



David Copperfield

An interview with Michael Hollington by Marc AMFREVILLE

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The first thing I would like us to try to do, is define Dickens's place in English literature. Do you consider him a Victorian writer?

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Yes and no, I think. He really transcends Victorian writing in my view. And I think, like Angus Wilson and some other people, that his closest relatives are European writers, rather than other Victorian writers—that's to say people like Dostoievsky, Balzac or Gogol—and that he belongs in a kind of European league that rather transcends the characteristic preoccupations of Victorian fiction. And one of the things Angus Wilson said is that he's got a bigger sense of evil than most people, than most Victorian writers. And I believe that.

But there have also been suggestions among the critics, that he was a pre-Victorian writer in many ways.

Well, perhaps that's part of my answer. Donald Fanger has a very good book *Dostoievsky and Romantic Realism*, about Balzac, Dickens, Gogol in relation to Dostoievsky. And that's the sort of way I would approach Dickens, not as a realist in a Henry James sense, or even a George Eliot sense, but in relation to those kinds of writers, and therefore the word *romantic* almost inevitably occurs with the word realism.

Do you still perceive, I'm thinking of David Copperfield in particular, do you still perceive shades of romanticism in Dickens's work?

Absolutely, yes. I don't think I believe in some absolutely fundamental shift between romanticism and realism anyway, I don't see those as simply in opposition. But the case of Dickens would be one where there is a complete muddying and intermingling of those two things.

Now, to say that in a way he is also a realist writer leads us to the social dimension of David Copperfield.

I think it's very important. It has been underestimated. It's one of the things that I feel reasonably strongly about. In other works by Dickens the social element is overt and you can't mistake it. *Oliver Twist* is about the Poor Law and *Bleak House* is about the legal system and various novels have a specific social target. *David Copperfield* obviously doesn't, and yet it seems to me thoroughly mistaken not to see it in relation to the social world. And the whole sets of questions that I'm sure you are going to ask about development and the individual, in my view, can't be answered just in individual terms. If you try to think about the individual realising his or herself, that can't happen in a vacuum. It's bound to happen in a society and family.

Would you go as far as to say that there is a political, a polemical dimension to David Copperfield?

I would. Although it's not overt. It's less overt in that novel than in almost any other novel by Dickens. But I'm always very interested in the fact that what triggered off Dickens's re-visiting of his childhood was actually a revolution that he witnessed in Geneva in 1846, and he says at that moment one must be devilish careful, or something like that, with what one does to children. "I thought of that in Geneva", he writes to Forster. And I see a very interesting kind of connection that at the moment he started writing about his childhood, it was in the middle of writing *Dombey*, and then he went on to *David Copperfield*. The specific political circumstances, relatively speaking, take a back seat. But they are there. Jack Malden, for instance, talks about "the unrest in the North", Dr Strong asks him what's in the news at breakfast, and he says, "Oh it's just the same old story about unrest in the North". And we're seeing, through the negative figure of Jack Malden, a view of how one should actually be concerned about these social questions.

And yet, if I remember correctly what I read in Ackroyd's biography, Dickens seems to have been insensitive, for example, to signs of upheaval in Italy, although he lived there for a while.

I think absolutely the reverse. Dickens was an enormous supporter of the Italian Revolution. And he did a great deal on behalf of the Italian people. He was a friend of Mazzini's. He was a major figure amongst the English supporters of the *Risorgimento* in Italy. So now, I refer you to an article¹ I wrote myself on Dickens in Italy, in a journal of Anglo-Italian studies for that kind of background, but I'm not the only person to draw on for that. He was a very committed figure on behalf of the Italian political cause.

Still in this socio-political context, how do you view the emigration of various characters to Australia? Would you say, in the way some critics have considered it, it was just a convenient way of getting rid of the Micawbers, Emily, Mr. Peggotty and the rest?

