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Steerforth's Arm: Love and the Moral Point of View

I

The summer my daughter fell in love with James Steerforth, she was fourteen and I was forty. We were traveling around England, and, in response to her Dickensian longing, we had ended up in Yarmouth, to inspect, so to speak, the scene of the crime. I had indulgence, but little sympathy, for this literary infatuation. For I felt that I had known long ago, and would have known even if I hadn't made it my business to write on ethical topics, that he was simply not worthy of a good person's love. And I suspected her, as well, of immature reading. For surely, as I remembered it, it was Dickens's intention to make the reader judge Steerforth from the moral point of view, not to encourage her, or him, to fall in love with Steerforth. Full of maternal superiority, and bored with the garish coarseness of Yarmouth—in 1987 a place of oil refineries and cheap summer holiday facilities—I undertook to reread the novel in order to establish my point.

My composure survived the first encounters, where I firmly took the side of Mr. Mell, censured Steerforth for selfishness and egotism in his relation to the other boys, even concurred with Agnes in warning innocent David against his bad angel. And then one afternoon, sitting on the Yarmouth beach in the early July sun, my back turned to the ugly casinos, the cheap hotels, the pink and blue cottages, my eyes shifting from the pages of the novel to the generous sweep of the dark blue sea that beckoned onward before me, I felt a wind in my face and an excitement in my heart, a sensuous delight in the fresh presence of each thing that seemed to be connected, somehow, with the vividness of the chapters, with the power, above all, of Steerforth's presence. I felt my heart quite suddenly take itself off, rushing happily from the firmness of judgment into the eager volatility of desire. And, as I read on, the very words made my "heart beat high" and my "blood rush to my face," until, with tears and with love, maternal authority utterly vanquished, I saw him there before me, "lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school."[1]

1. The sections in quotation marks are taken from the novel; see below. The paragraph as a whole is in the spirit of the novel, and contains many paraphrases and allusions.

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The question I want to ask in this essay is, quite simply, what has happened here? First, how is the point of view of love related to the moral point of view, and what, precisely, are the tensions between them? And also: how does novel-reading, the reading of this novel in particular, explore these tensions, constituting its readers as hybrid transmoral agents who slip dangerously back and forth from one world, one point of view, to the other?

II

The subject of romantic and erotic love is not often treated in works on moral philosophy, especially in the Anglo-American tradition. In part this has been a matter of reticence—for that philosophical tradition has lived within a conventional morality that disapproves, on the whole, of the public expression and even the public discussion of deep feelings. In part, too, it has been a matter of *style:* for the plain unadorned nonrhetorical style that the Anglo-American moral tradition both chooses and justifies as the most appropriate for moral reflection is not a style in which the topic of romantic/erotic love can be very easily or very fully discussed. (We see this, for example, in the thinness of Hume's account, which hardly compares to his analyses of pride or sympathy in persuasive and intuitive power.) The topic seems to demand for its convincing treatment a more literary style, a style that uses metaphor and narrative, that represents and also awakens powerful feelings. And all of this Anglo-American moral philosophy has usually avoided.

But these views about public expression and about style do not simply express, on the part of these philosophers, an unreflective adherence to cultural conventions. Philosophers are creatures of habit, to be sure. And one sees the effect of this traditions's habits of writing in the work of some contemporary moral philosophers who defend the moral centrality of intimate personal relationships, romantic love prominently included, but who write, nonetheless, as if philosophy would be better off not going too deeply into the texture of these relationships, not investigating too closely or too concretely the contribution they have to make to the good human life. But, as I say, habit is not all that is motivating philosophers in this tradition. There are deeper motivations too, arising from beliefs about morality and the moral point of view, beliefs that make it questionable whether romantic love could ever correctly be included inside morality, or be anything but subversive of the moral point of view.[2]

Some of these deeper reasons are, roughly speaking, Kantian. Romantic love is not something that is governed by the will. It is, instead, something with respect to which we are, at least in part, *passive.* It seems that we can't choose to fall in love with someone; it simply *happens* to us. And we can't altogether govern the way in which, or the goodness with which, it will happen. As Pindar long ago

2. In this essay I use the word "moral" rather than "ethical" as the generic word (see "Perceptive Equilibrium," Notes) following the usage of the moral sentiment tradition. Adam Smith's own terminology (see below) is more complex: for he describes his task as the analysis of the "moral sentiments," but frequently also uses the terminology of virtue and the virtues, probably under the influence of the Stoics.

observed, some are lifted up by "the gentle hands of necessity," but "others with other hands" (*Nemean* VIII). So if one believes that the domain of morality is the domain of the will-governed and the actively chosen, one will be likely to feel, as Kant does, that romantic/erotic love must lie outside the domain of morality.

This is the motivation for Kant's remarkable distinction, in the *Doctrine of Virtue,* between *pathological love,* his name for the romantic, non-will-governed variety, and *practical love,* an attitude of concern that one can will oneself to have toward another human being, and which is, for that reason, a part of morality.[3] If one believes, in addition, that the realm of morality is of special and perhaps of supreme importance in human life—a belief that it seems fair to attribute to Kant—one will be likely, having once made that distinction, to ascribe high *human* worth to practical love, and far less worth to the pathological variety. In fact, since the relationship between the two loves for Kant is not simply neutral, since pathological love, indulged, actually draws us away from the correct moral attitude, sapping and subverting it, and since the moral attitude, actively cultivated, on the other hand activates our wills, making them less likely to succumb to the lures of pathological love, the Kantian will be likely to ascribe to pathological love a low human value indeed, probably a disvalue.

All this would not exactly suggest that moral philosophy should not be concerned with the topic of pathological love: for one who makes the negative judgment might become preoccupied, as, for example, Spinoza is preoccupied, with showing exactly what sort of threat love is to morality, and how this threat might be headed off.[4] But the negative judgment on love does imply that a treatise written from the point of view of morality will not display the value of love as lovers see it, or investigate the experience of love with empathy, from within.

But it is not this objection to love that I want to consider in the body of this essay. The Kantian objection, based on the distinction between activity and passivity, has certainly been influential in explaining the absence of love from our moral philosophy. But the objection is, in the context of our interest in understanding the properties of *love,* too large-scale and, so to speak, unrefined an objection. It throws out too many things to show what might be morally problematic about love in particular. For it holds, if it holds, not only against (romantic) love, but also against all the other sentiments, inclinations, passions, and even perceptual states with respect to which we are, in a manner, passive. The specifically Kantian tradition on the sentiments and passions finds moral problems in pity as well as love, in friendly feeling as well as erotic passion, in anger, fear, even sympathy—all these are morally problematic insofar as they are not will-governed. It is beyond my purpose here to criticize that general line of argument against the sentiments.[5]

What is more revealing, if it is romantic love we wish to understand, is the

3. I. Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue* (Part III of *The Metaphysics of Morals,* Berlin, 1797), trans. M. J. Gregor (Philadelphia, 1979), Akad. 500–1, 447ff; see also *Critique of Practical Reason* (Berlin, 1988), trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, Ind., 1956), Akad. 83ff.

