Daemonic, mesmeric, parasitic: Dickens and Evelyn Waugh.

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Abstract

It has long been recognised that there is a close relationship between the works of Charles Dickens and Evelyn Waugh, the most important English comic novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. This essay argues that this relationship should be seen not as a matter of literary borrowings by Waugh, nor in terms of loose analogies between their works, nor as an essentially Oedipal conflict. Their writings, I argue, act as both parasite and host to each other. Waugh’s writing is parasitic on Dickens’s, burrowing into it for names, allusions and narrative tropes. Through their incorporation into Waugh’s host texts, these in turn act as parasites that embed their own disturbing trajectories and associations within their new fictional homes. Waugh’s relationship to Dickens, a figure who is called in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* “the most daemonic of the masters”, is seen most powerfully in the forces of compulsive repetition, haunting and mesmerism that irrigate both that novel and *A Handful of Dust*. Such forces comprise, derange and invade many of Waugh’s texts and their shaping aesthetic and affective stances, and are particularly seen in moments of death, madness and wild laughter.

Evelyn Waugh was the leading English comic novelist of the twentieth century, as Charles Dickens was of the nineteenth, and the latter was a dominant cultural and fictional presence in the years of Waugh’s childhood and youth. The parallels between their biographies are extensive and at times uncannily close: both wrote fourteen novels, one of which (*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Work Suspended*) remained incomplete. Dickens published his first novel at 24, as did Waugh; Dickens died at 58; Waugh completed his final novel at 57. Both wrote autobiographies which were abandoned at the point at which they would have had to describe their first major disappointment in love: Maria Beadnell, Evelyn Gardner. Each wrote just two novels in the first person - *Brideshead Revisited* and *Work Suspended;* *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* – which were written in mid-career. Both lived in London as young men and later moved to large period houses in the country. Both had many children (Dickens 10; Waugh 7); all of whom survived childhood with one exception, a daughter, who died shortly after birth when their fathers were respectively 37 and 38 years old. Dickens’s father died when his son was 39, as did Waugh’s; Waugh’s mother died when he was 51, as did Dickens’s. Both authors were published by Chapman and Hall; both wrote several travel books and a brilliant satiric account of the United States (*Martin Chuzzlewi*t’s deathly Eden; *The Loved One*’s Whispering Glades); both had orotund, theatrical fathers with whom they skirmished in their fiction; both felt ambivalent - to say the least - about their parents, often hostile to their fathers, guilty about their mothers in their long widowhoods. And both loved to read the works of Dickens aloud.

Dickens and Waugh, then, are writers bound together in intimate and often troubled ways. Evelyn Waugh’s father, Arthur, was the managing director of Chapman and Hall, which had been Dickens’s major publisher throughout his lifetime and the owner of the Dickens estate’s most lucrative copyrights until their expiry in 1920. This fact, together with Arthur’s well-attested love of Dickens’s work, have often been seen as the cause and bedrock of an essentially hostile attitude by Waugh towards Dickens and his works, encapsulated by the derisive nickname he gave his father, “Chapman and Hall” (Waugh, *Letters*, 40). Much of the Waugh family’s prosperity stemmed, directly or indirectly, from Dickens, and an important thread in Arthur Waugh’s literary culture and sense of self derived from his deeply sentimentalised understanding of Dickens. As editor of the “Biographical Edition” of Dickens in nineteen volumes (1902-3) and co-editor of the celebrated “Nonesuch Edition” (1938-9), we could call Arthur Waugh a kind of parasite on Dickens.

The question of parasitism is one that recurs in Evelyn Waugh’s writings, which are themselves laced with figures of parasitism and parasitic re-workings of Dickens names, events and characters. These references are almost invariably interpreted by critics in biographical terms, and as essentially hostile or disparaging in intent. Martin Stannard in *Evelyn Waugh: the Later Years*, for example, describes Dickens as:

Waugh’s humanist *bête noire*. He associated Boz with sentimental ‘uplift’, flabby writing, the mythology of progress and (possibly worst of all) the popularization of the ‘traditional’ British Christmas. He worshiped Ruskin and hated Dickens (338-9).

But the ways in which Waugh borrows from, transfigures and reworks narrative motifs and ideas from Dickens are less condemnatory and more creative and disturbed than this.

