1

Young Dickens

Focal Point: 1812–1817

Case Study: David Copperfield

Author biographies will inevitably start with a whimper. No-one is born as an author, after all; the skies do not crack, nor do angels sing to announce the moment. Charles Dickens's infancy, compared to the rest of his biography, is not the story of a writer. There are elements of his childhood which can arguably be considered the most normal or universal part of his experience, distinct from the ever-growing reputation and public awareness of his work as a writer that would commence in the 1830s. But rather than being seen as a generic childhood, Dickens's youth is frequently framed by the traumatic episode of his father's imprisonment for debt and his own employment in Warren's Blacking, a factory which produced boot-blacking. Fred Barnard's 1904 illustration conveys the traumatised young Dickens, slumped in a heap either of exhaustion or despair at his worktable [see Figure 1.1]. The inspiration for seeing this as such a prominent part of Dickens's biography stems predominantly from Dickens himself albeit through a tangled web of indirect sources: there is his friend John Forster's biography, which is drawn from Dickens's own brief autobiographical fragment, as well as the refashioning of that fragment by Dickens as the background to his hero's adventure in *David Copperfield*. The relationship of Dickens and Copperfield, creator and creation, will be discussed in due course. However, while the blacking factory certainly provides the headlines for Dickens's youth, it can be seen that Dickens's later anxieties in life stem from the *entirety* of his childhood, precisely because of their lack of grandeur. It is not simply what he *did* experience, in Warren's Blacking, but also what he did *not* experience in his youth – namely, an unbroken education and university experience, or the travel and culture a richer man's son might encounter – which provided the basis for a number of associated insecurities for the adult Dickens to counter while he attempted to establish himself as a gentleman. Throughout Dickens's life there is a hunger, a need to expand his knowledge, skills and reputation: this would manifest as an adult in his renewed vigour to

The Life of the Author: Charles Dickens, First Edition. Pete Orford.

Figure 1.1 Fred Barnard, 'Dickens at the Blacking Warehouse', 1904.

read and develop a library; to learn new languages and travel the world; and his eagerness to become a newspaper editor and man of letters.

But before this extraordinary series of experiences comes the everyday: to repeat, Dickens's childhood began quite normally. He was born in Portsmouth on 7 February 1812 in the family home at 1 Mile End Terrace. His father, John Dickens, was a clerk for the Navy Pay Office, and his mother, Elizabeth Dickens (née Barrow) had moved to Portsmouth shortly after their marriage in 1809 for John's work. They had originally met in 1805 in London, through Elizabeth's brother Thomas, who worked in the office with John in Somerset House. The couple married in 1809 and moved to Portsmouth, where in 1810 their daughter Frances – Dickens's older sister – was born, commonly known in the family as Fanny. John's parents were servants, while Elizabeth's father was, like her husband, a Navy Pay clerk; in 1810 he was found guilty of embezzlement. Such was the family that Dickens was born into: son to a Navy clerk, grandson to servants and another navy clerk charged with embezzlement, and younger brother to a sister two years old. Dickens's full name at his christening was Charles John Huffam Dickens, named respectively after his maternal grandfather, his father, and his godfather Christopher Huffam, who was a gentleman and head of a firm in Portsmouth.

One of the defining traits of Dickens's early life is being on the move. Dickens and his family relocated according to his father's job (and later, in response to his growing debts): Table 1.1 shows at a glance just how much the young

Table 1.1 Dickens's Childhood Homes.

Location	*Year entered*
Mile-end Terrace, Portsea	1812
16 Hawke Street, Portsea	1812
39 Wish Street, Southsea	1813
Norfolk Street, London	1815
Sheerness	1816
No 2 Ordnance Terrace, Chatham	1816
The Brook, 18 St Mary's Place, Chatham	1821
16 Bayham Street, London	1822
4 Gower Street North, London	1823
Little College Street, London (while family are in Marshalsea)	1824
Lant Street, London	1824
Little College Street, London (again)	1824
Johnson Street, London	1824

Dickens moved home during his first twelve years. Michael Slater suggests, not unreasonably, that the repeated act of relocation, and resultant unsettledness, 'affected Dickens in his later life when he seemed to have some sort of need for constant changes of environment.'[1] This need for change extends beyond environment and into the need for new activities and interests; Dickens's unsettled childhood may well have cultivated the restless spirit that would characterise the older Dickens.

