Chapter-III

A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD

David Copperfield is familiarly discussed as a novel about growing up. A celebrated and commemorated Victorian bildungsroman, it has captivated and allured a long shelf of critical commentary analyzing its concern with maturation, its very Dickensian escalation of deaths and questionable loves, and its interlaced and whirled themes of memory, discipline, and the craft of writing. The novel’s imagery and structure, the parallels (both internally within its narrative and to the contemporary literature), its characterizations, and its humor have been richly described. While exploring the growth and maturation of the eponymous figure who so carefully reconstructs his past, only incidentally or tangentially, however, have scholars of Copperfield spoken of David's embedded elegy to lost innocence, his transcription of his despondency for it. Bert Hornback encapsulates this critical tradition: "David's 'progress' is, in one sense, quite a simple one. As a child David is required to relinquish his innocence, and the world which he meets beyond this innocence contains all the evil which the novel describes." The actual experience of crumbling this innocence, certainly significant, is simply overlooked or summarily regarded. It is interesting, appropriate, and rewarding to examine David Copperfield as a novel that mourns and elegizes the loss of innocence and its enthusiasms.

The novel focuses on the development of David, which resembles and parallels his progress as a writer, and it highlights the centrality of memory in the evolution of its hero and the telling of his narrative. But peel back that surface and coexisting with or underpinning the forward-looking story of success is the backward-glancing narration
of a detailed lamentation. For all of the demises that punctuate *David Copperfield*, the determining, overarching loss that David experiences and mourns is the world of innocence, a loss he confronts repeatedly and that is periodically, refracted in other figures.

*David Copperfield* is the novel in which Dickens was perhaps most attentive to the surrounding literature of the nineteenth century, poetry as well as fiction. This makes perfect thematic and psychological sense, considering that it is the first person narrative of someone who develops (much like his author) into a notably successful novelist. The specific allusions and echoes accumulate to reveal a pervasive concern with the process of mourning and of how one deals with loss. It may be only one of the tidy coincidences of literary history that Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, and Dickens’s “autobiographical” fiction were all published in 1850, but that confluence and meeting remains striking.

Wordsworth’s “*Tintern Abbey*” (1798) strops and hones to poignant lyric a diminished reality; the “dizzy rapture,” William’s bounding “over the mountains” wherever “nature led” are gone; “That time is past.” In his “Growth of a Poet’s Mind,” he elaborated this theme into transcendent Romantic epic. Dickens implicitly acknowledges his predecessor. David experiences and has to deal with the sense of lost innocence that Wordsworth so resonantly described. Just as Dorothy remained a fixed image of what was, a point to which the speaker can return the end of “*Tintern Abbey,*” so does David find Agnes Wickfield valiantly waiting, pillar-like. Even the inceptive repetition of the five long years that have passed since William has returned to the Wye anticipates David’s awareness of having been away from England for three years. More tellingly, the place that memory and “spots of time” occupy in *The Prelude* is
analogous to the emphasis on memory in the novel, in both instances serving as an artistic driving force.

The most obvious analyst Freud, wrote “Mourning and Melancholia” in 1917 and “The Ego and the Id” (1923). In these essays he described himself as merely a codifier of what poets had long before understood and rendered, but his codifying analyses can still be useful in unraveling a work of art. The web of fairy-tale like images and references in David Copperfield is yet another indicator of how the subtext is one of surviving the loss of innocence in a world that confusingly resembles a dark, uncertain, and dangerous woods. Common alike in fairy tales, quest stories, and Bildungsromane are journeys, and a significant pattern or motif in David Copperfield is that of a journey. The principal or overarching journey is David’s, from his birth to his marriage to Agnes. Within David’s personal journey is an almost classic depiction of his losing his sense of innocence, the necessary initial stage of his evolving maturation. With unobtrusive propriety, the periodic fairy tale-like references, parallels, and images reinforce this process. The Murdstones resemble the evil step-parents who disrupt childhood paradises. David’s consignment to Murdstone Grinby’s warehouse—besides consciously recalling Dickens’s blacking factory stint. David’s own Pronouncement occasionally invoke the world of fairy tales. e.g. "About to embark for Yarmouth, he wondered, if she (Peggotty) “were employed to lose me like the boy in the fairy tale, I should be able to track my way home again by the buttons she would shed” (39) And in the aptly named chapter, “Absence”, David bemoans the loss of the whole airy castle of his life.

