

Introduction

I should like to know how you set to work in such matters. With me the conception has at first no definite or clear object; this comes later. A certain musical state of mind precedes it, and this, in me, is only then followed by the poetic idea.

(Schiller in a letter to Goethe, 18 March 1796)

How did Charles Dickens write his novels? The rhetorical query will hardly serve as an opening. It was well known among his contemporaries that Dickens wrote his novels very rapidly and under considerable stress. The speed which accompanied the gestation of his narratives and the serialised form in which they were published were amply commented on in various assessments of his work and not infrequently related to what were seen as shortcomings of his workmanship. As a matter of fact, nineteenth century reviewers gave considerable attention to Dickens's mode of composition. Who could have doubted that the narrative structures which he set up bore the stamp of a unique talent? And yet the peculiar art of the author seemed to pertain to the single scene or character rather than to the overall narrative flow. Overwhelmed by the diversity and sheer copiousness of Dickens's narratives, reviewers might even confess themselves unable to delimit a firmly grounded plot. It was even claimed that the excess of invention found in the novels was but insufficiently matched by artistic control. Yet while many of Charles Dickens's contemporaries hardly ventured beyond the syntagmatic level, which might be treated as the sum and substance of his writing practice, other and more discerning readers began to probe the less overt structures, or what he himself would have called the "conduct" of his narratives.

How then did Dickens fashion his novels? One of the first to regard their structural proportions favourably was the German author and critic Otto Ludwig (1813–1865), who pointed out the coherence of the various components of the narratives. He speaks specifically of an "arrangement

of all the strands round an idea or major concept". Contrast and similarity correlate and connect the subordinate elements, which are thus integrated into a composite whole. However, Charles Dickens does not always attain this degree of integration. In fact, Ludwig deplores what he regards as the "formlessness of the content and the lack of content in the form" of *Little Dorrit*.¹ Many contemporary and even later critics would have agreed with the former of these censures, deprecating the seemingly unrestrained variety and copiousness of his tales,² without accepting Ludwig's disapproval of the coincidental dominance of mainly formal devices. In as late as 1934 David Cecil could still maintain the absence of control in Dickens's tales.³ In the course of the twentieth century, a more constructive view of his writing has, however, evolved, which treats his novels as closely patterned coherent models. Even a structuralist analysis which regards the texts as systems of different voices or discourses will allow for a final unification attained by the implied reader.⁴

In the opinion of modern critics, Charles Dickens did indeed organise his novels, in particular the later ones, on what he himself called a "general purpose and design" (Preface to MC), aiming at a pervasive order that could embrace much of the variety and richness that is still regarded as a hallmark of his literary attainment. Much, but not all, of the extraordinary variety that so distinguishes his work can be accommodated within this concept. For there can be no doubt that even his later and more consciously organised works contain numerous references that stand somewhat apart from the framework to which the more substantial components of the novels adhere. Yet while a striving for control is evident throughout all his works, it will not suffice to explain how he produced them. For this reason, recent criticism tends to conceive of a polarity between an ordering, organising component and an impulse towards free imaginative exuberance: an Apollonian opposed to a Dionysiac mode. Thus Rosemary Mundhenk feels free to assume a "creative tension between imaginative freedom and artistic discipline", whereas Steven Connor would even regard a broadly conceived conflict between "force" and "form" essential to Dickens's writing.⁵ A genuinely comprehensive approach to his craftsmanship will have to premise two seemingly disjunctive yet in fact complementary modes of composition that jointly determine the specific quality of his achievement.

The first mode comes close to what might be conceived as the traditional, or constructive, form of narrative composition that we associate

with the great masters of English fiction. Starting from a ground-plan, which with Charles Dickens at least, may as yet not be fully discerned, the writer will tentatively lay out a line of progress, developing agents whose primary function lies with the scheme of action, while their configuration supports scenes and situations which in turn lend shape to what modern critics have come to regard as the thematic design of the novel: a cluster of ideas, aspects or concerns deepening the significance of the narrative construct through its various components down to the textual level. We cannot be sure to what extent Dickens would have accepted the aesthetic concept of literary symbols, which are now seen as an essential element of his later novels. Conversely, there should be little doubt that he was aware of the deep-seated and complex meaning of the multi-layered compositions which his art had fashioned. There is in fact some indication that he was as desirous to achieve distinct thematic structures as to work out consistent narrative models. The often employed image of “the story-weaver at his loom” who is fully conscious of the overall “pattern” in elaborating on its “finer threads” (OME, Postscript)⁶ has a wider application than the overt reference to story-telling might seem to suggest. Referring to low-class figures as representative of the ills of society, the narrator of *Dombey and Son* expressly speaks of a “pattern of this woof” (DS, ch. 34, p. 477), thus voicing an authorial concern for thematic integration. The later novels can indeed be regarded as semantic systems whose coherence is determined by a network of parallels, variations, and contrasts. While only a close analysis can hope to unravel the varied relationships between the different constituents, no modern reader attuned to the patterning of twentieth century writing can fail to respond to their import.

The second compositional mode would have derived from an entirely different motivation, the impulse of an immensely fertile imagination, and is best understood as the exact opposite of the former type. Nonetheless, it should not be equated with an entirely ungoverned and unreflected way of telling, as G. K Chesterton seems to imply in singling out “the primary inexhaustible creative energy of genius.”⁷ Its apparent artlessness is contradicted by the prevalence of coherent textual patterns and thematic constellations that can be observed throughout Dickens’s novels. While inclusions generated by this imaginative energy might indeed be understood as “alternate workspaces”, they should not be confused with the “narrative annexes”⁸ permitting “unexpected characters, impermissible subjects, and plot altering events to appear in a bounded way” that

Suzanne Keen has discovered in Victorian fiction. As the few examples cited from Dickens's work demonstrate, Keen is mainly concerned with interpolations of some breadth, circumscribed plot strands that might indeed be considered annexed to rather than involved in the narrative flow of a novel by Charles Dickens. Consciously or, at times presumably, unconsciously the author steers an indefinite, meandering course, undetermined, it would seem, by any purpose but an unacknowledged drive for variety and richness which will eventually have to be checked and channelled. Concluding a particular sequence of action, he will often leave room for a variety of developments or network of possibilities, as Claude Bremond would have it,⁹ which may again permit of more than one continuation. At such a juncture a wide range of additional information is initiated that may later on be retrieved, revised or at times abandoned. In this way an entire scene, impressively conveyed through detailed description, may still appear incomplete as if its specific *raison d'être* had still to be worked out.

