a comic effect when Boffin reveals to Bella Wilfer that he is not a miser. We also know that the novel had the desired effect on at least one person intelligent and committed enough to author and have published a monograph on Victorian novels and that a similarly qualified literary critic experienced and recorded a reaction as vehemently negative as one can imagine. Together, the fact of these two reactions helps emphasize the role of the reader in creating the comic. Moreover, the novel also contains a second prominent plot surprise that

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[1]By this word I mean to express the idea "resembling a stage comedy."

Dickens worked carefully on, so much so in fact, that he took pains to have even the novel's cover involved in laying the ground for the surprise. As a result, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Hard Times,* taken together, offer an unusual opportunity to put the analytical tool presented in the last chapter to the test. If it is indeed an effective tool, one expects it to do the job of demonstrating what has gone right in the case of *Hard Times* and so very wrong in the case of *Our Mutual Friend*.

To pave the way for the test, however, it helps to be acquainted with what I will call Dickens's transparent mysteries. They abound in all of his fiction and distinguish the experience one has in reading a Dickens novel. In each case, the narrator withholds information from the reader, who nevertheless finds him or herself able to know what that information is, with very little effort. Here, the darkness is dispelled almost as soon as the words have been assimilated. One example of such a transparent mystery occurs in the middle of Mrs. Leo Hunter's "Public Breakfast" cum costume party, which is described in chapter 15 of *Pickwick Papers*. At this point in the proceedings, all *chez* Hunter is well. This state of affairs changes, however, when Mr. Leo Hunter announces the arrival of an apparently distinguished guest, Mr. Charles Fitz-Marshall, to whom Mrs. Hunter beckons from across the room:

> "Coming, my dear Ma'am," cried a voice, "as quick as I can--crowds of people--full room--hard work--very."
>
> Mr. Pickwick's knife and fork fell from his hand. He stared across the table at Mr. Tupman, who had dropped *his* knife and fork, and was looking as if he were about to sink into the ground without further notice.
>
> "Ah!" cried the voice, as its owner pushed his way among the last five and twenty Turks, officers, cavaliers, and Charles the Seconds, that remained between him and the table, "regular mangle--Baker's patent--not a crease in my coat, after all this squeezing--might have 'got up my linen,' as I came along--ha! ha! not a bad idea, that--queer thing to have it mangled when it's upon one, though--trying process--very."
>
> With these broken words, a young man dressed as a naval officer made his way up to the table, and presented to the astonished Pickwickians, the identical form and features of Mr. Alfred Jingle. (286-287)

The information that is withheld throughout the passage is, of course, the true identity of Mrs. Hunter's recently-arrived guest. Because of Jingle's distinct idiolect, virtually all readers following the serial would know to whom "the voice" belongs by the time they have hit Jingle's distinctive "very" at the end of the first paragraph quoted above. At this point, such readers would be able to take pleasure in their success at having turned the lights on themselves, as it were.

For the reader, the idea "Jingle has arrived" is a comic turn of thought in that it quickly supplants whatever meanings the reader initially assigned to "Mr Charles Fitz-Marshall," and replaces them with less grand but more welcome connotations. Most readers would be content to see Mrs. Hunter's

silly pretentiousness given a shake, and any qualms the reader might feel respecting the demise of Jingle's latest alias (once he realizes that he has been noticed by the Pickwickians) would be offset by the chance to see the trickster's resourcefulness in finding his way out of a new jam. The turn of thought the reader experiences thus renders this passage what the narratologist Menakhem Perry terms an "inverted text," one in which "the reader is required in light of new information . . . to substitute for the main [hypothesis] integrating the beginning of the text another [hypothesis] diametrically opposed to it" (61, note 16).

Just in case there are readers who remain in the dark respecting this transparent mystery, Dickens has his narrator shed considerable light on the subject in the last sentence of the passage: "With these words, a young man presented . . . the identical form and features of Mr. Alfred Jingle." Note, however, that even at this point we have not been informed outright that the newcomer is unquestionably Jingle. Literally, Mr. Charles Fitz-Marshall only bears an identical resemblance to the man who eloped with Mr. Tupman's Rachael. The point of view adopted by the narrator here is thus that of the Pickwickians--who have apparently begun to exercise caution in making assumptions about any phenomenon presenting itself to their senses.

That this passage meets the criteria set out above is plain, and several enclosure revisions are possible here. Notice that for a reader who has been unaware of a context that would render sensical the apparently non-sensical plural form "Charles the Seconds," Dickens has now supplied one via Jingle. As well, the same team of Dickens and Jingle have brought into association two entities that many readers would have heretofore mutually excluded from each other's company, namely, a person in a mob and a suit in a mangle. It is part of Jingle's charming unorthodoxy that he--unlike most of us--gives somewhat sincere consideration to the implications of the scheme of actually pressing one's clothes in this decidedly unusual but modestly effective fashion. Finally, notice the principle of enclosure-revision behind Jingle's hallmark phrase "--very." The effect of including it at the end of an utterance is to force the reader to rewrite the text preceding the "very" as more remarkable than originally thought. Just when we think we have heard it all from Jingle, he favours us with an encore text even more noteworthy than the one we construe before we assimilate the intensifying "very."

Besides the "very," a distinctive feature of Jingle's idiolect is the prevalence of dashes, many of which signal the absence in the written text of the explicit logical connections between the signs that Jingle does actually give utterance to. These gaps are analogous to the spaces between the

individual panels of a comic strip. Such gaps shift much of the burden of meaning-construction onto the shoulders of the reader, who must be able to follow Jingle's own eccentric trains of thought if the entire communication process is to be prevented from running off the rails. Notice, as well, that the key idea of the passage, "Jingle is back," is one that the reader must transport him or herself to with somewhat more than the effort required were Dickens merely to have told us at the passage's onset that Fitzmarshall is really Jingle. Indeed, to have done that would have deprived the reader of the journey altogether. This unspoken information, this unwritten text, thus resembles the panel that Bill Watterson did *not* draw in the *Calvin and Hobbes* strip discussed in the last chapter. What the reader ultimately places in the enclosure of conscious thought has been conspicuously excluded from the written text, with the result that the work of propelling the main idea into that enclosure falls to the reader.

A distinguishing feature of this passage, and the legion like it in Dickens's works, is the relationship of mutual understanding that exists between author and audience in moments such as this one. The passage operates almost as a test of the reader's devotion to the serial in that only those who have committed to memory Jingle's idiolect will write the unwritten text based on Jingle's speech alone. This narrative strategy

contributes to the sense one so often has in reading Dickens that he is writing for his fans. He and his kindred readers share a bond in that they are thinking roughly the same unspoken thoughts. Excluded from this party are those readers who have forgotten Jingle's Jingleisms, which would have been last encountered two monthly numbers previous to the one in which chapter 15 first appeared. It is telling also that in the title of the chapter, Dickens refers to Jingle as "AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE" (214), the adjective "old" conveying a sense of affectionate familiarity, and the noun "acquaintance" suggesting a social bond between the reader and Dickens's character. Given that the acquaintance in this case is an agent of carnivalization, Jingle, there is here a typically Dickensian placement of disruption within a context of familiarity, security, and safety. Unless the reader really *is* a Mrs. Leo Hunter, she observes Jingle's disruptions without fear of being herself disrupted.

A second kind of Dickens mystery that may lead to comic elucidation is the one Poe describes, that is, the game that Dickens openly invites us to engage in whenever the text piques our curiosity. These are mysteries proper. In such a work, the narrator pointedly withholds the information necessary for the reader to form a final hypothesis concerning what is going on in the imagined world of the novel, yet offers plenty of information for

the reader to form tentative hypotheses. As in the case of the transparent mystery, that the narrator *is* withholding information is known to the reader. This will be the case in neither the Boffin nor the Bounderby plots of *Our Mutual Friend* and *Hard Times* respectively.

Knowing just how much information to keep back requires careful judgment on the author's part. To elicit the ideal reaction from the reader the author must foreshadow the mystery's revelations to the extent that the reader will have a fair chance of catching on, yet not to the extent that the reader solves the narrative's riddle too soon and thus becomes disqualified and perhaps unwilling to continue play. Thus, the author faces the difficult task of creating a sign sequence which will keep the mystery's solution outside of the reader's enclosure of conscious thought, yet will cause the solution to linger just outside the boundaries of that enclosure throughout the reading of the work. The words included in the written text must therefore mutually support a wrong initial interpretation at the same time as they hint at and ultimately support the correct final interpretation. Creating such a written text is difficult enough in a 25-word riddle; to accomplish it in a full-length novel requires admirable skill indeed. What is more, the difficulty increases if one chooses, as Dickens often did, to create an *inverted*

text, one in which a genuinely virtuous character[2] seems at first to be otherwise. The best narrative of this kind should thus be a friendly contest of wits between the author and reader, winnable by either party. Moreover, the author and audience must trust that they share an ethos that will render such a narrative puzzle a mutually satisfying venture regardless of who "wins." Ultimately, the parties' ability to agree that the solution is a just and happy one will reveal a communion of likemindedness that is the hallmark of many successful comedies.

The form of Dickens's major works--the long, usually illustrated, serial novel--is rich in potential for such narrative riddles. In the first place, the length of the novel in words and the length of time from the commencement of the game to its conclusion (usually nineteen months) allow the writer ample opportunity to embed many clues and to pique the reader's interest with many mysterious happenings. What is more, the reader confronted with so many words over such a long period of time is likely to forget even very obvious clues that s/he may have read literally months before their significance is made clear. In light of the circumstances under which Dickens's serials were first read, it may not be overly ingenious to suggest that the encoded message communicated on the watch sent from Mr. to

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[2]Abel Magwitch epitomizes this type of character in Dickens.

Mrs. Clenham in *Little Dorrit*, to wit, "'Do Not Forget!'" (406), is as much an admonition from author to reader as it is a fictional one from husband to wife. Indeed, the Dickens reader would be well-advised to keep the *Little Dorrit* admonition in mind two novels later, as s/he reads *Great Expectations*. In passing their eyes over that text, it is fairly easy for readers to have buried in their minds the tavern scene in which Pip receives a pair of one-pound notes from a man who possesses the file Pip stole for Magwitch. When, upon learning 17 weeks later that the transported Magwitch has been the source of Pip's income all along, one might be a little miffed at having neglected to remember the file episode and excluded Magwitch from consideration for the source of Pip's fortune.

On the other hand, the reader had the advantage of being able to peruse, pore over, and reread a relatively small portion of the novel for up to a month before the next number would be published. As a result, especially keen readers would have the chance to etch scenes and details into their minds one number at a time by studying the usual thirty-two pages of text plus the two illustrations published with them. Readers could also speculate as a group about the novel's unfolding story. It was of course common in Dickens's time for his novels' instalments to be read aloud to a gathering of listeners, who would naturally discuss their evening's

entertainment just as people in our time discuss the goings-on in television serials. Advantages exist, then, on both the author's and readers' sides.

This relationship of friendly play between author and audience is a leading feature of the experience of reading one of Dickens's novels, and one of many potentially comic elements in these works. Hardly a novel is without a tantalizing riddle or two. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, for example, the narrator persistently piques our curiosity about the occupation of Jerry Cruncher. Commenting on Jarvis Lorry's cryptic phrase "Recalled to life" (itself a puzzler), Jerry makes the curious statement that he would be "'in a Blazing bad way, if recalling to life was to come into fashion'" (44). Typically, Dickens casts this gauntlet down to the reader at the very end of the chapter. As the game resumes, we are provided with more and more hints, such as the clay on Jerry's boots and the rust on his fingers (another chapter-concluding clue), until the solution to the riddle of his occupation is finally revealed in chapter 14 of book 2, 12 weeks into the novel's publication.

The most convoluted of Dickens's narrative riddles, however, is *Our Mutual Friend*. From its green wrapper to its final double-number, the novel is full of guessing games and surprises, not only those existing between the narrator and the reader, but some which exist among the characters

themselves. Notice, for example, how the novel opens with the same sort of occupational guessing game as that involving Jerry Cruncher:

> In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise, a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it, floated on the Thames. . . . The figures in this boat were those of a strong man with ragged grizzled hair and a sun-browned face, and a dark girl of nineteen or twenty, sufficiently like him to be recognizable as his daughter. The girl rowed, pulling a pair of sculls very easily; the man, with the rudder-lines slack in his hands, and his hands loose in his waistband, kept an eager look out. He had no net, hook, or line, and he could not be a fisherman; his boat had no cushion for a sitter, no paint, no inscription, no appliance beyond a rusty boathook and a coil of rope, and he could not be a waterman; his boat was too crazy and too small to take in cargo for delivery, and he could not be a lighterman or river-carrier; there was no clue to what he looked for, but he looked for something, with a most intent and searching gaze. (43)

This passage is a microcosm of the novel's world of riddles. Here, Dickens knows, of course, exactly what the two figures are doing, but refuses to have the narrator tell us openly. Instead, the reader becomes a sort of Sherlock Holmes spectator who must deduce the occupation of the two riverboat occupants based on the facts presented to us by the narrator's words. Perhaps, though, "Sherlock Holmes" is giving us more independence than we really have. It might be more fitting to characterize the reader as Nigel Bruce's Dr. Watson, puzzling over the pair as the all-knowing Basil

Rathbone guides our speculations and limits our mental search with assertions whose truth is unquestionable: "he could not be a waterman. . . . he could not be a lighterman or river-carrier; . . . he looked for something. . . ." These limiting statements provide explicit directions about what the reader should exclude from his or her hypotheses. Coming from such a narrator, they carry the same weight as a premise in a syllogism. The man in the boat is NOT a waterman by definition/for the sake of argument/for the sake of riddle. As in any brainteaser of this kind, we are meant to accept such limiting statements as necessary guidelines that define the game, and thus we exclude from our thoughts what the riddler/narrator tells us to exclude. In some cases, as in this passage, the avenues for speculation that are closed off serve to make our search for the solution a bit easier, just as players of Hide and Seek may agree to hide only in a single yard or room. On the other hand, such rules can sometimes make participation more difficult. In the opening passage of *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens makes it increasingly tough for us to offer any guess at all as he rules out one occupation after another, with the result that we are increasingly dependent on him to supply the answer. Such a dependency may make some readers a little uncomfortable to the extent that Dickens has the knowledge/power and they do not.

In the opening chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*, what we are ultimately forced to include in the enclosure of conscious thought is a fairly shocking circumstance, namely that there are people at the heart of the British Empire's flagship city who make their living by trolling for corpses and pocketing any valuables found with them. Although this is in no way a happy thought, it poses a direct challenge to the excluding and anti-comic Mr. Podsnap, who has "acquired a peculiar flourish of his right arm in often clearing the world of its most difficult problems, by sweeping them behind him" (174).

The main mystery in *Our Mutual Friend*, however, is that surrounding the Harmon murder. This plot is one of Dickens's most meticulously conceived. In fact, Dickens himself attests to the careful design of the Harmon conundrum in the lead paragraph of the novel's postscript. In it, he describes how he worked enough clues into the novel to acquit himself of any subsequent charge of narrative misconduct:

> When I devised this story, I foresaw the likelihood that a class of readers and commentators would suppose that I was at great pains to conceal what I was at great pains to suggest: namely, that Mr John Harmon was not slain, and that Mr John Rokesmith was he. Pleasing myself that the supposition might in part arise out of some ingenuity in the story, and thinking it worthwhile, in the interests of art, to hint to an audience that an artist (of whatever denomination) may perhaps be trusted to know what he is about in his vocation, if they will concede

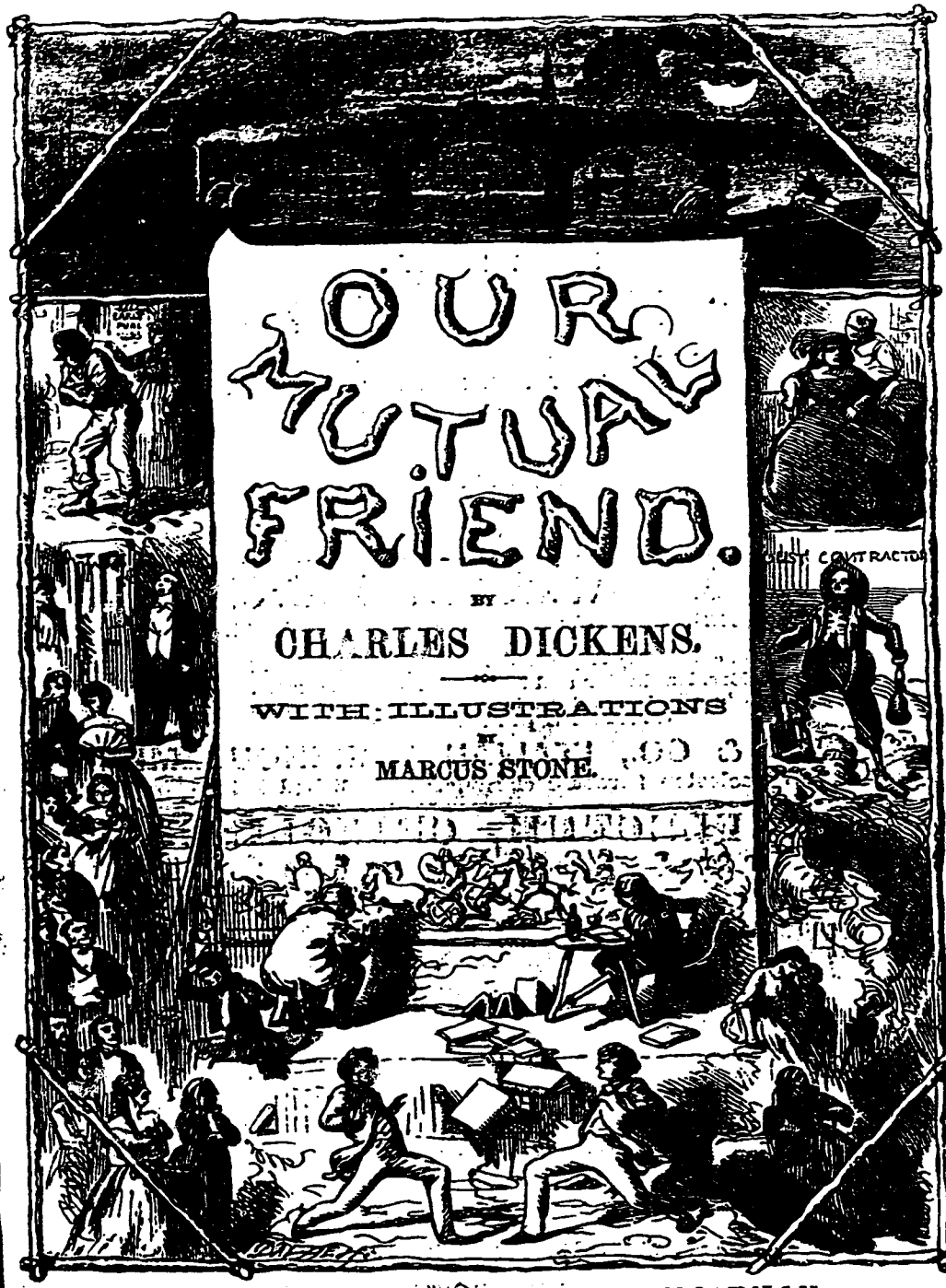
> him a little patience, I was not alarmed by the anticipation. (893)

Dickens's task, as I have suggested, is a challenging one. Given what he wrote in the postscript, Dickens clearly believed that he had dealt fairly with the reader of *Our Mutual Friend*.

To *some* extent, he has. That John Harmon is Julius Handford is hinted at by the fact that the two names share the same initials, by the fact that Handford acts so strangely when he sees the corpse, and by the visual clues evident in Marcus Stone's cover design for *Our Mutual Friend* (see figure 5 on the following page). According to Frederic J. Kitton, who interviewed Stone while preparing his study of Dickens's original illustrators, Dickens told Stone to "'Give a vague idea [of the plot of *Our Mutual Friend*] . . . the more vague the better'" (Kitton 196).

And Stone did just that in the vignette of the two gentlemen prominently displayed at the bottom center of the wrapper. The two figures are of roughly the same height and build, appear from their clothing to be of the same social class, and together form a symmetrical mirror image. These details suggest that the two characters are somehow the same man. Moreover, looking at an original wrapper or a good copy thereof, one can notice two more cleverly disguised details that hint at the solution to the

No. 3. JULY, 1864. Price 1s.



OUR MUTUAL FRIEND.

BY

CHARLES DICKENS.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

MARCUS STONE.

LONDON: CHAPMAN AND HALL, PICCADILLY.