If the random fairy-tale quality spaced across the novel provides a vaguely fabular aura to David’s journey, his path is much more dramatically punctuated by a
series of deaths—deaths that are entangled with love. It is captivating to take at face value the sufferings and mortifications he experiences as fundamentally deriving from the loss of those he has loved. It is more coherent and useful to see his story as one of lost innocence, in which the specific losses (these deaths—of his mother, infant brother, Dora, Steerforth, Ham) are reiterations of this loss. He of course began life in the silhouette and psychological luxury of his father’s having already died. David arrival and childhood were almost defined by death; it is preeminently a paradise shattered by losses. Loved ones, like idylls, tend to die or to disappear into the distance. His infatuation with Emily, so engrossing, was doomed by its unreality to fade:

Ah, how I loved her! What happiness (I thought) if we were married, and were going away anywhere to live among the trees and in the fields, never growing older, never growing wiser, children ever.... Some such picture, with no real world in it, bright with the light of our innocence, and vague as the stars afar off, was in my mind all the way. (158)

As in the influential creation story in our literature, David’s expulsion from this carefree bliss is associated with impermanence. Various monsters intrude upon it (one notoriously described as serpentine), and their intrusions threaten catastrophe. Murdstone’s hardness (he advertises it as firmness) distances David from his mother and the love she represents. It also leads to the deaths of Clara and of David’s brother. Reflecting back, David comments—“The mother who lay in the grave, was the mother of my infancy; the little creature in her arms, was myself, as I had once been, hushed for ever on her bosom” (144)
Clara’s character and her love for David are particularly associated with innocence and a childlike naivety. Her devotion and her death also importantly foreshadow the subsequent death of Dora. David’s marriage to Dora was facilitated by the sudden death of her father, Mr. Spenlow—a comic alteration of the ogres who would obstruct young love. But the elimination of this (adult) impediment only allows David to reconstitute in his adored wife the figure of his mother. Dora resembles Clara in her frailty and incapacity before the demanding severity or rigors of the practical world. eventually she prevails in making David—admonished by Aunt Betsey—accept her as the plaything, the child-wife, she declares herself to be. Clara and Dora, like Emily, were unprotected, defenseless orphans. Steerforth, another of David’s youthful loves, also dies—“drown dead” along with Ham, Emily’s abandoned love. But long before the tempest,” David accepted Steerforth’s death to him, almost philosophically musing on his continued strong, if ambivalent attachment to the romantic, suave, commanding aspect of his school idol. “The Beginning of a Long Journey” opens:

What is natural in me, is natural in many other men, I infer, and so I am not afraid to write that I never had loved Steerforth better than when the ties that bound me to him were broken. In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him. Deeply as I felt my own unconscious part in his pollution of an honest home, I believed that if I had been brought face to face with him, I could not have uttered one reproach. I should have loved him so well still—though he fascinated me no longer...I felt, as he had felt, that all
was at an end between us....but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead. (461)

We can understand why the alluring friend, whom Agnes warned was his “evil, angel,” had to be cleared out from David’s forest—at least physically. Besides these actual deaths, David experienced metaphorical deaths, the disappearances of such early loves as Emily and the transitory attractions of Miss Shepherd and Miss Larkins. Even his early love for Agnes necessarily goes underground for years, until he has recovered and matured sufficiently to perceive it. But all of these losses, physical and psychological, are recurrences of the fundamental, scarring loss of innocence David experiences and observes in the world. They re-enact the loss he mourns and surmounts.