When Charles Dickens was forced to insert an additional chapter into the second serial number of *Our Mutual Friend* (I, ch. 7) he quite spontaneously chose to introduce a taxidermist who is smarting from an unrequited courtship, the object of which remains undisclosed at this point.¹⁰ That the downcast Mr Venus is to be involved in Silas Wegg's intrigue against Neddy Boffin is anticipated by his casual hints at property lying hidden in Old Harmon's dustheaps. Conversely, this would hardly seem to justify the extensive description of Venus's shop, unless its gross disorder was already at this point intended as an analogy to the accumulation of dust which Boffin has inherited. The reader has to wait for seventeen more chapters until the importance of this weird location as a meeting-place of the two conspirators becomes apparent. Yet although Dickens included a large variety of grotesque objects in his scene painting, the forbidding alligator behind which Boffin hides to eavesdrop on their talk had to be added when the occasion arose in a later scene (OMF, III, ch. 14).

In a similar way, the detailed catalogue of kitchenware in Eugene Wrayburn's chambers does initially not amount to more than a suggestion of extravagant waywardness (OMF, II, ch. 6), until an abrupt interference reveals the redundancy as a symptom of incipient domestication on the wastrel's part. Yet there are other, far less pleasant indications of Lizzie Hexam's desirability and her role as a heroine of one of the two main plots

of the novel. At a point when Wrayburn's courtship of the girl has become obvious and Bradley Headstone's instant passion for her forebodes evil consequences (OMF, II, chs. 1–2), the mean moneylender Fledgeby is brought in as yet another suitor to complicate the delicate situation further (OMF, II, ch. 5). There is a third party to be reckoned with from now on. The matter is taken up several times and finally laid to rest (OMF, III, ch. 1; IV, chs. 8–9). It might seem as if Dickens had deliberately laid a false trail here to mislead the avid reader. He may, on the other hand, also have been deliberating over an alternative sequence of events involving Lizzie Hexam and Fledgeby. It should not be overlooked that the usurer is finally punished through a severe thrashing, albeit not for his abortive womanising (OMF, IV, ch. 8). The grotesque scene parallels, if comically, the murderous assault on Wrayburn inflicted by the maddened Bradley Headstone (OMF, IV, ch. 6). Eugene Wrayburn, who has treated his fellow human beings too lightly, gains maturity from his suffering; which can hardly be expected of his grotesque counterpart.

Conversely, a climactic moment in the action may become blurred through the addition of diverse references pointing towards so far unforeseen transformations. The reader of *Our Mutual Friend* may be forgiven for thinking that the heading of Book II, chapter 10, 'A Successor', following the death of little Johnny, whom Mrs Boffin had adopted, heralded the re-instatement of John Rokesmith as the true owner of the Harmon estate. Yet the chapter initially dwells on Silas Wegg's detestable triumph at the child's demise, as if the sad event had assured him of a claim on the inheritance. Subsequently, an extensive scene is devoted to the comic Sloppy, who is to receive support from the Boffins from now on without, however, ever gaining the preferment little Johnny could have expected. Yet even this show of generosity turns out to have been ill-considered: the frequent absence of Sloppy from Betty Higden's home (OMF, II, ch. 14) prompts her migration, which leads to the old woman's death (OMF, III, ch. 8; ch. 9); a consequence which even the most perceptive of readers could hardly have anticipated.

The often cited introduction to chapter 17 of *Oliver Twist*, in which Dickens ironically dwells on the alternation of scenes in popular literature, would prove that he must have been quite aware of the varied structure of his own writing. This short piece of metafiction refers to well-considered shifts of focus, however, whereas our present interest lies with apparently unintended departures from the narrative line. There are

indeed numerous instances where a seemingly unrelated digression may disclose the workings of a subtext. The waterman Rogue Riderhood's accident on the Thames and his rescue from drowning so vividly related in Book III, chapters 2 and 3 of *Our Mutual Friend* might be read as a mere divagation, delaying the progress of the main action until the high incidence of water images and the numerous references to drowning in the novel are fully accounted for.

As this and the previous examples show, Charles Dickens is in such an instance not merely considering modifications of the course of action he has so far followed, but attempting variants that might affect the thematic pattern of the novel. Compared to the first mode of composition with its marked tendency towards organisation and integration, what we have defined as the second mode acts centrifugally, reaching out for directions and patterns that tend to widen the significance of the narrative work. If we visualised the creative process from which Dickens's works arose as the interaction of contrary forces balancing and blending with each other, we must allow for cases where the inventive urge acted so intensely that the controlling component failed to restrain it.

No wonder then that nineteenth century critics, who had learnt to apply the principle of the economy of art to works of fiction, deplored the abundance of apparently redundant references in Dickens's writings,¹¹ blaming his heedlessness, a facile adherence to the sinuous strategies of the sensational novel or the conditions of serial publication for such apparent excesses. However, as recent analytical readings of the novels have shown, the wish to keep his readers in a continual state of suspense, which Dickens shared with many other authors, will hardly serve to explain the amplitude and variety of the second mode of composition. Some further comment on the prevailing attitude towards novel writing might be useful at this point. Compared to the narrative fashion of a Jane Austen or the French novelists,¹² whose highly unified compositions might even be classified as works of art, Dickens's way of writing did indeed appear undisciplined and vague to many of his contemporaries. After all, evaluations of works of fiction still resorted to drama or the epic poem for their points of reference. The most frequent censure was, however, directed against an apparent absence of central ideas or even a lack of orientation in his writings: "He often begins a book without having formed a clear notion of it as a whole," maintained the *Westminster Review*, "he introduces a character with no defined intention as to the use that is to

be made of him.”¹³ Charles Dickens is evidently incapable of keeping his creative energy under control; he seems uncertain of the direction of his own story-telling.

What those critics failed to see was that their strictures comprehended only one element in Charles Dickens's writing, which was to a considerable extent balanced by a striving for order and harmony. “[I] never give way to my invention recklessly,” as he himself maintained, “but constantly restrain it.”¹⁴ The carelessness and vagueness which critics held up for censure may strike the modern reader as the reflection of an uncongenial approach to fiction rather than as a flaw on the part of the author. Today, the apparent indecisiveness is even traced to a profound tension between contradictory sets of beliefs, which some literary theorists would regard as a symptom not only of Dickens's writings, but of the age in which he lived. For our immediate purpose, the absence of definiteness should be seen as an aspect of the narrative discourse that we have characterised as Dickens's second mode of composition. On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that the element of uncertainty inherent in narrative processes might equally be construed as a literary indeterminacy as well as an actual absence of resolution on part of the writer. We are in fact dealing with a very complex phenomenon, comprising psychological as well as aesthetic factors. As far as Charles Dickens is concerned, there is some indication that the uncertainty which pervades his novels to such an extent might be more deeply rooted in his personality than has been as yet surmised.