LONDON PRINTED BY W. CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET, AND CHARING CROSS.

Figure 5

mystery. The first is a rope that is barely perceptible as it encircles the left character's neck and trails down his chest. The deceased man's body is dragged by such a rope when Gaffer Hexam retrieves it from the Thames. The second detail is the difference in the faces of the two men: the face of the man on the left is shaded with diagonal lines; his counterpart's is not. This detail suggests the disfigured corpse of the assaulted man, whose body was also battered as a result of drifting among the river traffic before Hexam could find it. The clear-faced man is the very-much-alive John Harmon/Julius Handford/John Rokesmith. Stone has also highlighted the contrast between the aliveness of the man and the lifelessness of the corpse by slightly intensifying both the facial expression and the stance of the right-hand figure. Readers who study the wrapper carefully can thus confirm any suspicions that Julius Handford is connected to the corpse (perhaps a twin?), especially considering the posture of recoiling revulsion to be seen in the right-hand figure. Readers may even guess that Handford/Rokesmith is Harmon or Harmon's twin brother, if they notice the juxtaposition of the Handford/Rokesmith figure with the figure of Bella Wilfer immediately to the right. Bella, dressed in mourning for the husband she never wed, is the woman in the bottom right-hand corner of the monthly wrapper. Stone's wrapper design is, then, a fine example of a puzzle that manages to tantalize

with its hints while it avoids giving the solution away. The conundrum telegraphs its message to the reader quite obviously, but makes sure that the message is nonetheless sent in code.

That is not to say that the specific details of the crime are discernible to even the most rigorous reader: even if one could guess that Rokesmith is Harmon, the real identity of the drowned man, George Radfoot, is altogether unknowable before the solution is provided in the ninth number. Here Dickens has loaded the dice against us. Other cheats work their way in as well. No question that it is fair to put us off the scent of the connection between Rokesmith and Harmon by letting us in early on the connection between Rokesmith and Handford, but consider the titles of chapters two and three: "The Man from Somewhere" and "Another Man." Is it fair for these titles to mislead us into thinking that John Harmon, the "Man from Somewhere," and Julius Handford, the only character introduced in chapter three besides the Inspector and the only character to whom the title of chapter could refer, are different men? On the other hand, I can hear Dickens insisting that "Another Man" could refer to the deceased George Radfoot and that it is the reader who is to be blamed for being blind to the message that the corpse is not Harmon's but someone else's. I suspect there would be no winning the argument with him.

Similar misgivings and suspicions enter one's thoughts once the solution has been read and scrutinized. Because the solution is rather involved and its details are difficult to recall, a summary is in order, and simply reading mine should bring some problems into relief. Here it is:

> As he sails to London with his life savings, John Harmon befriends the ship's third mate, George Radfoot, whose build and background resemble Harmon's own. Unfortunately for Harmon, Radfoot is no friend at all, but a thief plotting to steal Harmon's cash, 700 pounds stored only in a valise. Learning that Harmon's deceased father has assigned his son a bride and learning that Harmon desires "to see and form some judgment of [her, and] to try Mrs Boffin and give her a glad surprise" (424), Radfoot apparently suggests that Harmon should disguise himself for a few hours and that the two men would "put themselves in [Bella's] way" (424) to see what she is like. Apparently, Radfoot's scheme would somehow be facilitated if Harmon leaves the ship unrecognized. Radfoot's plan goes against him, however, and he himself is savagely beaten just after he has drugged and beaten Harmon. At the time, Radfoot is wearing Harmon's clothes (Dickens does not make it altogether clear why Radfoot would have wanted to wear them. Perhaps he wishes to be able to carry Harmon's valise away without arousing suspicion.) Radfoot's assailants then dump both men into the Thames, Harmon alone surviving. It takes two days for Harmon to clear his head of the drug he has been slipped, during which time he decides to go ahead with his plan of "proving Bella" (427). After twelve days Radfoot's corpse is discovered, the "Body Found" notice comes to Harmon's attention, and he goes to view the corpse, assuming the alias "Julius Handford." Soon after this event (recorded in chapter three), he adopts the second alias John Rokesmith, at which point chapter four begins.

Got all that? The length of this solution is a problem in itself because of the

sheer amount of information we have to sort through. When we hear the answer to a riddle, we often go through a split-second adjustment period in which we reread and redefine the terms of the riddle's initial question. In presenting us with the solution to the Harmon mystery, however, Dickens forces us to cope with a veritable host of mental recalculations. Almost every word and act of Rokesmith's must be viewed in a new light, especially those that may have caused us to question his honour and integrity, which Dickens probably wants us to view as impeccable. As it turns out, Rokesmith belongs to a familiar type of Dickens character: "the wronged man." Typically, the prejudices of other characters or of society force this character to face a false charge of wrongdoing. Subsequently, the charges are proven ill-founded, and a comic effect occurs insofar as the narrative moves from a state of injustice to justice. A precursor of John Harmon, in this respect, is the equally honourable and similarly secretive Charles Darnay in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Despite the movement that we make from injustice to justice and from confusion to understanding as we read "A Solo and a Duett," Dickens's chapter fails to satisfy partly because the delivery of key information is clumsy and partly because the job of reconstructing the suspicious Rokesmith into the virtuous Harmon can not be completed quickly, if at all.

Much of a revelation scene's effect depends on timing. In successful scenes of this kind, the reader assimilates the revealed information quickly and performs the necessary tasks of revising the text as initially construed almost instantly. This rapidity of mental processing is analogous to that of a computer spreadsheet program that alters an entire set of calculations the moment a preexisting number has been changed by the user: one keystroke and the new financial forecast appears before your eyes. It is possible to argue that Dickens does achieve this effect at the instant in the text when John Rokesmith addresses himself as "'John Harmon'" (423). That Dickens was conscious of the surprise that some readers would experience upon reading these words is suggested by the physical break in the text at this point.

The explanation that follows the break, however, is hardly one that can be absorbed quickly, even when it is read in the form of a summary such as the one above. Although Dickens has Harmon *re*tell the story afresh to himself and thus include for the reader's benefit what Harmon might not really need to remind himself of, nevertheless the reader must simultaneously construct a new character, George Radfoot, and reconstruct an old one, Rokesmith. Moreover, the reader must absorb not only a complex sequence of events, but also pay simultaneous attention to both

characters' motives for doing what they do during that sequence of events. For example, we need to take in not only why the virtuous Rokesmith would wish to enter London incognito, but also why the villainous Radfoot would wish him to do so. In addition, at the same time that we are assimilating Rokesmith's plot of testing Bella, so too are we assimilating Radfoot's design of robbing John Harmon. At this point, it is evident that, although quantity of enclosure revision is desirable in a moment of comic elucidation, there must exist some limit, beyond which the text becomes mind-boggling.[3]

More importantly, Dickens has to satisfy his reader that the solution to the Harmon mystery is both fair and water-tight. This is so because the mystery writer has to provide enough information to disprove all the solutions that could have reasonably occurred to the reader who has been hypothesizing about the story all along. Hence the length of Harmon's "Solo." Indeed, this authorial task can be so tedious and time-consuming in the denouement of mysteries that one is almost inclined to abandon the genre altogether. Even in this case, in which an immensely clever writer is consciously trying to avoid accusations of unfairness, the attempt to contain the inevitable flood of objections becomes futile. What I have in mind here

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[3]With respect to Congreve's *The Way of the World*, a professor emeritus made a statement to me that I didn't altogether comprehend at the time. He said, "It is a play I can hold in my mind for only an hour after reading it."

is the presence in Harmon's narrative of details such as the fact that he has kept some of his fortune in a money belt. The only reason for its being mentioned is that Dickens feels compelled to explain how Harmon came to have enough money to live independently after his mishap with Radfoot. That's one objection satisfied, yet others will inevitably occur once such a tale comes under the sort of minute scrutiny that these ambitiously encompassing solutions invite.

The problem is compounded, moreover, by Dickens's desire to keep Harmon's motives pure throughout his pious fraud. Even if one can accept his initial plot "to see and form some judgment of [his] allotted wife, before she could possibly know [him] for [himself]; also to try Mrs. Boffin and give her a glad surprise" (424), questions inevitably arise when Harmon resolves to proceed with the initial plan after he is presumed dead. Would John Harmon, man of honour and integrity, really allow the Boffins to endure the painful idea that their beloved John had been murdered just hours before their reunion with him was to take place? Asking such a question at this point in the novel is akin to grilling Aesop on whether he *really* believes that carnivorous foxes would hunger for grapes or be capable of speech, yet the attention given to a detail such as the money belt invites us to scrutinize Harmon's narrative with verisimilitude as one of our criteria. It is a no-win

situation for any novelist who is not satisfied with the defence that literary worlds operate according to rules quite different from those that govern reality. The Dickens who contends in the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend* that "there are hundreds of Will Cases . . . far more remarkable than that fancied in [his novel]" (893) is the same Dickens who felt compelled to defend *Bleak House* by insisting that people really do perish by means of spontaneous combustion.

Both the *Bleak House* mystery surrounding Krook's sudden death and the Harmon mystery in *Our Mutual Friend* lack a necessary element of comic elucidation: the inclusion of the solution to the mystery in the text that precedes and leads up to the moment of elucidation. To render the Krook subplot a true narrative riddle, Dickens would have had to place the idea of spontaneous combustion somewhere near the edge of the enclosure of conscious thought while keeping the idea from actually entering that enclosure. Given the oddity of the idea of spontaneous combustion, it would be virtually impossible to guide the reader's thoughts near that idea without actually having them arrive there. With respect to *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens would have needed somehow to work George Radfoot into the text that precedes "A Solo and a Duett." Naturally, readers who encounter these plots assuming that Dickens is following the rule that the

seeds of the mystery's solution must be sown among the words of the novel's written text will be disappointed when the moment of elucidation occurs. Moreover, that moment of elucidation may also be disappointing to a reader who has been expecting the solution to have the ingenious simplicity that the best brainteasers evince. There is thus relatively little comedy in the author/reader relationship that has been established by the time "A Solo and a Duett" is read, despite the potential for the type of comedy that exists in narrative games of this kind.

A third kind of narrative that has comic potential besides the transparent mystery and the mystery proper is that in which the catastrophe, the moment of elucidation, comes as a surprise. Here, the reader has been producing the wrong unwritten text without realizing it. Although a reader who has not finished reading the entire written text of any work is always aware of the tentative status of the hypotheses formed in order to integrate the meanings conveyed by the words in that text, a reader of a mystery proper is particularly aware that any hypothesis is open to revision and even outright rejection as the end of the narrative approaches. The potential for words to deceive never strays far from one's thoughts. However, when a catastrophe comes as a surprise, as sometimes happens in Dickens's novels, the reader is forced to admit that s/he has produced a

wrong interpretation and perhaps to acknowledge that s/he has neglected to be vigilant with respect to the potential for words to deceive. Surely, one of the most pervasive lessons in the body of Dickens's work is that words are powerful tools in disguising, manipulating, and even obliterating truth. Surprise catastrophes thus serve to remind us of this lesson.

Catastrophes that take the reader by surprise can also be the means by which one discovers one's biases and perhaps the paradigm of thought one inhabits. Often the reason for miswriting the unwritten text is that ideas the reader has habitually excluded from his day-to-day consciousness continue to be excluded as possible interpretations of the words in any written text, whether that text is a riddle or a novel. As a result, good comedy often increases its reader's self-awareness insofar as it brings into the enclosure of thought what the reader habitually excludes from it. For a surprise catastrophe to approach comedy, then, the reader must agree that s/he would not have misread the written text if s/he were free of the biases that the writer's surprise revelation points out.

Our Mutual Friend is, of course, famous for the surprise catastrophe centering on Noddy Boffin's apparent corruption by wealth and the revelation that his corruption has actually been feigned in order to effect a positive change in the mercenary Bella Wilfer. Because this pious fraud is

practised not only on Bella by Boffin but by Dickens on the reader, and because the source of the subplot seems to indicate that Dickens thought he was writing within the genre of comedy, the issues that arise in discussing the Harmon mystery resurface here.

This issue of fair play has already been taken up by several critics of the novel, though not with the question of the subplot's comedy explicitly articulated. Prominent among these critics is Grahame Smith, whose sensational assertion that Boffin's revelation scene counts as "One of the biggest disappointments in literature" (182) has achieved a kind of fame in the debate. In support of this assertion, Smith writes:

> Boffin belongs to the tradition of Dickens' genially eccentric old benefactors, and yet we feel convinced that Dickens is prepared to sacrifice him in the interests of artistic truth. His failure to do so is damaging . . . to our response to the entire novel, but it makes nonsense of the earlier scenes in which we have watched Boffin's breakdown. These passages can never be read again with patience. Our resentment might be contained if we felt that this particular "mystery" enclosed a special meaning, but the reason for Boffin's supposed pretence is as disappointing as the pretence itself. (182)

Clearly Smith perceives that Dickens has not dealt fairly with him, and that Dickens has betrayed the "artistic truth" of the novel. Apparently for Smith, the theme that the corrupting influence of money in a fallen world is not to be resisted even by the very best-natured of men and women is paramount

to *Our Mutual Friend*. I do not think, however, that Dickens's theme is as gloomy as Smith seems to imply. *Our Mutual Friend* does warn of the corrupting influence of money, but teaches also that money, in the hands of the wise, can and must be used to promote good, a task to which Dickens devoted considerable time and energy in dealing with both his own wealth and that of the heiress Angela Burdett-Coutts. I agree with Smith that the world of the novel is a fallen one, yet the potential to resist sin remains for those who choose good over evil. Smith seems averse to Dickens's common themes of the possibility for redemption in the fallen world and of the virtual incorruptibility of genuinely good characters such as Boffin.

Another critic, U.C. Knoepflmacher, seems to have been reading a different novel altogether from the one Smith read. His response, perhaps the most sanguine of all, runs thus:

> When Boffin reveals that his "change" was feigned, that he has actually been "playing a part," we are elated. Nicodemus Boffin has been as invariable as always. Our security is restored. Delighted, we yield to his nonsense, as he delivers 'in the grisliest growling of the regular brown bear' his blessings on the John Harmons and their child: 'a pretty and hopeful picter? Mew, Quack-quack, Bow-wow!'" (163-64)

Knoepflmacher's words describe well the reaction I believe Dickens strove for in the scene, but it seems odd that he experiences no reservations about Dickens's execution of it. Even Chesterton, often a Dickens admirer to a

fault, did not share Knoeflmacher's joy: he believed that Dickens's decision to reinstate the old Boffin must have been a last-minute one.

My own initial reaction is one I remember clearly; however, it was inextricably linked to my experience of the Harmon mystery. Like many readers, I caught on that Rokesmith was Harmon before being told in "A Solo and a Duett," but I thought I detected an oversight on Dickens's part in that the Boffins had not recognized Rokesmith as Harmon. Moreover, my disappointment with Dickens grew as I read of Boffin's decline into miserliness and concluded that Dickens had wrongly sacrificed the integrity of one of his "genially eccentric old benefactors" for the sake of overstating the filthiness of lucre. I was rather pleasantly surprised, then, to have Boffin restored and to learn that Harmon had not gone unrecognized after all. Nevertheless, there remained for me a rather unpleasant aftertaste.

That aftertaste was then and is now what Rosemary Mundhenk describes well, namely,

> the reader's emotional reaction, his sense of being 'tricked.' There is a serious problem in the rather simple psychology of the 'pious fraud': having been shown his error, one is supposed to reform or convert. This strategy works with Bella, but it may not be so effective with the sophisticated reader. (note to page 50)

Although one would think that a reader whose trust in the writer's fairness

has been compromised might decide to throw the novel across the room, it is probably more likely that such a reader will instead keep the novel firmly in hand long enough to hunt down the specific cheats it has perpetrated. In the case of the Boffin surprise, critical attention of this sort has focused on one passage in particular. It is found at the end of book three, chapter 14. In it, the narrator comments on the thoughts with which Boffin greets Venus's defection from the Wegg camp to his own. When Boffin imagines that Venus has become a double agent for reasons that may only serve the interests of Venus himself, the narrator asserts:

> It was a cunning and suspicious idea, quite in the way of [Boffin's] school of Misers, and he looked very cunning and suspicious as he went jogging through the streets. More than once or twice, more than twice or thrice, say half a dozen times, he took his stick from the arm on which he nursed it, and hit a straight sharp rap at the air with its head. Possibly the head of Silas Wegg was incorporeally before him at those moments, for he hit with intense satisfaction. (650)

Given the implausibility of Boffin's keeping up his pretence of miserliness even when Bella, Wegg, and Venus are not present to see it, this passage is a cheat despite the slipperiness of the words "looked" and "Possibly." Perhaps Dickens would insist, however, that Boffin was practising "Method" acting by "living" his part.

There are other similarly deceptive and arguably unfair passages that

deserve attention partly because they occur much earlier in the text than the oft-cited one in chapter 14. These are to be found in chapter five of book three. This crucial chapter is the first in which Dickens allows the reader to observe the altered Boffin first hand, and if a well-executed double narrative really does exist in this novel/riddle, we would expect to find it here. Up to this point, the reader has witnessed only a brief conversation at the end of chapter four in which Bella Wilfer reports to her father that Boffin has grown "'suspicious, capricious, hard, tyrannical, unjust'" (521). The following chapter, the lead chapter of the twelfth monthly number, actually begins quite fairly in that the narrator openly raises the possibility that Bella Wilfer's judgment may be mistaken. The narrator asks, "Were Bella Wilfer's bright and ready little wits at fault, or was the Golden Dustman passing through the furnace of proof and coming out dross?" (522). That Dickens plants the thought that Bella's perception may be unreliable is a point in his favour, yet a sentence that follows almost immediately after the narrator's question goes against the author. The narrator promises that "We shall know *full soon*" how reliable her perception is (emphasis added, 522). The phrase I have emphasized turns out to be a cheat. Few readers would define "full soon" as 26 chapters and eight months later! Almost certainly we expect that the current chapter will hold the answer, but it does not.

Once the scene itself comes before us, another questionable manipulation of the reader takes place. It involves Mrs. Boffin, whose role in duping the reader is crucial, so crucial in fact that Dickens feels compelled to account for it when the whole ruse is made known to both Bella and the reader in chapter 13 of book four. At that late stage of the narrative, Dickens has Bella ask whether Mrs. Boffin ever "'supposed any part of the change in Mr Boffin to be real,'" pointing out that the older woman "'took it very much to heart'" and that she was "'very uneasy'" (847). The explanation we are given, that Mrs. Boffin was genuinely upset to see even the mere words of a miser spring from her good husband's lips and to have him even temporarily and mistakenly thought ill of, does not altogether hold up when the performance is revived when we reread chapter 5 as informed readers. With the explanation in mind, consider the following exchange between the husband and wife. Mr.Boffin begins by declaring:

> "Our old selves wouldn't do here, old lady. Haven't you found that out yet? Our old selves would be fit for nothing here but to be robbed and imposed upon. Our old selves weren't people of fortune; our new selves are; it's a great difference."
>
> "Ah!" said Mrs Boffin, pausing in her work again, softly to draw a long breath and to look at the fire. "A great difference." (525)

This kind of exchange is a familiar one to those who read Dickens

habitually. What is typical is the dramatic irony created by our perceiving more in one character's words and gestures than another character "on stage" perceives. In this case, the phrase "a great difference" refers in Mr. Boffin's mind to a change for the better, yet signifies a change for the worse both to the sighing Mrs. Boffin and to the reader. Evidently, Mrs. Boffin is upset about her husband's new outlook, a piece of information that the reader duly notes in constructing Boffin as a miser. Yet how do we account for Mrs. Boffin's reaction once we have read the denouement? What can her words and gestures mean if they are not part of the act, but genuine concern for her spouse? How would the sigh and the phrase "a great difference" be consistent with a woman whose real concern is merely that Bella will think ill of her husband? I do not see that the intensity of her expressed feeling matches up with the emotional experience that she is really having, according to the explanation delivered at the end of the novel.

The reader encounters a much more successful exchange shortly after Mrs. Boffin's sighing "assent" to her husband's new doctrine. At this point Mrs. Boffin comes close to blowing her spouse's cover by telling Bella not to mind what Mr. Boffin says:

> "Eh?" cried Mr Boffin. "What! Not mind him?"
> "I don't mean that," said Mrs Boffin with a worried look, "but I mean, don't believe him to be anything but good and

> generous, Bella, because he is the best of men. No, I must say that much, Noddy. You are always the best of men."
>
> She made the declaration as if he were objecting to it: which assuredly he was not in any way. (526)

The reader who falls for Dickens's ruse will see here a wife in the act of blinding herself to her husband's obviously insupportable conduct and a man whose egotism gladly acknowledges even hyperbolic praise. The truth, however, is that the man whom Mrs. Boffin perceives remains as virtuous as ever, and that her husband gratefully tolerates his wife's coming to his defense despite the risk her comment poses to their charade. Boffin cannot object when his wife values him more than their pious fraud, a circumstance hinted at by the narrator's use of the word "assuredly" and the phrase "not in any way." The passage is thus a model of the sort of narrative ambiguity that Dickens is after.