So, although it has long been recognised that Dickens’s work matters a great deal to Waugh’s fiction, many accounts of their relationship underplay its fictional and affective complexity. It has often been seen in essentially biographical terms, but in this article I want to argue that the sheer strangeness and intensity of Dickens’s work in Waugh’s disorders any simple account of literary influence. It should be seen not as a question of allusions, citations and quotations by Waugh, nor of analogies between aspects of the two oeuvres, nor of essentially biographical filiations and overthrowings. The fictions of the two authors, I argue, act as both parasite and host to each other and their fictional interweavings are peculiarly unsettling ones. There are a number of privileged figures and tropes - in particular forms of compulsory repetition, madness and parasitism – through which Dickens’s fictions linger within and erupt into Waugh’s work. Waugh’s writing is parasitic on Dickens’s, burrowing into it to take names, analogies and narrative tropes; through their incorporation within Waugh’s host texts, these act like parasites that embed their own disturbing trajectories and associations within their new fictional homes. The question of the relation of host and parasite, and the disturbing forces that are at play within that relationship, become particularly explicit, thematic and terrifying in the short story ‘The Man who Loved Dickens’, later incorporated into *A Handful of Dust*, and the ‘fictional’/ ‘autobiographical’ account of a descent into madness, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*. Understanding Waugh’s relationship to a figure who is called in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* “the most daemonic of the masters” (95-6; ch. 6) can be seen most powerfully in moments of compulsive repetition, daemonic power and madness in these two texts, but are persistent features throughout his work, from accounts of his adolescence to his final television interview.

1.

Dickens’s posthumous reputation was shaped decisively by John Forster’s publication of the “autobiographical fragment” in which Dickens revealed that he had as a boy been sent to work as a child labourer of twelve at Warren’s Blacking Warehouse when his father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea prison (16-27; bk.1. ch. 2). In his 1937 article “General Conversations: Myself….”, Waugh comically reverses Dickens’s revelation:

Dickens held it against his parents that they tried to force him into a blacking factory instead of letting him write. The last firm at which I solicited a job was engaged, among other things in the manufacture of blacking. I pleaded desperately. If I wasn’t employed there, I should be driven to Literature. But the manager was relentless. It was no use thinking of blacking. That was not for the likes of me. I had better make up my mind and settle down to the humble rut which fate had ordained for me. I must write a book (*Essays*, 191-2).

With characteristic swagger, the most distressing of Dickensian childhood memories is inverted. This jaunty play with Dickens’s story of childhood abandonment was to continue: worrying about an unpaid tax bill in the 1950s, Waugh wrote to Nancy Mitford “I shall have to go to prison. Oh for the Marshalsea” (*Mitford Waugh Letters,* 172). In the course of his celebrated *Face to Face* television interview he described his own childhood as “blissfully happy” (Alexander Waugh, 76) as a way of both defeating Freudian speculation and turning Dickens on his head. An unwillingness to countenance the kind of pity (and self-pity) that coloured many representations of childhood in Dickens’s fiction was equally strongly resisted. Although John Carey has rightly said that “once Dickens starts laughing nothing is safe, from Christianity to dead babies” (7), the sudden, accidental death of John Andrew in *A Handful of Dust* and the game of animal snap that follows could not be more different from Dickens’s child deaths, such as that of Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son*, a novel which Waugh at one point described as “The worst book in the world” (*Letters*, 226). But Waugh’s relation to Dickens’s work was not simply one of parody and rejection, and his preoccupation with how his work resembled as well as differed from Dickens’s was to remain a powerful undercurrent of his thought, fiction and identity.

Waugh’s most extended and direct attempt to summarise his feelings about Dickens came in a review of Edgar Johnson’s mammoth biography of 1952. At first, the review seems cruelly dismissive of Dickens as a person: he was, Waugh writes, a hypocrite and “thumping cad” (*Essays*, 446). His essential concern, though, was to distinguish between the real force and nature of Dickens’s writing and the more sentimental sense of it often found among lovers of his work, those “ardent ‘Dickensians’ who made a hobby of the Master, without any particular appreciation of his genius. These gentle souls have made Dickens a symbol of family affection, benevolence and good-cheer” (445). This is not, manifestly, Waugh’s own view of Dickens but he does not offer an alternative or improved account of Dickens’s achievement. “Everyone”, he writes, “provided he does not dub it ‘definitive’, is entitled to his own interpretation of Dickens’s complex genius” (447). Instead, Waugh offers a striking analogy between Dickens’s work and the films of Charlie Chaplin, or rather the experience of reading Dickens’s works and a particular character in Chaplin’s film *City Lights*:

The happiest comparison perhaps is to Mr. Charles Chaplin, in particular to the film City Lights. There we have scenes of appalling sentimentality and unreality; we have a slight under-current of proletarian animosity; but we have a unique genius in full exuberance. The theme, it will be remembered, is the relationship of a tramp and a rich drunkard. The reader of Dickens often finds himself cast in the latter, unamiable role. In his cups the rich man embraces the tramp as a brother; crapulous, he rejects him. We all have our moods when Dickens sickens us. In a lighter, looser and perhaps higher mood we fall victim to his "magnetism."… It is this constantly changing mood of appreciation that makes everyone's fingers itch for the pen at the mention of his name. (447)