4. B. Spinoza, *Ethics,* Parts III and IV, esp. "Definitions of the Emotions," df. VI.

5. An effective general criticism of the Kantian position on the emotions and the other sentiments is in Larry Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (London, 1980).

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absence of this love from moralities based upon compassion and other sentiments. For it is plain that philosophers who argue that morality ought to be based upon sentiment and who insist that the ideal moral viewpoint is one that is rich in feeling, including a lot of what Kant would call *pathological* feeling, still find romantic love morally problematic in a special way. They still hold that it is to be left out of the moral point of view (not counted as a part of what animates someone who sees from that point of view), for reasons that have nothing to do with a general rejection of passivity. So if we want to understand what is uniquely troublesome about *love* in our moral tradition, we would do best to examine those arguments. It is also plain to me that if our interest is in the absence of love from modern writing in the Anglo-American tradition, it is this sentiment-based line of argument that explains our current situation—and our related ambivalence about the relationship between moral philosophy and the novel—to a far greater degree than does the Kantian tradition. Finally, if we need one further inducement to examine these arguments against love, I suggest that we have one in their power and cogency. I believe that they perspicuously describe a tension that really exists betweeen love and morality, and, in this way, they advance our understanding of the question: What role might romantic love play, or not play, in the good life for a human being?[6]

I shall turn first of all to a succinct philosophical statement of the argument in which I am interested, in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.[7] Smith himself suggests that we develop our sense of the objection and its force by considering our experience as readers of works of literature or as spectators at plays; so we shall investigate the parallel. But the experience of readership has, it seems, as a moral experience, a more complicated character than Smith allows. In pursuit of this complexity, we shall return to *David Copperfield*, which I take to be one of the most profoundly interesting treatments in the English novel of the tension between the point of view of romantic love and the point of view of moral sentiments. We shall ask about the relationship between Agnes' arm, which points morally upward, and the opposing gesture of Steerforth, who lies with his head reclining easily on his arm. And this will lead us to wonder what the relation of the narrator might be to both morality and romance, and how his narrative moves, and moves both him and us, between these two opposing viewpoints.

III

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith argues that the ideal moral point of view, the point of view of the "judicious spectator," is a viewpoint rich in feeling. Not only compassion and sympathy, but also fear, grief, anger, hope, and certain types of love are felt by this spectator, as a result of his active, concrete imagining of the circumstances and aims and feelings of others.[8] The spectator's

6. There are, of course, many varieties of love, and even of romantic love; the rubric "romantic/erotic," and the descriptions and discussions to follow, will make more concrete the type I have in mind.

7. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1st ed. 1759; 6th ed., extensively rev., 1790, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976). Hereafter *TMS*.

8. *TMS*, esp. Part I Sections i–ii. ". . . the spectator must . . . endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance

feelings are not just willed attitudes of concern, they are really passions; and Smith clearly believes that it is both possible and essential to cultivate the passions, making people not less but more responsive and, so to speak, passive, in certain ways at certain times. Correct feeling is, for Smith, both morally *useful*, in showing us what we ought to do, and also morally *valuable* in its own right, as a kind of proper recognition of the ethical character of the situation before us. For Smith, who refers back to the Greek Stoics here,[9] the passions have a cognitive dimension—they are at least partially made up out of beliefs—so that it is natural for him to think of them as both guides and as pieces of recognizing.

The link between passion and the deliberately undertaken is forged by the imagination. By cultivating our ability to see vividly another person's distress, to picture ourselves in another person's place—and this, he makes clear, is something that we *can* set ourselves deliberately to do—we make ourselves more likely to respond with the morally illuminating and appropriate sort of response. It is clear that Smith attaches considerable importance to literature as a source of this kind of moral development; and literature is also, for him, an artificial construction of ideal spectatorship, which leads us into the morally good viewpoint naturally, and offers us in that way a model we can refer to in real life. For frequently, in order to show his reader what he means by a certain claim about the ideal spectator's responses, or in order to support his assertion that the spectator in a certain case will respond this way and not this, he refers to our experience as readers of stories and watchers of plays, asking us to notice what sentiments we experience in that role.[10] He proceeds as if readership and spectatorship are more familiar to us, more securely and concretely grasped, than the moral problems of life, concerning which he wishes to persuade us. He also assumes that we will agree that literary readership is structurally isomorphic to the spectator's moral role, so that a dubious issue in the real-life moral sphere can legitimately be pinned down by appeal to literary experience. The experience of readership is a moral activity in its own right, a cultivation of imagination for moral activity in life, and a test for correctness of real-life judgment and response.

What is, however, very remarkable, in the midst of this tremendous emphasis on the cultivation of the passions, is that two types of passion that play a prominent role in our lives and (or so we might have suspected) our literary experiences are considered by Smith to be totally absent from the judicious spectator and therefore totally to be omitted when we describe the limits of moral propriety. Whereas most passions are moderated and channelled, but still assiduously cultivated within the moral point of view, these two sorts are omitted from it altogether. The two are the bodily desires, including sexual desire, and the so-called

of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded" (I.i.4.6).

9. The Stoics are referred to prominently throughout, and Part VII contains extensive discussion (and some criticism) of their views. The cognitive nature of the view of passion is made clear from the start: see I.i.1.8, and many other places. Smith is critical of the Stoics for urging the extirpation of the passions, which he regards as elements in complete virtue.

10. Literature is first mentioned very near the beginning of the argument, in I.i.1.4 ("tragedy or romance"), and these references form an important part of the account of the spectator throughout Part I.

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"passions which take their origin from a particular turn or habit of the imagination." The salient example in the latter category is romantic love. If we combine the two passages, we have a sweeping rejection from morality and the moral viewpoint both of love and also of the erotic desire that is, Smith himself emphasizes, a prominent component of it. We also have, as I think we shall see, a claim in its own way as uncompromising as Kant's concerning the subversive relation between love and morality—though this claim is defended with arguments that have nothing to do with the rejection of passivity.

How does the argument work? Let us take the bodily passions first. Smith asks us, first, to imagine his judicious spectator looking on at someone else's hunger for food. The spectator, as elsewhere, is imagined as someone who is a concerned friend of the parties, emotionally involved with their good and ill, able to imagine vividly what it is like to be them. At the same time, he lives a life distinct from theirs and connects himself to theirs primarily through imagining rather than interacting. As I have said, Smith's frequent way of getting us to see what such a spectator is like and what he will feel is to ask us to think of him as like us when we read a novel or see a play, caring about the characters and vividly responding to their predicament. And seeing what this spectator will feel gives us a test to determine the proper sort and degree of feeling for us to have in our own real lives, in situations where we are not spectators but actively involved as moral agents. (For example, we will learn not to have excessive anger in a personal case of our own by reminding ourselves that the friendly spectator would feel anger for our situation only up to a certain limit.)

