

# Dickens' Autobiographical Method in *David Copperfield*

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*David Copperfield* (appeared in 20 monthly numbers, beginning in May 1849 and ending in November 1850) stands in an approximately central position in the succession of Dickens' novels. Therefore it unites the ease of his youth with the greater sense of his maturity as a novelist. At a time when Charles Dickens began to write *David Copperfield*, he had already gained a reputation as a novelist. Under such circumstances, it may have been natural for him to write an autobiography of his own.

According to John Forster, a famous biographer of Dickens as well as an intimate friend, "...in all the late part of 1848 Dickens' thoughts were turning much to the form his next book should assume. A suggestion that he should write it in the first person, by way of change (his previous novels had been of the 'omniscient type'), had been thrown out by me ...".<sup>(1)</sup> Forster's advice appealed to Dickens, and he was tempted to write his own life for his next novel. Dickens had never mentioned the miseries of his early life even to his family, and had buried all remembrance of them deep in his subconsciousness. But it now seemed to him that in depicting them there might be a kind of liberation, and he decided to make Charles Dickens a hero of his next novel. Dickens' early struggles are pathetically reflected in the hero's hard youth. And yet the hero, David, is not partly what Dickens was, but, to a much larger extent, what Dickens could not be and would have liked to be. In this sense, *David Copperfield* may fairly be said Dickens' psychological autobiography, or his projective novel in which surface life reflects his inner self.

The advantage of an autobiographical narrative written from the first-person point of view is, that since a hero is usually in some sense a narrator himself and is involved directly or indirectly in most events, the story consists of the experiences of the narrator and things actually happened to or around him. However, some restrictions are brought into this form from the technical point of view. Two periods of time — the time about which and the time at which he writes — are constantly intermingling and interacting in the narrator's mind. Dickens achieves this excellently.

The reader's first impression of *David Copperfield* is that it has been written vividly and convincingly, under a duration and coherence of time. Especially the

first half of the novel is exactly the world seen through the eyes of a child. George Orwell, on reading *David Copperfield* for the first time when he was nine, found "... the mental atmosphere of the opening chapters was so immediately intelligible to me that I vaguely imagined they had been written by a child." And he goes on to explain that those chapters lost none of their charm when he read them later, for Dickens "has been able to stand both inside and outside the child's mind."<sup>(2)</sup>

To stand both inside and outside the child's mind, Dickens adopts a kind of double position. For instance, in the second and the fourth chapters, David the narrator mingles the present tense and the past in one sentence; "... but I knew it pleased her. I *knew* it quite as well as I *know* it now." (Chap. II, p. 24) "I knew as well, when I saw my mother's head lean down upon his shoulder, and her arm touch his neck—I *knew* as well that he could mould her pliant nature into any form he chose, as I *know*, now, that he did it." (Chap. IV, p. 45) By this device, the reader is at once with the experiencing child and with the adult who judges the meaning of these experiences. Moreover, Dickens has recourse to the certain devices. After mentioning that the memory of most grown men can go farther back into the past than many of them suppose and the power of observation in numbers of very young children is quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy, Dickens lays down two rules; "... if it should appear from anything I may set down in this narrative that I was a child of close observation, or that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics." (Chap. II, p. 13) In addition, the first self-portrait of David is "a child of excellent abilities, and with strong power of observation, quick, eager, delicate and soon hurt bodily or mentally." (Chap. XI, p. 154) At the result of these rules, the reader comes to regard David as both a boy of keen observation and a grown man of a strong memory. Although he has a sharp observation, David is only a mere child. So David, as a child, can only experience isolated fragments of sensation, without possessing any power to put them together to form a coherent whole. Before the marriage with David's mother, Mr. Murdstone accompanied by David goes to an hotel by the sea, where two gentlemen are waiting.

'And who's this shaver?' said one of the gentlement, taking hold of me.

'That's Davy,' returned Mr. Murdstone.

'Davy who?' said the gentleman. 'Jones?'

'Copperfield,' said Mr. Murdstone.

'What! Bewitching Mrs. Copperfield's incumbrance?' cried the gentleman.

'The prettly little widow?'

'Quinion,' said Mr. Murdstone, 'take care, if you please. Somebody's sharp.'

'Who is?' asked the gentleman, laughing.

I looked up, quickly; being curious to know.

'Only Brooks of Sheffield,' said Mr. Murdstone.

I was quite relieved to find that it was only Brooks of Sheffield; for, at first, I really thought it was I. (Chap. II, p. 23)

Being a child, David cannot understand the true meaning of the elders' talk, and gets confused and embarrassed by Quinion's reference to David as 'Brooks of Sheffield', and his jokes about his sharpness. This is natural for a child who knows little of the world. In such occasions, Dickens, standing on the side of a child, speaks by the mouth of David as follows; "I could observe, in little pieces, as it were; but as to making a net of a number of these pieces and catching anybody in it, that was, as yet, beyond me." (Chap. II, p. 23) Thanks to this confession, the reader can understand why David is not aware of his mother's remarriage to come, in spite of occasional suggestions.