For Waugh, the reader of Dickens is like a rich man who embraces a poor tramp when he is drunk, and rejects him when he is sober. This daring comparison contains a tempered, almost puzzled, mixture of feelings, not that of a Dickensian who thinks of his favourite author in terms of family affection, benevolence and good cheer, but someone who sees him as a “genius”, a “complex genius”, indeed a “unique genius in full exuberance” with an essential mystery and magnetic power before which he is “helpless”. Waugh admired Chaplin greatly – he was for him “a great artist” (*Essays*, 337) - but his relation to Dickens was more complexly equivocal. Dickens may sicken Waugh, but he can also hypnotise him. Readers, he writes, are intoxicated by Dickens when they read his work but such feelings occur, ambiguously, in “lighter, looser and perhaps higher” moods. The drunken toff in *City Lights* is suicidal, we remember, before Chaplin’s tramp rescues him. Waugh himself, of course, was a rich man at this period, drinking heavily, and was shortly afterwards to suffer the bout of madness that he fictionalised in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, an episode that was marked by radically contradictory states of mind and consciousness. Intoxicating itself, Dickens’s work, like Chaplin’s tramp, seems able to communicate with the intoxicated and despairing, who nevertheless remain radically ambivalent about the experience, unable to reconcile their intoxicated and sober selves.

The single most striking remark by Waugh about Dickens occurs in his 1964 “Monitor” TV interview with Elizabeth Jane Howard, when he gives us an example of what he thinks is “bad novel-writing”.

It isn’t the novelist’s business to feed the reader with emotions. If your novel’s any good the reader should get emotions from it, perhaps not ones you intend but they should be there. What I think you don’t want is the splendid rhetorical passages of Dickens about death and Tom’s all cold, you know; beautiful to read aloud and brings everyone to tears, but I think it’s bad novel-writing.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This at first appears to be a firmly dismissive judgement: Waugh’s decisive example of “bad novel writing” seems almost certainly to be Dickens’s portrayal of the death of Jo the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House*.

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day (572; ch. 43).

For Waugh, the essential point of aesthetic dissent is with Dickens’s affective stance, epitomised by his wish to “feed the reader with emotions”. The advocacy of an impersonal or affectless narration has sometimes been taken to license the view that Waugh fundamentally rejects Dickens’s work. Jerome Meckier, for example, has argued that *A Handful of Dust* is simply hostile to Dickens and Waugh is said to “parody Dickens extensively” (172), indeed that “Waugh … considers the Inimitable largely responsible for the breakdown of social restraints” (171). But it seems misleading to see “Du Coté du Chez Todd”, the section of the novel in which Tony Last is trapped in the jungle and forced to read Dickens out loud, simply as “the joke against Dickens” (172) or to believe that Todd makes “a substitute religion out of Dickens” (172), thus making him “the novel’s primary scapegoat” (172). Meckier’s evidence for this latter claim is that Mr Todd, when he has imprisoned Tony Last in the jungle, despite weeping over the fate of the poor in Tom-all-Alone’s, is unmoved by Tony’s suffering and never thinks to release him. For Meckier, this is the essential difference between the two authors, and the grounds of Waugh’s hostility.

But this account neglects not only Waugh’s praise of Dickens’s “splendid” rhetoric that is both moving and “beautiful to read”, but also distorts quite seriously the nature both of Dickens’s work and Waugh’s. For the idea that being moved by representations of distress is no sure guide to moral behaviour is one that Dickens’s oeuvre (and *Bleak House* in particular) is all too aware of. The passage that Waugh is thinking about when he accuses Dickens of “feeding his reader with emotions”, the death of Jo, undoubtedly makes an emotional appeal to the reader but it is placed by Dickens in a very particular context. Shortly before, Jo is given refuge in John Jarndyce’s home, where he is cared for by Esther Summerson, the heroine of the novel. Harold Skimpole, aesthete, parasite and sponger, is also a guest. Esther tells us how Skimpole:

entertained himself by playing snatches of pathetic airs and sometimes singing to them …. with great expression and feeling. … he said he would give us a little ballad which had come into his head "apropos of our young friend," and he sang one about a peasant boy,

 "Thrown on the wide world, doomed to wander and roam,

 Bereft of his parents, bereft of a home."

quite exquisitely. It was a song that always made him cry, he told us. (386; ch. 31).

The very same evening that Skimpole sings the moving song about a homeless child, he also betrays the refuge of his “young friend” Jo to the policeman Bucket. Jo is made homeless through Skimpole’s treachery, and thus begins his final “moving on” to death.[[2]](#endnote-2) So Todd’s indifference to Tony’s suffering is not a point against Dickens but a Dickens point, made in the same novel and concerning the very same character that Waugh criticises and which Tony Last reads to Mr Todd in *A Handful of Dust*. Skimpole cries at the ballad of “The peasant boy”, just as “tears ran down” Todd’s cheeks at the thought of the outcasts in “Tom all Alone’s”. Neither response is endorsed by the narrator.