Smith now argues as follows. When we read a story about hungry people (in, he says, "the journal of a siege, or of a sea voyage") we can sympathize with, both respond to and assume in our empathetic imagining, their grief, fear, and "consternation" at being in such a predicament. What we can't take on as readers is the hunger itself, since that is based on a physical condition that we are not in. Therefore hunger is not, by itself, a moral response, or a part of the moral point of view.[11] We could better convey the centrality of this point of view in Smith's account of human agency by saying that hunger is not a constituent part of a fully and adequately human response to the world. This doesn't mean that we should never feel hunger, or should feel guilty about our hunger; it just means that we should not identify ourselves with it, think of it as a good human thing or any part of our true humanity.

The same, Smith now continues, is true of "the passion by which Nature unites the two sexes."[12] It is a very strong passion—in fact, "naturally the most furious of the passions." But, unlike other strong passions such as anger and grief, it proves altogether improper and extramoral, when we apply the spectator test. The claim seems to be that we do not become sexually aroused when we look, as spectators, at people who are themselves sexually excited by one another. The closest we get to their excitement in our own state is, says Smith, a spirit of "gallantry" and "sensibility" toward them. As in the food case, Smith would presumably wish to say that reading about erotic arousal does not cause us to become, ourselves, aroused—although the absence here of any explicit remark to that effect (in contrast to the hunger case, where literature is prominent) may indicate that he is familiar enough with pornography to sense a difficulty in his argument at this point. In any case, the conclusion, as before, is that sexual desire is outside of the moral viewpoint on the world, and to be judged improper when we look at the world from that viewpont. "All strong expressions of it are upon every occasion indecent, even between persons in whom its most complete indulgence is acknowledged by all laws, both human and divine, to be perfectly innocent."[13]

Smith now adds a further point. The ancient philosophers, he says, hold that the reason these bodily passions are problematic is that we share them with "the brutes." Not so he replies: for we share with "the brutes" many passions:

> such as resentment, natural affection, even gratitude, which do not, upon that account, appear to be so brutal. The true cause of the peculiar disgust which we conceive for the appetites of the body when we see them in other men, is that we cannot enter into them. To the person himself who feels them, as soon as they are gratified, the object that excited them ceases to be agreeable: even its presence often becomes offensive to him; he looks round to no purpose for the charm which transported him the moment before, and he can now as little enter into his own passion as another person. When we have dined, we order the covers to be removed; and we should treat in the same manner the objects of the most ardent and passionate desires, if they were the objects of no other passions but those which take their origin from the body.[14]

In other words, there is a point of view that we are deeply committed to, which expresses something very fundamental about our humanity. And it is because the bodily passions do not appear in us, when we assume that viewpoint, that we must reject them from morality, not because they arise from some brutish element in us.

There are some problems with Smith's account of the spectator in this passage: a tendency to blur the distinction between empathy and sympathy; a tendency to confuse propriety in feeling with propriety in the public expression of feeling.[15] But we see the general shape of the argument well enough. What a concerned friend or a reader cannot respond to out of friendly concern (and I think that the point can be made without Smith's assumption that all sympathetic response involves having the *very same* feeling), what the reader can't, as a reader, be moved by, is somehow morally suspect. We turn now to the next group of banned passions: for it is here that romantic love itself gets rejected.

Among the passions derived from the imagination, Smith writes, are some that "take their origin from a peculiar turn or habit it has acquired." And these are always morally problematic:

> The imaginations of mankind, not having acquired that particular turn, cannot enter into them; and such passions, though they may be allowed to be almost

11. *TMS* I.ii.1.1.
12. *TMS* I.ii.1.2

13. Ibid.
14. *TMS* I.ii.1.3.
15. See, for example, I.ii.1.2, discussed above; there are many other such passages. But perhaps this is, after all, not such a confusion, since the moral world is, for Smith, the world of the publicly expressible, and whatever cannot with decency be publicly expressed would be ipso facto suspect; see below.

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> unavoidable in some part of life, are always, in some measure, ridiculous. This is the case with that strong attachment which naturally grows up between two persons of different sexes, who have long fixed their thoughts upon one another. Our imagination not having run in the same channel with that of the lover, we cannot enter into the eagerness of his emotions. If our friend has been injured, we readily sympathize with his resentment, and grow angry with the very person with whom he is angry. If he has received a benefit, we readily enter into his gratitude, and have a very high sense of the merit of his benefactor. But if he is in love, though we may think his passion just as reasonable as any of the kind, yet we never think ourselves bound to conceive a passion of the same kind, and for the same person for whom he has conceived it. The passion appears to every body, but the man who feels it, entirely disproportioned to the value of the object; and love, though it is pardoned in a certain age because we know it is natural, is always laughed at, because we cannot enter into it. All serious and strong expressions of it appear ridiculous to a third person; and though a lover may be good company to his mistress, he is so to nobody else. He himself is sensible of this; and as long as he continues in his sober senses, endeavours to treat his own passion with raillery and ridicule. It is the only style in which we care to hear of it; because it is the only style in which we ourselves are disposed to talk of it. We grow weary of the grave, pedantic, and long-sentenced love of Cowley and Petrarca, who never have done with exaggerating the violence of their attachments; but the gaiety of Ovid, and the gallantry of Horace, are always agreeable.[16]

We can, he continues, enter into the lovers' hopes of happiness, or their fear of disappointment—but not into the love itself, making its seriousness real and vivid for ourselves.

Smith's point seems to be that romantic and erotic love is based upon a strong response to morally irrelevant particularities, in such a way that it can't be explained, it retains always an element of the surd, the mysterious, the impenetrably arbitrary. We can't imagine *why* it has happened between these two people in this way at this time—and so we can't see the love from the lovers' own viewpoint. This is all the more so, presumably, because this romantic love contains within it the bodily arousal that Smith's argument has already rejected, and which Smith here calls "perhaps, the foundation of love."[17]

Smith now returns to the issue of literary spectatorship. For it would appear to be a natural objection to his argument that romantic and erotic love are a staple of literature, and among the things that, in literature, most move and engage the

16. *TMS* I.ii.2.1.