A discussion of Charles Dickens's mode of composition will always have to pay special regard to the manner in which the novels appeared. The practice of writing for serial publication in monthly or even weekly portions certainly influenced his writing profoundly.¹⁵ While Dickens might chafe against the pressure imposed by this form of literary production, there can be no doubt that he made full use of the range of opportunities which it provided. Its temporary lack of closure enabled him to work out provisional strands of action which could be tested on the reading public, while the text was still kept open for changes. The practice of reviewing the individual numbers as they appeared, which was widely maintained in the newspapers and journals of the time, and the evidence of the sales figures, offered Dickens considerable opportunity to assess the current standing of his narratives. If the regular reviewers, individual readers whose judgement he appreciated, or the public at large

failed to approve of an anticipated turn of events, modifications might be introduced in the following numbers to channel the narrative into a different direction. Recent research work on the reception of Dickens's novels, though its conclusions must largely remain tentative, offers ample evidence for the importance of reader response to his writing.¹⁶ An extant letter of the author to his friend and literary adviser John Forster proves that the spirited counsel of Lord Jeffrey determined him to let Edith Dombey stop short of committing adultery with the detestable James Carker, a dramatic reversal of the course of action which reflects the psychology of the heroine so accurately that it may indeed already have been considered earlier on.¹⁷ Though there is insufficient proof that Dickens further involved the episodic Mr Micawber in the main plot of *David Copperfield* in response to the enthusiastic reception of the character in the current reviews, we may still assume that Micawber would not have been reintroduced so frequently had he failed to please. This was certainly the case with Mrs Gamp, whose repeated entries are said to have increased the sales of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The same holds good for the American scenes in the same novel, which had evidently occupied the mind of the author long before he decided to use them as a background for the moral growth of the hero. The imminent reason for their introduction derived, however, from the poor reception of the early numbers of the publication.¹⁸

While it is customary to speak of modifications of the narrative progress in such cases, a more accommodating view might consider these variants as alternatives which Dickens may have envisioned beforehand. Bearing the close relationship between the writer and his public in mind, there is then some reason to suppose that Dickens found serial publication a congenial medium.¹⁹ Conscious of the opportunity of testing his work before it had reached its final stage, he could indulge in imaginative flights, which he might take time to rein in or expand. After all, Dickens's novels came out over periods of up to one and a half years, and thus allowed for substantial changes to be made in accordance with their reception and new insights which might occur to the author. The traditional publication in volumes, on the other hand, would have diminished the possibility of even minor revisions. Despite its inherent tendency towards looseness, publication in instalments should no longer be seen as a restrictive or debasing form of literary communication. While many of Dickens's contemporaries held the view that the requirements of "novel-writing by scraps against time"²⁰ were responsible for the alleged slackness of his writing, the author made

good use of the advantages of the medium. Whatever the shortcomings and restrictions of the serial form, it offered the novelist a wide scope within which his inventive potential might be further explored and tested before the narrative reached its final stage.

There can be no doubt that a critical assessment of the composition of Charles Dickens's novels will have to take full account of the genesis and chronology of their publication. Since the author was usually a few numbers in advance of the current instalment, alterations of a more substantial kind could still be effected, provided that the preceding parts contained references that allowed for such retrospective changes. As we know, keeping the individual numbers equal in length often compelled him to omit entire passages from his manuscript which he deemed expendable on second thought. Thus a number of long passages were deleted from the first three chapters of *Dombey and Son* (cf. DS, p. xvi); equally extensive though fairly unsubstantial cuts were also effected from *Our Mutual Friend* (OMF, I, chs. 4, 9, 15, 16). Conversely, lines had to be added when the copy turned out to be underwritten.²¹ The episode of the young waiter at Greenwich who foolishly failed to grasp that Bella did not want to be recognised as a bride owed its insertion to the fact that chapter 4 of Book IV of *Our Mutual Friend* had turned out to be too short. As one would expect, the final text frequently contains extensions or digressions whose inclusion would seem to have been prompted by the need to supply a specific number of pages. In other cases though, seemingly expendable passages serve a different function. They may have deliberately been included as incipient alternatives which might later be resorted to if a revision of the original plan became desirable. Some of these references would also have been intended for internal use as markers or reminders, others were primarily aimed at the reader and patently fulfil an anticipatory function. Charles Darnay's tale of a prison cell in the Tower of London in which an inmate has hidden a letter, and Manette's shocked reaction to it (TTC, I, ch. 6), may be regarded as a marker referring to the doctor's own letter in the Bastille, which will be produced at the second trial of Darnay with disastrous results (TTC, III, chs. 9–10). Conversely, the leitmotif of the footsteps of crowds of people forecasting the terror to come throughout the early parts of *A Tale of Two Cities* would have been directed to the reader. The keen interest the lawyer Jaggery takes in the sinister character of Bentley Drummle in Book II, ch. 7, of *Great Expectations* might have been introduced to forebode a violent crime. Yet

Drummle interferes quite differently in Pip's life when he marries Estella. As has been shown above, Eugene Wrayburn's moral reformation is indicated long before the events that effect the change in him have occurred. It is worth observing though that the young philanderer evinces some foreknowledge of his future station at this point, whereas the picturesque fireside musings of Lizzie Hexam, his later partner in life, are hardly borne out by the following events. It may well be that Dickens changed his mind about the future relationship of Lizzie and her brother Charley, who so selfishly forsakes her in the end.

Not all variants, whether minor or more substantial, were taken up at a later stage. Charles Dickens may have thought of further involving the married sisters and brothers of Bella Wilfer, who are referred to desultorily on more than one occasion (OMF, I, ch. 4; II, ch. 8), but seems to have found no further use for them once the fortunes of the Wilfer family are satisfactorily settled. It will depend on our critical approach whether we appreciate these remnants as suggestive addenda or dismiss them as mere redundancies. This is a context where Dickens's second mode of literary production comes considerably to the fore. Every blind motif or unrelated passage in one of his novels can serve as an example of the extreme fecundity of his mind. Less directly, these abortive variants go far to indicate his reliance on outside approval, which might have failed him in such cases. A careful reading of the early chapters of *Dombey and Son* will show that Dickens went out of his way to affirm Dombey's hostility towards his daughter Florence from the very beginning onwards. It must seem excessive that young Walter Gay, who has only just started work at the firm, should already be informed about the estrangement between father and daughter (DS, ch. 4). Dickens even seems to have considered adding some extra motivation for the father's aversion. This is at least the impression which a scene in the manuscript version of the novel conveys, in which the widower is described as reading and then destroying a letter found in his wife's desk after her death. This highly suggestive passage was deleted at a later stage, ostensibly because the limit allowed for number 2 had been exceeded; yet the author left an earlier reference to a love attachment of the unfortunate Mrs Dombey standing: "A sharp misgiving, recently acquired, that he was not infallible in his power of bending and binding human wills; as a sharp jealousy of any second check or cross; these were, at that time, the master keys of his soul" (DS, ch. 5, p. 49). This brief observation will, however, hardly suffice as a follow-up to the

introductory characterisation of the unfortunate Mrs Dombey as a “lady with no heart to give him” (DS, ch. 1, p. 2). The inconsistency was never resolved.