As a navy clerk, Dickens's father was working in interesting times, with Britain engaged in naval conflict with France and the USA. He moved where the job required him to move, but there is also an element of levelling up, with Hawke Street and Wish Street both being larger properties than Dickens's birth-home of Mile End Terrace. Those early years in Portsea and Southsea, both in Portsmouth, might be presumed not to have made a significant impact on the young Dickens simply because of the limited awareness of his infancy, but in his later recollections, Dickens displays a remarkable memory and eye for detail from events of this time. In Forster's biography he notes 'the small front garden to the house at Portsea' which Dickens often recalled, 'where, watched by a nurse through a low kitchen-window almost level with the gravel-walk, he trotted about with something to eat, and his little elder sister with him.'[2] The recollection of this small garden has a nostalgic glow of a

simpler life, almost rural in comparison to what would follow. In 1815 they moved to London, Dickens's first experience of the big city. Only a year later they moved again to Sheerness for a brief period, before settling in Chatham, where the family would remain until 1822, a relative period of stability for Dickens. During this time, he began his education, first privately, then at a dame school, then at William Giles's school. Giles, 'a young Baptist minister', took kindly to Dickens; sixteen years later in 1838 Dickens wrote to Giles with copies of his works so far inscribed 'From his old and affectionate pupil', and in the accompanying letter Dickens professed to Giles 'a vivid remembrance of your old kindness and excellence'.[3] Giles in turn had sent Dickens 'a silver snuff-box with admiring inscription to 'the inimitable Boz' 'halfway through the publication of *The Pickwick Papers*.[4] Taken all in all, it suggests that Dickens's time at Giles's school was a happy one which fostered genuine respect and affection between teacher and pupil. When John Dickens next moved job again in June 1822, it is thought that Dickens stayed behind in Chatham to complete the school term before joining them in London.

Who were Dickens's household companions during his early childhood? His parents had several more children after Fanny and Charles: Alfred, born in 1813 and died the same year; Letitia, born in 1816; Harriet, born in 1819; Frederick, born in 1820; and another Alfred, born in March 1822, shortly before the family moved to London (see Table 1.2). Nor were they alone; there would also have been the servants of course, including Mary Weller who is believed to have told the Dickens children ghost stories, and in doing so provided inspiration for Dickens's many phantasmagorical tales, as well as being immortalised in the surname of Pickwick's beloved servant Sam Weller. In addition, Dickens's aunt Mary Allen (his mother's sister) had moved in with the family in Wish Street after being widowed, and she would remain in the household until her second marriage in 1821. Her new husband, Matthew Lamert, had a son from a previous marriage – George Lamert – who would prove to have a significant influence on Dickens, both positive and negative.

Table 1.2 The Dickens Siblings.

Frances (Fanny)	1810–1848
Charles	1812–1870
Alfred	1813–1813
Letitita	1816–1893
Harriet	1819–1824
Frederick	1820–1868
Alfred	1822–1860
Augustus	1827–1866

George Lamert was ten years older than Dickens, yet the two struck up a friendship. George's father and his new bride moved to Ireland, and George stayed in England and lodged with the Dickens family. Living in London, it is widely believed that Lamert took Dickens to the theatre, and also built a toy theatre for him too, fostering an interest in the stage that would last the rest of Dickens's life. Lamert had just attended Sandhurst for military training, but now stepped into an entirely different sphere of employment, going into business with his brother-in-law William Edward Woodd who had just purchased Warren's Blacking. With money proving tight for the Dickens family, Lamert suggested to John Dickens that Charles might find employment at the factory. It was by no means unusual for a child of Dickens's age to enter employment, and from an adult's perspective it can be seen as an act, if not of benevolence, then at least not of malice. Dickens recalled that Lamert 'had kindly arranged to teach [him] something in the dinner hour; from twelve to one', as well as offering to keep him separate from the other boys in the factory, but neither of these suggestions lasted very long:

> But an arrangement so incompatible with counting-house business soon died away, from no fault of his or mine; and for the same reason, my small work-table, and my grosses of pots, my papers, string, scissors, paste-pot and labels, by little and little, vanished out of the recess in the counting-house, and kept company with the other small work-tables, grosses of pots, papers, string, scissors and paste-pots downstairs.[5]

Note how even Dickens concedes the dropping of these arrangements were done 'from no fault of his or mine'; similarly, the moving of the small boy from his isolated position in the counting-house to join the rest of the boys can be equally interpreted as a well-intentioned end to his self-imposed segregation. But from Dickens's perspective, this was a gross betrayal.

One particular reason for Dickens's ire was that his older sister Fanny was able to continue her education even when he could not. She had been admitted to the Royal Academy of Music, and Dickens's parents had their hopes pinned on her, so understandably kept her in education. In contrast, Dickens was a young boy of eleven, just finished school and with no clear plan; if there was an opportunity for the family to increase their income, it was one they had to accept. For Dickens this meant finding himself in an alien environment, doing physical labour while his sister trained in the arts. Years later, when writing *Little Dorrit* (in which Mr Dorrit is a long-standing inmate of the Marshalsea) Dickens gives the titular character, Amy, an older sister called Fanny, who works as a dancer at the theatre while Amy works penitently and diligently to help her father. As poor as both sisters are, there is nonetheless a broad distinction made between the poor life of Amy and the glamour of Fanny's. When Amy visits her sister at the theatre, Fanny is amazed:

> The notion of you among professionals, Amy, is really the last thing I could have conceived![6]

Fanny's condescending tone, and implicit sense of Amy not belonging in this realm, may very well be a lingering resentment on Dickens's part for the real-life Fanny and his own sense of not belonging. It is also pertinent to remember a more favourable portrait of a younger child and his older sister Fanny in *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge's older sister comes to his school to 'bring [him] home' now that father says circumstances have changed: 'Father is so much kinder than he used to be [...] And you're to be a man!'[7] In both fictional instances, the younger sibling is bearing the brunt of their father's actions.

If the young Dickens hoped his time in the factory would soon end, he was disappointed. His father's debt troubles increased, and shortly after Dickens began working in the factory, his father was committed to Marshalsea Debtor's Prison. Dickens's mother and siblings subsequently moved in to the Marshalsea with his father, while Dickens remained on the outside, lodging in London and walking to and from work alone. His trauma of this era is not borne from poverty so much as shame and isolation. Dickens's recollections of his time in Warren's is full of pain and remorse, which is elaborated further in *David Copperfield*, but it is important to note that the job itself was not a bad one. It paid, and was certainly much safer than several other employments for young boys. The horror of the role lies entirely in Dickens's shame and self-awareness of his social descent. Dickens recalled that the other boys in the factory 'always spoke of me as "the young gentleman"'.[8] This is both praise and damnation: recognition of his different status, alongside potential mockery for his perceived superiority. It is this that isolated Dickens, this sense of distinction between he and his co-workers, felt no less by him: shame, not poverty, was the overwhelming horror informing Dickens's memory of this time.

Much of the details of Dickens's time in the blacking factory have been significantly redefined by Michael Allen's recent work. Allen noted how 'the story of Charles Dickens's childhood is dominated by a single narrative' – Dickens's own.[9] This was recorded first in a short fragment of autobiography, since lost, but used by Forster in his subsequent biography, and of course in *David Copperfield*, but in both cases this narrative as dictated by Dickens had been neither corroborated nor challenged, so Allen went to historical sources for clarification, and found several inaccuracies. For example, Forster refers to Dickens's cousin as James Lamert, not George. As Allen notes, 'it is just possible that Dickens, when it came to writing his fragment of an autobiography, simply forgot his cousin's name', which seems at odds with our perception of Dickens's infallible memory but could be explained if 'the young boy didn't often use his cousin's first name'; or it might be that George preferred to use a