But Waugh’s seeming condemnation of Dickens in the “Monitor” interview is misleading in a deeper and more revealing way, for he misremembered Dickens’s character’s name in his reference to “the splendid rhetorical passages of Dickens about death and Tom’s all cold”: “Jo” becomes “Tom”. It is a telling change, driven partly by the fact that Jo lives in a slum called “Tom- All-Alone’s” but also by Waugh’s fusion of Dickens’s great scene to one of equal, if not greater, power and fame: the storm scene in *King Lear* and Edgar’s “Poor Tom’s a-cold” (3.4.144). It is hard to read the intention or affect behind Waugh’s doubly misquoting fusion of poor Jo and poor Tom, but in bringing together Dickens and Shakespeare, through two of their greatest scenes of pathos and compassion, Waugh elevates Dickens in and through the identical gesture by which he seems to condemn him.

2.

Why, though, should Waugh at times appear at times to be disparaging of Dickens’s work? The most common answer is to do with his father, Arthur Waugh, editor of Dickens and President of the Dickens Fellowship. Frederick Stopp, Martin Stannard, Alexander Waugh and Richard Jacobs have rightly emphasised the complex entanglement of Waugh’s feelings about his father with those about Dickens’s work and there is a broad critical consensus that when Evelyn thinks of Dickens, he is thinking also or really of Arthur. Alexander Waugh captures the dynamic well, imagining Arthur Waugh reading the title of “The Man Who Liked Dickens”, the story that was later to become “Du Coté du Chez Todd”, the final section of *A Handful of Dust.*

Arthur must have shuddered when he saw, for the first time, the title … ‘What new onslaught - what patricidal biffing am I in for now?’ The title alone was enough for him to know that he was in line for another of Evelyn’s cruel, satirical wallops. As a man who described himself as a ‘Dickensian’ and was known to Ellen Terry as ‘that dear little Mr Pickwick’… as president of the Dickens Fellowship, a renowned expert who lectured on Dickens, who had edited two complete sets of Dickens’s works, who, for thirty years, had been managing director of Dickens’s publisher and who, throughout Evelyn’s childhood, had read aloud the works of Dickens night after night to his sons, Arthur was not only ‘the man who liked Dickens’, he was the maniac who was *obsessed* by Dickens. ‘All the more likeable Dickens characters,’ according to Evelyn, ‘provided him with roles which, from time to time, he undesignedly assumed.’ (226)

Frederick J. Stopp and Stannard have rightly seen an element of self-identification that co-exists with the hostility. For Stopp,

in this fantasy of living incarceration, Mr Waugh has judged and condemned a side of himself. The words read are those of Dickens; the voice condemned to perpetual reading is a voice from the past, a link with his father’s outlook and taste. (216)

and in *Evelyn Waugh: the Later Years 1939-1966*, Stannard notes the resemblances between Waugh’s charges against Dickens in his review of Edgar Johnson’s biography and the “accusations Waugh himself had suffered - vulgarity, snobbery, insularity” (339-40). Stannard asks “Could it be that in Dickens Waugh’s unconscious recognised itself: the self-made self-publicist; theatrical, loveable and with a weakness for the gentry? If this were so, it was too horrible to contemplate and his invective tries to crush the slightest association” (340).

The literary indebtedness is a more complex question than the biographical parallels. Quite often critics make rather loose or opportunistic analogies between the two oeuvres, as does Christopher Sykes when he claims for example that “The opening scene of *Decline and Fall* shows unmistakable Dickensian influence” (88); as does Jerome Meckier when he says that Barnabas Washington’s note in *A Handful of Dust* falls into Tony Last’s lap “like a manuscript from *Master Humphrey’s Clock*” (176) and that Todd “compels Tony to serve his designs as calculatingly as Dombey bred Paul to be his business partner” (176); and as does Richard Wasson when he compares Tony to “Oliver Twist … kept prisoner in the house of a villain who first appears to the hero as a saviour” (335). Of course, Waugh can at times borrow almost directly from Dickens, most notably the publishers Benfleet and Rampole in *Vile Bodies* who owe a heavy debt to *David Copperfield*’s Spenlow and Jorkins, where Spenlow pretends that the mild Jorkins is a hard man of business. In fact, his

place in the business was to keep him in the back-ground, and be constantly exhibited by name as the most obdurate and ruthless of men. If a clerk wanted his salary raised, Mr. Jorkins wouldn't listen to such a proposition. If a client were slow to settle his bill of costs, Mr. Jorkins was resolved to have it paid; and however painful these things might be (and always were) to the feelings of Mr. Spenlow, Mr. Jorkins would have his bond (330-1; ch. 23).

This directly flows into the scene in *Vile Bodies* in which Adam explains that the manuscript of his novel has been destroyed to Benfleet:

There was a longish pause while Sam Benfleet thought.

‘What worries me is how we are going to make that sound convincing to old Rampole ... Now if I had my own way I’d say “Take your own time. Start again. Don’t worry…” But there’s old Rampole. He’s a devil for contracts, you know.’ (31-2; ch.2)

The connection is clinched by the change of Benfleet’s name to 'Bentley’ in *Put Out More Flags*: Richard Bentley was the first publisher of Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*.