17. *TMS* I.ii.2.2. Smith is here discussing the origin of our interest in pastoral poetry and other related literary works, and is arguing that we are drawn by the depiction of the lovers' wish for serenity and contentment, not by their love:

> We feel how natural it is for the mind, in a certain situation, relaxed with indolence, and fatigued with the violence of desire, to long for serenity and quiet, to hope to find them in the gratification of that passion which distracts it, and to frame to itself the idea of that life of tranquillity and retirement which the elegant, the tender, and the passionate Tibullus takes so much pleasure in describing; a life . . . free from labour, and from care, and from all the turbulent passions which attend them. Even scenes of this kind interest us most, when they are painted rather as what is hoped, than as what is enjoyed. The grossness of that passion, which mixes with, and is, perhaps, the foundation of love, disappears when its gratification is far off and at a distance; but renders the whole offensive, when described as what is immediately possessed.

reader's imagination. This Smith now denies. The lovers' wish for happiness and their fear of reversal—*these* are certainly staples of literary experience; and these are the foundation of our interest, he claims, both in pastoral poetry and in "modern tragedies and romances." But the *love itself* is not the object of the reader's interest, except in the comic manner already mentioned:

> The author who should introduce two lovers, in a scene of perfect security, expressing their mutual fondness for one another, would excite laughter, and not sympathy. If a scene of this kind is ever admitted into a tragedy, it is always, in some measure, improper, and is endured, not from any sympathy with the passion that is expressed in it, but from concern for the dangers and difficulties with which the audience foresee that its gratification is likely to be attended.[18]

Smith adds that romantic love, since it is frequently mixed with "humanity, generosity, kindness, friendship, esteem," is not, despite its extravagance and its mysteriousness, found actually revolting or odious—only, perhaps, a little ridiculous.

In order to understand Smith's argument here, we must first attempt to say more plainly what romantic love *is,* as he sees it. Unlike his Stoic predecessors, unlike, as well, Descartes and Spinoza, Smith does not offer definitions of the passions; so this is a little hard to do. But I think that we can infer from his examples and descriptions in this passage that he takes romantic love to contain, as necessary ingredients, at least the following elements:

1. Mutual feelings of sexual attraction and arousal.
2. Beliefs (on both sides, presumably) about the supreme importance of the object, beliefs that go beyond any reasoned justification that the lover could articulate to others—even though they may contain, as well, some articulable element of esteem.[19]

We can add that the romantic love Smith describes appears to connect these two elements closely: sexual arousal is felt towards the person *seen as* supremely valuable and important.

3. A complex intimate way of life that involves the exchange of affectionate communications, both verbal and erotic; a way of life in which lovers are totally wrapped up in one another, attending for long periods of time to nobody else, and in which, characteristically, they take themselves off into privacy, not inviting or wanting any scrutiny or even company, seeking a "perfect security."

18. *TMS* I.ii.2.3.

19. Smith has spoken of the disproportion between the passion and the value of the object, as seen from the spectator's viewpoint. But this and other passages depicting the intimate habits of loving exchange and conversation indicate, I think, that the problem is not an *illusion* on the lover's part; it is, rather, a strong response to what cannot be justified as admirable in the public world—to glances, gestures, habits of intimacy. What we are dealing with is a "peculiar habit" of the lovers' imaginations, entrenched ways of seeing and valuing that are idiosyncratic and not publicly communicable. It is not that the lover makes these things up when they aren't there; rather he or she endows them with an importance that the spectator cannot find in them.

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For the lovers, this life has the charms of mystery, secrecy, and intimacy; from the outside it is simply mysterious.

Once again, we can add that the third element is closely connected with the other two: sexual desire is felt toward the person seen as part of an intimate way of life, apart from others; intimacy enhances the sense of importance; and at the same time sexual desire and the belief in importance are strong motivations to undertake the way of life in the first place.

I should add that by insisting on this last, very complex, element, Smith seems to me to go beyond his philosophical predecessors on this topic, who all seem to define love as some sort of combination of feeling and belief,[20] without sufficiently taking account of the fact that love cannot exist in a single instant, but requires a pattern of exchange and mutuality, of mutual attention evolving over time. In this way he brings to the analysis of romantic and erotic love the insight first introduced in the sphere of friendly love by Aristotle:[21] love is fundamentally a relation, not something *in* a single person at all—a relation that involves the give and take, over time, of feeling, thought, benefits, conversations. Smith adds that this relation, where romantic love is concerned, evolves its own mysterious habits and delights in the charm of its secret routines, so inscrutable to the nonparticipant.

Smith's objection to this relation seems to be based, precisely, on its mysteriousness and exclusivity. We might expand his point about the spectator as follows. Lovers wrapped up in loving conversation (and it is, I think, significant that his paradigm scene of love is a scene of conversation) are not, insofar as they are lovers, also spectators. Being in love is altogether different, as a kind of attention, from being a judicious spectator; for lovers do not look around at the entirety of their world, but are exclusively wrapped up in one another. They do not enter into anyone else's predicament; their imaginations do not see out. By the same token, if we imagine the judicious spectator looking at his world, he will not be able to find in it, no matter how fine his imagination, the passion that they feel for one another. It is a mystery to him; he can't see into it. Lovers, then, neither see nor are seen with the judicious eye of sympathetic moral concern.[22]

We now must confront an ambiguity in Smith's account. For there are two ways in which the moral function of the spectator might be understood. (These two possibilities arise in interpreting most ideal-judge views, beginning with Aristotle's.[23]) On one reading, the judicious spectator is merely heuristic: moral appropriateness and propriety in passion exist independently, can in principle be specified independently of his response, and imagining his response is a useful device for us in finding out the appropriate response. On this reading, there is something inappropriate about love, something that demands apology, apart from the spec-

20. R. Descartes, *Les Passions de L'Âme,* Part II, Art. VI; Spinoza, *Ethics* "Definitions of the Passions," Def. VI. For Stoic definitions, see *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta,* ed. J. von Arnim, Vol. III., 397–420.

21. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII–IX; cf. *Fragility,* chap. 12. For a related account of romantic love, see "Love's Knowledge."

22. Compare the discussion of Henry James's *The Ambassadors* in "Perceptive Equilibrium."

23. On Aristotle, see *Fragility,* chap. 10, pp. 311–12; there is an excellent discussion of this question in unpublished writing by Christine Korsgaard.

tator's inability to enter into it, and the spectator shows us the way to the correct conclusion. On the second, and stronger reading, however, the spectator's responses are themselves constitutive of what is and is not morally appropriate. The fact that he cannot enter into love is not a sign that points beyond itself to some independently existing inappropriateness in the relation. It is the very fact that he cannot enter in, that *makes* the passion inappropriate. It is what is deficient, or excessive, about it.

The second reading can, I believe, be strongly supported from a number of passages in the text. To confine ourselves to the sections we are discussing, we might recall Smith's vigorous insistence that the *reason for* the inappropriateness of bodily passion is not some separate brutishness in hunger and sexual desire; rather, the "true cause" of our negative view is "that we cannot enter into them." This may just be a psychological remark; but it looks like something more. Not just the cause, but the justification for our negative view, seems to be found in the fact of the spectator's incomprehension.[24]

What, in that case, is the deeper significance of the spectator's failure to enter into these passions? What is the moral significance of the spectatorial stance?[25] I think that Smith's underlying point is this. Morality essentially involves thinking of oneself as one person among others, bound by ties of friendship and sympathy to those others. These ties, in turn, involve, essentially, two further things. First, they require us to look around us, taking thought, so to speak, for all that we can see. And they involve, too, general social conversation, the giving and receiving of justifications and reasons. Therefore, they require that we permit ourselves and our actions to *be seen.* These practices both express our concern for our fellow beings and bind them to us in a network of mutual concern. The presence of these features in the spectator explains why assuming, in thought, the spectator's position can be a way of assuming the moral point of view. We have built into the account of the spectator the most essential features of our moral humanity.