different name.[10] An error in a name is not a fundamental fault, but it highlights immediately the danger of taking Dickens's own word as gospel. More importantly, the chronology in Forster is wrong. Forster's biography tells us that Dickens went to work in the factory *after* his father's imprisonment, but Allen's re-examination of the historical documents now suggests he was working there *before*. Dickens's autobiographical fragment recalls the factory being at Hungerford Stairs, but the legal documents show the factory had moved out of these premises in 1824 – Dickens must have been working there in 1823. This re-examination of Dickens's testimony is not intended as an attack on him, who in his later reflections is trying to articulate the memories of an eleven-year-old boy from a time of personal trauma; but it does show how naïve we have been in automatically assuming Dickens's account to be true without corroborating it. With this awareness in mind, we can re-evaluate Dickens's narrative with a better awareness of the author's personal bias – his is a subjective account, not an objective one.

Sending the young Dickens to work in a factory was clearly not ideal, but nor was it demonic. This is no longer the narrative of a child sent to work while the father is incarcerated, but a child assisting the father in the aim of staving off incarceration. The family was in dire straits and, at eleven years old, Dickens was of an age to be working. Significantly, it potentially reframes Lamert's intervention as a kindly one, but that is not how Dickens saw it. The same cousin who had built him a toy theatre and been a companion through his childhood was forever rewritten as the treacherous destroyer of Dickens's dreams.

If shame defined Dickens's time in the factory, it was shame that got him out of it. Not his own, but his father's, who saw Dickens working in the factory window and felt the shame of his son being so prominent in the position. Dickens recalls that his father and his cousin argued and its probable cause being 'my employment at the window.'[11] Dickens Snr had previously had no issue with his son working there – but being *seen* to work there was too much. It also helped that John Dickens's mother had died and left an inheritance of £450. Charles was free – but further aggravation awaited when his mother wanted him to stay on:

> My mother set herself to accommodate the quarrel, and did so next day. She brought home a request for me to return next morning, and a high character of me, which I am very sure I deserved. My father said I should go back no more, and should go to school. I do not write resentfully or angrily: for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am: but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back.[12]

It is not so much what he says, but how he says it. It is all very well saying he does not write resentfully or angrily, but his repeated assertion that he will never forget betrays the impact of his mother's eagerness to send him back to the factory. And yet, once again, let us reconsider this objectively – he had a position, and a wage, so Dickens's mother was not being unreasonable in suggesting he stay on, especially given the financial insecurity experienced by her husband and father. But if her decision was practical, it was not maternal, and ignored both the misery Dickens felt, and the shame.

Dickens's Self-reflections in the 1840s

In 1838 Dickens was asked by J. H. Kuenzel to provide a few biographical details for an article he was writing for *Konversationslexikon*, a German publication. The account Dickens provides in his letter to Kuenzel is brief and offers the basic information which would inform the public biography of Dickens until after his death:

> I was born at Portsmouth, an English Seaport town principally remarkable for mud, Jews, and Sailors, on the 7th of February 1812. My father holding in those days a situation under Government in the Navy Pay Office, which called him in the discharge of his duty to different places, I came to London, a child of two years old, left it again at six, and then left it again for another Sea Port town – Chatham – where I remained some six or seven years, and then came back to London with my parents and half a dozen brothers and sisters, whereof I was second in seniority.
>
> I had begun an irregular rambling education under a clergyman at Chatham, and finished it at a good school in London – tolerably early, for my father was not a rich man, and I had to begin the world. So I began in a Lawyer's office[.][13]

This is the official story which would resurface in Dickens's obituaries, and it contains a notable omission. That second paragraph in particular jumps from his Chatham education to his London education with no mention of the factory work he engaged in. Even when he admits to his father not being rich, and having to begin the world, he reimagines that beginning as the lawyer's office, not the blacking factory. This was the lie, the secret, which would cause Dickens such anxiety. That gap in his resumé might be contested at any time by a former workmate emerging, or a schoolmate querying dates. The more famous Dickens became, the more scrutiny he faced. As a result, the contradiction of his success and security was that it brought even more insecurity and fear of failure.