But often the relationship is more complex than this. What should we infer, for example, about the paintings of John Plant’s father in *Work Suspended* when they are described as “Winterhalter with the spirit of Dickens” (252; ch. 1) and how do those works relate to his forgeries of Old Masters? Does it matter that his sinister and potentially blackmailing servants are called Jellaby, a name taken (with a single letter replaced) from Mrs Jellyby in Dickens’s *Bleak House,* a character who is as uninterested in the domestic as Waugh’s Jellabys are dominated by it? Waugh’s critical writings can be equally suggestively complex. He praises in one of his most revealing early reviews Henry Green’s novel *Living* because:

There are no unrelated bits such as one finds in most books. A danger in novel writing is to make one’s immediate effect and then discard the means one employed. Modern novelists taught by Mr James Joyce are at last realising the importance of re-echoing and remodifying the same themes. Note, for instance, the repeated metaphor of ‘pigeons’ in Living. (Dickens vaguely saw the importance of this, but he used it purely rhetorically - for instance, in the recurring image of Steerforth lying with his head on his arm as he had done at school.) (*Essays*, 82)

In what may be his most Pooterish moment of literary criticism – “Note, for instance, the repeated metaphor of ‘pigeons”’ - Waugh both acknowledges and deprecates a technical achievement in Dickens’s work. It is not entirely clear what he means by “purely rhetorically”, though; presumably, that Dickens uses such repetition to move the reader and increase the pathos of the scene, rather than to structure or contribute to the meaning of the book in a more “organic” way.

3.

The scenes when Dickens is most vividly present - thematically, topically, blatantly - in Waugh’s work are those in which the integrity and sanity of the leading character are most under threat, in two of his most important achievements: the conclusion of *A Handful of Dust* and the sea-voyage of *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*. In both novels the distinctions between the familiar and familiar, domestic and alien, sane and insane, self and other are deeply unsettled; both deal with, and are to some degree in the grip of, a daemonic, repetitive power from which it seems there is no escape: on Steerforth’s ship, in Todd’s jungle. Brooke Allen has called *A Handful of Dust* “a direct attack on Dickens and on the Victorian ethos in general” (157) but this over-simplifies both the novel and Waugh’s discriminating sense of the plural nature of “the Victorian ethos” and what he took from it. Waugh is fascinated by the rituals of hospitality and there are many hosts and parasites in his work. In *A Handful of Dust*, although John Beaver is never called a parasite by the narrator or the characters, it is a word that seems to come naturally to critics to describe him. For Jeffrey Heath, for example, “John Beaver is well equipped to become one of the many parasites on Tony, the reluctant host” (105). Beaver is a parasite on his mother and then, in the divorce negotiations, will only marry Brenda if Tony pays him to. Parasites are first alluded to, as a great deal else of the later book is, in Reverend Tendril, whose surname means a stem or leaf of a parasitic plant. The tendrils of his sermons stretch and cling through the book and his niece, for example, a tendril of tendril, provokes the horse to bolt that kills Tony and Brenda Last’s son, John Andrew. But the noun “tendril”, rather than the proper name, appears only once in the novel when, just before he is rescued by Todd, Tony has his vision of the City:

he picked his way through the surrounding thorn-scrub; the sound of music rose from the glittering walls; some procession or pageant was passing along them. He lurched into tree and became caught up in roots and hanging tendrils of bush-vine; (203; ch. 5)

The tendril that catches Tony has been hanging for a long time, since Tendril’s hilariously and inappropriate imperial Christmas sermon, which anticipates Tony’s very different fate in a distant land. Not long before his vision, Tony is attacked by cabouri flies who “found a way into the buttonholes of his shirt and the laces of his breeches” (170; ch. 5); by mosquitos which “got him at the ankles when he changed into slacks for the evening” (170; ch. 5); and by bêtes rouges, parasitic mites which “were crawling and burrowing under his skin” (170; ch. 5). The figurative parasites of England are literalised in the jungle: Tony moves from being a host to the parasitic Beaver to a host to the bêtes rouges before becoming himself a parasite on Todd, depending on him for food, drink and shelter, just as Beaver at the beginning of the book is fed by those who find him useful. There seems no escape from parasitism, for Todd is doubly parasitic in this book: both on Tony for his reading, and on Dickens’s texts, through which they will endlessly crawl and burrow together.