And that, we may now also add, thinking of Smith's reliance on literature, is why going to plays and reading novels and stories is a valuable part of moral devel-

24. There are many passages that point in this direction. Consider especially I.ii.1.12, where the fact that the spectator enters little into another's bodily pain is called "the foundation of the propriety of constancy and patience in enduring it." If the spectator were merely heuristic, he would be not the "foundation" of propriety here, but only a clue as to where propriety (specified in some independent way) was to be found. Similarly, when Smith asks what we ought to feel in a case where our own response to a personal calamity is inclined to be much more violent than that which the spectator would feel, he simply answers without further remark that we should keep our feeling down to that which the spectator would experience (rather than pointing to some independent moral value that the spectator helps us discover); and he specifies the desire of the agent for "a more complete sympathy" with others as the reason why he will be right to leave aside the special involvement he has with his own case (I.i.4.7–8). The passage culminates in a praise of "society and conversation" (I.i.4.10). Similarly, in asking what we should feel for the dead, Smith grants that there is no independent thing there to inquire about—for the dead are dead; but it is the fact that the judicious spectator will grieve that makes such grief appropriate.

25. By asking for the "deeper significance" of the spectator stance I am not returning to the first (heuristic) sort of view. What I am asking is why this particular stance, described as Smith describes it, should be thought to be constitutive of moral appropriateness—why he has built up the spectator in this and not some other way.

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opment: not because it points beyond itself to a separately existing moral realm, but because it is among the ways in which we constitute ourselves as moral, and thus as fully human, beings. For we find, as we read novels, that we quite naturally assume the viewpoint of an affectionate and responsive social creature, who looks at all the scene before him with fond and sympathetic attention, caring for all the people, and caring, too, for the bonds of discourse that hold them all together. Interpreting a novel or play involves one, indeed, in a kind of sympathetic reason-giving that is highly characteristic of morality; for we ask ourselves, as we try to enter into the plot, why the characters do what they do, and we are put off if our inquiries lead to nothing but mystery and arbitrariness.

But mystery is what love is all about. And the fact that we cannot, where love is concerned, enter into the essential forms of moral give and take is the very thing that makes love, as a relation, inappropriate to our highest humanity, and subversive of the moral community.

IV

Smith's idea about the moral stance and his connection of that stance to the experience of the reader of fiction has had a long history (whether through direct influence or through a more general cultural dissemination) in the reflections of English novelists themselves about the moral role of their craft.[26] I have argued elsewhere that Henry James takes a very similar view about the reader's activity and its moral worth.[27] And James has related worries about the role, in the moral vision that sustains his novels, of personal love, and of related emotions such as jealousy and the desire for revenge. Love, as James sees it, requires both hiddenness and a willful self-blinding, both a turning from the good of others and a request that others turn away their eyes. For these reasons it threatens a valuable norm of moral attention. And I have suggested that it is for this reason that strong personal love, in James, occurs only, so to speak, in the margins of the novel—in the silence beyond the ending of *The Golden Bowl,* after Maggie has buried her eyes in her husband's embrace, tragically surrendering her equal vision of the claims of all; in the boat where Chad and Marie de Vionnet are sailing, *before* that boat has been recognized by the spectator Strether and become a part of his, and the reader's, vision; in the trip of Charlotte and the Prince to Gloucester, where they step out of the novel's vision into a silence prefigured by their determination to "go" for that one day, only "by" each other. As readers, we are not encouraged to fall in love with any of James's characters, nor are we at all encouraged to take up a stance toward them that would make this a possible response. We are not seduced, not led, ourselves, into their silences. In this way we are borne up morally, held as "participators by a fond attention"[28] in the adventures of all the characters, even when we are reminded that there are silences into which the morality of fine-tuned social perception has no entry.

26. Other authors who should be considered in this connection are Jane Austen and George Eliot.

27. See "Perceptive Equilibrium," "Flawed Crystals" (with Notes), this volume.

28. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (New York, 1907), 62.

But Smith's nonerotic idea of readership, and James's similar but more complex idea, which complicates the austerity with erotic silences, are not all that novel-reading has morally to offer us. For if Smith's claim that we don't get seduced by fictional characters seems, up to a point, correct as an account of certain novels, for example the novels of James, we know well, also, that there are other experiences of novel reading that are, while still profoundly moral, also disturbingly erotic. And perhaps by investigating the relationship between moral community and erotic privacy in the novels that do have a seductive dimension we can better understand the tension between love and the moral viewpoint. And we might even discover, as Smith did not discover, a path between them, a way in which morality itself, most richly and generously construed, leads beyond itself into love.

I shall, then, for the balance of this essay turn to Dickens's *David Copperfield,* and to the question with which I began: Why is it that, morally attuned as the reader of this novel is made to be, the reader nonetheless falls in love, as David also falls in love, with James Steerforth? Why, and how, does this novel, which begins with an open question about who the hero of David Copperfield's life actually is, and which ends (apparently) with the upward-pointing gesture of morality, lead us, at times, outside of morality into the "shadowy world" of moonlight and love, of magic, and an arm curved along the pillow?

V

I shall begin by enumerating, simply, certain facts.[29] That David Copperfield was born with a caul—which signifies that he would never drown at sea (p. 49). That the hour of his birth, midnight on a Friday, signified that he would be unlucky in life, but be "privileged to see ghosts and spirits." That it is his persistent fantasy that he himself was born as a traveller out of that "shadowy world" (p. 60). That, in consequence of Betsey Trotwood's conjecture that he would be born a girl, he has, as well, the persistent fantasy that he has, in the spirit world, a sisterly double: "Betsey Trotwood Copperfield was for ever in the land of dreams and shadows, the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled" (p. 60). That this shadowy world is associated with his longing for his dead father, above whose grave the light that lights such ghostly travelers shines its mysterious nocturnal light (p. 60). That David's father left David a collection of novels that he avidly read and reread, "reading as if for life" (p. 106). That Dickens, in his Preface to the novel, speaks of his own sorrow at finishing the novel, comparing the entire world of the novel to David's imagined spirit world: "An Author feels as if he were dismissing some portion of himself into the shadowy world, when a crowd of the creatures of his brain are going from him forever" (p. 45). (I regard this less as an autobiographical statement than as a part of the fiction: Dickens in this way puts himself into his own text as a character.) That David Copperfield expresses, at the novel's close (a novel he has written) a similar sorrow—"subduing my desire to linger on" he dismisses "the shadows" (p. 950) until only Agnes' solid reality remains.