Often when we look to interpreting Dickens's childhood we turn to his pseudo-autobiography *David Copperfield*, which proves both insightful and misleading. I shall be using it here with a cautious eye, for as a commentary on Dickens's childhood it tells us two stories: one is the elements there drawn from Dickens's own life, and the other is the framing and reshaping of it by the adult Dickens. Ultimately, *Copperfield* is a work of fiction, and as much as Dickens draws on aspects of his early life in telling David's story, he is not beholden to the truth, and even when he is drawing on actual events, he is still spinning his version of those events. It is particularly telling that in creating David's story, he does not simply repeat his own life but actually makes the circumstances so much worse. David's father dies before he is born, subsequently to be replaced by his villainous stepfather Mr Murdstone who beats David, actively suppresses his imaginative qualities, and ultimately sends him to work in the blacking factory not out of financial desperation but as a further means of punishment combined with the opportunity to remove David from the family home. It hardly requires Sigmund Freud to read several layers of subconscious angst in this narrative. The blacking factory becomes categorically a form of torture, intended only to demean and dispirit the child. There is no sense of community spirit in the factory, or of playfellows for the child. Murdstone is particularly keen to remove David from the family home so that he can instead focus on his own child, David's young stepbrother, who is showered with praise in equal measure to the scorn poured on David. Dickens was not simply revisiting the past, but rewriting and massively exaggerating it. He is inviting pity for his character and his difficult upbringing; if we do choose to read David as a pseudonym for Dickens, then what Dickens is doing here is presenting his childhood as a subject that demands sympathy. Given time, the less savoury memories of his younger life have developed into demons. To what extent is this a conscious decision though? Is the older Dickens, as an experienced writer of fiction, recognising on some level that his own childhood is not sensational enough and requires these additional elements of heightened drama?

Copperfield was written in the late 1840s, at a point when Dickens was firmly established as a great success and, consequently, when aspects of his childhood were causing him ever growing concern. A chance encounter between Forster and 'Mr. Dilke [...] who had been a clerk in the same office in Somerset-house to which Mr. John Dickens belonged' in which Dilke mentioned Dickens had 'had some juvenile employment in a warehouse near the Strand' consolidated Dickens's worst fears that his new society would discover the truth of his childhood.[14] After being confronted by Forster about it, Dickens 'was silent for several minutes' and some weeks later sent Forster what has since become known as the autobiographical fragment, in which he first told Forster about his childhood.[15] But the wider world would remain in ignorance of this until after Dickens's death, when Forster

reproduced the fragment in the biography of his friend. *David Copperfield* is therefore as much, if not more of, a product of the 1840s as it is of Dickens's childhood.

Slater notes that Dickens was 'playing with fire' in drawing on his own life for this novel, as several contemporaries recognised autobiographical elements in the text.[16] Journalists recognised Micawber as a parody of Dickens's father; while the trope of a young reporter becoming a novelist ensured a wider awareness of connections to Dickens's own career path. Equally, however, there were elements that were not recognised as autobiographical – David's fervent romancing of Dora, mimicking Dickens's doomed attempts to woo Maria Beadnall, were considered as purely fanciful. And therein lies the rub: parts of the book based on fact can be dismissed as pure fiction, while other parts that are heavily fictionalised can be mistaken for fact. Dickens congratulated himself for his 'very complicated interweaving of truth and fiction' in the early parts of the novel, and we have been trying to unpick that weaving ever since.[17]

Forster is keen to stress the idea of Copperfield as Dickens: 'the poor little lad, with good ability and a most sensitive nature, turned at the age of ten into a "labouring hind" in the service of "Murdstone and Grinby", and conscious already of what made it seem very strange to him that he could so easily have been thrown away at such an age, was indeed himself.'[18] But this is not true. David was never Dickens; he was only ever Dickens's own interpretation of himself. Dickens was not 'thrown away' as David was, but put into employment to help the family by a cousin with good intentions for him. If the blacking factory was a tragedy, then the author was Dickens himself who reframed this time as melodrama, a dark secret of shame out of which England's great author was born. It is a terrific narrative, and all the more beguiling for that reason, but we must be conscious that we are being told this tale of woe by a master story-teller.