No. I think it's more than that. What it's most closely related to, in my judgement, is Dickens's activity at that time, on behalf of Urania Cottage, which was a place with the aim of reforming prostitutes and then sending them off to the colonies. There was a scheme run by a lady called Caroline Chisholm that Dickens very much supported. There was a perceived need for women to marry, to settle; now transportation was in the past and there was the Gold Rush starting about 1850, the discovery of gold and the idea of settling families which led to the founding of Melbourne, and Dickens was very much active in that move to resettle. Two of his sons died in Australia, by the way. So that he at one stage intended to visit Australia, but the negotiations broke down and he wanted too much money, he wanted his daughter and son-in-law to go with him as well. No, I certainly don't think they were just sort of sent off to nowhere, I think that Australia is a theme in his work as a whole. It has, in my view, a redemptive kind of level. Always people come back from Australia; even in *David Copperfield* you get the return of Daniel Peggotty at the very end. And they have reformed. They have made themselves down there. Magwitch, of course, in *Great Expectations*, is really very, very important. But even in the earlier texts, you'll also find this return pattern from Australia. So now I think it belongs in the whole series of symbolic journeys in *David Copperfield*. You could see the novel as punctuated by journeys.

Would you say that David Copperfield also constitutes an apology for Victorian values?

That's an interesting and difficult question, I think. [Laughter]... Angus Wilson, for example, sees it as his most bourgeois, most conformist novel. Mario Praz

is another example, seeing this in the light of a kind of Biedermeier ideology in this novel. And there seems to me no question that at some level that is there, in the novel. The case, to me, is how important is it in relation to the novel as a whole. I always want to stress the fact that David is a writer, and is becoming a writer, and this is what is important, and the kind of writer he is becoming is to be a socially critical one, not someone who simply accepts that ideology. And then we have figures in the novel who are not at all Victorian, such as Micawber, who are so vital and important. And they are vital precisely in terms of the education of an artist, because of Micawber's love of language and his extraordinary prolix and vital verbal activity. I think one can over-emphasise the bourgeois, Victorianness of *David Copperfield*. If one does, it turns out to be a novel that one doesn't rank as highly as some of the others. Angus Wilson seems to me to draw the right conclusion when he says it is very much more bourgeois than a lot of Dickens's fiction, very much more Victorian...

I was thinking of precise elements, like the work ethic...

Yes. Unquestionably, Dickens was a believer in the work ethic and got that from Carlyle and so on. But put it this way. Supposing one thinks in terms of what is the central essence of the Victorian work ethic values. You remember Samuel Smiles's book *Self Help*, I don't think that Dickens puts it as crudely and simply as that. The idea of self-help being anybody can make it, you know... the American Dream in Victorian England. I don't think Dickens believed in that. I believe that he saw society as constraining for us. And you couldn't, in fact, realise yourself if the society was rotten or had no means of allowing you to realise yourself. And it seems to me that those two are intertwined. He doesn't believe in simple self-help in Samuel Smiles's terms in his work. Even though he accepts considerable aspects of Victorian ideology...

Are you thinking of Victorian prudery, for example?

I think I agree with Graham Storey when he says there's a surprising amount of covert and overt sexuality in *David Copperfield* and it's just a case of where you look and what you expect to be the symptoms. You won't find Dickens going into people's bedrooms and describing in detail their activities, what they do with each other. You'll find indications, and one for instance is Littimer: when little Emily is abandoned, or cast off, you'll notice that he "licked his lips". All kinds of people do that... Uriah Heep's another, who talks about "plucking pears" and licking his lips over Agnes. Miss Mowcher is a character who is full of sexual reference. Rose Dartle in another way. There's a huge analysis, I think, in this book of various kinds of perversity. In Creakle you've got a kind of paedophile figure, I think. Someone who really loves chubby boys' behinds. You've got Murdstone's love of hurting, twisting David's neck or head, under his arms. Miss Murdstone... and Rose Dartle, it's

quite extraordinary, I think, how she wants Emily whipped and so on. There are other Victorian writers that are more outspoken than Dickens, that's for sure. But none will deal with sexuality in the way writers do nowadays.

One does perceive in the text echoes of other works. Could you tell us something of David Copperfield and intertextuality?