29. All references to *David Copperfield* will be taken from the Penguin Edition, ed. Trevor Blount (Harmondsworth, 1966).

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We now add to these several further facts. That David's relationship with James Steerforth casts him both as a storyteller and as the inhabitant of a world of moonlight and shadows, of enchantments and spells, in which David becomes first the Sultana Scheherazade (p. 145), who is "cherished as a kind of plaything," (p. 146) and, later on, the equally cherished character "Daisy," whose innocence is his seductive power. That Steerforth links David from the beginning with David's unborn sister, his ghostly female double:

> "You haven't got a sister, have you?" said Steerforth, yawning.
> "No," I answered.
> "That's a pity," said Steerforth. "If you had had one, I should think she would have been a pretty, timid, little, bright-eyed sort of girl. I should have liked to know her. Good night, young Copperfield." (p. 140)[30]

And Copperfield, or his shadowy sister, gazing at Steerforth as he sleeps in the mysterious moonlight, loves him from that moment:[31]

> I thought of him very much after I went to bed, and raised myself, I recollect, to look at him where he lay in the moonlight, with his handsome face turned up, and his head reclining easily on his arm. He was a person of great power in my eyes; that was, of course, the reason of my mind running on him. No veiled future dimly glanced upon him in the moonbeams. There was no shadowy picture of his footsteps, in the garden that I dreamed of walking in all night. (p. 140)

The "reason" of course is no reason; it says, in effect, that there is no reason, only a great power. He loves because he loves, and he thinks nothing, in his dreams, for morality. In the sensuous rhythm of the prose itself, we feel that he has entered the other world, the world of moonbeams and shadows, of mysterious ease and delight, the world of a particular turn of the imagination, where reasons come to an end.

Two gestures frame this novel. The first is the gesture of Steerforth's arm here, as it curves easily along the pillow, supporting his "fine face" with its "curling hair" (p. 139).[32] The second is the gesture of Agnes, on which the novel closes, as she stands by him, her arm pointing upward. The first gesture becomes Steerforth's leitmotif, just as the upward gesture is Agnes's. As his Good Angel and his other angel (for only Agnes calls Steerforth a "bad angel" (p. 426)),[33] they take up

30. There may also be a forward reference here to Steerforth's involvement with Em'ly, who is depicted as similar in age to David, and in some sense his double.

31. Strictly speaking, the love has already begun. For just before this, reflecting on the school rumor that Miss Creakle is in love with Steerforth, David remarks, "I am sure, as I sat in the dark, thinking of his nice voice, and his fine face, and his easy manner, and his curling hair, I thought it very likely" (p. 139).

32. Of Steerforth's preference for pillows, see p. 347, where he arranges for David a room with "pillows enough for six." Curling hair is also a salient trait of Steerforth elsewhere—see pp. 346 and 863. In this way, the concerned reader, staging the scene in imagination, draws in details from other parts of the novel.

33. Here David repeatedly calls Agnes a Good Angel (see p. 426), but denies that Steerforth is correctly called a bad angel: "Agnes, you wrong him very much."

their positions beside his heart, beside his bed ("You belong to my bedroom, I find" (p. 137)), contrasting guardians, beckoning to him from their different worlds. Steerforth's gesture returns at two crucial moments later in the novel, as a hauntingly concrete vision, in which sensuous perception and emotion-infused memory join together. The last time David sees Steerforth before the seduction of Emily, the last time he sees him alive and as a beloved friend, it is this gesture, once again, that arrests him:

> I was up with the dull dawn, and, having dressed as quietly as I could, looked into his room. He was fast asleep; lying, easily, with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school.
> The time came in its season, and that was very soon, when I almost wondered that nothing troubled his repose, as I looked at him. But he slept—let me think of him so again—as I had often seen him sleep at school; and thus, in this silent hour, I left him.—Never more, oh God forgive you, Steerforth! to touch that passive hand in love and friendship. Never, never, more! (pp. 497–98)

Notice that the gesture here is made a part of the remembering novelist's present life, as his art of writing takes him again to his vision of Steerforth, and his love.

And years later, when the body of the shipwrecked sailor is washed up, dead, upon the Yarmouth shore, David recognizes it, not by its form or feature, but by that same gesture:

> The old remembrance that had been recalled to me, was in his look. I asked him, terror-stricken, leaning on the arm he held out to support me:
> "Has a body come ashore?"
> He said, "Yes."
> "Do I know it?" I asked then.
> He answered nothing.
> But, he led me to the shore. And on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children—on that part of it where some lighter fragments of the old boat, blown down last night, had been scattered by the wind—among the ruins of the home he had wronged—I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school.
>
> No need, O Steerforth, to have said, when we last spoke together, in that hour which I so little deemed to be our parting-hour—no need to have said, "Think of me at my best!" I had done that ever; and could I change now, looking on this sight! (p. 866)

(We have already been told that this entire episode, in addition to being a frequent dream of the narrator/novelist in later life, is seen vividly before him as he writes: "As plainly as I behold what happened, I will try to write it down. I do not recall it, but see it done; for it happens again before me" (p. 855)).

We can begin our investigation of the tension between love and morality in the novel by thinking about these two gestures. Agnes's upward-pointing gesture is clear, unambiguous, conventional, literal. What it means, it says—and in a way that anyone who sees can understand: "Strive to be more morally upright, more worthy of heaven." It is the gesture famous from Jacques-Louis David's portrait

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of Socrates, from, indeed, countless religious paintings and sculptures in many periods. (Agnes, in her "tranquil brightness," has already been compared by the narrator to a figure in a stained glass window [p. 280].[34]) It is the gesture of moral discourse, reason-giving, and advice: "'Everyone who knows you, consults with you, and is guided by you, Agnes. . . . You are so good, and so sweet-tempered. You have such a gentle nature, and you are always right'" (p. 333). It is a gesture that is not personal to Agnes; anyone, we feel, might use it to say the same. Nor is it personal in its directedness toward David: just as she gives advice to everyone, so she points out, for everyone alike, the moral path. It would not be stretching a point to say that it is the gesture of the sympathetic and judicious spectator, a gesture that represents, in the novel, the nonshadowy public world of morality and reason-giving moral discourse.

Steerforth's gesture, by contrast, signifies nothing publicly communicable. Its only meaning is that he is there. It is mysteriously, sensuously, his, his beyond explanations and reasons. Its power to haunt comes not from the public world of reason-giving (in fact, it distracts David from that world, making moral judgment upon Steerforth's actions impossible), but from the private world of personal emotion and personal memory. It is irreducibly particular, characteristic of him and no other. It is what David recognizes him by. And its easy charm and erotic grace are for David part of a world of shadows and moonlight, not of the world of reasons and justifications. He cannot explain its power. He can only repeat the description, in haunting and almost incantatory language, as if the description, and the gesture, were, for him, for us, a magic spell. Above all, the gesture, and the language used to describe it, are erotic. Agnes uses the bodily as an instrument of the moral; and we know that as he writes the novel David sees her with him, "journeying along the road of life" (p. 946)—a metaphor typical of Agnes in its lack of sensuous freshness—surrounded by children, emblems of a moral use of the body. In Steerforth's gesture we feel the mystery and excitement of a body animated by a unique spirit, pointing to nothing but itself and the bed on which it rests.