As Rosemary Mundhenk has shown, Dickens is quite fair in one other respect. She demonstrates how Dickens's handling of point of view in the chapter aligns the reader with Bella, whose perception is fallible. The reader's experience of Dickens's chapter I would add, thus resembles that of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, in which our perceptions of Darcy are heavily coloured by the biases of Elizabeth Bennet. The reader of that novel, however, can offer as an excuse for being duped Lizzie's many correct

estimations of what she sees; in *Our Mutual Friend*, no such excuse exists given that Bella's questionable values and mistaken assumptions have been so clearly established in scenes such as the "Duett," during which Rokesmith reveals his devotion to her. Furthermore, to fail to be suspicious of Bella's point of view is also to fail to pay attention to Boffin's name. Dickens's readers may well have recalled the Biblical Nicodemus, "a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin who became a secret follower of Jesus" (*Random House Dictionary*). Boffin similarly serves the Lord while pretending otherwise.

An issue that has not received adequate attention in discussions of the Boffin episode in *Our Mutual Friend*, and one that pertains to much of Dickens's work, however, is the problem of genre. What genre does this book belong to? The obvious answer is "novel," and one who thinks immediately of the Wrayburn-Headstone plot with its investigations into problems of social class, sexuality, and crime might be inclined to call the work a novel of psychological realism or a Sensation novel. But the elements that dominate the Rokesmith-Boffin-Wilfer plot are those of stage comedy.

That should not come as a surprise when one recalls that Dickens borrowed much of the action for this part of the novel from James Sheridan

Knowles's *The Hunchback*. Originally produced at Covent Garden and featuring Charles and Fanny Kemble as well as Knowles himself in the leading roles, the play was the hit of 1832, having been performed 38 times from its opening on April 5 until the close of the Covent Garden season on June 22 (Meeks 91). Its popularity continued that summer when it was staged at the Surrey, Royal Pavilion, and Haymarket theatres, and the play was produced again in September at Drury Lane before reopening back at Covent Garden in October. In published form, the play was into a ninth edition by 1836, and was included in French's *Modern Standard Drama* in 1840. Dickens himself owned and made notes in a personal copy of the play (Cotsell 4).

The play is anything but a work of psychological realism that chronicles the interior struggles of a Eugene Wrayburn or a Bradley Headstone. Nor is it a murder mystery that raises questions about the nature of identity or an attack on the Poor Law, all of which can be found in *Our Mutual Friend*. *The Hunchback* is what we might call a comedy of ethics, a moral lesson about the true value of integrity, love, and money in which the virtuous are rewarded with titles, wealth, and each other. It is clear that Dickens is attempting to write in this genre in the Rokesmith-Boffin-Wilfer plot of his novel.

That he is doing so may not be clear, however, to some readers of *Our Mutual Friend*, especially to readers who come to the book having heard that it is Dickens's *Wasteland* or *Inferno* (it has been called both--aptly, to some extent). The unfortunate result is that those readers may be expecting the work to be operating according to very different conventions than those found in the sort of stage comedy that we find in *The Hunchback*. No wonder such a reader would be surprised to learn that Boffin has been golden all along. Such a reader may also be unwilling to grant Dickens the poetic license that we readily grant Shakespeare or Goldsmith or Sheridan as we defer to the conventions of stage comedy, which include disguises, ruses, multiple weddings, complicated wills, and so on. And who can blame such readers? How can they be expected, for example, to set plausibility aside and forgive the fact that Boffin would have had to play his role for a period of time amounting to something like 18 months, when Dickens asserts the verisimilitude of his narrative both in his postscript and in his painstakingly-detailed solution to the Harmon mystery? Dickens has thus encountered an unavoidable formal problem in attempting to marry the psychological novel to the stage comedy. The former invites the reader to see the novel's universe as a plausible one in which characters' thoughts, motives, and actions are accounted for in winding streams of consciousness that carry on

for pages; in the latter, characters' values mature and their fortunes are made in a single verse soliloquy. What Mundhenk calls "the serious problem [of] the rather simple psychology of the 'pious fraud'" becomes much less of a hurdle for the reader who is aware of the practice of many stage comedies to avoid intricate psychological maneuverings in favour of other literary virtues. In this light, Bella casts aside money in favour of the once-despised John Rokesmith as easily and perhaps implausibly as *Much Ado*'s Benedick can opt in one speech to people the world by marrying his arch-enemy, Beatrice. The conventions of such comedies also lead us to expect the novel's proliferation of pious and impious frauds, and the happily-wedded couples they bring together. The problem in *Our Mutual Friend* is the confusion of expectations engendered by the co-plots--particularly Headstone's--that demand a different kind of reading than do comedies such as *The Hunchback*.

Does knowing the genre of the Boffin plot smooth out its deficiencies? It certainly does put us more in mind to expect the kind of "Turning" we wheel through at the end of the third book's "Long Lane," but ultimately the bond of intimacy between author and audience simply cannot withstand the stresses that Dickens's little cheats subject it to. Moreover, in the stage comedy genre, *each* member of the couple who are happily wed at

the end of the work undergoes some sort of substantial character change before s/he is worthy of his or her ultimate mate. In *Our Mutual Friend*, it seems rather unfair that Bella has been singled out for moral instruction, while Rokesmith/Harmon is apparently flawless when he arrives in London. This impeccable state may render him a bit too Pecksniffian for some readers' tastes, and may lead them to think less of the coming together of Beatrice and Benedick or of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy and more of the separation of Charles and Catherine Dickens, during which squally time the novelist tended to lay the entire blame of the collapse of his marriage on his wife and absolutely none on his own rather suspect behaviour. Finally, if the comic turn of thought depends on reforming enclosures to include the previously excluded, it seems a bit uncomic for the novel's catastrophe to hinge on a moment when one character discovers that she has been excluded for eighteen months from a ruse that her most intimate friends are in on. One ultimately suspects that it is not Bella's "bright and ready little wits at fault" here, but Dickens's own.

A narrative puzzle that Dickens handles much better can be found in *Hard Times*, a novel whose comedy has been underappreciated.[4] I do not by

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[4]A notable exception is George Bernard Shaw's "*Hard Times*" (reprinted in Ford and Lane's *The Dickens Critics*).

any means claim that the entire novel is a comedy, but the history of Josiah Bounderby qualifies as one, particularly the late chapter in which circumstances expose the self-made industrialist for the humbug that he is. The chapter I have in mind, entitled "Found," succeeds admirably as a comic catastrophe.

This catastrophe, one of the very finest in Dickens's works, occurs as the reader of the novel--and many of the major characters in it--encounter Mrs. Pegler's surprise assertion that she is Bounderby's mother and listen to her impassioned denial that Josiah was "'brought up in the gutter'" (192):

> "Josiah in the gutter! . . . No such thing, Sir. Never! For shame on you! My dear boy knows, and will give *you* to know, that though he come of humble parents, he come of parents that loved him as dear as the best could, and never thought it hardship on themselves to pinch a bit that he might write and cipher beautiful, and I've his books at home to show it! Aye, have I! . . . And my dear boy knows, and will give *you* to know, Sir, that after his beloved father died, when he was eight year old, his mother, too, could pinch a bit, as it was her duty and her pleasure and her pride to do it, to help him out in life, and put him 'prentice. And a steady lad he was, and a kind master he had to lend him a hand, and well he worked his own way forward to be rich and thriving. . . . And I am ashamed of you , Sir, . . . for your slanders and suspicions. And I never stood here before, nor never wanted to when my son said no. And I shouldn't be here now, if it hadn't been for being brought here." (193)

By the time the reader has taken in this speech, s/he has made a tumbling

run of turns of thought that would be the envy of the most skillful performer in Sleary's circus. Indeed, a remarkable feature of the passage is the number of enclosures whose revision it brings about.

Prominent among these is the enclosure that the reader creates in response to reading the sign "Found" (274), the title of the chapter in which the catastrophe takes place. Because the previous chapter (published one week earlier) is entitled "Lost" (266), and because that past participle turns out to modify Stephen Blackpool, with whom Rachael has lost contact, the habitual-minded reader is inclined to expect that "Found" will once again apply to Stephen, and that in this chapter s/he will read about how the Coketowners "discover the whereabouts of (something hidden or not previously observed)" (*OED* first edition, definition 2 of "Find"). As it turns out, however, the word does not modify Stephen Blackpool, and signifies many more denotations of *find* than the *OED*'s definition number two. As the chapter is read, one discovers that Rachael and Sissy find, that is, "meet with, light upon" (*OED* #3) Mrs. Sparsit, who is triumphing in having "discover[ed] or obtain[ed] by searching" (*OED* #9) a bewildered Mrs. Pegler, the frugal old woman who has appeared outside Bounderby's house in previous chapters. In addition, the reader finds out--"unriddles" (*OED* #20a)--the full identity of this woman as she reveals herself to be

Bounderby's mother, and, along with a mob of Coketowners, is thus able to "detect, discover (a fraud, etc.); to penetrate the disguise of, discover the identity or true character of " (*OED* # 20c) this woman's heretofore [illegible] scn. "'Josiah Bounderby of Coketown'" (60). It is even possible that Dickens wants the reader to think of "find" in the obsolete sense of "To suffer, undergo (punishment, pain)" (*OED* #7), a denotation which describes what ultimately happens not only to Bounderby but also to Mrs. Sparsit.

The revelation that Mrs. Pegler is Bounderby's parent causes the reader either to confirm a suspicion of the woman's full identity that s/he may have formed much earlier in the text, or if s/he had not formed such a suspicion, to reconstrue the signs that Dickens placed in the text with this revelation in mind. Unlike the case in *Our Mutual Friend*, the reader will discover that Dickens has created quite a fair sign sequence, that is, one that supports the ultimate construction we are meant to give it. A good example of his proficiency occurs in the scene in which Mrs. Pegler first takes tea with Stephen and Rachael (chapter six of the second book). During that scene Stephen asks her whether she has any children, to which inquiry she responds:

> "I had a son," she said, curiously distressed, and not by any of

> the usual appearances of sorrow; "and he did well, wonderfully well. But he is not to be spoken of if you please. He is -- " Putting down her cup, she moved her hands as if she would have added, by her own action, "dead!" Then she said, aloud, "I have lost him." (186)

Like Rokesmith/Harmon, Mrs. Pegler does not tell an outright lie, although she certainly does allow both Stephen and Rachael to wrongly conclude that her son has died. Once again, characters misconstrue through habit of thought an ambiguous sign, in this case, the movement of Mrs. Pegler's hands. Whether the reader actually has solved this mystery or not before reading "Found" matters little. A reader who *has* will once again be able to relish his or her narrative competence; one who *has not* may well react with the telltale *slap-of-the-forehead-how-could-I-have-missed-it?* reaction.

On the other hand, a bit of cheating on Dickens's part is once more evident. Nowhere in *Hard Times* does Dickens supply us with an explanation of the fact that Josiah and his mother do not share the same surname. Apparently, either the mother has remarried after the death of her first husband, Mr. Bounderby, or Josiah has assumed a new name during his climb to the top of the smog-choked upper strata of Coketown celebrity.

The reconstruction of Bounderby as a humbug is comic partly because of the diametrical relationship between the absolutely self-made article he has represented himself as and the real Josiah, who has apparently been

helped along by others at every stage of his manufacture. This disclosure supports one of the novel's major themes, namely, that mutual interdependency is the fabric from which a just civilization is woven, and that no person is self-made. Moreover, a reader may certainly have the sense that s/he was a bit foolish ever to have believed Bounderby's windy fictions, although Dickens does play a little unfairly in transforming what seemed to be one of his satirical caricatures into a character with a plausible past. It is also clear from this passage that Bounderby has belonged all along to a category that a reader may have unjustly excluded him from, that being the stereotypically self-promoting Yorkshireman, a braggart who unceasingly trumpets his social ascent.

Another successful aspect of the scene, particularly when it is compared to the similar public humiliation of Pecksniff, is that the agent of the catastrophe is not an earnestly virtuous character who has premeditated and carefully orchestrated the defrocking of a public figure. There is something a bit unsettling in the self-congratulating exultations of characters like old Martin Chuzzlewit or even Mr. Brownlow when they humiliate their evil-doing adversaries in front of a group of characters. As John Carey so aptly observes, "We feel that the characters who knock Pecksniff around at the end might instead take a lesson from him about how not to bore their

readers" (67).

In the case of *Hard Times*, Dickens manages to have Bounderby unwittingly yielded up by members of his own clan, one of whom, Mrs. Pegler, lacks the impeccability that Dickens's earnest characters sometimes exude. Moreover, Bounderby's reaction to his humiliation, a firm refusal to add any chapters to the story recounted by his unwitting mother, rings far truer than the full--albeit coerced--confession of Monks in *Oliver Twist*.

Yet another contributor to the scene's success for many readers is the reversal of fortune that Mrs. Sparsit experiences, a downturn which the narrator describes as a plunge from the "pinnacle of exultation into the Slough of Despond" (281). Clearly, the text she has produced has effected an outcome precisely the opposite of that which she intended. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that her demise stems from her inferiority as a reader. Throughout the novel, from the early scene in "Husband and Wife"--when she mistakenly perceives that Bounderby will propose marriage to her--through her misconstruction of Louisa as a practising adulteress, and culminating in her misreading of Stephen Blackpool and Mrs. Pegler, Mrs. Sparsit is an object lesson in what befalls anyone who fails to cultivate his or her skills as a perceiver of texts. Once again, the butt of the comedy is a narrative incompetent, one who, like her blustery employer, deserves to be

ultimately banished from the category "admirable individual." Not only do they fall out of favour with their fellow Coketowners, of course. One of the few treats of the novel's final chapter is to be had when Bounderby and Sparsit include in their mutual discourse the attributes and appellations they have heretofore previously and studiously excluded, namely, the Nose and the Noodle.

In the epigraph to this chapter, the narrator of *Our Mutual Friend* describes the air of the inspector who has just heard John Harmon's account of his behaviour as "half-enjoying" and "half-piqued" (832). As these analyses of Dickens's narrative mysteries and catastrophes demonstrate, the Inimitable probably deserves only half marks for his performances in this challenging narrative game. Too often, readers who scrutinize with rigour the ambitious sequence of signs that Dickens has offered for their perception end up directing their pique not altogether at themselves but, unfortunately, at the novels' creator. Ultimately, he does not "know what he is about in his vocation" (*Our Mutual Friend* 893) to quite the extent that he would have us believe.

III. Oh What Fangled Texts We Read!: Dickens's Comic Hypocrites

"I always loved that boy as if he'd been my--my--my own grandfather. . . . "
--Mr. Bumble, *Oliver Twist*

Many of Dickens's funny scenes focus on liars, hypocrites, and even criminals. One wonders how the novelist manages to make us laugh at these characters, given the connection between comedy and joy--an emotion which one does not automatically associate with the behaviour of such people. Answers to this question can be found, however, by investigating the attention that Dickens and other comic writers give to a skill shared by all perpetrators of frauds good and bad, namely, the ability to produce misleading texts. Of course, it is not news that writers often take writing itself as their topic. As I suggested in the previous chapter, comic writers are as often interested in discourses as they are in people. Nevertheless, it has not been until relatively recently that structuralists, semioticians, and post-structuralists have demonstrated that a carefully managed public persona can be as much a text as an Elizabethan sonnet--if we include in our idea of "text" a little more than we traditionally have. Yet we do not want to give Barthes *et al.* too much credit. It may be fairer to the nineteenth century--and to the Victorians, among others--to suggest that the scholarship of this century has simply given us a second discourse in which to describe an aspect of human nature that Thackeray and Dickens managed to record in

works of narrative fiction.

Producers of texts--both those of the verbal and nonverbal varieties--abound in Dickens's novels. Those whom I wish to call attention to, obviously, are the ones we laugh at. Of this legion, I have privileged four: Wackford Squeers, Fanny Squeers, Seth Pecksniff, and Sarah Gamp. In doing so, I remain aware that comedy is subjective, and that people exist, have existed, and will exist who do not find these characters funny. But few of the rest of us would disagree that the four I have quadrupled out deserve particular attention in a discussion of Dickens's comic frauds. In analyzing these characters' texts, I intend to call attention again to Dickens's marked interest in the cognition of reading and the nonfixity of language, and to his prevailing concern with the vulnerability to deception of those whose minds too readily travel along familiar routes of thought. Ultimately, the reader who perceives these liars and their lies as comedy experiences the constant reaffirmation of his or her own facility with words. In addition, I hope again to promote the terminology of enclosure theory as a means by which the effects of perceived comedy can be described, and to use enclosure theory to suggest why there has been a perennial connection between liars and comedies.

In 1838, when readers first listened to Ralph Nickleby reading aloud

to his poor relations the contents of the prospectus for Dotheboys Hall, they were introduced to a character whose reputation for preposterous pretence has lived for some 150 years now. Indeed, the Dotheboys prospectus may be the most entertaining school calendar that has ever been printed and surely has no rival in what prospective students and their parents now struggle through. But why are the prospectus and its fictitious author, Wackford Squeers, so funny to some of us? The answers to this question are complicated.

To begin with, it is fair to say that they are funny if a reader expects them to be so. In fact, the text of the prospectus did not begin for many readers with its bold promise of "EDUCATION" (86), but started even before the novel itself began to appear. The prospectus is a *funny* lie mainly for those who have been prepared beforehand to perceive it as such. This preparation probably began when the initial readers of *Nicholas Nickleby* experienced their first comic thoughts in their early nineteenth-century childhoods. But, rather than pursue the origins of a comic reading of the prospectus in a manner akin to Tristram Shandy's discovering his own origin in an unwound clock, I have chosen to begin a little later, and to progress rather more rapidly.

Let us start with the "Nickleby Proclamation." This leaflet was issued

by "Boz" on February 28, 1838--roughly a month before *Nicholas Nickleby*'s first instalment was published. The document was meant as a warning to the literary pirates who had been plundering both *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, but also gave the contemporary audience an idea of what to expect from the new work. Specifically, Dickens gave notice

> TO THE PUBLIC.
>
> THAT in our new work, as in our preceding one, it will be our aim to amuse, by producing a rapid succession of characters and incidents, and describing them as cheerfully and pleasantly as in us lies; that we have wandered into fresh fields and pastures new, to seek materials for the purpose; and that, in behalf of NICHOLAS NICKLEBY, we confidently hope to enlist both their heartiest merriment, and their kindliest sympathies. (Slater xxxi)

By this time, of course, Boz and his works were famous for both their humour and their comic hypocrites (Mr. Stiggins and Mr. Bumble, to name two). Furthermore, the happy conclusion to *The Pickwick Papers* had been read by many and the death of Nancy at the hands of Sikes was yet to come. As far as readers of "The Nickleby Proclamation" knew, *Nicholas Nickleby* would have a happy ending in which the good and bad would get what they deserve, lawyers excepted.

Less obvious, especially to readers of the Dickens texts produced by Penguin, Oxford, and the myriad publishers of what we might call "pulp

Dickens," is the fact that readers of the first number of *Nicholas Nickleby* were invited to peruse Phiz's illustration of Squeers even before they read the first sentence of chapter one. At the time, each number's two illustrations were not "dropped into" the text at the point where the illustrated episode was printed, but placed between the number's several opening pages of advertisements and the beginning of the novel proper[1]. As usual, someone who exchanged a shilling for No. 1 of *Nicholas Nickleby* bought two of Phiz's works as well as Dickens's 32 pages of print. The second of these depicts the moment in the story when Squeers has just begun to perform the role of the parentally-inclined schoolmaster for the benefit of Mr. Snawley (see figure 6 on the following page). He is followed by his two reluctant stepsons, two prospective scholars who seem precociously aware of the exact variety of parental treatment Squeers is likely to exercise upon them.

A reader looking at the illustration would be just as suspicious of Squeers's brand of nurturing as the boys appear to be, and those suspicions would be fueled by the accompanying caption: "The Yorkshire Schoolmaster at 'The Saracen's Head.'" In "The Composition and Monthly Publication of

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[1]It is a shame that even a recently published facsimile of *Nicholas Nickleby*, reproduced "from the original parts" (*Nicholas Nickleby* facsimile, title page), does not put the illustrations in their original places. As I have suggested, they have value as a pre-text to the novel.