Yes, what's very often said, of course, is that it's most connected with *Tom Jones* because the only son who really made it big, Henry Fielding Dickens, was born in early 1849. He was going to call him Oliver Goldsmith Dickens, and then he changed his mind and called him Henry Fielding Dickens instead, and many people said, Ha, ha, this is because *Tom Jones* was on his mind... and then of course, *Tom Jones* is mentioned in the text or David imagines himself as a child's Tom Jones, i.e. an innocent and not a sexually voracious Tom Jones. So that certainly is an element. He loved all these eighteenth century writers. He loved Smollett, the picaresque form was something that mattered to him very much. The loose structure with the central hero passing through a series of encounters and so on. There is a great deal of Dickens that is obviously indebted to the eighteenth century novel in England.

Hamlet?

Yes. Well, *Hamlet* is an obvious presence in the novel and right in the first chapter he has Mr. Chillip, like the ghost in *Hamlet*. Mr. Chillip is a wonderful non-aggressive male, he's very much female-dominated, and mild, the real male in the first chapter is Aunt Betsey. And he walks so softly, he's like the ghost in *Hamlet*. And then that immediately gets taken up with David's fear of his own father, resurrecting from the grave. And Mrs. Copperfield reads the story of Lazarus and he's scared that it means his father will come back as a ghost. If you just look at the word ghost, for instance, in connection with *Hamlet*, it's there over and over again in the novel. There is a lot of intertextuality, it's a very literary book and Dickens is a very allusive writer and there are characters who are very allusive, such as Micawber, constantly quoting from a whole range of English literature. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is certainly the text after the Bible that everybody, even the poorest family in the nineteenth century, would own a copy of. And Dickens is always, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* for instance, following this kind of allegorical path of the hero or heroine towards salvation or their goal, and that's another key text. But one could mention lots and lots of texts that have a connection. Recently I've been very interested in the connection between *David Copperfield* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Wilhelm, as a child, is in love with puppet plays, and the play that he loves above all is "David and Goliath". And it suddenly struck me how much David and various Goliaths can be seen in the novel; his confrontation with Murdstone can be seen with that kind of figuration in mind. Chaucer's

Canterbury Tales also figures in the book. The town of Canterbury has such prominence in the novel—and the journey metaphor, through and to Canterbury. Micawber quotes Chaucer, he quotes almost every English author. He stands for the English literary tradition, I think. He's a kind of father of David as a writer. By handing over to him all kinds of writers; Burns is a good example—he stands as a joke embodiment of a literary patrimony.

Which is interesting, because it's also been suggested that he was also partly a caricature of Dickens's father.

Unquestionably. I think it is a complex representation but eventually a tribute to his father. I can't make any sense of this in any other way, you know. A kind of very, very mixed one, of course, whose nearest equivalent is perhaps Naipaul's representation of his father in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The Micawbers are, as Graham Storey says, certainly the only real family that David discovers in the first half of the novel, at least until he discovers the very eccentric family of Aunt Betsey and Mr. Dick.

One does perceive, however, some distance taken from his father, in his representation of Mr. Micawber's bombastic style, don't you think?

Yes, well, obviously...

Not to mention his relationship to money, of course, which is one of the points he might have wanted to reproach his father with.

Yes, yes, yes. I mean the downside to Dickens's father of course was his way of getting into debt but if you look at the autobiographical stuff, it's the mother he's most angry about, because the mother wanted him to work and he says "I shall never forget her being warm for my going back". The father actually pulled him out of the blacking factory, maybe not for the best of reasons, because he was angry that he was on display in a window, so that people could see his boy working there, but the father was more active in getting him out. The mother wanted him to continue. She thought of the cash. So, I think Dickens was harder on her, really, in his assessment of who was to blame, than he was upon his father. That's my reading of it anyway. With Mrs. Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby* he really gets at his mother. It's interesting that Mrs. Micawber, by comparison, is much more attractive, really loveable in lots of ways in this novel, and of course, there is her total devotion to her husband [laughter].

Aside from this blacking factory episode you were mentioning, do you see other significant autobiographical details?