Modern European literature about the process of mourning, like the literature portraying the process itself, is substantial. The primary text or starting point remains Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” but extensions and elaborations continue, with the appearance as recently as 2004 of Tammy Clewell’s, “Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss.” The process, as Freud described it and others seek to refine and clarify it, illuminates the extent to which the psychological trajectory that David labors to make transparent falls into a recognizable pattern.

Freud was careful not to limit the loss that occasioned the subject’s mourning to a beloved person. “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (243). This accommodates the sense of a lost paradise elegized by Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” and still more decidedly in the
“Intimations Ode” (“Whither is fled the visionary gleam?”). Freud’s formulation helps to reframe David’s grief. It is not simply the prelude to his maturation in the face of Dora’s death; but also—importantly—his reaction to the disruption of his vision of innocence, manifested in the series of deaths of those he loves. Freud summarized the psychological work of mourning:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachment to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition—it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them...The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.. (244)

If David’s lost “love-object” is a carefree, exuberant response to the world, then the repeated buffetings that have forced him to abandon this attachment are the deaths of his mother (preceded by that of his father), of Steerforth, and of Dora. The process of yielding accomplished, he (his ego) is then “free and uninhibited” and can turn to Agnes.

David, in fact, becomes increasingly introspective and articulate’ about his sorrow towards the end of his history. After Dora’s death, he lets us glimpse his despondency -“I came to think that the Future was walled up before me, that the energy and action of my life were at an end, that I never could find any refuge but in the grave. I came to think so, I say, but not in the first shock of my grief. It slowly grew to that.” (774).
The first pages of “Absence” go on to present an extraordinary self-analysis of his misery, a compilation of images drawn from well-known Romantic novels and poems on loss and death. David has become despairingly conscious of all that he has lost:

The knowledge came upon me, not quickly, but little by little, and grain by grain. The desolate feeling with which I went abroad, deepened and widened hourly. At first it was a heavy sense of loss and sorrow, wherein I could distinguish little else. By imperceptible degrees, it became a hopeless consciousness of all that I had lost—love, friendship, interest; of all that had been shattered—my first trust, my first affection, the whole airy castle of my life; of all that remained—a ruined blank and waste, lying wide around me, unbroken, to the dark horizon. . . .

If my grief were selfish, I did not know it to be so. I mourned for my child-wife, taken from her blooming world, so young. I mourned for him who might have won the love and admiration of thousands, as he had won mine long ago. I mourned for the broken heart that had found rest in the stormy sea; and for the wandering remnants of the simple home, where I had heard the night-wind blowing, when I was child. . . .

From the accumulated sadness into which I fell I had at length no hope of ever issuing again. I roamed from place to place, carrying my burden with me everywhere. I felt its whole weight now; and I drooped beneath it, and I said in my heart that it could never be lightened. . . .

When the despondency was at its worst, I believed I should die... Listlessness to everything, but brooding sorrow was the night that fell on my undisciplined heart. . . .
This remarkable catalog of emotional distress makes eloquently clear that no single occurrence is bedeviling him. What follows is the slow, initially dark-clouded pilgrimage to rejuvenation. The process of mourning and recovery that Dickens renders is not only artful, it simulates the realism of a personal experience.

Freud emphasized the primacy of memory in the letting go that mourning requires, and Tammy Clewell elaborates, explaining that:

mourning entails a kind of hyper-remembering, a process of obsessive recollection... that comes to an objective determination that the lost object no longer exists. With a very specific task to perform, the Freudian grief work seeks, then, to convert loving remembrances into a futureless memory.