Figure 6

Nicholas Nickleby," Michael Slater, recounting in detail the prosecutions of one William Shaw for abusing a pupil in his care, shows how Dickens's readers would have construed the restrictive modifier "Yorkshire" in the caption. The phrase "*Yorkshire* schoolmaster," if not altogether a synonym for "child abuser," would certainly connote harshness, and possibly hypocrisy. Even a reader excluded from this code would receive ample help in forming the right idea from Phiz, who has bestowed upon Squeers physical attributes that communicate his true nature. These attributes include what Dickens's narrator describes as a "low protruding forehead" (90), plus gaping nostrils between which and Squeers's mouth spreads a broad upper lip that reminds one of a chimpanzee's. Moreover, his head--sunken into his shoulders as if nothing whatsoever existed around which to wrap his neckerchief--seems as much too large for his torso as his legs are too short. In the painfully species-ist language of those backward times, the schoolmaster is obviously an unthinking brute.

Together, Phiz's illustration, the phrase "Yorkshire Schoolmaster," and the "Nickleby Proclamation" establish some ground rules for the game that many readers will play when they engage Dickens's written text. In the schoolmaster we anticipate a type, a caricature of a flesh-and-blood William Shaw, the monstrous impostor of a learned benefactor. This fictional entity

will thus for many readers be an enclosure from which the attributes "truthful" and "authentic" are excluded well before Ralph Nickleby reads the Dotheboys prospectus out loud.

Furthermore, this pre-text would likely have created in the minds of many readers a second enclosure, one that defines not a single character but a genre. The name "Boz" is privileged on the wrapper by means of a larger font, enclosing quotation marks, boldfacing, and block letters--all followed immediately by a period that seems to consign the subsequent mention of the novel's illustrator to an abyss of superfluous afterthought. The pseudonym "Boz" in combination with the other preparatory communications I have mentioned thus provides the reader of the prospectus with specific "interpretive strategies," as Stanley Fish would say (173). In this instance, the reader is prepared to perceive *Nicholas Nickleby* as comedy, and probably as the kind of comedy that many readers of *Nicholas Nickleby* would have found when they read *The Pickwick Papers*[2]. For these readers, a genre enclosure would be in place from which, for example, the expectation of ultimate sadness would be excluded. When such readers encounter the Dotheboys prospectus, they are thus expecting to perceive a

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[2]For a full description of this genre and an enlightening discussion of it, see chapter three of Paul Schlicke's *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*.

lie--and an incompetently perpetrated one at that--when they construe the text Ralph reads.

All the same, the reading of the prospectus proper is no simple matter. Much occurs in the mind of one who reads it as comic, even though that psychological event lasts just a few seconds. Indeed, so many turns of thought happen--and so rapid is their rotation--that construing the text can be as exhilarating as watching a figure skater effect a quadruple jump. The ultimate star of the prospectus, however, is not so much a human being--not even the Inimitable--but mercurial language itself. Reading the passage, it is possible to produce two construed (and contradictory) texts almost simultaneously: the text that would lead a naive reader, such as Nicholas, to construct the advertisement's author as an authentically noble schoolmaster, and a second text that reveals Squeers to be a *Yorkshire* schoolmaster, which is to say, no schoolmaster at all.

To bring this remarkable reading experience about, Dickens relies on one of the oldest devices in the comic writer's bag of tricks. This is the practice of putting into the written text an indeterminate sign that does not in itself dictate one specific meaning, but rather allows the reader to privilege what s/he is accustomed to or predisposed to privilege. As such, the device is a linguistic trap for the habitual-minded, for those who forget their

own agency and complicity in making meaning happen. The first word of the prospectus, "EDUCATION" (86), is such a device. In perceiving this word, one almost certainly creates an enclosure that includes a thought akin to what the *OED* describes as "The systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young in preparation for the work of life. . . ." However, one may also place into the enclosure much that is not warranted by the lone word "education," including not only assumptions about the curriculum of instruction and its depth, but also the idea that the learning experience will be a positive one. Of course, under normal circumstances, such completion of the written text and limiting of its meaning is necessary and forgivable on the reader's part. One would be overwhelmed were one not able to filter out of one's mind all potential constructions of a written text--if one could and did place into the enclosure of conscious thought, for example, *all* the *OED* definitions under the entry "Education" rather than the single definition cited above. Nevertheless, reading the prospectus is no normal circumstance. Those of Dickens's readers who have kept in mind the idea that Dickens and Phiz have already planted--that the schoolmaster introduced in this number is an impostor--may do little more when reading "EDUCATION" than erect an empty enclosure into which meaning will be placed only when more written text has been taken in.

However, no matter what text one construes upon perceiving "EDUCATION," rapid revision almost certainly occurs when the eyes pass over "Mr. Wackford Squeers" (86), surely one of the most ingenious character names in literature. In this three-sign sequence, ideas of respectability and scurrility meet in a rapier-quick duel whose outcome is decided before its onset is assimilated. Reviewing the action in slow motion, one can perceive an initial thrust--the respectable title "Mr."--parried by the first syllable of the character's Christian name, which means nothing if not the denotation of its homophone "whack;" next, we see a second thrust for the respectable in the suffix "ford," which bestows on "Wackford" connotations of impressive men of the landed gentry whose Christian names are family surnames (for example, Fitzwilliam Darcy). For all its impressive backers, however, the lone syllable "ford" has no hope of success when met by the counterattack of "Squeers."

This surname, as formidable a syllable as one may utter politely, is as packed with connotations as it is with morphemes. Among these one might list *squeeze, squire, skewer, queer* (in the sense not only of odd, but perhaps also homosexual), *weird* and *leers*, to which--once Squeers's wife calls him "Squeery" in the following number--one might append *leery*. One might also add to the list the word "square," whose meaning for Dickens is not fully

articulated until he publishes *Hard Times*. Up against "whack" and "Squeers," poor "Mr." and "ford" are ridiculously outmatched.

Assimilating "Mr. Wackford Squeers" causes an interesting rewrite of "EDUCATION." Any positive ideas of rewarding instruction that one may have prematurely included in the enclosure of meaning which that word initially effects are soon displaced by a curriculum of hard knocks. Here again, such revision can be a comic corrective for the reader who--through habit--has excluded from thought the possibility that the education promised involves something quite different from the normal Greek and Latin curriculum. This process of rewriting continues through a rather acrobatic run of turns of thought, as the reader tumbles through the prospectus's second sentence, which reads,

> Youth are boarded, clothed, booked, furnished with pocket-money, provided with all necessaries, instructed in all languages, living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry, the use of the globes, algebra, single stick (if required), writing, arithmetic, fortification, and every other branch of classical literature. (86)

Generally, it is fair to say that the mental enclosure erected by perceiving "EDUCATION" is revised in direct proportion to the mounting total of the listed subjects that make up Squeers's curriculum. Indeed, the depth of coverage for each becomes so shallow as one proceeds from the first subject

to the last, that one is left with a "depth" measurable in inches rather than fathoms. What is more, an instance of mental rewriting is required of the reader even when it does not seem possible. I have in mind the splendid comic turn that takes place during the sequence "all languages, living and dead." In this case, one is probably pretty sure of one's ground after perceiving "all languages"--pretty sure that the "EDUCATION" initially promised could not get any shallower--when, with the slightly delayed addition of "living *and* dead," yet more of the instruction's depth evaporates. One might say of this whole section of the syllabus that the more Squeers professes to offer, the less he can offer to profess.

Like "Wackford Squeers," the school's name is a *verb. sap.* As the *OED* states, the verb *do* is

> [t]he most general word expressing transitive action; and so, familiarly substituted for any verb the action of which is of a nature to be readily inferred from the subject or object, or both combined. In *Slang*, employed euphemistically to avoid the use of some verb plainly naming an action.

The *OED* goes on to list some of the actions that someone construing the transitive verb *do* might call to mind, including "To finish up, exhaust, undo [in the sense of rape or kill], ruin" and "To hoax, cheat, swindle, overreach." The name "Dotheboys Hall" is thus a word to the wise that someone wishing to doom his or her children to suffering and perhaps death has found the

right man in Squeers. As Michael Slater points out (x), in the real prospecti written by the likes of William Shaw, the phrase "No Vacations" was often prominent, and properly decoded could mean, "keep the premiums coming and you need not see your child again." In Squeers's prospectus, this message is communicated covertly and prominently in the last sentence proclaiming the virtues of Dotheboys Hall: "No extras, no vacations, and diet unparalleled." Once again, an index--in this case "diet unparalleled"--points to two diametrically opposed constructions, signaling a guarantee of deprivation to a reader such as Mr. Snawley, and a promise of bounty to an unsophisticated or merely unsuspecting reader.

Another superb comic passage in *Nicholas Nickleby* is the very scene that Phiz chose for the illustration that introduces Squeers to the reader, the initial meeting between Squeers and Snawley. This scene too is remarkable for the sudden changes that occur in it, some of which may be comic turns of thought for certain readers. In this case, the changes result from several remarkably violent enclosure collisions that occur as Squeers speeds through a series of distinctive registers of language. Each of these registers manages to suggest a whole discourse and, indeed, a whole paradigm of thought and behaviour.

The overall effect is akin to a kind of dramatic performance made

famous by Charles Matthews, known as the "monopolylogue." In it, one actor would undergo many rapid shifts of language and character with amusing results.[3] In our time, this kind of comedy carries on in the stand-up routines of Robin Williams, who has a genius not only for mimicry but also for capturing in just a few words a distinct value system and the ideological flaws in it. The effects Williams manages to achieve are best *seen* in the recent Disney movie *Aladdin*, in which Williams speaks the part of the comically metamorphosing and punning genie of the lamp. In the movie, the animators have been able to give visual expression to Williams's sudden verbal transformations by accompanying his words with equally ingenious caricatures of the individuals and classes of people whom Williams mimics (and usually mocks). The overall effect of this kind of comedy is to call attention to the ubiquity of the enclosures themselves, whether the enclosing structure be an habitual phrase or a habit of mind.

Squeers's monopolylogue begins at the moment when Snawley's arrival at the Saracen's Head has been announced to the schoolmaster by the Inn's waiter, Richard:

> "Show the gentleman in, Richard," replied Mr Squeers,

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[3]To read more about the monopolylogue--and other forms of early nineteenth-century "illegitimate" drama, see William F. Axton's *Circle of Fire: Dickens' Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theatre* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1966).

> in a soft voice. "Put your handkerchief in your pocket, you little scoundrel, or I'll murder you when the gentleman goes."
>
> The schoolmaster had scarcely uttered these words in a fierce whisper, when the stranger entered. Affecting not to see him, Mr Squeers feigned to be intent upon mending a pen, and offering benevolent advice to his youthful pupil.
>
> "My dear child," said Mr Squeers, "all people have their trials. This early trial of yours that is fit to make your little heart burst, and your very eyes come out of your head with crying, what is it? Nothing; less than nothing. You are leaving your friends, but you will have a father in me, my dear, and a mother in Mrs Squeers. At the delightful village of Dotheboys, near Greta Bridge, in Yorkshire, where youth are boarded, clothed, booked, washed, furnished with pocket-money, provided with all necessaries--" (93)

The first discourse we hear Squeers adopting is that which a Victorian gentleman-traveller would employ in addressing a servant. In this specific instance, the discourse is marked in four ways: first, by the direct command "Show;" second, by Squeers's naming of the person at the bar by privileging his status as a "gentleman;" third, by Squeers's referring to the waiter by his Christian name, "Richard;" and, fourth, by what the narrator describes as Squeers's "soft voice." The voice I hear upon reading "soft voice" is informed with the condescending tone of pleasantry that one would use in perpetrating the fiction that one's inferior has every reason in the world to consider himself well off in being the underling of so pleasant-speaking a patron. All four of these markers distinguish Squeers as one of the waiter's "betters."

It is a bit of a stretch, of course, in that a schoolmaster would not at the time necessarily fall into the category "gentleman," nor even into a category all *that* much higher up the social ladder than "waiter." In his direction to the Saracen's Head servant, Squeers is thus participating in a project that many of Dickens's comic hypocrites take part in: effecting in words that which has no existence outside of words (for example, Uriah Heap's insistence on being 'umble). Simply put, one becomes a gentleman by adopting the language and gestures of one, gestures whose artificiality may be part of the point of Dickens's passage.

That "the gentlemanly" is what I would call an enclosure, a structure in which certain words, thoughts, and actions are included to the exclusion of others, becomes very clear when Squeers exits this persona and aims his words at a different addressee, the boy on the trunk. This new audience requires a new role from Squeers, that of the omnipotent children's overseer. The markers of this discourse include (once again) a direct command; (once again) a form of address affirming the addressee's inferior status--here, it is "little scoundrel;" and a threat asserting the speaker's unlimited power over his addressee. What Dickens has Squeers specifically threaten the boy with, "murder," is a stroke of Dickens's genius. It lends a degree of extravagance to the passage that distances it somewhat from the sort of threat that a real

William Shaw might utter to one of his charges, and it indicates an understanding on both Squeers's (and Dickens's) part of a child's limited knowledge of what is and is not possible (or likely, at least) in the world. It would take a "knowin' imp" such as Jack Dawkins to point out to Squeers by way of retort what the boy on the trunk can not be aware of yet, namely, the unlikelihood of Squeers's tearing up one of his own meal-tickets, even a sneezy one. In this respect, that is, in understanding well how his audience thinks and how to adopt a distinct linguistic strategy that will play well with that audience, Squeers exhibits a skill that Dickens's most diabolically-represented characters possess (Fagin and James Harthouse come to mind).

What places Squeers more firmly in the category of *comic* villain, however, is the suddenness with which he shifts from one persona to another, and the relationship of diametrical opposition between the two personae. In effect, he suddenly includes in his words and behaviour what the previous persona has patently excluded. Thus, a process of definition takes place in that we learn the nature of a given persona by seeing not only what it is, but also what it strives *not* to be. The two personae together form a kind of binary opposition, defined against each other rather than in isolation.

On the other hand, the immediate collocation of the brutal children's

overseer and the Victorian travelling-gentleman, and their inclusion in the same fictional entity, Squeers, invites one to consider what attributes these two enclosures share and the artificiality of the enclosures as carefully monitored linguistic contrivances. It is difficult to determine whether in the first half of this passage Dickens means to imply a criticism of the Victorian gentleman persona, or merely to imply a criticism of those, like the Yorkshire schoolmaster, who are base pretenders to this class. In this case, both the children's overseer and the Victorian travelling-gentleman occupy a position of superiority in a hierarchy, and make their superiority to the addressed inferior explicit in the words they utter. In other words, they privilege in the texts they produce those verbal markers by which their privileged social positions are identifiable. By calling attention to the markers themselves, however, Dickens runs the risk of suggesting that they are not only conventional and artificial, but perhaps arbitrary. However, there are so many genuine socio-economic gentlemen in Dickens's works of whom we are clearly meant to approve (for example Mr. Brownlow) that it is difficult to know whether the Victorian gentleman is the target of Dickens's satire here; on the other hand, poking fun at the gentleman's questionable superiority to his "inferiors" is a major part of the project of novels as early as *The Pickwick Papers* and as late as *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend.*

This same foregrounding of the conventional and imitable tags of a given discourse occurs at the two subsequent transformations that Squeers makes in this brief passage: first at the moment the children's overseer becomes the parentally-inclined schoolmaster, and second when Squeers begins to recite the Dotheboys prospectus. By this time, of course, Squeers has begun to perform for still another audience, Snawley. Yet, as in the first half of the passage, one somewhat predictable part yields to an unexpectedly effective improvisation. What I am getting at is the similarity between the role of Victorian travelling-gentleman and that of the benevolent schoolmaster, insofar as the script for each is made up of relatively hackneyed lines. Squeers's line in the former, "Show the gentleman in," is just what we would expect such a man to say in such a circumstance. Hardly less predictable are the lines Squeers delivers in the part of beneficent schoolmaster. They include a cliche ("all people have their trials"), a worn-out metaphor (the bursting heart), and a stale oxymoron ("less than nothing"). Dullest of all, perhaps, is the "you will have a father in me" routine. Once again, the ease with which the idioms of this discourse are adoptable calls the authenticity of anyone exhibiting this persona into question.

This point is ingeniously driven home by Dickens when he has

Squeers slip directly and unexpectedly into the recitation of the newspaper ad. Because this ad and real ones actually published in the London newspapers share many common features, one might suggest that these boarding school prospecti constitute a genre. The distinguishing features of this form include, as Michael Slater points out, a "salubrious setting" and a list of "the subjects to be taught" (xiii), to which partial description I would add the prominence of the word "education;" the name of the school, its proprietor, and location in Yorkshire; financial terms; the phrase "no vacations;" a list of referees; and a string of past participles detailing the actions the boys will be on the receiving end of. By virtue of their conventionality and artificiality, these ads are very far removed from spontaneous oral discourse, as is most writing. One sees in them a degree of order, patterning, and arrangement that is quite unlike what we would see in reading a transcript of actual speech, which is full of fits and starts, backtrackings, ums and uhs, and so on. The collocation of the highly contrived form of the written newspaper advertisement and the words Squeers uses when addressing the boy on the trunk calls attention to the artificiality of the parentally-inclined schoolmaster's voice. Assuming that the genuine and the artificial are mutually exclusive, the inauthenticity of Squeers's professed benevolence is prominent insofar as the words he uses

are conventional. Words addressed by someone who really loves and looks after a little boy rarely sound as well-rehearsed and formal as the phrases uttered at the doomed young fellow on the trunk. As a result, the shift into the ad introduces into the persona of the benevolent schoolmaster attributes that we normally exclude from that enclosure, but, in this case, attributes that ought not to have been excluded, given the contrived nature of Squeers's role as care-giver.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of the two normally exclusive discourses of genuine caring and newspaper advertising calls attention to the fact that the real addressee of this communication is not the boy himself, but a prospective client, Snawley. That a newspaper ad should be addressed to prospective clients is not surprising; that words of benevolence should be so addressed comes as quite a surprise, but one that we really should have been anticipating all along. To any reader who even fleetingly forgets that these dulcet words are meant for Snawley's ears and not for the recently boxed ones of the boy on the trunk, the shift into the ad is a timely reminder that the promotion of both his school and himself is a project Squeers never abandons.

What we see in the entire monopolylogue, then, is the inclusion into one enclosure of voices normally kept in different categories of thought, but

between which Dickens's unparalleled genius for noticing like attributes discovers surprising connections. Because the idioms of inauthentic affection really *are* as carefully prepared and contrived as an oft-drafted and oft-delivered sales pitch, Squeers's sudden shift into the words of the prospectus is illogical for a split second only.

At this point, I am reminded (by an audible cough seeming to have vibrated from the vicinity of the bosom of Miss Fanny Squeers) that in my *own* prospectus at the beginning of this discussion, it was nowhere suggested that *one* of the four characters chosen for consideration--even one so distinguished as her own erudite pa--should be allowed to occupy a segment of the chapter disproportionate in size to that afforded the other three, and that Miss Squeers has been kept waiting *quite* long enough to hear what I shall have to say about *her* communicatory accomplishments. Taking this delicately suggested hint, I call your attention, then, to the work for which Miss Squeers is justly famous, her letter to Ralph Nickleby concerning the recent conduct of his monstrous nevew, Nicholas. (You will understand, I am sure, that the merits of this epistle, and its authoress, compel me to reproduce it in its entirety):

'Dotheboys Hall,
'Thursday Morning.

'Sir,

'My pa requests me to write to you. The doctors considering it doubtful whether he will ever recuvver the use of his legs which prevents his holding a pen.

'We are in a state of mind beyond everything, and my pa is one mask of brooses both blue and green likewise two forms are steepled in his Goar. We were kimpelled to have him carried down into the kitchen where he now lays. You will judge from this that he has been brought very low.

'When your nevew that you recommended for a teacher had done this to my pa and jumped upon his body with his feet and also langwedge which I will not pollewt my pen with describing, he assaulted my ma with dreadful violence, dashed her to the earth, and drove her back comb several inches into her head. A very little more and it must have entered her skull. We have a medical certifiket that if it had, the tortershell would have affected the brain.

'Me and my brother were then the victims of his feury since which we have suffered very much which leads us to the arrowing belief that we have received some injury in our insides, especially as no marks are visible externally. I am screaming out loud all the time I write and so is my brother which takes off my attention rather, and I hope will excuse mistakes.