Obviously, that's got to be the main one, because, as we know, not long before *David Copperfield*, for the one and only time in his life, Dickens confessed. It was an accident. Forster said that someone called Dilke remembered having seen him as a child, and Dickens said, "Oh, yes. I knew him generally," and Forster added, "Ah, but he saw you in a particular place," and then finally Dickens confessed. So that's got to be the main autobiographical element. But no, there are lots of others. Dora is related to Maria Beadnell. Personally, I find Dora a very attractive and interesting character in *David Copperfield*, a rather sexy person: again, if you want to think in terms of "is there sexuality in *David Copperfield*?" I think undoubtedly yes. And that's one of the problems with Agnes, because she's totally lacking in this respect. But there are many things that one can relate to Dickens's autobiography. Whether that's the most important thing to do, however, I'm not sure.

But would you say this is the most autobiographical novel?

I think you'd probably have to say that, yes.

Perhaps more in terms of tone and general feeling towards his novel writing than actual facts...

Yes. I'm a little bit resistant to the notion that an autobiography explains *David Copperfield*, because I really don't think it does. And in a way, I think it can lead us up the wrong path. How pervasively, for example, so many critics of *David Copperfield* completely neglect the social level because they're so interested in the autobiographical set of issues. And then another danger, I think, is that one almost unconsciously thinks that David is Dickens. That seems to me a very dubious assumption—that because he is the narrator in the novel, he is also the author. Dickens doesn't identify himself with David. He's much more critical than David. David is a device, really, in terms of the Bildungsroman for instance and the device, as in *Wilhelm Meister*, is to make David, in some sense, a fool, which I don't think Dickens was.

Do you think Dickens has used all the possibilities of this first person narrative? I'm thinking in terms of comparison with American writers of the same period, for example. Do you think he makes a satisfying use of the possible resources of the unreliability of David, or of dramatic irony?

Oh, unquestionably. He certainly uses such devices. If you want to study that, you can look at the notes for the number plans. This is one of the reasons why

I tend to resist the critical emphasis on the earnest, bourgeois, Victorian work ethic. At the point where David is thoroughly into that kind of thing, if you look up the notes, you'll find Dickens saying "overdone," David's throwing himself into work is overdone. So you can very much see there's this gap between the writer and his character, when we get, for instance, David seeing a stone breaker out working on Highgate Hill, and he says "I wish I could take the pick from him" so as to build a path to Dora. It's quite obvious that he's being mocked. So the question about the unreliability, though, is that we've got a mature narrator, haven't we? The mature narrator is himself aware of the mistakes of the younger David, and clearly that's not the same in American fiction, in *Huckleberry Finn*, anyway.

In that case, this may be one of the successful aspects of the novel itself?

I think it is... I mean one of the most brilliant things, surely, about this novel, is the handling of memory, the extraordinary fluidity in which it moves between now and then, often with wonderfully ambiguous effects. The moment of the announcement of David's mother's death on a foggy day: "I can see the hoar frost, ghostly, through it." And you first of all think, is that ghostly because he can't remember well enough, or was it ghostly at the time? And you realise that, because of the fog, it had to be ghostly at the time, but at the same time, there's a kind of way in which it's a prolepsis that he's worried that she is dead. He has a premonition, some brilliantly fluid movement between now and the past, and then the time in between. And that, it seems to me, there are very few writers who have managed that. He has a notion of *mémoire involontaire*, very Proustian, of course; it's never theorised as such, but how easily in Dickens this is done—how it's not something that occurs in privileged moments, when one happens to feel a particular twinge, but is there all the time. It's happening all the time. And we're moving so fluidly and easily between past and present. I do think of *David Copperfield* as a very remarkable book, from a formal point of view. On a comparative scale there are certainly later, subtler uses of the first person narrative. Joyce, for instance, makes a splendid use of his first person narrator, but it's surely the case that *David Copperfield* is one of the major breakthroughs. Certainly for Dickens, anyway.

Now, to turn to other characters. There have been reproaches of inconsistency in certain characters. I'm thinking of Miss Mowcher, for example.

Well, yes, absolutely true, of course. Miss Mowcher, on the first occasion we meet her comes across as an extraordinary figure, very remarkable. And the second time, after Dickens got a solicitor's letter from a dwarf lady, saying how distressed she was at the representation of Miss Mowcher, he obviously completely changes that figure. And she loses her power, pretty much anyway, in that second appearance. I don't think, however, that it is an isolated case.