The Dickens novels mentioned in “The Man Who Liked Dickens”, the final section of *A Handful of Dust,* include both *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. Our last glimpse of Tony Last is as Todd says “Let us read *Little Dorrit* again” (217; ch. 6). These are not accidental choices. *Bleak House* is a most appropriate choice for Tony’s first reading material, a novel about seemingly interminable, inescapable processes and about being trapped, even though you are innocent, in ways that can only be ended by death. But *Little Dorrit*, the only Dickens title that is repeated in Waugh’s book, may be even more significant. For *Little Dorrit* is as fascinated as *A Handful of Dust* is by foreign, psychic and unorthodox forms of imprisonment.[[3]](#endnote-3) It begins with a scene in a Marseilles prison, followed by one in which the leading characters are held in quarantine abroad; Mrs Clennam never leaves her room although she seems to have no organic illness or disease; William Dorrit seems to carry the air of the Marshalsea prison with him, whether he goes to Venetian palace or Swiss monastery. The novel is full of characters, including William Dorrit, Flora Finching and Mrs Clennam, who seem condemned to repeat themselves over and over again, like Tony Last in the jungle or Mrs Rattery in *A Handful of Dust* with her endless games of patience, substitutes for significant action or human sympathy. *Little Dorrit*’s hero, Arthur Clennam, like Tony Last, is a decent middling Englishman, heir to a large decaying property (the Clennam house collapses into handfuls of dust at the end of the book) but whereas Clennam arrives from an exotic foreign country, China, at the beginning of the book, Tony goes to one at the end. Both are desperate and imprisoned at the book’s climax, and both become seriously ill, hallucinating the coming of the woman they love in their imprisonment: Brenda Last in Tony’s fantasy “wears a ragged cotton gown” (202; ch. 5), which is like the clothing of the Pie-wie Indians but also like the “old worn dress” in which Amy Dorrit comes to Clennam in prison (723; vol 2. ch. 29). These are not simply thematic continuities or shared motifs but can take us towards a different sense of Waugh’s relation to Dickens. We know what a remarkable and troubling host Waugh the man could be (Stannard, *Waugh: the Later Years,* 257-61). What kind of host is Waugh as a writer to Dickens? Or, to put it slightly differently, what kind of parasite? At such moments, is Waugh hosting Dickens; or has Dickens attached himself like a parasite to Waugh’s text, getting between his laces and into his buttonholes, crawling and burrowing under his skin?

Both Dickens and Waugh were brilliant writers of voice, and creators of voices that take on a hallucinatory power. The question of Dickens for Waugh is intimately bound up with the question of voice. His father often read Dickens out loud to him when he was a child and in his autobiography he praised his father’s reading as “The happiest conjunction” of his “literary and theatrical tastes … I have never heard him excelled except by Sir John Gielgud.” (Alexander Waugh, 341). As Alexander Waugh points out, this is a surprisingly genial account, as Waugh had “detested” (341) such reading in his childhood although, as Christopher Sykes notes, he himself often read Dickens aloud to his children (451). Both Todd and Tony Last are inheritors from Dickensian fathers: Hetton, the house which Tony inherits, seems to “have been adapted by Mr Pecksniff [from *Martin Chuzzlewit*] from one of his pupil’s plans for an orphanage” (14; ch. 1); Todd has inherited his set of Dickens from his father.

4.

*A Handful of Dust* and *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* are not often thought of closely-related texts but we can see a similarly complex and creative relationship to Dickens in both. Both novels contain journeys abroad by men in great distress, who encounter madness and hear voices. These journeys are not identical, of course; indeed, there is a sense in which the former novel is reversed by the latter. In *A Handful of Dust* a madman, Mr Todd, desperately wants to hear fictional voices and will do anything to make it happen; in the latter, a madman is compelled to hear voices against his will and is desperate for them to end. Waugh’s confusion in his television interview of poor Tom from *King Lear* and poor Jo from *Bleak House* is not the only place in which Shakespeare and Dickens are brought together in Waugh’s work. *The Ordeal of* *Gilbert Pinfold*, that remarkable play of voices inside the demented Pinfold’s head, is studded with references to both authors: in a character called Cordelia and the plea “let me not be mad” (81; ch. 5; *Lear* 1.5.43) on a ship that is captained by Captain Steerforth, who shares his surname with David Copperfield’s betraying boyhood friend. There are several other quasi-Dickens names in Waugh: Miss Flite from *Bleak House* is borrowed for the Flyte family of *Brideshead Revisited*; the Jellybys of *Bleak House* becomes the Jellabys of *Work Suspended* and Professor Jellaby of *Scoop*; *Oliver Twist*’s Fagin becomes Dr Fagan of Llanabba Castle in *Decline and Fall*: each is a Dickens name with a single letter changed. There is also “Cheerible” which in at least one draft of *The Loved One* is the name of the character who becomes Mr Joyboy (Davis, 208). Again, a single letter is replaced, and the shift from “Cheer” to “Joy” nicely captures the differing fatuousnesses of Dickens's characters (the Cheeryble brothers from *Nicholas Nickleby*), and Waugh’s.