'The monster having sasiated his thirst for blood ran away, taking with him a boy of desperate caracter that he had excited to rebellyon, and a garnet ring belonging to my ma, and not having been apprehended by the constables is supposed to have been took up by some stage-coach. My pa begs that if he comes to you the ring may be returned, and that you will let the thief and assassin go, as if we prosecuted him he would only be transported, and if he is let go he is sure to be hung before long, which will save us trouble, and be much more satisfactory. Hoping to hear from you when convenient

'I remain

'Yours and cetrer

'FANNY SQUEERS. (242-43)

Judging by this one artifact alone, it is clear that the daughter has learned

well what her father has to teach. As in the case of her pa's prospectus, much of the comedy here arises from Dickens's rare genius for exaggeration. One is hard-pressed to think of any other writer whose mind would be open enough to conceive an absurdity as outrageous as Fanny's assertion that she has managed to write such restrained prose under the handicap of her own and her brother's constant screaming. Such outrageous lying, of course, guarantees that virtually all readers of the letter would be certain that Fanny is perpetrating a falsehood, as does Dickens's plotting of the novel, which lets us first witness for ourselves events that Fanny retails for Ralph Nickleby's information. Moreover, like her father, Fanny does us the favour of foregrounding the attributes of discourses that normally reside apart, by bringing them into each other's company in a single enclosure, her letter. Glancing over at the second paragraph, for example, one may observe in close proximity the language of the familiar personal letter ("We are in a state of mind beyond everything"), and that of the Penny Dreadful ("steepled in his Goar").

However, one feature that distinguishes her text from her father's prospectus is her incompetence as a writer of the Queen's English. Obviously, Dickens communicates this incompetence in very unsubtle ways, Fanny's spelling perhaps foremost among them and probably the feature of

the letter most easily aped by the many hacks who peddled cheap imitations of Dickens's comedy. Prominent as well are her errors in grammar, though it is likely that the mistaken substitution of "lays" for "lies" would be lost on many today.

What the Dickens wannabes probably would not be able to pull off, however, is the incompetence Fanny exhibits in judging what ought to be included and excluded from her text. Notice how she disqualifies herself for membership as one of the wise to whom a word is sufficient by including in her written text that which goes without saying to all but the most helpless producers of construed texts. What I have in mind here is the concluding sentence of paragraph three, in which Fanny feels compelled to put into words herself, and to have had put into words by medical authority, the likelihood that a comb driven several inches into a brain would harm someone unfortunate enough to sustain such a lobal assault.

Fanny's underestimation of the inferences proficient readers draw from what they read is clear again from the coup de grace of her letter, its postscript. By having Fanny assert, "I pity his ignorance and despise him," Dickens elicits a laugh by means of the time-honoured device of having a speaker project upon someone else a fault that is really the speaker's own. Obviously, Fanny would be well advised to avoid bringing the concept

"ignorance" anywhere near the reader's enclosure of conscious thought. She would also have done well to have made no mention whatsoever of her current opinion of Nicholas, if her intention really were to put to an end all hopes he may have cherished that his conduct would not have altered her fondness for him. In asserting that she despises him, she not only betrays the fact that he still has a place in her thoughts, but also invites us to construe her declaration as an inverted text and thus infer that she has not gotten over him at all.

Here we can see one crucial reason for liars and laughs to have teamed up successfully for such a long time. If it is true that a good comic author will effect a state of latent comedy by placing an idea right under our noses that we will nevertheless fail to conceive until a comic catastrophe causes us to do so--in other words, if an idea must be somewhat available to our perception, but kept from being explicitly perceived until some subsequent moment of elucidation, then it makes sense that characters who ultimately turn out to hold beliefs diametrically opposed to those they profess should predominate in comedies. The reason for this is that whenever there appears in the enclosure of conscious thought, any concept x, for which an opposite exists, that opposite will always be much closer to our thoughts than the multitude of concepts that are not directly related to concept x.

Put simply, someone who conceives the concept "black" actually comes much closer to thinking of "white" than of "toaster-oven," "hypochondria," or "mitre." The same principle operates in simple verbal irony, which also fits Perry's description of an inverted text. Just as Percy Shelley's Spring never lags too far behind the Winter we smell on the "breath of Autumn's being," so does an assertion's antithesis loiter relatively near that assertion, compared to a second assertion not connected by blood to the first.

Speaking of blood and autumnal winds, it might be wise at this point to escort Seth Pecksniff gently into the discussion before some malicious gust blows him in unexpectedly, and sends him falling into and sprawling all over the thorns of life.

In the presentation of Pecksniff, one sees what may be Dickens's most sustained use of simple verbal irony. A clear example is the passage in which the reader first comes to know the Archangelic architect on intimate terms:

> Mr Pecksniff was a moral man: a grave man, a man of noble sentiments and speech. . . . Perhaps there never was a more moral man than Mr Pecksniff: especially in his conversation and correspondence. It was once said of him by a homely admirer, that he had a Fortunatus's purse of good sentiments in his inside. In this particular he was like the girl in the fairy tale, except that if they were not actual diamonds which fell from his lips, they were the very brightest paste, and shone prodigiously. He was a most exemplary man: fuller of virtuous precept than a copy-book. Some people likened him to a direction-post, which is always telling the way to a place, and

never goes there: but these were his enemies. . . . (62)

Whenever one assumes a facetious tone, whenever a speaker masquerades for the benefit of his or her kindred group as a member of those against whom the speaker and that group define themselves, a state of latent comedy exists. In this state, the masquerader keeps his or her own mercurial features out of sight, the viewer seeing instead a rigid, *papier maché* mask. The kindred viewer, of course, knows that the masquerader is in costume and can guess the person's true identity pretty well from an assortment of visual cues: physical stature, body movements, a telltale twinkle in the eye. Nevertheless, just *when* the perceiver will have the pleasure of seeing the familiar face behind the mask, and enjoying the full play of its features on the countenance of a cherished friend, remains to be seen. As a result, the perceiver is left in a rather pleasant state of anticipation until the identity of the masquerader is confirmed once the mask comes down. Similarly, the Dickens aficionado well knows in reading through the passage quoted above that the narrator's pretended endorsement of what Sylvère Monod aptly calls "Pecksniffery" (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 74) will abruptly end, and that the truth and Dickens will soon out.

This moment, for such readers, will be a comic turn of thought.

Dickens provides such a moment in the passage at the point where our eyes pass over the word "paste." It is with consummate skill that Dickens leads up to this moment, when the real value of Pecksniff's sense is revealed. Notice that Dickens keeps us believing that the passage is moving in a pro-Pecksniffian direction even after the tide has in fact turned and has begun to bear us back to the value system we call home. He does so by singing Pecksniff's praises in the Fortunatus' purse metaphor and seeming to offer us an encore as he modulates into the allusion to "Diamonds and Toads." With the sudden intrusion of "paste," however, we realize that quite a different tune is now being sung. Besides its careful plotting, the joke nicely showcases Dickens's facility for drawing on what Lakoff and Johnson call the "unused" part of one of the domains in a metaphor. In this case, the paste diamonds fall neatly into the category of decorative jewelry and the "adornments" of speech, but obviously signify a category of assertions diametrically opposed to that which would be suggested by a reference to genuine diamonds. Note, finally, the riddle-like structure of the last sentence: "Some people likened him to a direction post, which is always telling the way to a place, and never goes there. . . ." The initial independent clause operates much the same way as would the question, "How is Pecksniff like a direction post?" Such a question will cause some readers to erect in

their minds an enclosure into which they will place tentative guesses by thinking of the possible attributes shared by the entities "Pecksniff" and "direction post." As usual, the shared attributes that Dickens has in mind almost certainly will not be conceived by the reader, despite their aptness. Note also the delicate sense of comic timing Dickens exhibits in choosing the conjunction "and" over the adversative conjunction "but." In doing so, he once again leads the reader down the garden path whose circuit begins with the positive attribute of "telling the way to a place," only to suddenly reverse directions by introducing the negative idea of "never go[ing] there." One of Dickens's finest qualities as a comic writer is his ability to hold off on a joke's punch line until the reader's guard has dropped far enough down for the punch to knock him flat.

The physical description of Pecksniff that immediately follows the signpost joke showcases yet more of Dickens's best qualities as a prose comedian, qualities that the language of enclosure theory can help us appreciate. Here is the description:

> His very throat was moral. You saw a good deal of it. You looked over a very low fence of white cravat (whereof no man had ever beheld the tie, for he fastened it behind), and there it lay, a valley between two jutting heights of collar, serene and whiskerless before you. It seemed to say, on the part of Mr Pecksniff, "There is no deception, ladies and gentleman, all is peace, a holy calm pervades me." So did his hair. . . . So did

> his person. . . . So did his manner. . . . In a word, even his plain black suit, and state of widower, and dangling double eyeglass, all tended to the same purpose, and cried aloud, "Behold the moral Pecksniff!" (63-64)

At this point, it will be helpful to distinguish between two separate entities, these being what I will call "Mr. Pecksniff" and "Seth Pecksniff." By the former appellation I am referring to the public figure that the father of Charity and Mercy exhibits, the sartorial and gesturial text that the land surveyor cum architectural professor presents to public view, "public" here including even Pecksniff's daughters. By "Seth Peckniff," I mean the fictional man that writes the text "Mr Pecksniff" and who experiences, presumably, many of the emotional and cognitive experiences that any fictional human being might. This latter, Seth Pecksniff, rarely appears in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but does become available to the reader's perception, for example, in the brief period after the architect is surprised to discover that the man in the Blue Dragon whom Mrs. Lupin has summoned him to counsel is actually his wealthy relation, old Martin Chuzzlewit. In short, "Seth Pecksniff" is the man; "Mr. Pecksniff" is the persona.

Notice that both passages of description I have quoted above describe for the most part what Dickens calls "'Mr Pecksniff" and that assertions such as "*Mr Pecksniff* was a moral man" (emphasis added) are relatively true. The

person that Seth Pecksniff would have the world regard him as *is* a virtuous Christian philanthropist. All the same, this text that Seth writes is an exceedingly limited contrivance, an enclosure that includes all the signs of virtue that Seth Pecksniff's mind is fluent in, and strives to exclude *altogether* signs of other kinds. What we are being presented with, then--in the passage that begins with the description of this man's throat and ends with the reference to his double eyeglass--are the signs which constitute not *Seth* Pecksniff but *Mr.* Pecksniff.

Moreover, what Dickens has included in his text here is a translation into words of what these sartorial and physiological signs mean. Dickens rarely seems to have received the credit he deserves for being the pre-eminent translator in his time of the sartorial, physiological, and body languages by which the Victorians seem to have spoken to each other.[4] Indeed, it is no exaggeration to assert that Dickens's novels are to this language what Dr. Johnson's dictionary was to eighteenth-century English. Furthermore, the comedy which informs so many of the pages in these novels may arise in part from the reader's recognition that clothes, body movements, and, of course, facial expressions were as pervasive a medium of communication in real Victorian society as they were on the Victorian stage,

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[4]One noteworthy exception is Juliet McMaster's *Dickens the Designer*.

the extravagant histrionics of which are perhaps its defining characteristic. By giving verbal expression to the productions that a human being stages for those nearby, Dickens is demonstrating something like what Pope called "true wit," that is, "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed." In Dickens's case, the thoughts to which he gives verbal expression-- the messages that we all have sent and received by nonverbal means-- may not have been expressed in words at all.

Part of a comic response to such a passage, therefore, results from Dickens's having included in the enclosure of "that which has been given verbal expression" accurate definitions of the countless nonverbal communications that the Victorians so often expressed themselves by. Of course, much also depends on the reader's assenting to the accuracy of the definitions and, in this case, on the reader's being surprised to discover in each other's company the relatively low entity "Pecksniff's 'throat'" and the relatively grand register of language in which it speaks: "'all is peace, a holy calm pervades me.'"

Part of the fun of the passage, as well, is seeing just what Seth includes in his idea of the signs of virtue and the pathetically limited understanding he has of that of which genuine virtue consists. Indeed, the experience is much like the one Dickens offers us when we are permitted to

be among the Gradgrindian elite, to be among those who possess insight into what a horse *really* is: "'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth'" (50). Both Bitzer's well-conned definition of what the Romans called "equus" and Seth Peckniff's textual rendering of a moral man exclude so much of what those two entities in all their fullness are that their status as unjustly exclusionary enclosures is swiftly and patently obvious to Dickens's kindred readers. In sum, much of what Dickens is satirizing here is the smug certainty with which the Pecksniffs of the world presume to profess that their feebly one-dimensional conception of virtue is the final and only word on the subject. Thus, it may be fair to say that "Mr.Pecksniff" is to real virtue what a Dublin tourist pamphlet is to Joyce's *Ulysses* or what "Jesus Loves Me" is to Beethoven's Ninth.

In addition to smugly presuming to know what can not be known, one of the vices that Dickens often targets in his comedy is sameness. Like Mr. Pumblechook addressing Pip, Pecksniff is the embodiment of unrelentingly doltish dinning as he complacently and infuriatingly arrogates to himself all understanding of what is pleasing to God. The means by

which he achieves this authority, of course, is the nature of language, the nonfixity of which Pecksniff is able to exploit to render his every action impeccable. Indeed, he contrives to construct his blatant misdoings as not only sinless, but exemplary of sinlessness. Moreover, it is this same quality of language, its slipperiness, that allows Pecksniff to put down any verbal assaults to his immaculate nature. As Coral Lansbury admirably observes in her recent essay "Pecksniff and Pratfalls": "Nobody can defeat Pecksniff in debate, no one discomfit him, not even a middle-aged gentleman at an upstairs window roaring at him to 'Come off the grass'. Like the Clown, the only way to get the better of Pecksniff, and that momentarily, is to beat him down physically" (50). In this respect, Dickens draws on the rich English tradition of the comedy of humours that calls attention to those unbalanced monomaniacs who do not dismount from their hobby horses until such time as they are catapulted off them by some comic corrective. At the same time, the ingenious authors of these fixated characters often bestow upon their creations a facility for linguistic invention that real blockheads rarely exhibit.

Pecksniff's proficiency in this art puts him in an elite category of Dickens's logocentric villains, Wackford Squeers included. Just as the Yorkshire schoolmaster dutifully discharges his pedagogical obligations by conceiving a "botinney" curriculum whereof a substantial portion is devoted

to "weeding the garden" (155), so too does Seth soar--and with no middle flight-- to heights of sophistry. A fine example is Pecksniff's lecture on the desirability of his and his daughters' being bundled up snugly inside a London-bound coach while all the other passengers succumb to frostiness on the outside:

> And this, he said, was quite natural, and a very beautiful arrangement; not confined to coaches, but extending itself into many social ramifications. "For," (he observed), "if every one were warm and well-fed, we should lose the satisfaction of admiring the fortitude with which certain conditions of men bear cold and hunger. And if we were no better off than anybody else, what would become of our sense of gratitude; which," said Mr Pecksniff with tears in his eyes, as he shook his fist at a beggar who wanted to get up behind, "is one of the holiest feelings of our common nature." (174)

Once again, Dickens's marvelous extravagance is at work here, as he draws into proximity Mr. Pecksniff's tears of piety and Seth Pecksniff's shaking fist. Moreover, the passage exhibits nicely the relationship of diametrical opposition that so many comic turns of thought centre on.

Unlike Squeers, however, Pecksniff does not remain forever conscious of himself as the caretaker of a persona, nor does he ever break out of this enclosure voluntarily. Some of Wackford Squeers's finest moments come when he *himself* lays low the facade he habitually presents to society's view. For example, once he has discovered that Mr. Snawley is not the parent, but

actually the stepfather of the two boys in his care, Squeers outrageously exclaims, "'Oh! Is that it? . . . I was wondering what the devil you were going to send them to Yorkshire for. Ha, ha! I understand now'" (95-6). The London coach conversation between Pecksniff and Anthony Chuzzlewit, however, lets us know that Seth Pecksniff is in danger of being altogether subsumed by his own persona. As old Anthony points out to Pecksniff himself, "'the annoying quality in *you*, is . . . that you would deceive everybody, even those who practise the same art; and have a way with you, as if you--he, he, he!--as if you really believed yourself'" (176). "Mr. Pecksniff," then, is becoming what Frank Kermode would call an ossified fiction and what I would describe as an enclosure whose status as an exclusionary construct is being forgotten even by its own architect, Seth Pecksniff.

This vanishing awareness on Seth Pecksniff's part that "Mr. Pecksniff" is an enclosure-- that the persona is the product of words and actions that have been privileged over others for presentation to the public eye-- causes that eminent impostor no end of trouble when a given occasion calls for a voice other than that of "Mr. Pecksniff." In contrast to Squeers, an accomplished polyglot of Victorian discourses, Seth's act consists of one voice only. Nowhere is this more hilariously evident than when Pecksniff

finds himself addressing an audience, specifically "the grand-nephew of Mr Martin Chuzzlewit" (107-8), who proves hopelessly incapable of participating in the high-minded discourse of which Mr. Pecksniff is so fond. The incident which I have in mind, of course, is the moment in chapter four when Pecksniff attempts to suggest to an entire congress of interested Chuzzlewits that their wealthy relation would be better off without his paid companion, Mary Graham:

> "What I would observe is, that I think some practical means might be devised of inducing. . . . our respected relative to dispose himself to listen to the promptings of nature, and not to the--"
>
> "Go on, pa!" cried Mercy.
>
> "Why, the truth is, my dear," said Mr Pecksniff, smiling upon his assembled kindred, "that I am at a loss for a word. The name of those fabulous animals (pagan, I regret to say) who used to sing in the water, has quite escaped me."
>
> Mr George Chuzzlewit suggested "Swans."
>
> "No," said Mr Pecksniff. "Not swans. Very like swans, too. Thank you."
>
> The nephew with the outline of a countenance, speaking for the first and last time on that occasion, propounded "Oysters." (113)

In my reading experience of Dickens's novels, I can't recall ever having laughed out loud with quite the same intensity as I did the first time I passed an eye over the grand-nephew's submission, "'Oysters.'" I now understand why this moment was so funny to me. There are many enclosures simultaneously modified when I and other Dickensians enjoy this

passage. Obviously, Pecksniff's initial periphrastic reference to the entity whose name has escaped him will cause "siren" to be placed in or near the enclosure of conscious thought in many of the passage's readers. Notice how much time we are given to allow that to happen, as we depart from the word "water," travel past George's mildly funny suggestion of "'Swans,'" and arrive at our ultimate destination, "'Oysters'" itself. The route is some 41 words long. Notice also that 19 of those words, the sentence that lets us know by whom the second suggestion will be made, give us ample time to place in or near the enclosure of conscious thought some idea of what the grand-nephew will suggest, but that there is virtually no chance for any reader to anticipate correctly what Dickens ultimately has him say. We may not even anticipate a second wrong suggestion, even though we ought to, given the suggestion's source. Thus, Dickens affords the reader plenty of time to erect an enclosure and place in it "siren" or whatever s/he anticipates the grand-nephew will propose. When Dickens has him offer "'Oysters,'" that enclosure is drastically revised.

Moreover, the relationship between the concept "siren" and the concept "oyster" is important. Each has resided quite far apart from the other in a different neighborhood of discourse. Many readers would consider "siren" a denizen of the upscale community of Literature,

Mythology, and Poetry. "Oysters," on the other hand, is definitely an Eastender. By taking these residents of disparate quarters and drawing them together in one ingenious passage, Dickens achieves the same effect he has pulled off in the novel's very first sentence, that which brings Adam, Eve, and "agricultural interest" into each other's company.

Also brought into an unexpected union are the woman Pecksniff perceives to have been hoodwinking old Martin, the virtuous Mary Graham, and the entities "swan" and "oyster." The metaphor WOMAN=SWAN, though technically an absurdity (as every metaphor is), is at least an absurdity we are used to. The metaphor WOMAN=OYSTER would choke even the least resisting reader. On the other hand, as anyone will tell you who has had the mixed pleasure of teaching English verse to people whose notion of "literature" is a leaflet on acne treatments, the idea that "Oysters" would be the offering you receive when a word is on the tip of your tongue, lies well within the enclosure of "what is possible in this world." The more fools we, who have ruled out this possibility. The passage thus operates as a reminder to the literature-centric of the existence of those outside our circle--not just the grand-nephew, who is clearly alien to one who picks up a Dickens novel to enjoy the fresh metaphors in it, but also Pecksniff himself, who foolishly misjudges what current composition textbooks term the

"communication situation." In this case, he fails to take into account the linguistic limitations of his uninitiated relative. Of course, even if he had kept his audience in mind, Seth would have had no voice to offer other than "Mr. Pecksniff." What we are thus witness to here is a total failure of communication on the parts of both listener and speaker, neither of whom has the required verbal proficiency to make up for the other's shortcomings.