One of the things it shows, of course, is that Dickens was very sensitive about middle class reactions to his novels. He didn't want to offend, and the idea that he was offending troubled him. That would be one case of inconsistency in Dickens. However, there's an almost deliberate kind of inconsistency in Dickens. His use of pantomime effects, of transformations. If you take Miss Mowcher, she transforms, doesn't she, in this sense. Yes, I'm trying to build a defence, although I don't really believe in it. I mean, it is a pity that he changes Miss Mowcher. But you get these characters like Mrs. Gummidge, who transforms. You might say, it's inconsistent, "she's only a poor lone creature", then all of a sudden, she becomes this heroine. But it happens regularly in Dickens that people transform because of the pantomime structure of his writing, that is non-realist, if you like...

Now, on the other hand, a character like Uriah doesn't transform.

Interesting. It seems to me that that's connected with his theology. You know, he's a Calvinist, it's a mistaken view of the soul and its destiny and its possibilities. He denies freewill. The two major Calvinist figures, puritans, are Murdstone and Heep and they are clearly related. And, you know, their nature is much more imprinted in them, in the onomastics of the names for instance... Murdstone/murderer, his personality hasn't got as much fluidity in it as David's of course, and this is again this conception of the *Bildungsroman*, the central figure must not be too definite.

Would you like to add a comment on the onomastics of Uriah, perhaps?

Yes, well, biblical, fundamentalist, bible-reading. His father is a sexton, if you remember. And Heep is a wonderful name, of course, that Micawber picks up on. Heap... pile... and those characters have fixed identities to a greater extent. Even in the end, Uriah Heep is utterly a hypocrite, even when he goes to prison... he doesn't reform. This is where the Australia thing comes in... Only because Uriah should have been transported, in a way...but Dickens doesn't want that notion at all, Uriah is not capable of remaking himself.

I was trying to suggest that perhaps characters like Uriah Heep are ultra-simplistic, types, almost, as opposed to characters?

Yes.

One-sided villains, if you wish.

I think it's a case of what you are looking for. Obviously you would be disappointed if you want a study in realist psychology. There's something essentially symbolic and demonic about Uriah Heep. I don't think you're likely

to meet individuals like this. He doesn't impinge upon your sense—ah, I know someone like that—if that's a criterion of realism. One of the significant things about him, though, is the way in which he is related to David, and the purity and intensity of his evil. The problem is that someone like David is, in a peculiar way, attracted to him. They have a sort of relationship...

Doppelgängers in a way?

Yes, certainly. Remember when he stays the night and David can't resist going in and looking at him as he's got his mouth open, he's fascinated by him. It's what he called, I think he even uses a phrase, the attraction of repulsion. So he may in himself be simple, if you like, but he has a function in relation to other characters who are not simple.

There remains for us Agnes to discuss. Q.D. Leavis suggests that Agnes is only, I quote, "a willed concession to the Victorian ideal". Whereas, I think, Dickens himself wrote that she was the real heroine.

Either way, Agnes is a great weakness, if not the major weakness of the novel. Q. D. Leavis is perhaps saying, yes, this is true, but in the end it's not that important. But perhaps you're saying, "ah but he thought she was the heroine of the novel", and I agree if that is so, it's a pretty serious problem for the novel that Agnes is so awful, really.

You mean perfect?

[laughter] Yes. But I have a lot of sympathy with Q.D. Leavis's view. I think it's a terrible pity at least if one allows the failure of Agnes to have too much weight in one's reading of *David Copperfield*, of the novel. And she is, on the whole, confined, even if she's given a central role. She isn't there that often, not to be a major, really major problem, so that I'd probably side, relatively speaking, with Q.D. Leavis, in the sense that she's saying "well in the end it doesn't matter, that's not what the book is about".

In the same light, do you consider the happy ending an aesthetic flaw?

Yes I *do*. Insofar as it is concerned with the marriage of Agnes and David. It's so inert. There's nothing there, is there? In fact this wonderful analysis of the relationship with Dora, the marriage with Dora, it just doesn't exist in the end and by the way I'm very much on the side of those who think Dora is an important and interesting character.

Really?

Yes. [laughter]

She may be interesting as a literary device, I am not sure she is psychologically fascinating.