Case Study: Charles Dickens and *David Copperfield*

Compare these two passages, the first from John Forster's *Life of Dickens*, and the second from *David Copperfield*.

> No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every-day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day

> by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written.[19]

> No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these henceforth every-day associates with those of my happier childhood – not to say with Steerforth, Traddles, and the rest of those boys; and felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my bosom. The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written.[20]

Reading the two passages, one after the other, it is undeniable that they represent different drafts of the same story. *Copperfield* introduces a few details relevant to the book's narrative, in the mention of David's school friends Steerforth and Traddles, and makes occasional changes to the tense, but ultimately we are reading the same narrative twice over. *Copperfield* was published, like all Dickens's novels, in a serial form, so this chapter would have first appeared in print in August 1849. Forster's *Life of Dickens* was published in three volumes, with this passage appearing in the first volume, published in 1872. However, Forster tells us the passage comes from an autobiographical fragment, now lost, written *before* the publication of *Copperfield*. There is some debate as to when precisely – Forster dates it to sometime after 'March or April of 1847', Ackroyd believes it to be 'just after Fanny's death' in 1848; and Slater imagines various drafts appearing between 1847 and 1849.[21] In turn, the events described in the fragment of course relate to Dickens's childhood in 1824. We are therefore looking at two pieces of writing which account for three different time periods – the 1820s, when the events occurred; the 1840s, when the events were first written about; and the 1870s, when Forster subsequently edited and published the fragment and the world first learned about Dickens's origins.

It is vital that we remember this order when we consider the two texts and their influence upon another: the fragment, as written by Dickens, predates *Copperfield*, but the fragment, as published by Forster, postdates *Copperfield*. Forster based his biography upon his own recollections and letters from Dickens, but also regularly supplements it with reference to Dickens's fiction. Describing Dickens's childhood home in Chatham, Forster refers the reader to *David Copperfield*, in which Dickens imagines David reading a small library of his father's books 'in a little room upstairs':

> From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time,—they, and the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Genii,—and did me no harm; for whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me; I knew nothing of it.[22]

Forster states that this is 'one of the many passages in *Copperfield* which are literally true'.[23] Fact and fiction are frequently interwoven in Forster's narrative both to inform the story of Dickens's life and, to an extent, justify the prolonged discussion of Dickens's childhood in his biography by asserting its relevance to his written works.

Thus, when we look at the similarity of the fragment and *Copperfield*, there are two explanations. One is that Dickens himself turns directly to the fragment as source material when writing *Copperfield*, and the other is that Forster turns to *Copperfield* as source when editing the fragment, to make the parallels clearer. In the instance of the two passages cited together earlier, the first explanation is the likelier one, but in other instances in Forster, the second explanation should not be fully discounted. The comparison of *Copperfield* to Dickens's own life, as reported in Forster, should be treated with caution, recognising both where Dickens himself has edited his earlier experiences to fit his later fiction, and where Forster has interpreted events of the past shaped by that fiction. But also we need to look at the autobiographical fragment itself as a piece of rhetoric; in writing about his childhood and presenting it to his friend Forster, with the possibility at that stage of wider publication, Dickens was not simply reporting, but framing the narrative to show himself as victim, and the time at Warren's shows that bias of narrative most of all.

With that caveat, consider now the description of Dickens's, then David's, workplace.

