

Skeletons in *David Copperfield*

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David Copperfield is a difficult novel to analyse, probably because the narrator seems so resolute to defy any analysis from those on the outside of his narration. But at the same time, the book almost invites us to see that the narrator is a thorough hypocrite, and is totally unreliable: failing to see this means that you have learnt nothing from all the lessons in gullibility, instances of how people deceive you with a perfectly straight face, which the book offers in profusion.

One would even be inclined to imagine that, unless the narrator/David is under some delusion, being madder than Mr Dick or the successor of the Rookery (p. 328), it might have been he who actually arranged everything backstage, making sure that all his wishes were fulfilled. Especially suspicious is the mysterious death of Mr Spewlow directly after their confrontation, for which David apparently does not have an efficient alibi (pp. 562-3). David would also have had a good chance to search and destroy the will (p. 565) which Mr Spewlow may well have altered directly, seeing that David would clearly not be prevailed on. When we recall David's adolescent fantasy of a lady's father saying, 'Here are twenty thousand pounds. Be happy!' (p. 279), his claim that he is not mercenary in his campaign on Dora (p. 559) sounds hollow: as hollow as Mr Spewlow sounds himself when he claims that he is 'actuated by no mercenary considerations' (p. 360) in demanding the premium of a thousand pounds, which David partially recovers through Dora. Though it would be difficult to accuse him of being responsible for the suspiciously 'disordered state' (p. 566) of Mr Spewlow's financial affairs, the association comes naturally regarding the obvious parallel between him and Uriah Heep. The way Dora suddenly collapses directly after David seriously starts to regret having ever married her (pp. 703-4) is also very disturbing, and the way Mr and Miss Murdstone flit around his courtship obviously suggests the repetitive quality in his marriage to Dora.

Even if all this is but futile literary detection, at least it would be worth noting how defiantly David behaves under these circumstances, as much as his enemies, Heep and Mr Murdstone. Anybody in David's place would naturally develop some sense of guilt, having had such direct fulfilments of one's wishes. Instead the narrator sounds so unapologetic and remorseless about them.

G. K. Chesterton argues this point as follows, in terms of the triumph of romanticism over realism in this novel.

The sting and strength of this piece of fiction [. . .] lie in the circumstance that it was so largely founded on fact. "*David Copperfield*" is the great answer of a great romancer to the realists. David says in effect: "What! You say that the Dickens tales are too purple really to have happened! Why, this is what happened to me, and it seemed the

most purple of all.” [. . .] This *life of grey studies and half tones*, the absence of which you regret in Dickens, is only *life as it is looked at*. This *life of heroes and villains is life as it is lived*. [my italics]¹

But to my mind, the persistence with which this story tries to make the reader believe in what is too good to be true only serves to make us uneasy and raise doubts about them. Realism can be seen as a literary strategy to produce the effect of the real by depicting disappointments of wishful thinking, or the pleasure principle, and the triumph of the reality principle. It is natural that George Eliot, the representative promotor of realism, saw the enlargement of human sympathy as central to the novel, for realism aims to realise the communication between the writer and the reader through inviting the readers' emotional investment in the characters that are made to face sorrowful disappointments. The happy-go-lucky David Copperfield seems to defy sympathy, and therefore, communication. Thus the appendix to the title, 'Which He never Meant To Be Published On Any Account', may sound but is not absurd, in that it indicates the narrator's fundamental attitude towards his authorship.

Chesterton, while praising this romantic defiance as cited above, is elsewhere uneasy about the convenient riddances towards the end;

I do not like the notion of David Copperfield sitting down comfortably to his tea-table with Agnes, having got *rid of all the inconvenient or distressing* characters of the story by sending them to the other side of the world. [. . .] Micawber is a nuisance. Dickens the despot condemns him to exile. Dora is a nuisance. Dickens the despot condemns her to death. But it is the whole business of Dickens in the world to express the fact that such people are the spice and interest of life. It is the whole point of Dickens that there is nobody more worth living with than *a strong, splendid, entertaining, immortal nuisance*. [. . .] And here at the end of *David Copperfield* he seems in some dim way to deny it. [my italics]²

There seems to be a contradiction between these two statements, for the romantic 'life of heroes and villains' would naturally end in the heroes getting 'rid of all the inconvenient or distressing' villains. Surely the same romantic defiance is at work in purging (cf. the word is used on Heep in p. 392 and p. 787) the friends who produce nuisances, as well as the enemies. David's enemies, as we have seen with Heep and Mr Murdstone, to which we will have to add Steerforth, are obviously his doubles, and these riddances show how the distinction between friends and enemies in this novel breaks down.

Dickens the despot here is Mr Punch himself, and so is the narrator/David. In this respect, that Traddles stays his sworn friend to the end is significant. His habit of drawing skeletons (p. 102, p. 852) is clearly an expression of the wish that all his enemies shall die. The message ciphered into the 'sheet of letter-paper full of skeletons' (p. 135) he gives to David on his departure from school can be interpreted as, 'cheer up: one day we'll see all our enemies dead!' David surely enjoys grappling with his friends and enemies, those 'immortal nuisance's, but is also determined to annihilate them, as much as Mr Punch enjoys both. The showman of *David*

Copperfield is forever living a lively life 'as it is lived', never trying to look at it from the outside, of which process is maturation itself. Contrary to the general supposition that this is a classical *Bildungsroman*, it is a critique of the ideal of maturity, that 'the life of grey studies and half tones', the reflections in the broken mirror held by the showman of Vanity Fair, to bring up another representative realist, is useless when 'a person must either live or die' (p. 426), and he is absolutely determined to live. The characters may indeed be colourful, but nevertheless this is a book full of skeletons.

Notes

- ¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (Methuen & Co, 1906), pp. 197-8.
- ² Ed. Harold Bloom, *David Copperfield* (Chelsea House Publishers, 1992), pp. 9-10.