It depends on what you mean by fascinating. Firstly, Dora's problems, it seems to me, have to do with conceptions of women in Victorian society. And these are understood and criticised, and her father is, like most Victorian men, out to sell her to the best bidder, to the highest bidder. Notice how, when David loses all his money, he gets very angry that he should have any relationship with his daughter. But up until then he'd been quite happy with this because he thought David was going to inherit a tidy sum, you know. And then the whole notion of how she is educated, of what she should do and what her role in society is. I think they help explain her inadequacies, if you like. I personally don't find her boring. First of all, she's funny, she's amusing. What she does with a dictionary, she turns it into something to pretend to fight Jip with, as if he were a lion or something. His pagoda, the dog's pagoda, and so on. I may be trying too hard for her, but she's interesting, I think. There's an article by Margaret Darby who puts the case for Dora and I think she is right in many ways. Certainly, I prefer her to Agnes, oh yes.

So let me ask you something totally different. We asked Peter Ackroyd the same question two weeks ago and I would like to have your opinion as well. Do you believe, along with Dickens himself, Virginia Woolf and several critics, that David Copperfield was his best novel?

Probably not. The first fifteen chapters of *David Copperfield* are incomparable of course. I don't think all of the rest of the novel is quite of that quality, although there are some absolutely wonderful things in it. Another novel that I like very much is *Dombey and Son*, and it has things in common with *Dombey and Son* in that respect, and again, I think that until Paul's death, *Dombey* is utterly brilliant, and they're both at the mid-point in Dickens's career. But were I to say which was the greatest novel, it seems to me that the later ones are the more sustained... Probably I would accept the idea that *Bleak House* is his greatest novel. It's a very commonplace view, but the book is so profound, it seems to me that with this central question of the law, so much is brought out of that: it's a metaphysical novel. So I prefer the late, great, social novels in the end and they're the finest... that's to say *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*.

But you do seem to suggest that David Copperfield marks the turning point in Dickens's consciousness of his craft?

Certainly.

So, perhaps we could tell us a bit more of that turning point in terms of structure, repetition, characterisation. Don't you think there is a sort of maturity of this talent that was not perceivable before?

Oh yes. Although, again, I think *Dombey* is the first mature novel. And *Dombey* has more overt social dimensions, it's about the railways, and it's about business in a more developed way than is *David Copperfield*. It's the first modern novel in Dickens, about now, about contemporary England. And that would be its strength against *David Copperfield*, the fact that the social side is so overt. They are both marked by a wonderful development in the representation of the child, I think. Kathleen Tillotson and others have remarked how earlier on, he wrote more, quantitatively, about children. *Oliver Twist* is always a child, throughout the novel from beginning to end; but Dickens has a much deeper understanding of the child now, partly because of seeing it in a developmental pattern. Oliver doesn't develop, Oliver is just a static notion of an essence and no, environment doesn't impinge upon him at all, but in Paul Dombey... and even more so, in David, there's a much subtler understanding of how environment affects the personality.

Would you say Dickens is the first writer to have laid so much emphasis on child psychology?

Not the first, no. I mean, the book that has to be read here is Peter Coveney's *Poor Monkey*, which first appeared in 1957 and then later was re-titled *The Child in Literature*. Of course, Coveney takes the child theme back to the romantic period. It has to be connected with Rousseau and in England with the Romantic poets in particular. Wordsworth, of course, in the *Prelude*, has an enormous, complex, psychological study of his own development and his own nature as a child. So not the first...

What if I had said "English novelist" as opposed to just "writer"?

Well, then, probably, yes. What is interesting is to look at it the other way round. One of the writers who thought that Dickens was incomparable in representing children is Turgenev. His great story "Bezhin Meadow" in *The Sportsman's Notebook* is a homage to Dickens's representation of the child. And Turgenev said, I couldn't do it as well as Dickens. But he was trying, that was what he wanted... Dickens was the model for him. So that's a way of saying, yes, Dickens's was the first great representation of the child, in prose.

And it's more than just representation. It's also perhaps, in a Wordsworthian fashion, the way he makes David the child the father of David the adult?

The child who is father to the man?

Very technically, I mean.

You mean in terms of the *Bildungsroman*.

Yes.