> The blacking warehouse was the last house on the left-hand side of the way, at old Hungerford-stairs. It was a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscoted rooms, and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again.[24]

> Murdstone and Grinsby's warehouse was at the water side. It was down in Blackfriars. Modern improvements have altered the place; but it was the last house at the bottom of a narrow street, curving downhill to the river,

> with some stairs at the end, where people took a boat. It was a crazy old house with a wharf of its own, abutting on the water when the tide was in, and on the mud when the tide was out, and literally overrun with rats. Its panelled rooms, discoloured with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years, I dare say, its decaying floors and staircase, the squeaking and scuffling of the old grey rats down in the cellars, and the dirt and rottenness of the place are things, not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant. They are all before me, just as they were in the evil hour when I went among them for the first time, with my trembling hand in Mr Quinion's.[25]

Note immediately the similarity of details: the crazy old house, abutting on the water, described as 'literally overrun with rats' in both narratives, word-for-word. But beyond, the tone of the description speaks as much about Dicken's response as it does about the building itself. The emphasis upon the rundown state of the building: discoloured, rotten, decaying – this becomes a place of neglect, a place where the young Dickens is sent to be forgotten, his young hopes dashed. There is almost an element of snobbery in his revulsion at how decrepit everything is, but what speaks volumes about his memory of the place is that it is depicted as this forlorn post where all hope is abandoned. Note also the tension between the past and present. In the passages above, Dickens says these visions of the building's degradation 'rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again.' In the correlating *Copperfield* passage he expands further on this, claiming them to be 'things, not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant. They are all before me, just as they were in the evil hour when I went among them for the first time'. This is far more emotive, and speaks more emphatically of the continuing influence this experience had upon Dickens. George Lamert, and Dickens's parents, may have considered this an opportunity for the boy in difficult circumstances, but for Dickens himself the moment is interpreted solely as a betrayal, a punishment and an abandonment. In the fragment he makes this entirely clear. He calls the moment when Lamert first makes the suggestion to his parents to be 'an evil hour for me, as I often bitterly thought', and he writes further of his crushing disappointment that Lamert's suggestion was never countered:[26]

> It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me, that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me – a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally – to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign. My father and mother were quite satisfied. They could hardly

> have been more so, if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar school, and going to Cambridge.[27]

Dickens's indignation is clear: the talk of being cast away reinforces the sense from the previous description of the factory as a place to be abandoned and neglected. Contrasted with this is Dickens's own fervent belief in his 'singular abilities': it is not simply that the blacking factory was a terrible place to be, but that it was a particularly terrible place for Dickens, of all people, to be. The reference to being 'twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar school, and going to Cambridge' speaks of Dickens's preferred upbringing, had he had the opportunity. Again, it is important to note that this fragment is written by Dickens in the 1840s, not the 1820s when it happened, so that longing for a university education may well be informed by his subsequent moving among literary circles, and a sense of his own shortcomings in that society, rather than accurately portraying his hopes when still a child.

The outrage felt by Dickens when writing about his time at Warren's is palpable in the autobiographical fragment, especially in the betrayal of his parents who 'were quite satisfied' with arrangements. We will never know if this outrage was simmering throughout the 1820s and 1830s, or if it came bursting out in a rage in the 1840s as he began to reflect back on his life in comparison to the upbringing of his friends. It is certainly clear that shame, not poverty, dictates his response. Dickens was a successful man in the 1840s, and a poor upbringing might only speak further of his triumph in rising to the top. But the shame of neglect, of not being sent on to school and university; this is what truly enrages him. So it is unsurprising to see that when Dickens fictionalises his autobiography for *David Copperfield* he does not simply retell the horrors of his childhood, but dramatically increases the woes of his protagonist to make the narrative even more tragic. Dickens grew up in a loving family, with a father imprisoned for debt; David's father dies before he is born, to be replaced by a wicked step-father who beats him, and his mother dies during his childhood, leaving David penniless and abandoned by the villainous Murdstone. Dickens gives free rein to his imagination to allow the depth of his own shame to dictate the atrocities David has to endure. We will never know the exact details of the conversation between Dickens, his father and Lamert when Warren's was first proposed; all we have instead is the exaggerated version between Murdstone and David:

> 'I suppose you know, David, that I am not rich. At any rate, you know it now. You have received some considerable education already. Education is costly; and even if it were not, and I could afford it, I am of opinion that it would not at all be advantageous to you to be kept at a school. What is before you, is a fight with the world; and the sooner you begin it, the better.'