As the scenes and conversations reported by David are supposed to have been observed by a child and preserved in the imperfect form of the childish perception of them, there brings out a delicate problem to the reliability of the narrative. Dickens solves this problem by specifying that the events reported have been partly reconstructed with the help not only of memory, but also of the judgement of the grown-up David; "My later understanding comes, I am sensible, to my aid here." (Chap. II, p. 18)

As for the information of the conversation that has taken place out of David's presence and even before his birth (Chap. I.), Dickens invents such splendid phrases as "I have been informed and believe", "My poor mother used to say ...", "This was in my past confirmed by Peggotty ...", "... so my mother suspected at last", "as he told my mother afterwards,", and so on. These phrases give convincing power to the narrative.

However, *David Copperfield* is, as David himself says, "a novel of memory" — "... this narrative is my written memory." (Chap. LVIII, p. 817) So the exactitude of David's memory often decreases the verisimilitude of the narrative as a memory, on the contrary. Dickens lets David say with a few signs of hesitation and uncertainty as follows:

"Whether it was the following Sunday when I saw the gentleman again, or whether there was any greater lapse of time before he re-appeared, I cannot recall." (Chap. II, p. 21)

"It seems to me, at this distance of time, as if it were the next day when Peggotty broached the striking and adventurous proposition I am about to mention; but it was probably about two months afterwards." (Chap. II, p. 25)

"I am not certain whether I found out then or afterwards, that ... he had some share in, or some annual change upon the profits of, a wine-merchant's

house in London ...; but I may mention it in this place, whether or no." (Chap. IV, p. 47)

These passages are quite adequate to give the reader an impression that *David Copperfield* is a narrative of memory.

Thus Dickens, not only by these devices mentioned above, but by the vivifying power of his imagination, and in addition to that, with an unlimited supply of words at his command, enables the reader to see the world of a child.

Since *David Copperfield* extends over a considerable number of years, time and incidents are treated with particular importance. First of all, when David the narrator recalls the remote past to his mind in concrete and sensuous immediacy, the method of a kind of superimposition of the past and the present is often used by Dickens. This is done by the associative link between some specific sensation in the present and the past.

The scent of a geranium leaf, at this day, strikes me with a half comical, half serious wonder as to what change has come over me in a moment: and then I see a straw hat and blue ribbons, and a quantity of curls, and a little black dog being held up, in two slender arms, against a bank of blossoms and bright leaves. (Chap. XXVI, p. 396)

The scent of a geranium leaf carries David's mind back to the old day when he "was a captive and a slave to Dora". (Chap. XXVI, p. 390) As we know from this passage, a scent in the present is used as 'signe mémoratif' producing the miracle of affective memory. This mode of memory often occurs to David. David says as follows:

I don't know why one slight set of impressions should be more particularly associated with a place than another, though I believe this obtains with most people, in reference especially to the associations of their childhood. I never hear the name, or read the name, Yarmouth, but I am reminded of a certain Sunday morning on the beach ... (Chap. III, P. 40)

Once David recalls the significant event to his mind in this way, he separates himself from his memory, which leads the reader to the very scene of the event with him.

I have an association between it and a stormy wind, or the lightest mention

of a sea-shore, as strong as any of which my mind is conscious.....I do not recall it, but see it done; for it happens again before me. (Chap. LV, p. 784)

This is clearly the method of a flashback. This device is effective in emphasizing vividness of the narrative. In such occasions Dickens tends to be a photographer rather than a novelist.

To emphasize the continued progress of time through David's life, Dickens uses some ingenious devices. For example, in the chapters where the adolescent David revisits his birthplace at Blunderstone, and Canterbury where he has spent his school-days, he says as follows:

There were great changes in my old home. The ragged nests, so long deserted by the rooks, were gone; and the trees were lopped and topped out of their remembered shapes. The garden had run wild, and half the windows of the house were shut up. (Chap. XXII, p. 320)

The next passage is about Canterbury.

I sauntered through the dear old tranquil streets, and again mingled with the shadows of the venerable gateways and churches. The rooks were sailing about the cathedral towers; and the towers themselves, overlooking many a long unaltered mile of the rich country and its pleasant streams, were cutting the bright morning air, as if there were no such things as change on earth. Yet the bell, when they sounded, told me sorrowfully of change in everything; told me of their own age, and my pretty Dora's youth; and of the many, never old, who had lived and loved and died ... (Chap. LII, p. 742)

These passages of the simultaneous reference to the change and permanence make the reader aware of the natural rhythm of time passing. David the narrator, in his recurring impression, finds himself once more at his dear old places, and continues to narrate as if he saw the scenes of his youth before his eyes.