There remains one more character to "dispoge" of in this discussion of the mastery that Dickens's liars exhibit (or do not) when they lie. That character is Sarah Gamp. As is the case with Pecksniff, what to name this fictional entity poses a bit of a problem, given that the entity is an enclosure containing quite disparate elements. Even the appellation which Phiz has hung up beside the window of her Kingsgate street lodgings, "Mrs. Gamp," causes difficulty. It refers both to the person Mr. Mould has recommended to lay out the body of the late Anthony Chuzzlewit and to the person who attends the gravid. Moreover, each of these Mrs. Gamps--the one a nurse, the other a midwife--seems to be able to make herself fully available on literally a moment's notice. When Pecksniff manages to disabuse her of the idea that he is acting not on behalf of a woman about to experience that "which expresses, in two syllables, the curse pronounced on Adam" (374), but rather on the advice of Mr. Mould, her reaction is swift: "Mrs Gamp,

who had a face for all occasions, looked out of the window with her mourning countenance, and said she would be down directly" (376).

Of course, Sarah Gamp is only able to pull off this quick-change feat because she has left off being a person with authentic feelings and become solely a contrivance. She is always dressed in rather rusty and full-figured suits of woe--or midwifery, depending on the current need. As he so often does, Dickens calls our attention through the likes of the Gamps, Moulds, and Sowerberries to the surprising power of habit to inure some people to even the most moving experiences, prominent among which are births and deaths. As the narrator of *Martin Chuzzlewit* observes of Sarah Gamp, "Like most persons who have attained to great eminence in their professions, she took to hers very kindly; insomuch that, setting aside her natural predilections as a woman, she went to a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish" (378).

Another quality she shares with the Pecksniffs of Dickens's world is a propensity so to contort logic and language as to construct her every vice as a virtue. Dickens seems to have been perpetually fascinated by this phenomenon that occurs when a person or society deems as eminently laudable that which is patently heinous. Notice, for example, the authorial ingenuity with which Sarah is able to put a positive spin on her having

upbraided poor Chuffey when he has unwittingly become her rival as the attendant of Anthony's corpse. As Mrs. Gamp reports to Pecksniff (to whom she has appealed for the grief-stricken Chuffey's removal from the room where the corpse awaits her professional observances), "'And even . . . if one calls [octogenarians] names, it's only to rouse 'em'" (382).

Yet more of her affinity for circumventing truth surfaces when, as nurse, she relieves Mr. Lewsome's pillow of the burden of supporting his fever-ridden head. In this case, however, the recuperative benefits of this appropriation are apparently so obvious that Mrs. Gamp need not trouble herself even to engage in some creative sophistry. Mere assertion seems sufficient: "'I a'most forgot the piller, I declare!' said Mrs Gamp, drawing it away. 'There! Now he's comfortable as can be, *I*'m sure!'" (481). Whatever comedy there can be in a passage such as this one seems to arise chiefly from the reader's revising the enclosure of "the lengths to which the selfish will go to claim for themselves what should be someone else's." In addition, we see here a trait showed by many of Dickens's villains. This is their ability to accept the word for the deed. According to this bizarre value system, all one need do when unable to bring about a desired state of affairs is merely produce a sign or signs that one associates with that state of affairs. Clearly Sairey, like Seth, has mastered this fraudulent practice.

One other respect in which Sarah Gamp resembles more the everperforming Pecksniff than the sometimes refreshingly (dis)honest Squeers is her facility for ensemble work. What I am specifically referring to are the mutually sustaining productions that she and, for example, Mr. Mould create for each other's benefit. By participating in each other's fictions, Mould and Gamp manage jointly to reassure themselves of the impenetrability of their public guises. In chapter 25, after Mrs. Gamp has paid both a brief visit and an extended compliment to the family Mould, the head of that household remarks to his spouse:

> "I'll tell you what my dear, . . . that's a ve-ry shrewd woman. That's a woman whose intellect is immensely superior to her station in life. That's a woman who observes and reflects in an uncommon manner. She's the sort of woman now," said Mould, drawing his silk handkerchief over his head again, and composing himself for a nap, "one would almost feel disposed to bury for nothing: and do it neatly too." (475)

This scene is thus another example of Dickens's seeming to write for a relatively exclusive audience of proficient novel readers and playgoers, textual adepts who pride themselves as much on their skill at construing the texts they encounter in everyday life as those they see in the theatres proper. In the passage just quoted, notice the dramatic irony that Dickens creates for such readers by having Mould describe Mrs. Gamp as "a ve-ry shrewd woman" and thus inviting those readers to conclude that Mrs. Gamp is even

shrewder than Mould himself realizes, given that she knows exactly how to manipulate the undertaker to further her own ends. Part of the joke in scenes such as this seems to involve the characters' mistaken belief that there exist no people--Dickens's readers, in particular--whose proficiency with texts exceeds their own.

This subtext surfaces visibly just a few passages earlier in the chapter that recounts Sarah Gamp's visit *chez* Mould. Before she arrives, the reader witnesses a revealing exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Mould. Gazing out of the first-floor window of their place of business and residence, and "closing his eyes in a perfect luxury," Mr. Mould nurtures the conversation by remarking:

> "Quite the buzz of insects. . . . It puts one in mind of the sound of animated nature in the agricultural districts. It's exactly like the woodpecker tapping."
>
> "The woodpecker tapping the hollow *elm* tree," observed Mrs Mould, adapting the words of the popular melody to the description of wood commonly used in the trade [i.e. coffin-making].
>
> "Ha, ha!" laughed Mr Mould. "Not at all bad, my dear. We shall be glad to hear from you again, Mrs M. Hollow elm tree, eh! Ha, ha! Very good, indeed. I've seen worse than that in the Sunday papers, my love. . . . Hollow *elm* tree, eh?" said Mr Mould, making a slight motion with his legs in the enjoyment of the joke. "It's beech in the song. Elm, eh? Yes, to be sure. Ha, ha, ha! Upon my soul, that's one of the best things I know!" He was so excessively tickled by the jest that he couldn't forget it, but repeated it twenty times, "Elm eh? Yes, to be sure. Elm, of course. Ha, ha, ha! Upon my life, you

> know, that ought to be sent to somebody who could make use of it. It's one of the smartest things that ever was said. Hollow *elm* tree, eh? Of course. Very hollow. Ha, ha ha!" (470)

What strikes me as odd about this passage is that Dickens seems to be as guilty of belabouring the joke on Mould's low comic standards as Mould himself is of his wife's bon mot. Here I perceive the Dickens whose towering yet unstable ego caused him to refer to himself as the Inimitable so often that Forster deemed it prudent to edit that appellation from some of the letters published in the biography he wrote of his unquestionably gifted friend. In the passage I have called attention to and others like it,[5] Dickens seems to be going to great and tedious lengths to assert his own pre-eminence as comic entertainer by presenting his readers with the undeniably second-rate efforts of his own characters. In reading such passages, I hear an all-too-Dickensian voice saying, "Perceive how *their* skill is but a pale imitation of my own!"

Trouble is, he is right. Dickens *is* the Inimitable, as is made clear by the falling out between Mrs. Gamp and Betsey Prig, when the latter calls a fictional construct a fictional construct by daring to suggest that, outside of the enclosure of Sarah Gamp's verbal utterances, there resides no "sich a

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[5]Cf. Jonas Chuzzlewit's efforts to amuse the sisters Pecksniff on the evening they spend at their cousin and uncle's London home in chapter 11.

person" as the esteemed and oft-quoted Mrs. Harris. Indeed, one of the finest moments in the entire Dickens comic opera is that which we experience when Mrs. Gamp expresses her indignation with her co-fancier of "cowcumbers" (the audience for her grand aria is a just-arrived group of three men, led by her landlord, Poll Sweedlepipe.):

> "Oh, Mr Sweedlepipes, which Mr Westlock also, if my eyes do not deceive, and a friend not havin' the pleasure of bein' beknown, wot I have took from Betsey Prig this blessed night, no mortial creetur knows! If she had abuged me, bein in liquor, which I thought I smelt her wen she come, but could not so believe, not bein' used myself"--Mrs Gamp, by the way, was pretty far gone, and the fragrance of the teapot was strong in the room--"I could have bore it with a thankful art. But the words she spoke of Mrs Harris, lambs could not forgive. No, Betsey!" said Mrs Gamp in a violent burst of feeling,"nor worms forget!" (836)

Much is at work here to bring the comedy about, but there are some features that I wish to highlight. First, "worms." Coming upon this word will provoke from many readers much the same reaction that the "Oysters" of chapter four bring about. This is so partly because of the structural similarity between the two famous moments. Just as the surprising entrance of "Oysters" was preceded by the not quite as "a-stonishing" but nevertheless unexpected appearance of "Swans," so too are Mrs. Gamp's "worms" led up to by a troupe of almost all-forgiving lambs. This structure works well because the sequence beginning "lambs could not forgive" and running

through to "nor" lets the reader know to some degree what to expect. In this case, we know from "nor" that we are about to be shown a second model of Christian virtue, but nevertheless one that Betsey Prig proves too much for. Apparently, this one's giving way to Betsey will be even more remarkable than the late capitulation of the laudably merciful lambs. Moreover, because of the familiar alliance of forgiveness with forgetting, we have a pretty good idea of the particular virtue which will succumb next. All the same, no impresario but Dickens could conceive of placing "worms" into the reader's just-erected enclosure, which might be articulated as "epitome of merciful forgetting."

Part of the joke here depends on the reader's laughing at Mrs. Gamp's lack of proficiency in communicating by means of metaphorical expression. The two entities drawn into association with each other in the CHRISTIAN PERSON=WORM metaphor share relatively few attributes, and the attributes that they do not share can not help but force their way into the reader's consciousness when s/he attempts to participate in the creation of the metaphor's meaning. Moreover, the mutual exclusion of "memory" and "worms" that most of us will have participated in before reading Dickens's passage is probably a segregation that we need not trouble our consciences over. All the same, there is unquestionably some fun to be had in bringing

these two entities together, and for that reason, the ethical point of Dickens's presentation of Sarah Gamp is lost somewhere in the alcoholic haze that surrounds her. Presumably, Mrs. Gamp's inability to compose an adequate metaphor is meant to be an index of her inability to perpetrate a fiction that is not easily seen through. In effect, our perceiving the absurdity of her metaphor parallels our disbelief in the existence of Mrs. Harris, whose shaky ontological status is made known to us immediately after Mrs. Gamp first mentions her in chapter 25. This keystone removed, the entire Gampian facade should collapse into rubble.

On the other hand, without going so far as to suggest that all metaphors are of equal quality and that all speakers and utterances deserve the utmost participation of the reader in constructing them charitably, I find myself somewhat unsettled by passages such as this one. Although much of Dickens's comedy promotes both an awareness of the reader's agency in creating meaning and an awareness of the nonfixity of language, in ridiculing Mrs. Gamp for perpetrating the CHRISTIAN PERSON=WORM metaphor, the novelist seems to imply that some metaphors are not fundamentally absurd. Apparently, he would have us believe that a *properly* composed metaphor could carry virtually the entire burden of meaning-creation, including the reader's share. Dickens seems to activate that faculty of mind

that discovers the disparate attributes between a metaphor's two entities only when the metaphor in question originates from someone whose conduct he does not altogether approve of; when the metaphor is one of his own, he expects this faculty to be turned off.

A striking example of this double standard is that Dickens has the narrator of *The Chimes* use, in all sincerity I believe, a metaphor whose employment by *David Copperfield*'s Mr. Micawber appears to be ridiculous. The metaphor I am referring to has to do with breastfeeding. Here is the appearance it makes in *David Copperfield*, just after David has asked Mr. Micawber whether his wife is well:

> "Thank you," said Mr Micawber, waving his hand as of old, and settling his chin in his shirt collar. "She is tolerably convalescent. The twins no longer derive their sustenance from Nature's founts--in short" said Mr Micawber, in one of his bursts of confidence, "they are weaned--and Mrs Micawber is, at present, my travelling companion." (315)

Here it is again in *The Chimes*. In this case, the metaphor is used by the narrator to chastise the hypocritical Alderman Cute. Cute has just failed to judge a banker who has lately committed suicide according to the same standard by which he judges the suicidal poor:

> What, Alderman! No word of Putting Down? Remember, Justice, your high moral boast and pride. Come, Alderman! Balance those scales. Throw me into this, the empty one, No dinner and Nature's Founts in some poor woman, dried by

> starving misery and rendered obdurate to claims for which her offspring has authority in holy mother Eve. Weigh me the two: you Daniel, going to judgment, when your day shall come! Weigh them, in the eyes of suffering thousands, audience (not unmindful) of the grim farce you play. (*Christmas Books* 212)

In the latter passage, Dickens exhibits a remarkable blindness to his narrator's speaking in a discourse of moral indignation so excessively high-toned that the passage becomes embarrassing. This blindness is even more astonishing, of course, given that it is found in an author capable of creating Wilkins Micawber's hilariously periphrastic idiolect.

In *The Dickens Pantomime*, Edwin M. Eigner prefaces his chapter on Dickensian avatars of the pantomime Clown with the following quotation from Leigh Hunt:

> The Clown is a delightful fellow to tickle our self-love with. He is very stupid, mischievous, gluttonous, and cowardly, none of which, of course, any of us are, especially the first; and as in these respects we feel a lofty advantage over him, so he occasionally aspires to our level by a sort of glimmering cunning and jocoseness, of which he thinks so prodigiously of himself as to give us a still more delightful notion of our superiority. (143)

That Eigner does not link any of the four characters I have discussed in this chapter as pantomime Clowns comes as a bit of a surprise. The four attributes listed by Hunt strike me as fitting them almost to a T (I would hesitate to call any of the four mischievous). What strikes me most in the

Hunt passage, however, is the aptness of his description of the audience's response to the Clown. A driving force behind the comedy that arises from the scenes in which each of these characters performs is the prodigious effort made by the character to reach a high level of skill in authoring texts and the mistaken belief each comes to entertain that this effort has been resoundingly successful. Clearly, these are characters whom Dickens wants us to laugh *at*. However, when taking in the spectacle of these four comic performances, I do not get the impression that Dickens shares Hunt's awareness of the extent to which we are laughing at ourselves when we laugh at the Clownish exploits of Gamp, Pecksniff, and the family Squeers. With just the right measure of irony, Hunt lets his reader know that the behaviour of the viewer, situated in his seat above and before the stage, may be just as much a comic attraction to the audience members seated behind him as is the performance that is taking place on the stage itself. Dickens, on the other hand, unfortunately seems to have claimed for himself the rearmost seat--the one furthest from the stage--in a place from which he can see the fools before and below him without exposing his own faults to view. In doing so, in seeming to believe quite genuinely in his own supremacy as fictionalizer, Dickens may be disqualifying himself from the very highest order of comic entertainers, those--such as Chaucer, Cervantes, Molière, or

Austen--who understand well that one's facility for spotting motes is less an act of observing others than of recognizing oneself.

Nevertheless, this is a *sub*text, and I do not mean to suggest, by calling attention to it, that this aftertaste is the major component of one's experience of Mrs. Gamp. Sometimes, impelled by the call to produce novel readings of well-known works, one can neglect to give due place to the accurate comments of previous scholars. In suggesting that one of Dickens's impulses in creating Mrs. Gamp as he has may be the Inimitable's desire to assert his own eminence in the production of texts, I run the risk of underprivileging the Dickens so many of us love, and love deservedly. The last words on Mrs. Gamp in this discussion, therefore, should not be mine, but those of Robert Polhemus, whose essay on comic expression in *Martin Chuzzlewit* has no peer that I know of. He writes of Mrs. Gamp what may be said of all Dickens's first-rate comic hypocrites:

> While Mrs. Gamp speaks, I hang on her words and do not care what will happen to her later on or whether she is a bad nurse and a selfish person. Dickens's comic language forms spots of time, or rather spots of timelessness, in which I can lose myself. Like no other Victorian novelist, and few writers of any era, Dickens is capable of transmitting a comic ecstasy that obliterates self-consciousness. His comic moment, stimulating, concentrating, and discharging an immense amount of thought and emotional energy, intensifies a sense of being in the social context of wit, joking, and live comic performance. It wards off the main burden of time, which is an awareness of moving toward an end. Expression itself becomes

Dickens's revelation, in which, for a time, we forget time. (116)

IV. Many Happy Returns: Dickens's Comic Repetition

> "There you are agin! An't it nice?"
>
> --Bailey, *Martin Chuzzlewit*

> "You think of me . . . and it is very natural that you should, as if I were a character in a book"
>
> --Tom Pinch, *Martin Chuzzlewit*

Mere change is not comic: if it were, then dividing twenty-two by seven would yield infinite laughs. It is just as true, moreover, that the results of three's going into ten, perpetual sameness, would be no one's idea of fun--although Satan's contriving such a fate for Pumblechook does not strike one as perfectly uncomic. Nevertheless, any approach to comedy so dependent on change--on multiple and virtually simultaneous acts of enclosure recognition/revision--runs the risk of being rather exclusionary itself, given the long association of repetition and comedy. It seems necessary, then, that one would want to apply the analytical tool presented in this thesis to scenes and characters with a reputation for being comic, and then see what, besides Mr. Micawber, turns up. In this chapter, therefore, I will discuss relationships between comedy and repetition, once again employing the enclosure method so to do.

A relatively straightforward instance of comic repetition in Dickens concerns the "United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company," around the formation of which a

slight episode in *Nicholas Nickleby* is based. Why should this name be amusing? No doubt, one answer is that it is an exaggeration of names of public companies that actually existed at the time. But I think it is interesting to consider what exaggeration really *is* and why it should have a connection to the comic.

Certainly, exaggeration has something to do with space and time. The verb itself comes from the Latin noun "agger," which means "heap." The distinguishing characteristics of a heap are its magnitude relative to other similar phenomena; the method of its formation, which involves repeated, haphazard, and relatively unconsidered acts of accumulation; and finally, if not exhaustively, the rather simple and uncomplicated lumpish shape that gravity ultimately imposes on the material of which the heap is made. The result is an entity that takes up an inordinate amount of space over an inordinate amount of time. Moreover, the heap offers very little in return for its existence in the way of aesthetic pleasure, ingenuity of design, or convenience of use. It is the sort of thing that any unthinking creature can summon into being, and is thus the very opposite of the art and order one finds in a handsomely built and meticulously ordered national library.

Returning to the particular exaggeration in question, the name of the company the clever management of whose shares Ralph Nickleby expects to

profit from, one sees at first glance that it is too long. Note, for example, that "Baking" has been given a place despite the fact that there is a decided paucity of ways to bring about the existence of a muffin. We have here once again a fault akin to Fanny Squeers's including in her letter that which does not require verbal articulation. What is more, the name's prolixity is the result of another particular brand of incompetence that Dickens delights in making fun of. This is the inability of some people to engage in acts of critical selection; in other words, they do not privilege properly. Among the many characters who come to mind in this respect are Sarah Gamp, Mrs. Nickleby, Flora Finching, and Mrs. Lirriper--all of whom are distinguished by their prolixity of speech. In monopolizing the time available for conversation by talking more than those who are expecting to converse *with* them, these characters exhibit a kind of selfishness that may have particularly irked Dickens. On the other hand, as the quotation from Polhemus suggests, their autism yields striking, delightful, and ever unpredictable collocations of words and ideas. Many of us would be forced to admit that *conversing* with Mrs. Lirriper, and thereby including our own habits of phrase to the exclusion of even a sentence or two of her unique idiolect, would be a loss. That said, that there exists a vice which the muffin company name points to must be conceded, and the fact that Dickens

entertains us while he calls our attention to this lack of skill speaks better of his genius for presentation than of the linguistic phenomenon it treats of.

Furthermore, the misconduct satirized in this scene, in which the 29-syl'-ble name is repeated six times, includes both the fact that public money is being wasted on such a venture, and that Parliament's time is being expended on an issue the chief purpose of which is to fill the pockets of a socio-economic elite. The longer it takes to utter the company's name, the more time misspent, given that the time that Parliament has to consider and enact legislation of national importance is finite.

The length of the name also satirizes those who are genre-incompetent. Even as non-literary a form as a company's name has implicit rules that the namers of new companies would normally follow. In creating the name he has, Dickens makes fun of those who are unable to infer the unwritten rules of company-name composition, and who apparently have arrived at the conclusion that sheer length alone will render a name impressive and effective. It is telling that the second motion of the meeting in which the company is being promoted is one to heap more words into the motion, an endeavour that prolongs the meeting itself and the time during which the presiding dignitaries will command public attention.