The practice of providing ready copy for serial publication did affect the composition of the novels in many ways. We have to bear in mind that each instalment represented a single unit while also serving as a link in an extensive narrative that often embraced several strands of action. This required considerable foresight and control. The traditional notion that Dickens started his works only on some entirely vague notion, working out the plot structure as his writing progressed and the serial numbers accumulated is indeed no longer tenable. Even the *Pickwick Papers*, never intended as a novel, seem to have been increasingly written with a view towards coherence. Looking back upon the genesis of his first extensive narrative after its original appearance, Charles Dickens affirmed his erstwhile intention that “every number should be, to a certain extent, complete in itself, and yet that the whole twenty numbers, when collected, should form one tolerably harmonious whole, each leading to the other by a gentle and not unnatural progress of adventure” (Preface of 1837, PP, p. XCIX). As far as the later novels are concerned, it is now generally understood that he must have arrived at a comprehensive plan before the actual writing commenced. “I have carefully planned out the story, for some time past, to the end”, he confided in one of his correspondents, “and am making out my purposes with great care” (CDL, VI, p. 131; DC, p. XLVII). The composition of *Our Mutual Friend* elicited a similar comment: “I see my opening perfectly, with the one main line on which the story is to turn” (CDL, X, p. 300).

Like some other great artists, however, Dickens seems to have required no preparatory sketches or drafts of any kind. Embarking on a new narrative constituted an intense process of gestation in its early stages, of which no records were made. He himself insisted that his thoughts were kept in better order “on different shelves” of his brain.²² Often only the names of his characters had been worked out at this stage. They may have served as tokens to which diverse associations had become attached. We may hence assume that a fairly advanced, though still indefinite, model of structural and thematic components would have been attained before work really began. When Dickens was actually writing he used to work at considerable speed, drawing from a large store of mental images or narrative varia which his mind had conceived beforehand. There are few

and nearly always only fragmentary references to his mental labours in his correspondence. "It is too hot to do much", he writes to his collaborator W. H. Wills, when engaged in the writing of a *Tale of Two Cities*, "but I am at work, and see the story in a wonderful glass" (CDL, IX, p. 90). Concentrating on the new novel, he rejects all proposals that might "tempt" him out of his story; "I have its track before me and am especially anxious to walk in it" (CDL, IX, p. 102). Or, to quote from yet another one of his letters, "I am prowling about, meditating a new book" (CDL, IX, p. 284, ref. to GE). The absence of any more detailed references must make a precise investigation into the genesis of his individual works very nearly impossible.

Only the later novels, starting from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, were to some extent sketched out beforehand in brief working notes, number plans, occasional memoranda and entries into his note book,²³ all of which convey no more than a very rough outline of the author's intentions. As one would expect, some of these notes indicate, or at least imply, that major alterations were still being considered while large parts of the text had already been published. It is perhaps in these jottings (often terminating in a query) that Dickens's uncertainty appears most striking. As the number plans for *Dombey and Son* show, Dickens remained long undecided about the fate of Walter Gay's Uncle Sol (DS, p. 842), who travels the world in search of his nephew. On the whole, however, the notes are far too sparse and tentative to offer more than corroborative evidence of options which the text itself suggests. While any study of Charles Dickens's manner of composition will mainly rely on the final text, it will equally have to consider the recorded variants and omissions which the critical editions of several of the novels have now made available. This seemingly extraneous matter can best be accounted for within the frame of a specific and highly individual manner of writing that we have defined as Dickens's second mode of composition; a mode of literary production whose effect on the complexity and vitality of his novels can hardly be overestimated, but which also reveals and amply illustrates a pervasive and multifaceted irresolution on the author's part.

While Dickens's second mode of composition may involve noticeable redundancies and inconsistencies, textual matter of such a kind will highlight its "offshoots and meanderings" (CDL, IV, p. 590) especially well. For this reason it also offers conspicuous material for further investigations into Dickens's literary production. An analysis of his narrative

work suggests that such unresolved references may be traced to an habitual proneness to wavering that can only to some extent be construed as an authorial indeterminacy, as it seems to have pursued Charles Dickens throughout his writing career. This opens the way for a systematic treatment of the matter at hand. In the following, several varieties of uncertainty will be discussed with a view towards the classification of sub-categories of Dickens's second mode of composition. Although different aspects of uncertainty tend to merge in the texts, three categories in particular can be clearly distinguished, each of which may be thought to arise from a particular trait in the author's personality.

The most obvious and accessible trait of the uncertainty that emerges so often from the texts may be traced to Dickens's extraordinary imaginative fecundity. Even the most censorious of his critics never questioned the wealth of invention displayed in his works. In contrast with other authors who tend to become stalled over their labours, Charles Dickens would have been mainly troubled by the necessity to restrain and reduce what flowed so freely from his pen. With him, every course of action he had introduced must have pointed into diverse directions, every situation would have suggested a variety of developments. And there is little doubt that an artist who identified so entirely with his creations must have been especially unwilling to dispose of fictions that had begun to take shape in his mind. As he observed while working on *Our Mutual Friend*: "It is a combination of drollery with romance which requires a deal of pains and a perfect throwing away of points that might be amplified; but I hope it is *very good*" (CDL, X, p. 346).

Infinitely inventive, Dickens can seldom have been at a loss as to how to proceed from given premisses. Conversely, he may often have found it difficult to effect a choice from a wide range of viable sequels all of which seemed to answer his purpose, albeit in different ways. The practice of serial publication enabled him to defer decisions in this respect, which might eventually be determined by the advice of friends or by the response of the reading public. Moreover, the wide canvas on which he painted offered sufficient space to work out variations of the plot lines, which might again be counterpointed through diverse configurations, achieving a narrative complexity which could hardly have been accommodated in a more restrictive medium. Within the scope of the panoramic novel even seemingly expendable extensions from which alternative strands of action might have unfolded could be sustained without seriously infringing on

the coherence of the composition. As we have noted, those remnants in particular permit conclusions about the workings of Dickens's second mode of composition. Demonstrating the inventive power of the author, they also help to define the nature of a particular type of uncertainty directly derived from it. It is perhaps best understood as a negative capability that deterred the artist from restricting and controlling what his imagination brought forth in such diversity. It would be quite wrong though to regard this apparent lack of decisiveness as a flaw that impaired Dickens's creative output. While an assessment of his achievement will have to remain mindful of the various inconsistencies that appear in his work, it can never overlook the tremendous energy and craving for excellence that produced it.