There are some other devices to combine the variety and the unity. These are four 'Retrospect' chapters; Chap. XVIII "A Retrospect" (David's school-days), Chaps. XLIII and LIII "Another Retrospect" (the period preceding and comprising David's first marriage and Dora's decline and death), Chap. LXIV "A Last Retrospect" (David's and Agnes' married life). Sylvère Monod points out the effectiveness of "Retrospect" as follows:

The "Retrospects" interrupt the continuous progress of the narrative, and

both accelerate and slow it down. They accelerate it in that they contain a summary of several years or at least months, yet it is no paradox to say that at the same time those chapters slow down the rhythm of the story, thanks to their contemplative chapter. The reader, as he comes to them, feels as though he were emerging from the turmoil of active life and entering an area of comparative peace where all that takes place goes on within hearts and souls.<sup>(3)</sup>

Each "Retrospect" begins with the word showing a contemplative arrest of time.

My school-days! The silent gliding on my existence—the unseen, unfelt progress of my life—from childhood up to youth! Let me think, as I look back upon that flowing water, now a dry channel overgrown with leaves, whether there are any marks along its course, by which I can remember how it ran. (Chap. XVIII, p. 265)

Once again, let me pause a memorable period of my life. Let me stand aside, to see the phantoms of those days go by me, accompanying the shadow of myself, in dim procession. (Chap. XLIII, p. 626)

I must pause yet once again. Oh, my child-wife, there is a figure in the moving crowd before my memory, quiet and still, saying in its innocent love and childish beauty, Stop to think of me—turn to look upon the Little Blossom, as it flutters to the ground! I do. All else grows dim, and fades away. I am again with Dora, in our cottage. (Chap. LIII, p. 764)

And now my written story ends. I look back, once more—for the last time—before I close these leaves. I see myself, with Agnes at my side, journeying along the road of life. (Chap. LXIV, p. 874)

The use of the word 'pause' and the phrase 'look back' shows that they are to be understood as moments when there is a contemplative arrest of time. In the "Retrospect" chapters the reader meditates and re-examines the various essential events and alternations in the narrative.<sup>(4)</sup> In these chapters Dickens uses the present tense, which makes the reader aware of David's real and vital connections with his youthful days. Thanks to the 'Retrospect' chapters, even an autobiography can be told as if each event in new chapter were happening right now. The result is that the vividness of the narrative is heightened to a great extent. What is more, on account of the arrest of time, these chapters are effective in controlling the tempo of the autobiographical narrative which unfolds itself in time.

Another device used by Dickens in order to emphasize the continued progress of time is that of a foreboding. Every significant event is foreseen by many warnings and signs, which make it cast its shadow backward as well as forward. By these warnings and presentiments of the future, the cohesion of events has been deter-

mined.

For instance, the remarriage of David's mother, and Mr. Murdstone's harsh treatment of David are already foreseen when David and Peggotty discuss the subject of marriage, and when David relates the tiff between Peggotty and his mother after Mr. Murdstone's visit. The death of David's mother is also hinted by her gradual weakness under the Murdstones' dominion. Thus with the advent of the Murdstones, the idyllic happiness of David's life surrounded by his mother and Peggotty is to be lost. When David leaves for school, after holidays, he says, "I was in the carrier's cart when I heard her calling to me. I look out, and she stood at the garden-gate alone, holding her baby up in her arms for me to see ... So I lost her. So I saw her afterwards, in my sleep at school — a silent presence near my bed — looking at me with the same intent face — holding up her baby in her arms." (Chap. VIII, p. 121)

The groundwork for the tragic melodrama of Em'ly is laid in the first introduction of her. Em'ly demonstrates her fearlessness of the sea by dashing along the edge of a jetty reaching into the sea. David says Em'ly seemed to spring forward to her destruction, and wonders whether "if the life before her could have been revealed to me at a glance, and so revealed that a child could fully comprehend it, and if her preservation could have depended on a motion of my hand, I ought to have held it up to save her ... Would it have been better for Little Em'ly to have the waters close above her head that morning in my sight; and ... I have answered Yes, it would have been." (Chap. III, p. 36) This passage forecasts the part which Em'ly is to play.

As to Steerforth, David's poetical description implies the anticipation of the final scene on the beach of Yarmouth in Chapter LV.