At this point, it is imperative to understand that almost all of the

assertions made in the preceding three paragraphs pertain not to *Dickens's* work, but to that of the unnnamed fictional authors of the name of the company. It is *they* who are the heapers, *they* who lack the skill of judicious selection, and *they* who have amassed a pile of words that is deficient in art. Understood in the sense I have highlighted, the word "exaggeration" applies much more to the linguistic production of the company founders than to what Dickens the satirist has created in authoring "United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company." As a brainchild of Dickens, the company's name is no exaggeration at all, if we understand an exaggeration to be related to an "agger," a lump antithetical to *art*, the defining characteristic of which is the form that it has by virtue of the acts of deliberate privileging that have brought it into being.

Moreover, by the time one has read or uttered them four or five times, the words of the company's name may begin to cease to mean much of anything, and one may begin to relive the child's experience of perceiving words as mere sound and as fairly silly contortions of the mouth, teeth, and tongue. Thus, as the sign is repeated over and over again, it begins to lose its status as a representational sign, and becomes somewhat divorced from the entity to which it refers. One is reminded of Beckett's Krapp, who

relishes the word "spool" for its sheer sound quality. And, of course, that these words are not much more than "airy nothings" is part of the point of the episode, given that it is a satire on the relative unimportance of what these Parliamentarians are spending their time on, not to mention the dubious value of the company itself.

What we really mean, then, when we call "United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company" an exaggeration is that it is not at all a heap lacking in artifice, but a highly (though probably quickly and intuitively) contrived symbol--one that unites in a single enclosure a cohort of Early Victorian abuses.

A second passage whose claim to being comedy depends substantially on repetition is the Christmas-dinner scene in chapter four of *Great Expectations*. Because its comic effects are the result of Dickens's adept handling of timing and context, I have taken the liberty of quoting it at length:

> . . . they wouldn't leave me alone. They seemed to think the opportunity lost, if they failed to point the conversation at me, every now and then, and stick the point into me. I might have been an unfortunate little bull in a Spanish arena, I got so smartingly touched up by these moral goads.
>
> It began the moment we sat down to dinner. Mr Wopsle said grace with theatrical declamation . . . and ended with the very proper aspiration that we might be truly grateful. Upon which my sister fixed me with her eye, and said, in a low

reproachful voice, "Do you hear that? Be grateful."

"Especially," said Mr Pumblechook, "be grateful, boy, to them which brought you up by hand."

Mrs Hubble shook her head, and contemplating me with a mournful presentiment that I should come to no good, asked, "Why is it that the young are never grateful?" This moral mystery seemed too much for the company until Mr Hubble tersely solved it by saying, "Naterally wicious." Everybody then murmured "True!" and looked at me in a particularly unpleasant and personal manner.

Joe's station and influence were something feebler (if possible) when there was company, than when there was none. But he always aided and comforted me when he could, in some way of his own, and he always did so at dinner-time by giving me gravy, if there were any. There being plenty of gravy to-day, Joe spooned into my plate, at this point, about half a pint.

A little later on in the dinner, Mr Wopsle reviewed the sermon with some severity, and intimated--in the usual hypothetical case of the Church being "thrown open"--what kind of sermon *he* would have given them. After favoring them with some heads of that discourse, he remarked that he considered the subject of the day's homily, ill-chosen; which was the less excusable, he added, when there were so many subjects "going about."

"True again," said Uncle Pumblechook. "You've hit it, sir! Plenty of subjects for them that know how to put salt upon their tails. That's what's wanted. A man needn't go far to find a subject, if he's ready with his salt box." Mr Pumblechook added, after a short interval of reflection, "Look at Pork alone. There's a subject! If you want a subject, look at Pork!"

"True sir. Many a moral for the young," returned Mr Wopsle; and I knew he was going to lug me in, before he said it; "might be deduced from that text."

("You listen to this," said my sister to me, in a severe parenthesis.)

Joe gave me some more gravy.

"Swine," pursued Mr Wopsle, in his deepest voice, and pointing his fork at my blushes, as if he were mentioning my

> christian name; "Swine were the companions of the prodigal. The gluttony of Swine is put before us, as an example to the young," (I thought this pretty well in him who had been praising up the pork for being so plump and juicy.) "What is detestable in a pig, is more detestable in a boy."
>
> "Or girl," suggested Mr Hubble.
>
> "Of course, or girl, Mr Hubble," assented Mr Wopsle, rather irritably, "but there is no girl present."
>
> "Besides," said Mr Pumblechook, turning sharp on me,"think what you've got to be grateful for. If you'd been born a Squeaker--"
>
> "He *was*, if ever a child was, " said my sister, most emphatically.
>
> Joe gave me some more gravy. (57-58)

This long passage epitomizes Dickens's comic satire on inclusion, exclusion, and the erecting of unjust enclosures. Among the many unjust exclusions are the following: first, there is the general exclusion from the time period during which the birth of Christ is celebrated of charitable feeling and Christian behaviour. Five of the six adults present perpetrate this exclusion. Second, the five *speaking* adults are guilty of excluding from the discourse in which they presume to converse--the discourse of edification--genuine edification itself. Third, there is the exclusion of the child's voice from this same discourse, presumably on the assumption that all children are necessarily to be excluded from the category "authority on virtue." Fourth, there is a blanket exclusion of doubt. Specifically, we see Mrs. Hubble excluding children from the category "grateful" as *absolutely and finally* as she

excludes Pip from the category of "those capable of perceiving injustice and experiencing insult." (Note that she also fails to include in the category "reasons for which the young aren't grateful" the patently obvious reason that those who are *supposed* to nurture them do not.) In like manner, Mrs. Hubble's husband is entirely certain that no other explanation exists for this phenomenon of child ingratitude than that innate goodness is an attribute *altogether* absent in boys. (And girls.) Furthermore, it is evident from his deep-voiced sermon on "Swine" that Mr.Wopsle would exclude all adults from the enclosure of "those on whom the parable of the prodigal son might have an improving influence." Finally, if not exhaustively, we are fortunate to learn from Mr. Pumblechook that we need look *nowhere* else for a topic to propound upon than at the meat of pigs. It would be belabouring the subject to enumerate the correspondingly stupid acts of unjust *in*clusion that this quintet of cant perpetrate on Pip and (by implication) all children. Nevertheless, it should be said that each of the five would undoubtedly include him or herself as an authority on youth and its proper upbringing.

The enclosures that Dickens invites his *readers* to construct (and ultimately revise) also play a part in a comic interpretation of the passage. Notice that the scene's general pattern is articulated for the reader in the first paragraph quoted above. According to the narrator Pip, we are about to

witness repeated acts of moral goading. As soon as the reader anticipates what specific acts will fall into the category "moral goading," s/he erects an enclosure. As usual with a writer as imaginative as Dickens, some of what ends up being included in that enclosure is not what any of us would have anticipated. Pumblechook, rivalling the tirelessly inculcatory Pecksniff, turns out to be quite expert at fashioning unpromising raw materials into points with which to skewer Pip, pork surprisingly among them.

Similarly, Mr. Wopsle's sudden and stentorian utterance of the monosyllable "Swine" may initially strike a reader as a surprising inclusion in the conversation. Directed properly on film or stage, this single exclamation could effect the sort of humour that Dickens achieves in *Little Dorrit* when he has Mrs. F's aunt utter what the editors of *The Dickens Index* aptly describe as "remarks of startling irrelevancy" ("Finching, Flora"). In the particular instance before us in the *Great Expectations* passage, one can see that Dickens is careful to interrupt Wopsle after the initial utterance of "Swine," in part to have the narrating Pip engage in some comic asteismus by construing "Swine" as an apostrophe to the boy Pip, but also to give the reader time to puzzle over the word's relevance to the current conversation. On stage or in film, the time it takes for the reader to get from "Swine" to the predicate that makes it relevant, given that s/he must detour through the narrator's

interruption of Wopsle, could be conveyed simply by having the actor playing Wopsle languish in a dramatic pause after delivering his opening monosyllable. In treating the dialogue in this fashion, a play or film director would not necessarily be taking too much of a liberty with the text, given that it is easy to imagine Wopsle relishing greedily the time during which he has the floor. Like so many other of Dickens's characters, Wopsle invariably prolongs his stay in the limelight for as long as his audience will suffer him.

Dickens's handling of comic prose timing and his fondness for inviting the reader to fail to anticipate correctly what he is about to offer can be seen again in what Wopsle actually ends up saying about pigs: "'Swine were the companions of the prodigal. The gluttony of swine is put before us all as an example to the young.'" Notice the comic effect that could be achieved by having an actor playing Wopsle hesitate just for a moment after speaking the word "example." Such a hesitation would give some members of the audience a chance to erect an anticipatory enclosure that would include "of vice" or some similar concept that would follow the lead of the phrase "before us all" in suggesting that the intended audience for Jesus's parable includes everyone interested in becoming virtuous. In what may be a surprising turn of verbal events to the habitual-minded reader, however, the final phrase of Wopsle's declaration makes it clear that he excludes all

adults from that category. As this reader should have expected all along, Mr Wopsle perceives that the messages in the parables of Jesus are meant to uplift only the pint-sized members of society; moral giants like himself need no help whatsoever to raise themselves above the baseness of sin.

The one exception among the adults in the scene is Joe. The lone person able to appreciate the bewildering task that faces the child trying to make sense of adult mores, it is he who endeavours to compensate Pip for the unjust and absurd behaviour of his pretentious and captious contemporaries. This compensation, of course, is gravy, Pip being entitled to a number of spoonfuls of it neither to exceed nor to fall short of the sum total of verbal indignities perpetrated upon his small self by his elders and betters. Indeed, part of what I find interesting about this remunerative act is its function as a text. Silenced, as are many of the Dickens characters who dutifully attempt to nurture children, Joe is driven to communicate with his charge by means of secret code. Some are authored jointly by the boy and the man quite carefully and deliberately in response to a specific problem. The adult Pip reveals one of these predetermined and explicit codes earlier in the Christmas dinner chapter when he describes how Joe and Pip secretly cross two forefingers as their "token that Mrs Joe [is] in a cross temper" (53). Immediately upon defining for the reader the denotation of this visual pun,

the adult Pip pauses in his narrative to observe that being cross "was so much [Mrs. Joe's] normal state, that [he and Joe] would often, for weeks together, be, as to [their] fingers, like monumental crusaders as to their legs" (53).

Like the crossed forefingers, the spooning of gravy into Pip's plate is a text whose meaning is for the most part available only to Pip, not so much because it is a particularly cryptic communication, but on account of the other diners' preoccupation with their own textual productions. The reader, of course, is also included in the small community which Joe and Pip have quietly forged in response to the injustices they have suffered at the red and bony hands of Mrs. Joe. And once again, Dickens achieves a comic effect by following a premise to an extreme but valid conclusion:

> . . . [Joe] always aided and comforted me when he could, in some way of his own, and he always did so at dinner-time by giving me gravy, if there were any. There being plenty of gravy to-day, Joe spooned into my plate, at this point [Hubble having just labelled all children as "'Naterally wicious'"], about half a pint.

Notice once again how Dickens delays the delivery of the joke's punch line, in this case by withholding the information regarding the specific quantity of gravy Pip gets. To do so, Dickens places two commas and the interrupting phrase "at this point" between the sentence's verb (and its

modifiers) and its direct object. Such a delay gives a reader the chance to anticipate for a split second just how much gravy Pip will receive. In my experience of reading this passage aloud to students, this moment invariably yields laughter.

The placement of the assertion that Joe has given Pip gravy is also crucial to the passage's success. Each time it puts in an appearance, this clause follows immediately upon a particularly sharp verbal goading of Pip. In fact, the clause's second and third appearances both come directly after an unwelcome conversational contribution from Mrs. Joe:

> ("You listen to this," said my sister to me, in a severe parenthesis.)
> Joe gave me some more gravy.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "He *was* [born a Squeaker], if ever a child was," said my sister most emphatically.
> Joe gave me some more gravy.

These interjections of Mrs. Joe's are so much of a piece (the one previous to the first that I just quoted is "Do you hear that? Be grateful.") and so regularly timed, that the entire passage has a surprisingly musical quality to it. The several orchestral instruments--the competing voices of Pumblechook and Wopsle, the grating undertone of Mrs. Joe's absurd admonitions, the counterpoint of Joe's gravy ladling--combine to form a comic polyphony that is decidedly the opus of a writer with a well-developed

ear for how his prose will sound if read aloud.[1]

Indeed, the statement "Joe gave me some more gravy," especially in its second and third occurrences in the scene, works much like a chorus, both in the sense of "The refrain or burden of a song . . . " (*OED*) and in the sense of a group or individual in a play that "explains or passes comments upon the course of events" (*OED*). Partly accounting for the refrain-like nature of the statement is the fact that Dickens has the narrator repeat it word-for-word in its second and third appearances, as well as the fact that it occurs in a predictable spot--just after the distinctly intrusive comments that originate with Mrs. Joe. Moreover, its status as a comment on the course of events is obvious. If it is not obvious to a reader that what one of the five speaking adults has just spewed forth is unjust, Joe's action makes it so. More importantly, in the fictional world of the novel, the spooning of gravy onto Pip's plate is Joe's way of reassuring the boy that at least one other person besides the boy himself is painfully aware of the outrageous unfairness of what the speaking adults are saying. The real compensation that Pip receives, therefore, is not nearly so much something pleasant to eat as it is the reassurance that at least one person in his home has a heart to

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[1]A similar passage, but one that is both more acerbic and sharply satirical, is chapter 2 of *Our Mutual Friend*, which centers on another dinner conversation, in this instance, one orchestrated by the nouveau-riche Veneerings.

understand what *his* heart happens to be.

Finally, I would like to pursue, by quoting the part of the *OED* definition which I left out above, the parallel between "Joe gave me some more gravy" and a song's refrain. The full text of definition six of "chorus" reads, "The refrain or burden of a song, ***which the audience join the performer in singing***" (emphasis added). Once again, I would argue, Dickens is writing for a group of kindred readers who share his opinions about the abuses which children were subjected to in the society depicted by the novel as well as in the society which existed when the chapter was published in the fall of 1860. All competent readers of the novel, whether they are similarly outraged by child[illegible] societies or not, will at least be "in the loop," given that Pip the narrator has explicitly decoded for them the meaning of the ladled gravy. What is more, readers adept at picking up on the patterns created by the weaver at his loom very well might confidently predict Joe's chiming in as soon as they have assimilated yet another of Mrs. Joe's irksome asides. Readers who do so thus become co-performers of *Great Expectations*, mutual creators of the text that comes to life whenever it is read aloud--or even when it is read silently with an accompanying nod of assent of the sort that Stanley Fish has in mind when he confidently asserts, "We know." What I wish to emphasize is that the spirit of kindred feeling and sympathetic

commiseration has been brought about by, among other talents, Dickens's timely use of repetition.

What we have in the structure of this passage, therefore, is a microcosm of a larger structure in *Great Expectations* and, indeed, a structure one finds throughout Dickens's works. This is the pattern of return. Scenes in which characters return from an encounter with a hostile environment to a place of physical and emotional security are frequent in Dickens. A prime example of the character who escapes the elements is Tom Smart, the protagonist of "The Bagman's Tale" in *Pickwick Papers*; in *Great Expectations* itself, of course, Pip's errant ways are associated with a London on which the rain seems to fall endlessly. Moreover, when Pip's crises reach their peak, he apparently succumbs to an ague, and upon recovery, finds his habitual consoler, Joe. It is not news, of course, that Dickens is fond of retelling the story of the Prodigal Son or that his protagonists are so often sinners, those who err from God and for whom redemption is possible. What I wish to point to, however, is how Dickens's comic structure mirrors in miniature a broader structure of erring and return in his works. It is this recurring theme of the return to the secure environment that in part accounts for the way Dickens's novels appeal to children. Thackeray's daughter, one recalls, was habitually curled up with *Nicholas Nickleby*, a prototype of books such as

Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which cater to the child's need for protection from hostile environments, be they meteorological or social. Indeed, the original ending of *Great Expectations* gains much of its impact from the sense that both Dickens and Pip have undergone irrevocable change and that the secure world, the congenial and comic world, is no longer to be found where they left it. This theme is summed up in the pun on "changed" in the closing sentence of the first *stage* of Pip's expectations: "We changed again, and yet again, and it was now too late and too far to go back, and I went on. And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me" (186).

It is often stated that Dickens's eye for the comic is the eye of the child who looks at the absurdities s/he sees and names them accurately, innocent of the criticisms such naming may imply about the object of the that gaze. Referring to an account Dickens wrote of a childhood visit to the theatre, John Carey begins his first-rate essay on Dickens's humour with the following assertions:

> Faced with theatrical conventions which are usually accepted without question--the idea of one actor playing several minor roles, for instance--[the child] insists on taking a crushingly literal look at them. He suddenly refuses to co-operate in the normal, everyday conspiracy by which, for the sake of art or good manners, we all agree to put on an act, to accept the fake as real. (54)

Moving on to discuss the Crummles episodes in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Carey makes an assertion about it that applies to much of Dickens comedy: "Nearly all the humour . . . consists of seeing what is actually there instead of what convention has agreed to pretend is there" (55). Given this association of the child with truth, it is very easy to see why Hans Christian Andersen and Dickens might have had much to talk about. In many ways, Dickens works are novel-length versions of "The Emperor's New Clothes." It, like so many comic works, deals with the peculiar tendency people have for placing in enclosures the precise opposite of what deserves to be there. What is more, given the association between childhood and comic insight, it is easy to understand the poignancy of unbecoming a child: in doing so, one stands to lose not just the nurturing protection of a Joe Gargery or a Clara Peggotty, but the comic turn of thought as well.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy two or three times digresses briefly from his main narrative to make comments about the comic that have relevance for any discussion of comedy, but particularly for one about repetition and representation in Dickens's comedy. One of these comes at the point in the story when the narrator is describing Tess and her mother steering the drunken Jack Durbeyfield home after he and his wife have spent an evening amidst the alcoholic vapours of Rolliver's:

> They went home together, Tess holding one arm of her father, and Mrs Durbeyfield the other. He had, in truth, drunk very little: not a fourth of the quantity which a systematic tippler could carry to church on a Sunday afternoon without a hitch in his eastings or genuflexions; but the weakness of Sir John's constitution made mountains of his petty sins in this kind. On reaching the fresh air he was sufficiently unsteady to incline the row of three at one moment as if they were marching to London and at another as if they were marching to Bath--which produced a comical effect, frequent enough in families on nocturnal homegoings; and, like most comical effects, not quite so comic after all. (33)

The question I would like to pursue is "After all *what*?" The answer is not really all that elusive: what Hardy seems to have in mind is something like, "After all the implications of Durbeyfield's drunkenness have been considered" or perhaps "After all the feelings of the people involved in the episode--especially feelings of inconvenience, embarrassment, and possibly shame--have been called to mind." As we come to learn very soon in Hardy's story, for example, her father's state means that Tess and her little brother will have to try to give up a night's sleep, the failure of which attempt will prove disastrous once the family's horse has been killed. And, of course, since it is a Hardy novel, there will be no end of grief as the narrative carries on. In other words, once the whole story is told, once the truth is known, a comic response to Durbeyfield's tipsy lurchings will no longer be possible for any feeling reader.

A second episode in *Tess* that raises the issue of the antithesis between degrees of knowing and the possibility of a comic response occurs when Tess has found a temporary respite from her own and her family's woes while working as a milkmaid at Dairyman Crick's farm. The episode centers on a story Crick tells when the butter does not come, a story that hearkens back to a previous time when the churning was not yielding the desired result. Correcting his wife's speculation that a worker's being in love was the cause of the trouble, Crick relates how a milker named Jack Dollop had courted and deceived a young woman, and had subsequently been sought out by the woman's irate mother:

> "The villain--where is he? says she, 'I'll claw his face for'n, let me only catch him!' Well, she hunted about everywhere, ballyragging Jack by side and seam, Jack lying a'most stifled inside the churn, and the poor maid--or young woman rather--standing at the door crying her eyes out. . . . Well, how the old woman should have had the wit to guess it, I could never tell, but she f[illegible]t that he was inside that there churn. Without [illegible] a word she took hold of the winch (it was turned by hand-power then) and round she swung him, and Jack begun to flop about inside. 'O Lard! Stop the churn!--let me out' says he popping out his head. . . . 'Not till ye make amends for ravaging her virgin innocence! says the old woman. 'Stop the churn, you!' screams he. 'You call me old witch, do ye, you deceiver!' says she, 'when ye ought to ha' been calling me mother-law these last five months!' And on went the churn, and Jack's bones rattled round again. . . . and at last 'a promised to make it right wi' her. 'Yes, I'll be as good as my word,' he said. And so it ended that day."
>
> While the listeners were smiling their comments there

> was a quick movement behind their backs, and they looked round. Tess, pale-faced, had gone to the door. . . . She was wretched--O so wretched--at the perception that to her companions the dairyman's story had been rather a humorous narration than otherwise; none of them but herself seemed to see the sorrow of it; to a certainty, not one knew how cruelly it touched the tender place in her experience. (138-39)

What allows Tess's companions to experience Crick's narrative as comic, it seems, is their having excluded from the enclosure of conscious thought the suffering and humiliation experienced by the young woman in the story, whose life no doubt was little improved once she had been made the wife of the unscrupulous Jack Dollop. Because of her own recent experience with a rake, Tess naturally finds it impossible to keep such thoughts from flooding into her mind as she listens to Crick's tale.