There is perhaps no better example of Dickens's so very idiosyncratic wavering over the continuation of a narration than the abortive sections of *Master Humphrey's Clock*, which he himself came to dismiss as a "lost book" (OCS, Preface of 1848). Charles Dickens had originally planned a miscellany in which diverse descriptive sketches and tales should follow one another, ostensibly connected by a conventional narrative frame, the title figure and his friends. Various characters and strands of action were taken up and dismissed before *The Old Curiosity Shop*, originally conceived as a mere episode, fully came into its own. Characteristically, Dickens decided to elevate Little Nell and her grandfather into major characters only after his audience, who did not take to the loosely related stories, had assured him, through an increase in the sales, that he had found the right track. An alteration of this scope would seem to suggest that Dickens had at this point recognised that some restraint of his inventive exuberance was after all imperative. Conversely, it has also been argued, somewhat paradoxically, that the change to the restrictions of the novel form offered rather more scope to the author's imagination than the former arrangement would have done. Whatever explanation was offered here, there can be little doubt that the genesis of *The Old Curiosity Shop* reflects the tension between imaginative freedom and artistic control very strikingly.

By way of contrast, one might turn to a work which has always been regarded as especially unified. But even a novel like *Bleak House* contains numerous variants that demonstrate Dickens's inventive richness rather than his restraining power. Having presented a range of female philanthropists like Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle, who are all distinguished by

their excessive self-regard, the author might have been expected to add yet another such personage in initiating a visit to the home of the surgeon Richard Bayham Badger, with whom Richard Carstone is to serve his apprenticeship, and that of his imperious lady (BH, ch. 13). But, as so very often with Dickens, expectations of this kind are not fulfilled. Instead, the author offers a character sketch of a superwoman, whose main achievement consists in having acquired three husbands in a row. More might have been made of this daunting figure, yet no attempt is made to fit her into the thematic pattern of the novel. Mrs Badger disappears from the story when Richard saunters on to another profession.

Fully conscious of the wide range of artistic possibilities at his command, and keenly intent on satisfying his readers, Charles Dickens must often have deliberated over the most suitable succession of incidents in one of his tales. It would seem very probable though that he was painfully aware of another uncertainty at the same time which involved feelings of a more personal nature. Dickens's attitude to the traumatic period in his childhood when he was forced to earn his bread at a very low trade indicates that he remained especially sensitive to his loss of status at the time. His memoirs that he entrusted to John Forster and the autobiographical reflections in *David Copperfield* suggest that he could never rid himself of the "agony" of this undeserved degradation.²⁴ David Copperfield is constantly beset by fears that the dark phase of his childhood will become known, depriving him of the stature he has regained through his aunt's interference and his own efforts. The extent of this insecurity is amply demonstrated in his encounters with waiters and servants, who invariably seem to make light of him. It is for this reason also that the repeated entries of dear Mr Micawber, a witness of his former poverty, should make him uncomfortable. Especially so, as Micawber has befriended the detestable Uriah Heep, in whom David recognises a perverted version of his own ambitions. His dread turns out to have been justified when Heep openly denounces him as an upstart who has risen from the dregs of society (DC, ch. 52, p. 640f.). Fortunately, the hero is by this time safely settled and no longer vulnerable to exposure.

This was not the case with David Copperfield's creator. While it does not seem as if the undeserved misery of his childhood had ever been thrown into his face, there is ample evidence that many of Dickens's contemporaries did regard him as an upstart and deplored his inability to portray higher life.²⁵ He can hardly have been unaware of his own unstable

status, which may well explain his excessive preoccupation with questions of class. It is not improbable that the anxiety about a character's standing, so often arising in his novels, derives ultimately from his own continual embarrassment. Conversely, the motif may also have some foundation in Dickens's own lack of discernment. Uncertain where he himself stood in the social hierarchy of his time, he must have found it difficult to place a person socially. This would go far to explain the strained reactions to any social challenge evinced by so many of his characters.

To mention but a few examples: Pip Pirrip, who believes himself to have reached the status of a man of the world, is utterly confounded when the impish apprentice of the tailor Trabb openly derides him in the high street of his native town. The impoverished William Dorrit will insist on his superior rank even as a prisoner of the Marshalsea. In his view, the regular tributes he expects from his fellow paupers or occasional visitors are due to his standing rather than to his needs (LD, I, chs. 18, 19). Risen to immense wealth, he responds angrily to what he suspects to be disrespectful behaviour (LD, II, chs. 3, 18). Like the sham financier Merdle, or the nouveau riche Mr Veneering in *Our Mutual Friend*, he is secretly afraid of his underlings. In each case, eventual ruin leads to ostracism. Conversely, property does not inevitably confer status and the social graces commonly associated with it. As their reactions to Eugene Wrayburn's apparent *mésalliance* prove, none of Veneering's "bran-new" friends, who regard themselves as the "voice of society", acts like a gentleman. Only the impoverished and enfeebled Melvin Twemlow rises to the occasion by firmly holding up Wrayburn's conduct to their arrogant disapproval (OMF, IV, ch. 17).

The gentleman-motif in the novels of Charles Dickens has received some attention.²⁶ Yet too little has been made of the element of anxiety which in so many ways determines its treatment. It requires little reflection to perceive that Twemlow's idealistic view of the gentleman as the "degree" which "may be attained by any man" (OMF, IV, ch. 17) or Matthew Pocket's conviction that "no man who was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner" (GE, II, ch. 3, p. 179) have little significance where a person's actual standing is at issue. Only Pip perceives, and this very belatedly, that the much despised Joe Gargery deserves his highest regard as a "gentle Christian man" (GE, III, ch. 18, p. 459). On the other hand, the contrary notion that the distinction ought to be based on the grounds of good birth, prop-

erty, and education fails to satisfy for a variety of other reasons. Charles Dickens himself took inordinate pride in recalling that his fellow workers at the warehouse used to call him “the young gentleman” (Forster, p. 129), which he, resorting to yet another hallmark of quality, regarded as a consequence of his “conduct and manners”. Dickens may not have been aware of the irony implied in this statement. After all, refinement is commonly held to rise above assertiveness. At the same time, his semi-autobiographical novel holds disconcerting proof that its creator nursed some unacknowledged doubts about his own social pretensions. What else are we to make of Uriah Heep’s reproach to David Copperfield that the latter prides himself too much on his “honour, and all the rest of it” (DC, ch. 52, p. 641) in spite of his mean background – a charge which the narrator noticeably fails to answer.