> I think it occurred to me that I had already begun it, in my poor way; but it occurs to me now, whether or no.[28]

Forster makes an explicit link between the 'crisis of [Dickens's] father's affairs in fact which is ascribed in fiction to Mr. Micawber's', confirming the idea many readers have since suspected that the optimistic, but unpractical, Mr Micawber is a fictionalised rendering of Dickens's father.[29] But in this moment it is Murdstone who represents the demonic side of Dickens's father as perceived by the young Dickens himself. Murdstone claims to be taking David out of school because he cannot afford it, but this is shown to be untrue given the life Murdstone and his sister are now leading in David's home, once the property of his father, then his mother, and now owned by Murdstone, not David. Murdstone then confirms that he would still not send David to school even if he could afford it. It is possible in this to read the reasoning and excuses of Dickens's father, rendered into monstrosities from Dickens's perspective. For Dickens's father education would have been costly, but John Dickens may well have tried to present the sending of his son to Warren's as an opportunity rather than necessity, for his own pride as well as his son's. In *Copperfield* the moment is one that screams of resentment and unfair treatment. Once again there is the awareness of the narrator reflecting on himself back then in the final line 'it occurs to me now'. The moment may be from David's past, but the anger comes from the present. So too with the autobiographical fragment we need to look at the events described as belonging to the 1820s, and the tone and narrative belonging to the 1840s.

The story of Dickens's childhood is therefore a narrative told, and retold, many times – and that retelling has confused rather than clarified. In *David Copperfield* we are not presented with Dickens's past, but rather with Dickens's interaction with his past. The narration is unreliable, but reveals more than Dickens meant to reveal. In his exaggerations and lamentations, Dickens betrays his own embarrassment and insecurity. Whatever is untrue or exaggerated, Dickens's shame is real. This sense of shortcomings in his upbringing would prompt him to forever push himself. In the next chapter we will see how upon reaching adulthood, Dickens began his frantic climb to the top of the literary sphere.

Notes

1 Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven: Yale, 2011), p. 4.
2 John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Volume One (London: Chapman & Hall, 1872), pp. 2–3.
3 Forster, p. 12; Charles Dickens, Letter to the Rev. William Giles, August 1838, in Madeline House and Graham Storey (eds.), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Volume One 1820–1839 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 429.

4 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 13.
5 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 32.
6 Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: OUP, 1979), Ch. 20, p. 227
7 Charles Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol', in Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (ed.), *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), Stave 2, p. 33.
8 Forster, Volume One, p. 38.
9 Michael Allen, *Charles Dickens and the Blacking Factory* (St. Leonards: Oxford-Stockley, 2011), p. 1.
10 Allen, p. 89.
11 Dickens in Forster, Vol. 1, p. 48.
12 Dickens in Forster, Vol. 1, p. 49.
13 Charles Dickens, Letter to J H Kuenzel, July 1838 in *Letters*, Vol. 1, pp. 423–4 (p.423).
14 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 27.
15 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 27.
16 Slater, p. 29.
17 Dickens, 'Letter to John Forster', 10 July 1849, in Graham Storey and K. J. Fielding (eds.), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Volume Five 1847–1849 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), p. 569 (p. 569).
18 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 28.
19 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 33.
20 *Copperfield*, Chapter 11, p. 133.
21 Forster, p. 27; Ackroyd, p. 305; Slater, p. 278.
22 *Copperfield*, Ch. 4, p. 53.
23 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 9.
24 Dickens in Forster, Vol. 1, p. 31.
25 *Copperfield*, Ch. 11, pp. 132–3.
26 Dickens in Forster, Vol. 1, p. 30.
27 Dickens in Forster, Vol. 1, p. 31.
28 *Copperfield*, Ch. 10, p. 131.
29 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 16.