This is a complex question, isn't it? That militates against notions of development. If you say that the given aim of one's life is to be an artist... You will remember that passage in the second chapter in which David says "I'd rather retain certain features than acquire them," and the passage which stresses that "the power of observation in numbers of very young children is quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect may with greater propriety be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it." This maybe is the technical sense which you are referring to; i.e. that the mature narrator cannot narrate without the fresh perceptions of the child. And that includes a particular attitude towards language, a particular innocence and seriousness about language. When David sees in the Dolphin Inn the dolphin on the door, he thinks there must be a Mr. Dolphin within. Or take the case of "Mr. Skylark", you know, when he sees the word "skylark" on his chest, he believes he must be called Mr. Skylark. Or the child's capacity to see analogy, weird analogy which starts right at the beginning at Pegotty's finger that he compares to a nutmeg grater—its rough edge is like a nutmeg grater. These kinds of unprejudiced, non-conventional linkages are the conditions, I think, in Dickens, of being a writer and they are certainly represented most strongly in the child. The adult artist has to be able to retain that capacity rather than acquire it.

Would you say that David Copperfield is also a sentimental education? I'm thinking of Mrs. Strong's phrase "Undisciplined heart." Would you say that David's story is that of a sentimental education?

Yes. I think that may be the conception, but I'm not sure that that is a strong part of the novel. There's this famous article by Gwendoline Needham, "The Undisciplined Heart", which really holds so many critics enthralled. Lots of them have followed it. If you find that, then you come up against the Agnes problem, don't you? You say, "But I'm not sure I want this to be the main theme!" It certainly wouldn't work in the Flaubertian sense, anyway, if Agnes is the aim of the sentimental education. Many critics have noted, I think quite

well, that there are two types of women, and they are there right at the beginning of the novel. That's to say: the mother and Peggotty.

Peggotty has got no shape at all, we are told, in the beginning. The mother and the nurse, and the child walking between the two, is the very first image, isn't it? They're both down on their knees and the child goes from the one to the other, and you could say, well, that's what David does, he ends up with the nurse... [laughter]... But that's not a real sentimental education, is it? You want to end up with a nurse? I mean, I don't, anyway. [Laughter]

Sentimental education has to do with moving away from the mother and Dora may be considered, as you suggested, as a repetition of David's mother figure.

Yes. Certainly. There is no doubt that he is seeing in her the same sexual attractiveness. But I think one of the powers of this novel is actually the very unbuttoned rendering of love of the mother, the purity, the intensity—that is the word I should stress—of David's relationship to his mother, which is rendered with so much power and conviction. That's the stronger side of his relation to women. [Laughter]

So this leads us to the central question of the Bildungsroman as a genre. Do you think that David Copperfield fits the definitions given by Suzanne Howe, Jerome Buckley, among others?

The whole question is a difficult one... First of all "Bildungsroman" is a German word, and it's a German concept. And when Jerome Buckley uses it in the English context, he almost completely drops the German side of this term. And yet, there's a very specific reference in German literature; by the way, the person who really promotes and popularises this term is Wilhelm Dilthey, in the imperial period in Germany. It is very much connected, in that period, with nationalism; the Bildungsroman for German nationalist critics around 1900 is *the* Germanic form, nobody else can do it... Then later that term becomes widespread, it's one of the few German terms to have an international currency and then people want to see lots of English novels in relation to it. I'm a bit dubious, I have to say, about that whole enterprise, that's to say Jerome Buckley's enterprise. I think he has some interesting things to say about the novels, but whether they can actually be called Bildungsromane, I am not totally sure. Certainly a German would not think of them as such. I think he would call them something like Entwicklungsromane, novels of development. But Bildung is such a specific concept in German, it means something like self-cultivation, conscious self-cultivation, as it were...

This is precisely Suzanne Howe's definition...

Is it? Yes. That's the old Suzanne Howe of *Wilhelm Meister's English Apprentices*. It's a very useful book, at least sixty years old...

I'm sorry to use a German term again, but would you say that it is closer to the Künstlerroman perhaps?