The assertive class-consciousness of the young David Copperfield is by far exceeded by the hero of *Nicholas Nickleby*, who will proudly insist on his superior rank against the contempt he so often encounters from high and low. Not unlike the villainous Rigaud in *Little Dorrit* (LD, I, ch. 1), Nicholas feels equal to the nobility even in his obsession with his self-proclaimed rank as the “son of a country gentleman” (NN, ch. 32). It sits well with his high self-regard that he should unhesitatingly be addressed as a gentleman by the benevolent Charles Cheeryble, who so conveniently comes to his rescue when utter ruin appears inevitable. It might not seem all that probable that a self-made businessman would be so taken with an indigent young man of considerable pretensions, unless we grant that the chance encounter, in spite of being described as an everyday occurrence, can only be fully comprehended as an imaginative projection of Nicholas’s fervent ambitions.²⁷ While the novel abounds in episodes demonstrating the magnanimity and courage of the hero, these virtues are never specifically identified as traits of the natural gentleman (as they well might have been in the later novels). On the other hand, Nickleby’s excessive pride is never censured as a flaw that might equally have to be taken into account in an assessment of his personality. So rigid is the code of honour that Nicholas has adopted that he feels bound to sacrifice his personal happiness and even that of his sister to the “honest pride” (NN, ch. 55) of the pauper. While he has earlier on fantasised about marrying her to a young nobleman whom he might befriend at Dotheboys Hall (NN, ch. 3), Nicholas later on resolves that she ought to reject a proposal from the heir of the Cheeryble business. This absurd highmindedness causes the lovers

some suffering, which is, however, eventually amended when the Cheeryble brothers, interfering once more in the complications of the plot, bring the narrative to a happy conclusion.

At a cursory reading, these circumstances might seem to prove that Nicholas has been justly rewarded for his noble conduct. Not a word of criticism passes the lips of the officiating brothers in the scene of revelation in which he and his sister are united with their respective partners. On the other hand, Nicholas does not receive the traditional recommendation that might be regarded as his due. In fact, the text would hardly support an interpretation that tried to construe his self-inflicted predicament as the test which the heroes of romances have to pass before gaining the hand of their beloved. Moreover, the novel includes a comic parallel to Nicholas' exalted sense of honour, which should not be overlooked. The rhetorical displays of the quixotic hero cannot be isolated from the fantastic ramblings of his misguided mother. Again and again Mrs Nickleby will hold forth on her erstwhile life-style and distinguished connections. Always inclined to regard herself as an object of romantic devotion, she can never be induced to comprehend the obscurity of her commonplace situation. There can be little doubt that Charles Dickens indulged his sense of the ridiculous in the comic scenes centring on the Nickleby household. At the same time, he can hardly have been unaware of their ironising effect on the main plot of the novel. The chivalric notions of the pretentious son are continually parodied in the bizarre delusions of the feeble-minded mother.²⁸ Undoubtedly, these are distinct structural features that add to the novel's peculiar quality; and yet they may have originated from an unacknowledged sense of incompetence on part of the author. *Nicholas Nickleby* abounds in inconsistencies, many of which may well derive from attempts to correct or modify earlier errors in judgement. It is significant that the major characters are removed to a rural idyll in the finale, where social distinction and pride of place have lost their relevance. Dickens has discovered a world of its own, where his own uncertainty about social affairs can be happily abandoned.

Nicholas Nickleby is a novel in which the workings of Dickens's second mode of composition, in particular where it arose from a sense of social inferiority, appear prominently. Undecided on questions of rank and usage, the author frequently resorted to variations and additions to make up for inconsistencies in the already completed parts of the publication. A striking proof of his endeavours to amend earlier flaws

appears in the 'Preface' added to the 1848 edition of the novel. Here Dickens tries to even out anomalies in his hero's character and conduct, which might have been pointed out to him, by contending that Nicholas Nickleby was by no means intended as an exemplary figure, but should be accepted as an inexperienced and somewhat impetuous young man. The statement might be read as a belated admission on the part of the author, who had retrospectively come to realise his weak grasp of social conventions.

There is yet another sphere of values and attitudes which seems to have caused Charles Dickens considerable concern. A Victorian writer used to addressing a large section of society and fully aware of their implicit trust in his authority might be expected to fall back upon conventional norms in matters affecting the family and the relationship between the sexes. Contrary to early twentieth-century assessments, this was not entirely the case with Dickens, whose views on sexual morality were hardly consistent and underwent various changes. In fact, he seems to have wavered in his opinions on human behaviour and on how it ought to be presented, an irresolution which is amply reflected in his narrative work.

We have come a long way from the traditional view which comprehended Victorian morality as uniform and essentially restrictive, although the erstwhile hostility towards Victorian views, which Michael Mason denounces in his investigation into *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*²⁹, may yet linger on for some time. Morally as well as religiously, the Victorian Age is seen today as beset by doubts and contradictions. It may well be argued then that an artist, deeply sensitive to the issues of his time, would be prone to give shape to the conflict between anarchic notions and standard beliefs, two contrary states Edmund Wilson has taught us to discern in Dickens's³⁰ artistic personality. There is little doubt that he followed the double morality which the student of the era encounters so frequently in contemporary records and memoirs. Nowadays it may hardly be necessary to point out that he did not practise what he so often preached; on the other hand, it would be erroneous to suppose that the public role of the author and his private persona were entirely unrelated. One wonders what a more discerning nineteenth-century reader may have made of Walter Bagehot's magisterial claim that Charles Dickens, unlike his rival W. M. Thackeray, never forayed into forbidden territory in his writing; a habitual restraint which Walter Bagehot traced to the "instinctive purity of genius".³¹

In connection with this, an observation of the author in a letter to his literary adviser and confidant John Forster deserves attention, where Dickens protests against the apparently wide-spread opinion that the hero of an English book was always uninteresting, in fact far too good.