I thought of him very much after I went to bed, and raised myself. I recollect, to look at him where he lay in the moonlight with his handsome face turned up, and his head reclining easily on his arm ... No veiled future dimly glanced upon him in the moon beams. (Chap. VI. p. 87)

This attitude of Steerforth's 'lying with his head reclining easily on his arms' is afterwards noticed several times in the course of the narrative, and is always accompanied with remarks about ominous future awaiting him. Steerforth, shortly before the elopement, appeals to David, "Think of me at my best, if ever circumstances should separate us!" (Chap. XXIX, p. 436)

The elopement of Em'ly and Steerforth is often hinted in various ways. Steerforth is the only possible seducer for Em'ly, and is destined for this role. This is hinted when he asked David casually if the latter had a sister. David does not have a real sister, but Em'ly is almost in the position of a sister to him.

As soon as the elopement has taken place, Dickens sets on preparation for the last act, the simultaneous death of Ham and Steerforth on the beach of Yarmouth.

Walking on the beach, David happens to glance at Ham who is looking out to sea upon the distant light. There is an expression of stern determination on his face that 'if ever he encountered Steerforth, he would kill him'. (Chap. XXXII, p. 456) Ham says as if he knew his destiny as follows;

"... Mas'r Davy. I doesn't rightly know how 'tis, but from over you there seemed to me to come — the end of it like;

"... I was calling to mind that the beginning of it all did take place here — and then the end come. But it's gone." (Chap. XXXII, p. 457)

Soon after this, David adds, "The remembrance of this ... haunted me at intervals, even until the inexorable end came at its appointed time." (Chap. XXXII, p. 457) After the fury of the storm and shipwreck at the close of *David Copperfield*, the body of Steerforth, whom Ham has died to save, is flung dead on the beach "among the ruins of the home he had wronged — I (David) saw him lying with his head upon his arms, as I had often seen him lie at school." (Chap. LV, p. 795)

These devices of giving advance signs of tragic events are due to the nature of the book in the autobiographical form. In an autobiography written and organized late in life, the narrator cannot but mingle the remotest events with the remembrance of their recent consequences. These devices in *David Copperfield* contribute to show and impress mutability in human life.

On the other hand, the element of permanence throughout all change is expressed in the recurrence of a number of objects. Peggotty's sewing materials and her Crocodile-Book which David has known from a child are the embodiment and the symbol of Peggotty's unchanged affection for David through the turmoil of changing situations. In 'A Last Retrospect' chapter, the grown-up David, who has written up his autobiography, looks back once more, for the last time, before he closes these leaves;

I see myself, with Agnes at my side ... I see our children and our friends around us ... here comes Peggotty, my good old nurse ... never sitting down to it (needlework) without a bit of wax candle, a yard measure in a little house, and a work-box with a picture of St. Paul's upon the lid.

There is something bulky in Peggotty's pocket. It is nothing smaller than the Crocodile-Book, which is in rather a delapidated condition by this time, with divers of the leaves torn and stitched across, but which Peggotty exhibits to the children as a precious relic. I find it very curious to see my own infant face, looking up at me from the Crocodile stories. (Chap. LXIV, p. 874)

The grown-up David recognizes his infant face looking up at him from the dear



old book and combines the present with his old days in his mind. Thus ends the narrative of *David Copperfield*. The reader, at the end of the narrative, believes in the identity that has grown and endured through long time.

By these devices mentioned above, a number of objects, events, and feelings and emotions are elaborately linked together, and as a whole, they impart the psychological continuity to the narrative.

The actual life of Dickens is not literally described in *David Copperfield*; the autobiographical fragments are elaborately interwoven with fictions. The first quarter of *David Copperfield*, which is devoted to the first ten or eleven years of David's life, is the world seen through the eyes of a child, and the nostalgic world for the adult readers. David's reality springs from the vivacity of his memories. Approximately the next two quarters of the book deal with David the adolescent. He has various experiences among the characters with whom he comes into contact. In such occasions Dickens is a wonderful expositor of the adolescent personality. The last quarter is less of an autobiography; David is only reporting these incidents and things which come to his notice. There is no more such grasp on reality as seen in the opening chapters. Nevertheless, the elements of the variety and the unity of the whole narrative are skillfully woven together into an excellent psychological autobiography.

#### Footnotes

- (1) John Forster: *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Vol. II, p. 79 Everyman's Library, 1969.
- (2) George Orwell: *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. I, p. 465 Penguin Books, 1971.
- (3) • (4) Sylvère Monod: *Dickens the Novelist*, part three, p. 304

#### Textbook

Charles Dickens: *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, with introduction and note by R. H. Malden, Oxford University Press, London, 1966.

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- F. R. and Q. D. Leavis: *Dickens the Novelist*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1970.
- John Butt & Kathleen Tillotson: *Dickens at Work*, Methune & Co., Ltd., London, 1968.
- J. Hillis Miller: *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novel*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965.
- Robert Liddell: *Some Principles of Fiction*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1970.