Mourning comes to a decisive and “spontaneous end” according to Freud, when the survivor has detached his or her emotional tie to the lost object and reattached the free libido to a new object. (44)

Over and over again, the mature, authorial David asserts that his “Personal History” derives from his fruitful memory. This is insisted upon at the beginning of the second chapter, “I Observe.”- " He claims to know himself well: he was a child of close observation, and, as a man, he has a strong memory of his childhood." (25). Besides being suffused with memory, David Copperfield also very much follows the pattern Clewell abstracts from Freud. The hoarded, studied, and artistically shaped memories coalesce into a rapid emotional reorientation for David; “decisive” and “spontaneous” are accurate descriptors. Agnes’s letter arrives almost like an epiphany, concluding David’s agonizing; reading it, he claims, “night was passing from my mind” (820). He
quickly resumes his career as a waiter, now alert to the romantic possibilities in Agnes. Re-establishing himself artistically is preparatory to returning to England and Agnes.

As Peter Homas argues, "memory is pivotally linked with mourning and recovery: “In the case of mourning, the giving up of the lost object proceeds gradually through repeated remembrances of it, each contradicted by reality. This can occur because the mourner is psychologically separate from the lost object” (17). As David accomplishes this separation, his view of a fairy world becomes increasingly remote.

David’s earliest recollected image includes the picture of his mother, “with her pretty hair and youthful shape” (24). David Kellogg effectively indicates how David merges the cherished image of his mother with that of his first wife, invoking the mourner’s characteristic initial response of denial in the process:

In marrying Dora, David refuses to recognize the death of his mother, creating a substitute for her in his wife. Dora’s death annihilate David not because of his love for Dora but because he has recreated his mother in Dora. The loss of a parent is likely to destabilize anyone’s identity; but for David, whose sense of self is repeatedly threatened from a number of quarters, the death of Dora comes as the last in a series of traumas. (61)

Memory, mourning and his quest for identity all converge. As Jerome Buckley observed, “To David, memory reaching back is in fact the strongest sanction of identity, for the present consciousness is constantly coloured by the remembered or never quite forgotten past.” (20) Coincident with the question of identity, remembering who you are— so as to achieve the transition from innocence and its loss to experience and its stability—is Dickens’s delight in names. progresses. Dickens’s delight in
playing with names is here, as is generally true of his fictions, palpable. In David Copperfield, he cannily charts the stages of David’s growth, the way people respond to him, and his ultimate resignation of his grief, through his various names. He is always “David,” but in his more guileless youth that name often yields to others. His mother and Peggotty naturally refer to him as Davy or little Davy. It’s more pointed for the dominating, six-year-older Steerforth to call him Daisy at Creakle’s school and then reassert it (permission granted by David) seven or eight years later when David is seventeen and they meet up again. This clearly identifies the juvenile side of the narrator (who admits to never entirely relinquishing his romantic image of Steerforth). It is also congruent with Dora’s nickname for him, Doady. David may have been stripped, reclothed, and renamed Trotwood by Aunt Betsey when he arrived at Dover, soon to be cast free by Murdstone, and he may have chronologically reached his majority when he married Dora, but Dickens astutely shows that dispensing with a blissful innocence is not a simple or clear-cut, one-step event. David’s desire for the earlier world and its allure, evoked with seeming charm by “Daisy” and “Doady,” persists; he must struggle to make his rechristening prevail, just as he must go through the pains of grief and mourning before he can relinquish his mother, Dora, and even little Emily. He may have felt, at nine, “The mother who lay in the grave” to have been the mother of his infancy, but his “infancy” was not so expeditiously interred. Under the new domestic arrangement, he is greeted by an angry dog and finds his room relocated far from his mother. When he visits for the school holiday, David feels it strange-”Ah, what a strange feeling it was to be going home when it was not home, and to find that every object I looked at, reminded me of the happy old home, which was like a dream I could never dream again!” (119)
Even more pronounced than Dickens’s use of names and the alienated home as markers in David’s enlargement is the theme of writing. Writing, for the young David, has its roots in reading. To escape from the oppressive Murdstone regime, he retreats to the trove of fables, from the Tales of the Arabian Nights to Peregrine Pickle, bequeathed by his father. These not only offer a refuge from the puritanical, Gradgrindish regimen, they also turn him into a story teller, initially providing private entertainments for Steerforth and intimately fashioning him into a novelist of renown. Not surprisingly, a Juliet McMaster discovers, “His vision of a lost paradise is intimately bound up with the art of reading” (297). Beginning as a hopeless escapee into a world of fables, he comes to forge his own tale of loss and resolution.