I am continually hearing this of Scott from English people here, who pass their lives with Balzac and Sand. But O my smooth friend, what a shining impostor you must think yourself and what an ass you must think me, when you suppose that by putting a brazen face upon it you can blot out of my knowledge the fact that this same unnatural gentleman (if to be decent is to be necessarily unnatural), whom you meet in those other books and in mine, must be presented to you in that unnatural aspect by reason of your morality, and is not to have, I will not say any of the indecencies you like, but not any of the experiences, trials, perplexities, and confusions inseparable from the making or unmaking of all men! (CDL, VIII, p. 178)

What needs emphasis here is that Dickens's divisive attitude to sexuality is not infrequently reflected in his narrative work. The modern reader, who finds himself habitually treated to pseudo-clinical references in his bed-side reading, would certainly look in vain for blatant descriptions of sexual fulfilment in his novels. It might be added in this context that occasional attempts by present-day critics to detect some prurient innuendo in the texts have fallen wide of the mark. Conversely, a Victorian sensitive to implied references and used to interpret gaps and indeterminacies would have been quite able to extract a telling subtext from various relevant passages. In a more specific context, a passing reference might have settled the matter for an attentive reader. There can hardly be any doubt what expression the maddened Dombey employs when he tells his daughter "what Edith was, and bade her follow her" (DS, ch. 47, p. 637) upon discovering his wife's elopement; an outburst that reveals more about his repressed sexuality than an extensive characterisation might have done. Similarly, a mere "wink" on the part of the scruffy Captain Bunsby suffices to suggest that his long stay at the house of the shrewish Mrs Macstinger has led to intimacies (DS, ch. 39, p. 537). The eventual marriage of the confirmed bachelor proves beyond doubt that the inference was correct. "Why did I ever conwoy her into port that night?" (DS, ch. 60, p. 815), exclaims the entrapped husband.

Honeymooning and the intensive love-making that is traditionally associated with it is usually not narrated in Dickens's novels. The novelist must have known that the erotic scenes that his favourite Tobias Smollett so explicitly evokes would hardly find favour with a Victorian

audience. Thackeray's sly reference to the "blushing days" which Amelia and her husband were enjoying during their honeymoon at Brighton (*Vanity Fair*, ch. 23) demonstrates how far a contemporary writer could afford to go in this respect. An author who excelled at travel descriptions might still be expected to provide an account of the outward details of a honeymoon trip, but even this is never the case. There would seem to be a particular reason then why the arrival back home from such a journey should be rendered in detail in *Dombey and Son*. Mr Dombey has taken his beautiful bride to Paris, but the trip does not seem to have brought them closer together. In fact, the scene is determined by an atmosphere of chilly gloom (DS, ch. 35). The lack of affection between the newly-weds is rendered even more obvious when the second Mrs Dombey joins her stepdaughter Florence in her bedroom. "So passed the night on which the happy pair came home" (DS, ch. 35, p. 488). The intriguing James Carker seems well aware of the misery of an incompatible marriage when he tries to lure Edith Dombey to Sicily, the "idlest and easiest part of the world" (DS, ch. 54, p. 722).

The subtle irony arising from the contrast between the association of a holiday in the gayest of cities and its dismal outcome is to some extent repeated in the satirical description of Louisa Gradgrind's wedding to the monstrous Josiah Bounderby (HT, ch. 16). Again the "nuptial trip" takes the "happy pair" to France. But the destination, in this case, is Lyons, which has not been chosen for its picturesque sights, but on account of its textile industry which will offer the bridegroom ample opportunity to observe the labour relations prevalent in these concerns. The reader is not told about the events and consequences of the trip. Nothing, it seems, needs to be added to the above mentioned passage.

Mr and Mrs Alfred Lamble, to mention one more couple of conjugal lovers, spend their honeymoon on the Isle of Wight (OMF, I, ch. 10). Once more, the privacy which the newly-weds enjoy does not provide for happiness. Yet in this case there is no hint of marital incompatibility. In fact, it takes the Lammles as long as a fortnight to discover each other's lack of integrity and property. It is not insignificant that the chapter in which the show-down is narrated should end with the dispirited, but united departure of the pair towards a darkling destination. The image is repeated in Book IV, chapter 2, where the Lammles are once again seen walking away downcast, recalling Milton's Adam and Eve after their final ejection from Paradise: "The world was all before them, where to choose

their place of rest" (*Paradise Lost*, XII, 646). While the pair seem to be held together mainly by mutual aversion, there is some indication of a working, if loveless relationship implied in the description.

These are some cases where Dickens was indeed able to touch the physical side of human experience without outwardly transgressing the boundaries of propriety. Numerous other examples might be cited which show the author in a state of uncertainty about the degree of frankness that might be considered permissible. Thus he seems to have wavered for a long time over the figure of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, whose character improves morally as the action progresses. Paradoxically, her occupation becomes obvious only after the girl has returned to virtue, a step that will eventually lead to her murder. While the early chapters of the novel show her as a brutalised and repulsive figure, the reader is still led to believe that she lives by thieving. The true nature of her calling is only disclosed in her confrontation with Rose Maylie (OT, ch. 40), where Nancy also reveals her sexual bondage to the robber Sikes. Thackeray expressed himself critically about the veracity of the figure, but had no doubts about her background.³² As a matter of fact, it took Dickens several years to come entirely clean on Nancy's vocation. Only the Preface to the third edition of the novel (1841) refers to her explicitly as a "prostitute" (OT, p. LXI).

Charles Dickens was very knowledgeable about the evils of prostitution through his own active reform work. Yet this social problem is differently treated in his novels. While the prostitute Martha Endell, whose profession, as in the case of Alice Marwood in *Dombey and Son*, is never expressly indicated in *David Copperfield*, is allowed to put her past behind her after her emigration to the new world of Australia, Emily, one of the main figures of the novel, has to persist in a state of penitence although she has avoided the "black pit of ruin" (DC, ch. 51, p. 623) through the intervention of the streetwise Martha. Her guilt runs deeper, however, since she caused much suffering to her people when she let herself be abducted by the irresponsible Steerforth, who may be regarded as an alter ego of David Copperfield in this respect. After all, David's own childhood romance with the girl may well be read as a forecast of her later involvement with a man of superior standing, whose blatant libertinism is for this reason hardly censured by the narrator.³³ It is worth noting that the boy does not mention his affection for Little Em'ly to his aunt, intuitively feeling that she would not take all that kindly to her (DC, ch. 17, p. 212). An unmistakable anticipation of future events deserves closer attention,

however. Dwelling on the waywardness of his infant heroine, the narrator inserts a grave comment:

There has been a time since – I do not say it lasted long, but it has been – when I have asked myself the question, would it have been better for little Em'ly to have had the waters close above her head that morning in my sight; and when I have answered, Yes, it would have been.