But Steerforth is the only name in all of Waugh’s work borrowed from Dickens accurately and outright, not twisted or made strange. And Dickens himself is named directly near the beginning of *Pinfold* in a passage that is concerned with artistic creativity in relation to repetition, exhaustion, guilt, professional trickery and the daemonic. These all become central concerns of the novel. Richard Jacobs has argued, following Stannard and Alexander Waugh, that “Dickens, in Waugh’s unconscious mythology, evokes the father-figure” in the “tangled literary-filial Oedipal stuff here” (xxix). But too simple a deployment of the Freudian and Oedipal unconscious can miss Waugh’s often pressingly conscious thoughts and feelings about Dickens and his father. Jacobs continues:

betrayal is a crucial notion in the novel’s unconscious. Steerforth’s betrayal of David Copperfield’s idealising love is the most painful thing of its kind in Dickens; betrayal is also dominant in *King Lear* which Waugh was insistently ‘rereading’. Lear and Steerforth are blandly obvious in the novel at the level of allusion and reference; but their penetration in the shared matter of betrayal cuts further. (xxx-xxxi)

But it is not just a matter of betrayal. For Steerforth in *David Copperfield*, although not a sea captain, does own a boat, which he uses to seduce little Em’ly and ruin her family; he eventually drowns at sea in a terrible shipwreck. He is also a homoerotic figure for David, who loves and admires him until and beyond the seduction and abandonment of Em’ly. These motifs all recur in *Pinfold* in which there are seductions (or attempted seductions), dramatic happenings at sea, betrayals and accusations of homoeroticism.

The most remarkable sentence about Dickens in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* comes early; from it, one can unfold much of Waugh’s relationship to Dickens, his understanding of his own writing career, and indeed the central concerns of the book:

A novelist is condemned to produce a succession of novelties, new names for characters, new incidents for his plots, new scenery; but, Pinfold maintained, most men harbour the germs of one or two books only; all else is professional trickery of which the most daemonic of the old masters - Dickens and Balzac even - were flagrantly guilty. (95-6; ch. 6)

Pinfold too is a guilty novelist, condemned to repetitious fictions that are also a strange succession of novelties. Questions of guilt recur in the dialogue with Billy the sailor accused of vice; in the trial, interrogation and torture of the seaman by Captain Steerforth and “Goneril”; in the many accusations made against Pinfold by Fosker and his friends, and in Pinfold’s summoning of that group to a kind of trial. “Professional trickery” is of course also a topic of the book: the professional trickery of the fantasised radio producer Angel is Pinfold’s penultimate explanation of what is happening to him (114-5; ch. 7).

Most importantly, the passage sets up two ways of understanding literary creativity which it both opposes and joins. On the one hand, fiction is daemonic inspiration; on the other and often simultaneously it is professional trickery. The most daemonic authors, Dickens and Balzac, are also paradoxically the most guilty of professional trickery. References to Dickens infest and invest the story, with a presence in each of Pinfold’s major fantasies: the ship is commanded by Captain Steerforth; the scene of evangelical preaching and the interrogation of the sailor Billy about his vices stems from “literature, from Mr Chadband [the hypocritical clergyman of *Bleak House*] and Philip Henry Gosse”(30; ch. 3); the incident with the copper and the interrogation, torture and death of a sailor is carried out by Steerforth and Goneril; the family who torment Pinfold are led by Fosker, who “has something in him of the dissolute law students and government clerks of mid-Victorian fiction” (55; ch. 4); the apparent arrival of a Spanish ship and the handing over of Pinfold instead of the supposed secret agent is masterminded by Steerforth. Dickens is never far away, nor is Shakespeare: Pinfold’s name (which becomes “Penfold” at one point) is the name of someone whose fantasies unfold at the point or pin of a pen; but it is also a kind of enclosure or trap.

Like Pinfold, Steerforth is a suggestive, disyllabic name, but Pinfold’s feelings towards him are extraordinarily mobile. The ship that carries him through his insanity and hosts his terrifying, absurd, fantasised encounters is captained and hosted by Steerforth. On the one hand, he safely steers the boat onward, takes care of Pinfold; on the other and simultaneously, he is a sadist and betrayer who will hand over Pinfold to his enemies. Ambivalence does not begin to describe Pinfold’s feelings for him: at first sight, he is “an unremarkable man” (34; ch. 3), to whom he feels a “bond of duty” (35; ch. 3) but then thinks of him in Hamlet’s words as a “Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!” (44; ch. 3; *Hamlet* 2.2. 557) whose relations to Goneril are “grossly erotic” (44; ch. 3). At this point, Pinfold thinks of ways to place the captain “in irons” (49: ch. 3) but the next day “his feelings … had moderated in the course of the afternoon” (49: ch. 3). Later still, Steerforth becomes “fully restored to Mr Pinfold’s confidence. He saw him as a simple sailor obliged to make a momentous decision, not only for his own safety, but for the peace of the world” (73: ch. 5) but then, at the moment of Pinfold’s strongest identification with King Lear, when he exclaims “O let me not be mad not mad, sweet heaven” (77; ch. 5), Steerforth becomes for him a “booby Captain” (80: ch. 5). This is another parasitic hosting both of Shakespeare and of Dickens, as in *A Handful of Dust*, and it is once more embedded in a scene of madness, compulsive repetition and near-death. As Captain Steerforth steers the ship of fools inside Pinfold’s head, it is a parasitism of the most dangerous, indeed near-fatal, kind. The voices on his ship seem to burrow into its pipes and tubes, simultaneously inside and outside Pinfold’s deluded head. Pinfold’s final judgement on Steerforth is a radically uncertain one: “Mr Pinfold was still not sure of the Captain. That quiet sea-dog had turned a Nelson eye on proceedings far beyond the scope of his imagination (117-8; ch. 7). It is only, it seems through cliché – “seadog”, “Nelson eye” - that Pinfold can be released from the successively unremarkable, treacherous, lecherous, simple, booby and quiet Captain Steerforth, and Steerforth released from him.