David’s mourning can be seen as mirrored in the struggle he has with writing. He must literally, escape from under the damning sign pinned to his back—“Take care of him. He bites” (90). His compatibility with Dora Spenlow, espied by Jane Murdstone, temporarily derails his romantic hopes. He sets out to earn his way by mastering the inscrutable code of shorthand. Incrementally, with continued diligence and application (both of which he is careful to make the reader aware), David not only vanquishes “the noble art and mystery of stenography” (551), he establishes a career in creative writing—first desultorily with short pieces, then with acclaimed novels. But David’s current, most advanced prose is the memoir before us (paradoxically announced as not for publication). He has labored to achieve a style that is efficient, persuasive, precise, sophisticated, and, most important, transparent. This well-wrought prose presents itself as the authentic voice of the author, denuded of anything fabulous or sensational, equally distant from the Arabian tales, the undisguised sadism of Creakle’s sign, and the euphuistic epistles of Micawber. It correlates wonderfully with
the speaker who has lost his illusions of a paradisial bliss, weathered his mourning, and
is trenchantly recording the successful process—to a placid domesticity. Significantly,
it coincides with the arrival, of Agnes’s similarly guileless letter effectively summoning
him back toward England and terminating his mourning. The imaginative style, like
Dora, like his ebullient, youthful innocence, like Blunderstone and Yarmouth, has
slipped from his life—along with his grieving.

David’s loss of innocence has, expectedly, a notable sexual dimension. At about
eight, when he first encountered little Emily, he was young enough to indulge in all of
the enthusiasms of prepubescent crushes and fantasies. Thinking back, David is sure—"I
loved that baby quite as truly, quite as tenderly, with greater purity and more
disinterestedness, than can enter into the best love of a later time of life” (49). Though
seemingly safe, warnings loom. There are hints at the kind of cautionary figure she
would later become, abandoning Ham for an erotic sojourn with Steerforth. Emily lets
slip that she is afraid of the sea and that she wants to be a lady. The sea, associated with
open danger and the allure to which she later succumbs (partly for wanting to be made
a lady), suggests the sexual or erotic figures David would warily encounter.

On first meeting Emily, David ironically describes how he and his mother had,
always lived by ourselves in the happiest state imaginable, and lived so then, and
always meant to live so. Unsuspected by him, the very reason for his holiday excursion,
as we (and he) soon discover, is so that his mother can remarry, thus cashiering his
happy quiddity. Leaving Emily, he claims, left a void, if he ever had one, in his heart.
The void proved to be premonitory.
Much like Emily, Steerforth embodies the memoirist’s ambivalence about eroticism. David readily admits, when Steerforth is most calumnious, to his attraction. He finds him as beguiling as he had while watching him innocently asleep at Creakle’s. In his seduction of Emily and general drifting, we see the dangerous side of his sensuality. One of the casualties in Steerforth’s past is Rosa Dartle, whose temperamental scar (her inner, wasting fire of passion) compounds her fascinating for David—a fascination he recognizes to be dangerous—even before he overhears her berating Emily. Among the most comically exuberant of the novel’s passages is when David recounts his early infatuation with Dora, how engrossingly he loved her. "What a "beautiful name," he exults; “I was a captive and a slave. I loved Dora Spenlow to distraction!” (397)