This may be premature. I have set it down too soon perhaps. But let it stand.
(DC, ch. 3, p. 31)

There can be no doubt that David Copperfield, in his role as the narrating self, is meant to be speaking from hindsight at this point. Nevertheless, the dark foreboding seems disproportionate to Emily's actual lapse, which would argue for a change of heart on part of the author. In fact, the narrator's admission that the insertion was "premature" might well be read as an expression of Dickens's own uncertainty about Emily's fate. Conversely, he had obviously begun to cast her in the role of the "fallen woman" who might decline into prostitution as so many deserted country girls did at the time.³⁴ A letter of 29 December 1849, written several weeks before he turned to the narration of Emily's elopement, would seem to indicate that Dickens was still considering such an outcome at this stage. He is in fact even reflecting on the didactic effect the history of Emily might exert on his unenlightened readers. Yet the same letter also asserts emphatically that Emily "*must* fall – there is no hope for her" (CDL, V, p. 682), as if the writer was trying to silence his own doubts about the matter. As the final text shows, Dickens did not shrink from letting his heroine yield to seduction, but preserved her from a fate "worse than death". He had after all made sure earlier on that there was indeed hope for her by introducing the figure of Martha Endell, the abandoned woman, who fails to serve as a warning to Emily, but achieves her timely rescue when absolute ruin seems imminent.

The reasons for the alteration of the Emily plot may have been manifold, but it seems probable that an uncertainty about the moral decline a heroine, as distinct from a supporting figure, might be allowed to undergo, contributed largely to the final, and not entirely satisfactory, closure of this part of the narrative. It is important to recall that Emily is last seen clinging to her old uncle Peggotty, while their ship is "solemnly" drifting away in the rosy light of the setting sun (DC, ch. 57, p. 695); as if she had been returned to a state of childlike innocence. Inhibited by a sense of

uneasiness as regards the treatment of sexuality in fiction, Dickens chose what may have seemed the least controversial ending for the history of Emily. His heroine is spared the dire fate which the "premature" narratorial comment foreshadowed, but is not permitted to gain the emotional fulfilment which a satisfactory partnership might have brought about. It is, however, not inconsistent that the ordinary prostitute Martha, decidedly a minor figure, should eventually fare better than her superior, who must necessarily suffer more deeply. This sinner can only gain redemption through immaculate sainthood, it would seem, as though her error had been equal to the transgressions of a Magdalene. Thus one of Dickens's most finely conceived female figures is barred from attaining the maturation of a David Copperfield, in which she herself fulfils an important function. This is not to say that the ending which Dickens came to prefer is devoid of artistic truth. Already in her role as David's childhood sweetheart, Emily is to some extent cast as a romantic figure, whose later betrayal by the Byronic Steerforth bears little resemblance to the treatment of the motif of the deserted girl in works of popular fiction. Profoundly uncertain about the propriety of a realistic treatment of the issue of prostitution, Dickens fell back on a romantic strain, which may, after all, have never been absent from his thoughts.

At the same time, Dickens's vacillating between different ways of weaving the "threads" of his narrative need not only have been prompted by moral deliberations. In general, what we have cast as sub-categories of his second mode of composition tend to appear in combination. Thus Dickens may also have modified earlier plans of letting Emily sink into prostitution in consideration of the social aspect of such a decline. The upright Peggottys, whose just pride in their own integrity is emphasised throughout, must have shrunk in stature had one of their number so degraded herself; which in turn would have been detrimental to the democratic ideals that are associated with these figures. It is important to comprehend in this connection that the social dimensions of the Emily plot are literary rather than realistic. Whereas a young village dressmaker might well have mistaken Steerforth for a fairy-tale prince, the numerous references to his standing are too inconsistent to indicate his true social rank. This becomes especially noticeable once the Emily plot begins to take shape. So far David's idol has been presented as the spoilt offspring of a widowed matron whose Highgate abode bears the appearance of a typically Victorian middle-class home. In his new role as the reckless

seducer of rural innocence he assumes Byronic traits, riding “roughshod” (DC, ch. 28, p. 364) over all restraints, roaming through Europe in the character of an eccentric English Lord. His cynical scheme of marrying the cast-off mistress to his servant is even reminiscent of eighteenth-century aristocratic malpractices and may well have been suggested by the novels of Tobias Smollett that David Copperfield (and Charles Dickens) had consumed so avidly.

There has never been any doubt that the intervention of the storm in which Steerforth and the man who would have been avenged on him both meet their ends makes for a highly satisfactory closure of this strand of action. For one thing, David’s fallen angel has incurred too much guilt to live on unharmed. Yet there are also other reasons to make his demise imperative. Perfectly convincing as an individual figure, Steerforth exemplifies a variety of social traits and criteria which have become too diverse to permit of his further inclusion, let alone a significant change in his character. Psychologically seen, David’s alter ego is far too restricted by his excessive self-centredness ever to become truly penitent. Yet the main obstacle to such a development would seem to lie on another level: Dickens is too unsure about the social standing of the character to foresee an actual future for him. Paradoxically, Steerforth is so diffusely cast that even a removal to a utopian Australia, where many characters of the novel commence a new, in one case at least miraculous existence, would be unsuitable for him. From this perspective as well, the highly imaginative catastrophe serves to curtail a plot-line which could not have been plausibly continued.

In other respects, the plot structure centring on Emily and Steerforth reflects the extraordinary richness that we regard as the most striking characteristic of Charles Dickens’s second mode of composition. Even the account of Emily’s voyage home, which (presumably for reasons of propriety) is mediated through the rough articulacy of Daniel Peggotty, includes a few episodic turns that might easily have branched out into alternative strands of action. Thus the tale of Emily’s recovery at the Italian fisherman’s cottage, which indirectly points to an unexpressed longing for children, opens up a new domain altogether. We can be fairly sure that Dickens had made up his mind about his heroine’s fate at this stage; here, however, he seems to have wavered once more on the course the narration ought to take. Considering the manifold references that precede the last phase of the action, Emily’s dramatic rescue and final removal

to a somewhat romantic faraway land constitute just one of the many fictional worlds that his imaginative power might have constructed. Even the proposition that Emily must be purified through prolonged suffering, which had begun to preoccupy him, could still have been accommodated in yet another world of his making.

In defining the concept of possible worlds, literary theorists often point to the dynamics of the textual universe which an author establishes. While the fictional text is being written (or attentively received by subsequent readers) various possible worlds may suggest themselves yet remain unsubstantiated.³⁵ In the following chapters a variety of the many worlds which may have weighed on Dickens's mind or were at least fleetingly considered by him while he was seeking to restrain or inclining to make full use of his imaginative flights are to be explored in greater detail. While reference will be made to most of the novels, only a selection of his works can receive an in-depth analysis in our study.