Agnes' gesture moves us, insofar as it does, because it reminds us of aspirations for the good life that we can articulate to ourselves and to others. Steerforth's gesture stirs us, as it hauntingly does, not because we see beyond it into something else, but because it is made, for us, a sensuous reality, because, by the spell of erotic and incantatory language we are brought, ourselves, into the charmed world of love. The emotion we feel when that language stirs us with its own magic is something akin to David's emotion. We feel toward that arm some part of the inexplicable erotic excitement, the stir of tumultuous feeling, and the sheer indefeasible devotion to a particular person that are present in David's love. And in that gesture we are led, as David is led, beyond morality. The hand curves along the pillow, fingers pointing onwards.[35]

34. See also p. 289: "I feel that there are goodness, peace, and truth, wherever Agnes is; and that the soft light of the coloured window in the church, seen long ago, falls on her always, and on me when I am near her, and on everything around."

35. For the association of Steerforth with horizontal movement "on," see pp. 488, 489, and the descriptions of him as sailor. See also p. 377: "I knew that his restless nature and bold spirits delighted to find a vent in rough toil and bad weather."

Dickens's opposition of gestures disturbs us, making us aware (as we pass from one point of view to the other) of many of the problematic features of erotic love that we have already mentioned here in reflecting on Smith. And we are all the more disturbed because we respond to the gesture against our will, so to speak, against our expectation even. Just when we thought we were most morally secure in our judgment upon Steerforth's character, there we are, watching that bed in the moonlight, ready to weep. We notice love's mysterious character of inexplicable intimacy. We notice how, caught up in that moment, we don't see out for others, and we won't be seen by them. We don't care to attend to the injustice done to poor Mr. Mell; we suspend all general sympathy. We don't even care for Ham Peggotty, since we know, with Em'ly, that he is indeed a "chuckleheaded fellow" and that we too would gladly have followed Steerforth wherever he beckoned. And we certainly won't permit Agnes to look in at us in these moments, telling us what a bad angel he is, and speaking of moral uplift. The minute we, like David, hear Steerforth's footsteps, we react as David did, when he says that they made "my heart beat high and the blood rush to my face" (p. 485). And Agnes, though we don't exactly dismiss her, is closed up for the time being in a sanctuary from which she is not permitted, so to speak, to look out or look on: As David says:

> I was never unmindful of Agnes, and she never left that sanctuary in my thoughts—if I may call it so—where I had placed her from the first. But when he entered, and stood before me with his hand out, the darkness that had fallen on him changed to light, and I felt confounded and ashamed of having doubted one I loved so heartily. I loved her none the less; I thought of her as the same benignant, gentle angel in my life; I reproached myself, not her, with having done him an injury; and I would have made him any atonement if I had known what to make, and how to make it. (p. 485)

Much of this novel takes place in the daylight world, a world of social and other-regarding concern, a world in which the good heart cares for each part of its context and strives, with active sympathy, to do good. This world is also a world in which David can explain to us *why* each thing is good or bad, a world in which his feelings are always in proportion to these reasons and play an active part, we might say, in compassionate reason-giving social discourse. But we have already been made aware, from the beginning of the novel, that there is a darker world in this book as well, a world of shadows and spirits—and that the narrator presents himself to us not only as a person who has access to that other world, but also as someone who has a female double, pretty and susceptible, dwelling in that world. He has, then, access to that double, that realm. And it is in this counterworld, set over and against, or rather around the margins of the world of sympathetic morality—that the love of Daisy and Steerforth (of the Sultan and Scheherazade) is situated.

David's love for Steerforth contains, certainly, a great deal that the spectator could see: admiration for Steerforth's strength and boldness, his courage and intelligence, his power to do almost anything without apparent effort, his outspokenness and geniality, the way he protects and cares for David. And Steerforth's love for David (for I think we may really speak of love here) can, though more obscure,

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be similarly understood, in part: it addresses itself to Daisy's freshness, brightness, and innocence, his trust, his intelligence, his loyalty. David often gives expression to the communicable admiring side of his love, as if he were trying to satisfy himself that it could be explained to others, that reasons could be given, bringing it out into the public world.[36] But the shortcomings of his attempts only convince us the more that it is not entirely an articulable relation.[37]

We are aware, then, from the beginning, that there is, as well, in this love, much that the spectator could not enter into—and that, insofar as we can and do, we are being led by the novel outside of the spectatorial role. The physical erotic attraction of the pair is only a part of this mysterious side. But it is stressed, in David's frequent remarks about Steerforth's good looks,[38] in his account of his physical reaction to Steerforth's presence, heart beating and blood rushing, in his jealousy of Steerforth's other friends (p. 416), in his response to the sensuous gesture of head and arm. In the punctiliousness, too, with which he informs us that he and Steerforth "parted with friendly heartiness at his door" (p. 347), slept under separate roofs at Yarmouth, and so on; in his obsessive thought of the touch of Steerforth's hand; in Steerforth's wish to be acquainted with David's shadowy sister, in the "dashing way he had of treating me like a plaything" (p. 358), in the flirtatious use of the name Daisy.

But the erotic/romantic relation goes beyond both liking and erotic flirtation. We have a sense of a secret world, dense with conversation, storytelling, ease and laughter, with magic spells and the charm of being understood and loved. From the first, Steerforth beckons to the part of David that has access to the shadowy world: "Whatever I had within me that was romantic and dreamy, was encouraged by so much story-telling in the dark." (p. 146) His first meal with Steerforth initiates him into a universe of moonlight and magic, the blue glare of the phosphorous box shedding over everything its strange alluring light:

> How well I recollect our sitting there, talking in whispers; or their talking, and my respectfully listening, I ought rather to say; the moonlight falling a little way into the room, through the window, painting a pale window on the floor, and the greater part of us in shadow, except when Steerforth dipped a match into a phosphorus-box, when he wanted to look for anything on the board, and shed a blue glare over us that was gone directly! A certain mysterious feeling, consequent on the darkness, the secrecy of the revel, and the whisper in which everything was said, steals over me again, and I listen to all they tell me with a vague feeling of solemnity and awe. . . . (p. 138)

Steerforth, in this world, is the magician, shedding his strange light; and David is again in his presence, even as he brings us there. This love is at home in the night, in the bedroom; and its power of enchantment seems almost to have created around David the moonlit world. For we are made uncomfortably aware, always, of Steerforth's inexplicable power to charm:

> There was an ease in his manner—a gay and light manner it was, but not swaggering—which I still believe to have borne a kind of enchantment with it. I still believe him, in virtue of this carriage, his animal spirits, his delightful voice, his handsome face and figure, and, for aught I know, of some inborn power of attraction besides (which I think a few people possess), to have carried a spell with him to which it was a natural weakness to yield, and which not many persons could withstand. (p. 157)

It's this, of course, that Agnes finds so objectionable. The essence of this love, we have to say, is an enchantment that cannot be explained, that is too particular to be explained. The enchantment constitutes a mutual relationship of intimacy, in which David is "nearer to his heart than any other friend,"[39] and Steerforth inhibits David's dreams (p. 347).