Besides providing a good story with the advantages of self-chiding hindsight, all of these encounters combine to offer a picture of love, passion, sexuality, and marriage that, reasonably enough, gravitates from youthful, innocent abandon, including the delightful intoxication of courtship, to a more staid, settled reality, a transformation that is as grievous as it may be inexorable. As Uriah's infiltration of the social world and his horrifying—to David—pretensions to Agnes illustrate, a serpent in the garden of love symbolizes the threatening side of eroticism. The sea is beguiling; it also forebodes death by drowning. Emily is adorable, as, in her way, is Dora; both are flawed and inadequate. Something, David increasingly senses, is missing in his storybook marriage. Part of what John Lucas seizes upon as the core of David’s story, “the Growth of a Disciplined Heart” asserts the need to constrain or discipline erotic impulses. One manifestation of this constraint is, as Rachel Ablow discerns, David’s inclination to bifurcate people he loves, disregarding the flawed portion and
emotionally attaching himself to the idealized remnant. Only with the angelic Agnes
can he transcend the mundane human drives and realities, probably no critic goes so far
as Robert Garnett in arguing that because David experiences sexual love as
“dangerously destabilizing,” he ultimately turns to Agnes, whose titillating nature he
frustrates by a lack of real sexual response to her. A capacity for intense feeling, a
certain heightened response to life, which Robin Gilmour finds no longer possible for
David, Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden for transgressions commonly imagined to
be sexual—that fruitful knowledge about which we persist in being so ambivalent.
David witnesses, experiences, and seems to feel that eroticism is a threatening and
unprofitable venture. His renaming by Betsey and his marriage at twenty-one are only
precursors to his return to England and Agnes. That his second marriage is so briefly
glossed (what more is there to say!) highlights the attitude of the book’s concluding
paragraph: “O Agnes, O my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life
indeed; so may I, when realities are melting from me like the shadows which I now
dismiss, still find thee near me, pointing upward!” (882)

David has metamorphosed the exciting, lucid sensuality associated with youth
into a quasi-religious gazing upward with Agnes. In a world where love, youth, and
homes prove as ephemeral as innocence, the unearthly: exceptional Agnes alone can
keep everything as it was when they were children. The concern with innocence, the
apprehension of its evanescence, and the consequent grief or burden are not limited to
the protagonist; they reverberate around him. The most immediate example is that of
Emily; more pronouncedly than David’s, her catastrophe is sexual and her journey is
tortuous accompanied by treachery and despair. We again become aware that the
successfully disciplined heart, successfully mended, exacts the price of ecstasy. David
simply cannot respond to Agnes the way he did to Emily or to Dora, but he and his
family will presumably prosper. To round out the canvas, David witnesses instances of
unsuccessful mourning—approximating the pathological alternative that Freud
identified as melancholia. Mrs. Steerforth and Rosa Dartle in their different manners
loved Steerforth and were immoderately invested in his prospects. When his unguided
waywardness led to his obliteration and annihilation, both were devastated. Likewise,
Ham may declare his enduring love for Emily and hold himself to blame, but there is
no life for him beyond the loss of her. He, like Steerforth (and along with him), is
overwhelmed by the ferment and furore of the seductive passions the sea represents.
and spume of those who do not manage to clip. The comprehensively remembered,
lucidly and artfully retold journey of David, then, revolves around his painful—though
hardly unique—loss of innocence and the concomitant grief and lament. The story is
replete with allusions to fairy tales, to nineteenth-century literature, and to the
profession of writing (rooted in observing, remembering, and reading)—all of which
contribute to this core emotional process. The Victorians garnered a status for valuing
the hearth, marriage and the family; but the novels, those tell-all middle class domestic
mirrors, whether they be by Eliot, Meredith, Hardy, or even Thackeray or Dickens,
expose an uneasy, compromised reality. David, as a writer is peculiarly implicated in
and aware of the compromise. As the artist-hero, he—unlike Dora, Mr. Dick, and
others—must outgrow his innocence, if he is to succeed and be effective. This involves
an unavoidable loss, one that he records and that he and Dickens acknowledge.
Works Cited