I think I'm quite attracted to the *Künstlerroman* idea. Irène Simon is one of the people who I think puts that case rather well. The problem is this: Barbara Hardy says it can't be a *Künstlerroman* because it doesn't talk about "art" consciously, it doesn't talk about technique, as such. Irène Simon answers that objection, I think, rather well. She says "what do you expect in Victorian fiction?" Victorian fiction does not talk about technique as such; just as in the modernist period, self-consciousness about art is of the essence, so in the Victorian period one would not overtly talk about techniques of fiction and so on. And again, if you go back to *Wilhelm Meister*, what is Wilhelm but an artist? The whole novel is about finding his role; I mean he goes into the theatre first, and discovers that it is not his "métier" but that nonetheless he has a central role as the creative transformer of the given. So I think that that element is one of the strongest elements, paradoxically arguing in favour of *David Copperfield* as a *Bildungsroman*. If you just take it as being about sentimental development, for instance, I don't think that is really Bildung in the full sense. In my view, anyway.

How about the Erziehungsroman, then?

The *Erziehungsroman* would be something rather narrow, specifically about education. With Rousseau's *Emile* as the obvious model, there. Obviously, "Erziehung", education, as such, is only a small part of *David Copperfield*. *Entwicklungsroman* is a novel of development, more general development. I think you could definitely say that all the novels that Buckley calls *Bildungsromane* are certainly *Entwicklungsromane*. But whether they're *Bildungsroman* as well, is a moot question—mind you, in Germany itself, there's a whole argument about whether this isn't even a phantom genre that hardly exists, you know. Maybe whether even *Wilhem Meister* itself is a *Bildungsroman*!

Now, of course there are optimistic connotations to the idea of the Bildungsroman. Wouldn't you say that in spite of the happy ending, there is an undercurrent of melancholy in David Copperfield?

Yes, I certainly would. And this is another complication, isn't it, for thinking about it as a *Bildungsroman*. *Bildungsroman* implies, I think, free will, it's an

enlightenment idea, about the perfectibility of man, that you can fulfil yourself to your limit, and *David Copperfield* has that strand, yet I think it's a multiple structure. It's not simply a linear structure as a novel. It's certainly also a cyclical structure, it wants to return, it wants to go back, and there's the melancholy, isn't there, in that other structure, the structure where the loss of the mother is the most profound event of the novel. And forever. And that's why, if you like, he can't get beyond the mother in terms of fulfilment in relation to women. But that this return, this constant return to the wish to be with the mother and the other child, the little infant, seems to me the source, the major source anyway, of that melancholy strain within the novel. Kingcaid is one of the very good critics on that.

And this becomes particularly interesting if one relates it to what you said earlier about too much having been made of the autobiographical elements: the death of the mother has nothing to do with Dickens's personal history. So it would be in the entirely fictional parts that he would be, perhaps, the most melancholy?

Yes. John Lucas has a book called *The Melancholy Man* about Dickens. I think you can overdo that, because there's such a wonderful exuberance as well, in Dickens. He is this rounded person. His novels have to be seen as encyclopaedic in their form: they contain lots of different modes and moods. That's one of the reasons why to only study *David Copperfield* as a Bildungsroman is a limitation. Kingcaid has a three-fold structure to the novel which I like, and he sees three types of pattern. One is the linear, optimistic, freewill pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, the second is the cyclical return to the mother, to the dead mother, the third is the catastrophic, you know, the discontinuity, that's to say, the tempest scene, or the elopement with Emily. I like to think the third mode has a comic form, which is the pantomime transformation we spoke about earlier, where you pass from one state to another without continuity, and without growth, because the *Bildungsroman* is essentially an organicist form, I think, corresponding the Foucauldian model of the nineteenth century, which stresses organicism as its episteme or as its essential view of life. And it seems to me that's what's there. And it's certainly there in the line that goes from Goethe to Carlyle to Dickens. But, in addition, there are these other modes because the Dickensian novel, to me, is plural, it's not single and doesn't conform to one pattern, it has many patterns.

We can finish then on the happier note of humour in Dickens and in David Copperfield in particular...

Yes. Absolutely glorious, of course, and this is where you go back to the question: who is the hero of my own life? You might have to say Micawber, mightn't you, in that way, because he's the greatest comic creation in this