“[T]he most daemonic of the old masters - Dickens and Balzac” (95-6; ch. 6) is the only use of the term “daemonic” in the novel, but that single reference focusses a good deal of Waugh’s aesthetic and affective energy. “Daemonic” is a suggestive, if complex, term. It can refer to malevolent supernatural beings or spirits, “devilish, malevolent, evil; (also) crazed, frenzied” as the OED puts it, but it can also invoke the “inner or attendant spirit, especially as a source of creative inspiration or genius”. In *Plato’s Apology*, Socrates’s daemon, for example, was an internal voice that came from without, and that spoke to him when he was about to do something wrong.(64; 31c-d). In all these uses, the “daemonic” has a sense of overmastering power, dominance or possession. Pinfold is assailed by voices that have similarly uncertain, compelling status, daemonic powers that cannot be located safely in a place, origin or frame of understanding. Within Pinfold’s lucid, indeed self-possessed, account of madness lie some suggestive terms - allergy, addiction, telepathy, mesmerism - which stand at the edge of rational or scientific understanding. Dickens was a celebrated mesmerist and, as Fred Kaplan has shown, attempted to “cure” his friend Augusta de la Rue through its use (77-93). The extraordinary, seductive, sexualised encounters of the mesmerising Dickens and mesmerised patient, prefigurative of Freud’s early writings on hysteria, become a privileged figure for Waugh of the power of Dickens over his readers:

The novelist was literally and metaphorically a mesmerist. …Like Mme de la Rue we unroll from our insensible ball and do what the master orders. It is this constantly changing mood of appreciation that makes everyone's fingers itch for the pen at the mention of his name. (*Essays*, 447)

Another privileged figure that the novel uses to dramatize and comprehend the kind of derangement that Pinfold undergoes is that of “Life-Waves” (7; ch. 1). A Pinfold family friend, known affectionately as “the Bruiser” (7; ch. 1) owns a contraption which supposedly can cure illness or help plants grow through these life waves, but Pinfold worries about their power, which he feels may be a kind of “sorcery” (8; ch. 1). His wife reassures him that they are only positive in their effects, but he counters this argument through the example of a dog whose worms becomes enormous through the power of the box (8; ch. 1). It is a striking moment, for these worms are, of course, parasites, which become through a daemonic or quasi-daemonic power too large and destructive for their host. The *Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* is one of the most unsettling accounts of madness in modern literature, although at times Waugh tries to give it the shape of a morality tale, as for example in the final chapter “Pinfold Regained”, when order is restored and his mental health improves. But the daemonic, the mesmeric and the parasitic, those forms of intoxication and possession that repeatedly occur when Waugh thinks of Dickens, are not so easily contained. We should not think of *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, or indeed *A Handful of Dust*, as evidence of Waugh the host and Dickens the parasite, or as Dickens the host and Waugh the parasite. Poor Tom, like Dickens and simple Steerforth, is not a bête noir or even a bête rouge, but something stranger, daemonic or hypnotic, voices or life waves that get into his buttonholes and between his laces, working away on his flesh and under his skin, like worms that ‘simply grew enormous with all the Life Force going into them. Like serpents’. (8; ch. 1)

1. Evelyn Waugh, interviewed by Elizabeth Jane Howard for *Monitor*, BBC, 16 February 1964, television broadcast. I am most grateful to Dr Barbara Cooke for allowing me to see a transcript of the interview from Evelyn Waugh. *A Little Learning.* Edited by John Howard Wilson and Barbara Cooke. Oxford UP, forthcoming, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Waugh references this scene from *Bleak House* again when Ambrose Silk in *Put Out More Flags* “asked no more. He accepted the fact as a pauper accepts the condition of being perpetually ‘moved on’” (196). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. An entry in Waugh’s diaries reads: “went to the private view of the film version of Little Dorrit. Very bad. Dickens always seems so fantastic and grotesque on the cinema with all his doddering old men and semi-imbeciles. The plot too seems peculiarly inconsequent and insipid.” (102*). Little Dorrit*. Directed by Sidney Morgan, Progress, 1920.

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