The issue raised by Hardy in these two passages calls attention to some essential elements of perceived comedy, which are its finite simplicity relative to truth and its fictiveness relative to reality, if we define reality as "the aggregate of real things or existences" (*OED*). In other words, the more one manages to conceive the full truth and the more of "the *aggregate* of real things or existences" one places into the enclosure of conscious thought, the less possible it may be for comedy to exist. The nemesis of the comic is therefore charitable thinking, especially if we include in the idea "charitable thinking" the attempt to understand as much of the truth surrounding a

situation as a human being can ever know. In the case of satire in particular, if we include in our thoughts as we assimilate the satiric work any circumstance that mitigates the absurdity of the person or group who is the target of the satire--if we begin to think that the person or group has had no choice other than to engage in the behaviour that the satirist has singled out for scrutiny--then the person or group does not deserve to be laughed at. Furthermore, if, as I am arguing, comedy has much to do with the recognition of the *un*just exclusion of an entity from an enclosure, then it follows that comedy will cease to exist if the exclusion is known to be other than unjust. Indeed, it might be more accurate to assert that a comic response, once experienced, will cease to be experienced *when*--not *if*-- the exclusion is known to be other than unjust, which would be to say that a moment of perceived comedy is as fragile and provisional as a shimmering bubble.

Consider, for example, how the Christmas-dinner chapter in *Great Expectations* would be received by a reader who does not or cannot accept the premise that Mrs. Joe's cross behaviour towards both her brother and husband is unwarranted, that she has every reason to be dissatisfied with a lot in life that allows her to do little else than serve bread and butter to a pair of privileged males lounging comfortably before the fire. Surely, one of

Dickens's greatest failings as a person and a writer was his inability to conceive that many women would share his own need for a career away from hearth and home. I imagine that few current readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, for example, would be receptive to the idea that a major index of Miss Brass's monstrous freakishness is her "unwomanly" occupation as a solicitor.

Or consider what would befall a reader of Flora Finching's comic speeches if, rather than conceiving Arthur Clenham's former sweetheart in the way she is portrayed in Christine Edzard's 1988 film adaptation of *Little Dorrit*, that reader constructed the garrulous character as a flesh and blood Maria Winter née Beadnell. As Peter Ackroyd records in his recent biography of Dickens, the odd behaviour of this middle-aged woman, Dickens's beloved when both were young, was hardly laughable:

> A nursemaid in the Winter household recalled that [Mrs. Winter] was "sweet and kindly" in the early part of the day, but that then she would begin to drink. "All her refinement and restraint seemed then to break down, and it would be during these times . . . that she would refer to Dickens. She had a tremendous collection of his books by that time. They were to be found all about the house. When excited she would take them from the shelves and run through their pages, commenting on their contents, interspersing them with references to the author." Did she take down *Little Dorrit*, too, and read over the descriptions of the woman modelled so unflatteringly upon her? "At other times she would lie on the couch and say, 'Nurse, it was here that he used to sit', and I have seen her, in one of these moods, actually kiss the place on the couch, and recall something that Charles Dickens had said

> to her . . . " A sad story, this sentimental, lost, bibulous woman--blasted, as it were, by Dickens's fame. (730)

Crucial, then, to a comic response to Flora Finching is a reader's ability to avoid responding to her as A.C. Bradley responded to Shakespeare's characters, and instead to consider the entity "Flora Finching" as something related to, but quite different from, a real human being. To do otherwise would yield quite odd results. Imagine a psychology major who experiences Mrs. Nickleby as clearly suffering from Pervasive Developmental Disorder--among the symptoms of which are "impulsivity" and "attention deficit" (i.e., "blurting out a story without preparing the other"/"dominating a conversation and not allowing reciprocal interaction") and "concreteness" (i.e., "having difficulty summarizing and giving too much detail")! To conceive Mrs. Nickleby this way would be akin to objecting to the fable of the Fox and the Grapes by flatly uttering, "But foxes don't *eat* grapes."

Whenever, then, there is a risk that the nature of a given fictional entity will incline readers to construct that entity as not only a fictional human being,[2] but one who inhabits an imaginary world that operates on the same jaded principles as our own, the author must devise certain

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[2]By this phrase I mean a character as fully-realized as Clarissa Dalloway in contrast to a fictional entity such as the man in *Pickwick Papers* who converts himself into sausages

strategies to ensure that the text will effect the desired comic response. Such will be the case if it is possible to include in one's construction of the fictional entity thoughts that would genuinely sadden or appal the reader. The task facing the comic author in instances such as these is thus to take steps to ensure that readers perceiving the fictional entity will banish any sobering thoughts that would preclude them from constructing the author's character as comic.

How this obstacle might be surmounted with admirable agility can be seen by examining one of Dickens's supreme comic achievements, Wilkins Micawber. That there is a risk that this fictional entity will not be experienced by readers as a comic character may be surprising, but given that Mr. Micawber is based on the author's own father, John Dickens, and that genuine suffering certainly resulted from the dysfunctional family headed by this apparently profligate and irresponsible man, it would be too much to say that there exists no chance whatsoever that readers who would *mis*read Micawber are lurking somewhere in the long lines of individuals queueing up to collect their undergraduate (or even graduate) timetables. Moreover, the risk increases when one considers that the behaviour we ***know*** to be Mr. Micawber's and *infer* to have been John Dickens's manifests itself in a heartbreakingly serious fashion in Dickens's other famous debtor,

William Dorrit.

So just how *does* Dickens manage to keep Mr. Micawber from being constructed as a William Dorrit or even a John Dickens? Much of the work is done by sending out textual signals that place *David Copperfield* in the genre of works that normally excludes scenes as affectingly tragic as that we experience in novels of a different kind. We witness a scene of this sort when William Dorrit reverts to being the Father of the Marshalsea before the shocked though unmoved gaze of a gathered coterie of Merdle worshippers. Describing how such genre tags guide readers of *Nicholas Nickleby*, Paul Schlicke observes, "Entertainment and moral conviction work together, as comedy lifts the villainy into a sphere of ethical certainties, in which we can laugh heartily at the wickedness because we know it will be defeated" (35). Of course, "Mr. Micawber" and "villain" are concepts mutually exclusive to most readers and, in its depiction of Steerforth, Dickens's eighth novel lies somewhere between *Nickleby* and *Little Dorrit* with respect to its ethical certainties; nevertheless, the words Schlicke writes with the family Squeers in mind apply well to *David Copperfield*.

Dickens's handling of narration and characterization, however, plays the lead role in guaranteeing a comic response, to the extent that an author ever can guarantee one. With respect to narration, key differences can be

discerned between the thoroughly comic Mr. Micawber and the sometimes comic but ultimately tragic William Dorrit. Because *David Copperfield* is related to the reader by a narrator agent who is a fictional human being without paranormal abilities, the information we receive about Mr. Micawber is entirely external: we recognize him by his clothes, his egg head, the condescending roll in his voice; since David cannot read minds, we never hear Mr. Micawber think (though well we know his thoughts do have a pleasing sound). Contrast this external presentation with how we come to know the Father of the Marshalsea, between which fictional entity and ourselves an omniscient narrator mediates. Here, for example, is a description of the internal state of William Dorrit of a sort that we do not really receive for Mr. Micawber and have difficulty even imagining receiving. The sentence is quoted from the chapter that introduces Dorrit and immediately follows the speech that Doctor Haggage delivers on the relative peace to be had in the Marshalsea:

> Now, the debtor was a very different man from the doctor, but he had already begun to travel, by his opposite segment of the circle, to the same point. Crushed at first by his imprisonment, he had soon found a dull relief in it. He was under lock and key; but the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out. If he had been a man with strength of purpose to face those troubles and fight them, he might have broken the net that held him, or broken his heart; but being what he was, he languidly slipped into his smooth descent, and never took

one more step upward. (103)

Now, by no means do I wish to suggest that Dickens treats Dorrit as Henry James would, or to suppress the external description that is by far the prevalent means of characterization here. But the virtual absence with respect to Mr. Micawber of sentences such as the one quoted above plays a role in moving him away from the end of the spectrum where the category "fictional human being" resides. Instead, he is established somewhere towards the other end of the spectrum, where we would find, say, the unfortunate man in the Sam Weller anecdote who regrettably "converted hisself into sassages."

If a character is a set of attributes which the reader comes to associate with a specific name, then what might be said of the difference between fictional entities like Mssrs. Micawber and Dorrit is that it probably has to do with the nature and number of those attributes. As so many of Dickens characters do, each of these two has signature mannerisms. Dorrit is known by his "irresolute hands . . . which nervously wandered to his trembling lip a hundred times in the first half hour of his acquaintance with the jail" (98) and scores of times afterwards. It is not quite so easy, however, to single out a mannerism of Micawber's--at least a nonverbal one--that comes to mind as readily as Dorrit's restless fingers. Moreover, it is interesting to note that

Dorrit's signature gesture is an index of an authentic feeling of anxiety on his part, an unself-conscious tick that we see when his intricately authored persona begins to wear down. Other than the disjointed words by which he manages to make his enslavement to Uriah Heep known to David and Traddles in chapter 49, Mr. Micawber's persona resists all threats of demolition. Even Mr. Mortimer is nothing more than Micawber in spectacles.

The chief difference in characterization between these two fictional entities is the total number of attributes which the reader is invited to associate with each character and the proportion of the total number of words that the attributes take up. Consider, for example, the recognition that young David experiences when Mr. Micawber pops his head through the open door of the street-front residence of Uriah and Mrs. Heep: "It was Mr Micawber! It was Mr. Micawber, with his eye-glass, and his walking stick, and his shirt-collar, and his genteel air, and the condescending roll in his voice, *all complete*!" (emphasis added, 315). I have called attention to David's summation at the end of this description because of how close it comes to being literally true. Unlike William Dorrit, whom we see "in two or three relations" in a single chapter (19 of Book the First) and whom we see engaged in many different specific activities and conversations, Mr.

Micawber is seen to do, heard to say, and observed to wear so few things that they literally may be enumerated. Excluding the comparatively brief period when, under Uriah's clammy thumb, he is not himself, Mr. Micawber is perpetually between job opportunities--all of which (the wine trade, the Custom House, coals, the corn trade) are somewhat if not altogether genteel; is--when in high spirits--humming, whistling, walking, or mixing punch, and-- when in low-- weeping, issuing epistolary announcements of an impending demise, or seeking razors; is planning residential improvements; is saving a distraught Mrs. Micawber from abysses of despair--in short, is waiting for something (usually negotiable) to turn up. Furthermore, when he speaks, the discourses he employs are two (the grandiloquent and the vulgar--in that order), and the repeated words and phrases are few in number though not infrequent of occurrence. These latter are also easily listed:

"in short"

"Copperfield"

"My Dear Copperfield"

"turn up"

"difficulties"

"friend of my youth"

"Annual income twenty pounds . . . "

The effect of such a relatively small number of discrete actions performed, individual discourses employed, and specific phrases uttered is to make "Mr. Micawber" a decidedly small enclosure, and a character who possesses a total number of attributes small enough to render him amusing, yet large enough to prevent him from being predictably boring. Employing the terminology of the enclosure method, we have a small menu from which to select what we anticipate one of Micawber's appearances will bring, but enough total choices on that menu to ensure a bit of a pleasant surprise whenever Mr. Micawber is center stage.

Just as Dickens drastically limits the number of sayings and doings that we associate with "Mr. Micawber"--in comparison both to the many we attach to the fictional entity "William Dorrit" and the uncountable number of them that would constitute one's construction of a real human being--so too does Dickens keep to a bare minimum the number of mentions and appearances of the fictional people for whom Micawber's actions have implications, Mrs. Micawber excepted. Notice, for example, how little textual space is afforded the Micawber children in comparison to the Dorrit children. In contrast to Fanny, Tip, and, of course, Amy-- characters as fully realized as any Dickens ever created--the junior Wilkins and Emma, the unnamed twins, and the baby exist as little more than props. Even when

young Wilkins shares the stage with his parents in chapter 36, he does not comprise much of anything apart from a collocation of restless limbs. As a result, the implications of Micawber's dire financial straits and cavalier approach to fulfilling his parental obligations are kept well out of the reader's sight.

Finally, there is a dramatic difference in how the two fictional entities are named by Dickens in the texts that bring them to life. Whereas *Little Dorrit*'s fictional counterpart of John Dickens is called "the Father of the Marshalsea," "the debtor," "the father," "William the bond," and "Mr. Dorrit," the character in *David Copperfield* is almost always referred to by the sign sequence "Mr. Micawber." In fact, he is so named 79 times in number four alone, 53 times (in six pages) in number six, 73 times in number ten, and so on. Even though the inclusion of "Mr Micawber" to the exclusion of other appellations is in part attributable to the fact that the narrator of the work is David, who would naturally call his friend and senior by a name that both connotes David's respect for him and constructs him the way he (Mr. Micawber) would be preferred to be constructed, nevertheless it is telling that even when the opportunity arises, David chooses "Mr Micawber" over the pronouns "he," "him," and "his." As a result, the sign "Mr. Micawber" occupies an unusually high proportion of the textual space that was available

to Dickens in each number of *David Copperfield.* The same can be said for the six or eight repeated phrases that dominate his speech and the four or five sartorial tags by which he is known. For this reason alone, Mr. Micawber's status as a verbal caricature is never far from a reader's mind while the thoughts that might occur to and trouble us were we conceiving something more closely resembling John Dickens are easily kept at a safe distance.

At this point, two famous and related literary critics are helpful: Northrop Frye and Aristotle. In his seminal essay on Dickens and comedy, Frye argues that characters such as Mr. Micawber are neither "caricatures" nor "realistic portraits," but "humours" ("Comedy of Humours" 56). Moreover, Frye goes on to describe the "simplest form of humor . . . the tagged humor"[3] and then asserts that "the 'lifelikeness' of a humor depends on two things: on the fact that we are all very largely creatures of ritual habit, and on a perverse tendency in most of us to live up to our own caricatures" (58-59). Mr. Micawber would presumably fall into this more "lifelike" of humours. Notice, however, that this lifelikeness is limited and that a key technique to accomplish this limitation is the frequent repetition

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[3]Frye offers Mrs. Micawber as an example, by virtue of the prominence of a single tag, namely, that she will never desert Mr. Micawber.

of a small number of attributes. Just as repeating "United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company" enough times in a finite textual space will effect distance between the sign itself and what it refers to in the empirical world, so too does the frequent recurrence of relatively few attributes help a reader keep at bay those thoughts that would render Micawber a John Dickens. As a result, Mr. Micawber falls into an unusual category of literary characters admirably described by John Carey. These are ones who/which "though magnificently solid, have no insides" (Carey 66).

Partly by virtue of this quality it may be fair to assert that Mr. Micawber is a member of another class of character, the "φαυλοι." These are, according to Aristotle (*Poetics*, end of chapter two), the central characters in comedies. Indeed, the presence of either "phauloi" or "spoudaioi" is one of the cornerstones upon which Aristotle's distinction between comedy and tragedy is built. These words might best be conveyed in English, according to George Whalley, by the words "'serious', morally superior, praiseworthy" (for "spoudaioi") and (for phauloi) "'mean', trivial--or, as Else happily suggests, 'no account'" (64). The two classes are apparently differentiated by class, morality, and the degree to which they command influence.

At the opening of chapter five of the *Poetics*, Aristotle elaborates on his definition of comedy: "As we have said, comedy is an imitation of baser men. These are characterized not by every kind of vice but specifically by 'the ridiculous,' which is a subdivision of the category of 'deformity.' What we mean by 'ridiculous' is some error or ugliness that is painless and has no harmful effects" (9). What attracts me to Aristotle's description of the kind of characters whose presence defines comedy is the combination of ridiculousness, meanness (in the sense "of lesser stature"), and harmlessness. Moreover, Else's suggestion of a "no account" person is interesting in that it seems to comprise the character's feckless nature along with the response it elicits from one who perceives the character. If, then, it is fair to say that a phaulos is an entity the harmless carelessness of which causes the reader to judge it lightly, then it is a word that comprises well the nature of Micawber as I have been constructing him.

Micawber himself, of course, is a peerless comic constructor, indeed, the essence of the comic temperament. One critic who has articulated this very well is James Kincaid. He writes that Micawber "builds worlds of delight out of words" and "finds joy not only in [them], but in arranging his unnecessary quizzing glasses, not only in writing letters but in creating a 'library' out of a few books and a dressing table." On the other hand,

Kincaid's assertion that Mr. and Mrs. Micawber "[refuse] any sort of escape or falsification" (180) does not ring true--at least not to my ear.

On the contrary, Mr. Micawber seems to keep on hand a healthy supply of unfounded optimism, without which he would fall prey to the world he strolls and whistles through. Micawber, in my vision, is an avatar of the comic spirit that informs, for example, Don Quixote, with whom Wilkins shares a rather enviable facility for protecting himself against a muddled and imperfect world by replacing it with a simpler, happier, and infinitely more hopeful version of his own. It is this temperament that he relies on in order to meet the restricting Limpers of life with composure, punch, pleasant company, and a fork sticking out of his breast pocket. His very essence is his ability to call sustaining fictions into being when the need arises and to exorcise what threatens him. At least, that is the fiction of Micawber that I create for my own sustenance, and from which I banish all the world.

V. Final

The epigraph to this thesis is a quotation from a letter that Dickens wrote to Wilkie Collins in 1859: "I think the business of art is to lay all that ground carefully, not with the care that conceals itself, to show by a backward light, what everything has been working to--but only to *suggest*, until the fulfillment comes. These are the ways of Providence, of which ways all art is but a little imitation" (Dexter 125). This philosophy of art makes Dickens and his fiction an exceptionally suitable vehicle to offer an approach to the comic that calls attention to its qualities of surprise, revelation, and insight. As Dickens's reference to Providence makes clear, he considers God the agent responsible for the comic, as it is observed in real life rather than in art. He also implies that the lot of the Christian is to receive only suggestions of the truth until such time as God reveals it, and that the lot of the reader is similar. What I have endeavoured to argue in this thesis is that this experience of enlightenment informs both the comic in general and the innumerable moments of comedy that Dickens has so deliberately prepared.

That the Inimitable considered himself god-like in his capacity as bestower of light is made apparent in statements such as the one I have presented above. Admirable as was his wish to share his insight with us, it is

difficult to blind oneself to Dickens's astonishing, well-documented egotism.

This flaw manifests itself characteristically in a cryptic, one-sentence letter he sent to John Forster while he was in Genoa, searching for the inspiration to match the success of the *Carol* in his second Christmas book. The letter reads, "We have heard THE CHIMES at midnight, Master Shallow!" (*Pilgrim Letters* 199). As Peter Ackroyd astutely observes in *Dickens*, "This short missive has often been quoted as an example of Dickens's boisterous good spirits, but it seems more remarkable for its entire but perfectly unconscious preoccupation with himself and with his own problems" (441). I tend to agree with Ackroyd, but of more interest to me than the question of which Dickens is to be found in it is the extent to which we, its readers, place in the letter the Dickens we are inclined to discover. Il Penseroso will see in the "We" Dickens's pretensions to monarchy and his superior attitude towards his friend, and as Ackroyd has done, will point to the impossibility of Forster's being able to know what the letter means. L'Allegro, however, will construe the "We" as inclusive, and will construct a Forster who would be delighted to receive a puzzle from his friend. What I have tried to communicate in this dissertation is that whether the letter relates Dickens to the *jovial* Falstaff or the *whoring* one involves rather more privileging on the reader's part than has adequately

been acknowledged, and that no sanguine Dickens exists unless we banish the egotistical, and perhaps diabolical, one from our thoughts.

If a choice must be made between the two, my temperament inclines me to partake of some Micawbery by cultivating with good cheer a sustaining critical fiction of the comic Charles Dickens.

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