Furthermore, we are, as readers, led by the novelist's art (by the vividness of perceptual memory that is, David tells us, at the heart of his own narratorial gift) to enter, ourselves, the shadowy world and to feel its enchantment through the enchanting power of David's poetic use of language. Led into the imaginings and habits characteristic of love, we, too, recognize the body by its posture on the beach and participate, mourning, in David's final farewell to the hand he has touched so often:

> I went through the dreary house, and darkened the windows. The windows of the chamber where he lay, I darkened last. I lifted up the leaden hand, and held it to my heart; and all the world seemed death and silence, broken only by his mother's mourning. (p. 873)

The chapter ends; the silence is also ours.

This romantic and participatory conception of readership is not only built into the structure of the novel, into the erotic ways in which it beckons to the reader. It is also explicitly described in the novel as David's own experience of readership in early life. Reading novels is his refuge from the gloomy religion of the Murdstones, and his renewal of contact with his father in the world of ghosts and spirits. His reading is passionately, generously involved, as he enacts in fantasy his favorite plots and their relations:

36. See especially his praise of Steerforth to Mr. Peggotty, p. 196: praise of Steerforth is David's "favourite theme."

37. In this same scene David tells Mr. Peggotty that "it's hardly possible to give him as much praise as he deserves." And the excitement that is, he tells us, in his whole manner as he speaks of Steerforth, excites little Em'ly, who begins to fall in love from this moment.

38. On Steerforth's good looks, see for example, "very good-looking" (p. 136); "his nice voice, and his fine face, and his easy manner, and his curling hair" (p. 139); "what a noble fellow he was in appearance" (p. 151); "the clustering curls of his hair" (p. 346); "the figure of a handsome well-formed young man" (p. 345); his "handsome head" (p. 488). At p. 345, he wishes to hug Steerforth, but is held back "for very shame, and the fear that it might displease him"; instead "I grasped him by both hands and could not let them go." Here we may have a clue as to why David, in recalling his fascination with Steerforth, and in the scenes of fascination themselves, tends to focus on the *sleeping* Steerforth: shame impedes acknowledgment of his strong feelings at any other time.

39. Strictly speaking, this records David's belief; but it seems, so far as we can tell, to be true; Steerforth values Daisy in a unique way, and blesses him.

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> My father had left a small collection of books in a little room upstairs, to which I had access (for it adjoined my own) and which nobody else in our house ever troubled. From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time,—they, and the *Arabian Nights,* and the *Tales of the Genii,*—and did me no harm; for whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me; *I* knew nothing of it. . . . It is curious to me how I could ever have consoled myself under my small troubles (which were great troubles to me), by impersonating my favourite characters in them—as I did—and by putting Mr and Miss Murdstone into all the bad ones—which I did too. I have been Tom Jones (a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature) for a week together. I have sustained my own idea of Roderick Random for a month at a stretch, I verily believe. I had a greedy relish for a few volumes of Voyages and Travels—I forget what, now—that were on those shelves; and for days and days I can remember to have gone about my region of our house, armed with the centre-piece out of an old set of boot-trees—the perfect realization of Captain Somebody, of the Royal British Navy, in danger of being beset by savages, and resolved to sell his life at a great price. The Captain never lost dignity, from having his ears boxed with the Latin Grammar. I did; but the Captain was a Captain and a hero, in despite of all the grammars of all the languages in the world, dead or alive.
>
> This was my only and my constant comfort. When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life. Every barn in the neighborhood, every stone in the church, and every foot of the churchyard, had some association of its own, in my mind, connected with these books, and stood for some locality made famous in them. I have seen Tom Pipes go climbing up the church-steeple; I have watched Strap, with the knapsack on his back, stopping to rest himself upon the wicket-gate; and I *know* that Commodore Trunnion held that club with Mr Pickle, in the parlour of our little village alehouse.
>
> The reader now understands, as well as I do, what I was when I came to that point of my youthful history to which I am now coming again. (pp. 105–6)

This is an important passage; for it tells us clearly how powerful novel-reading is in and for life, how surely it forms the life of fantasy, how surely fantasy shapes, for good or ill, the reader's relations with the world. David, as reader, is in no sense detached or judicious, as Adam Smith seems to recommend. He is a romantic and passionate participant. He peoples the world with the characters he loves, and puts his whole life into enacting the story. And the habits of desire formed by the novels he reads are kinetic and erotic, conducive to falling in love in life.

We have spoken of falling in love with Steerforth. Now we can see that this is the sort of novel-reading David knows and cultivates. The love of a fictional character can be love because it is an active and interactive relationship that sustains the reader for many hours of imagining, of fiction-making, beyond the time spent with the page itself; and because, in this relation, the mysterious and ineffable charm of interaction with a powerful presence can be experienced in much the

way it is in life; because, too, the reader is at the same time a reader of his or her own life, bringing to the imagining the hopes and loves of real life. Of course this interaction takes place in fantasy. But David insists upon the closeness of its links to love in life: its activation of the same generous, outgoing and erotic impulses, its power to transform the texture of the world. And he also indicates that the loves we find in life owe, themselves, a great deal to the storytelling imagination and to romantic projection. This does not mean that they are based upon *illusion* in any pejorative sense, as we shall see; the way one thing is associated with another, the richness of the intersection of one image with many others, all this is not mere deception, but part of the texture of life, and a part of life's excitement. Part, too, of our ability to endow a perceived form with a human life: in that sense, all sympathy, all morality, is based on a generous fantasy. Without "fancy" Mr. Gradgrind's pupils cannot see truly, cannot love.

Now, however, we are prepared to notice something further about the novel's portrayal of storytelling. Steerforth is not only a character and an episode inside this novel; not only an object of love for its readers; he is also unmistakably linked with the novelist's craft. Most obvious is the fact that, whereas Agnes is associated with school books (historical and philosophical and religious, presumably, not literary[40]), Steerforth and David meet to tell stories. It is David's ability to recreate the world of his favorite novels, to be Scheherezade, that first draws Steerforth to him. His love of Steerforth has been prepared, as we have suggested, by novel-reading; and he links Steerforth with the protective father who gave him novels to read, and who lives in the shadowy world. The onward erotic movement of storytelling is the movement of their love—whereas we associate Agnes, on the other side, with stained glass and sermons, rest and immobility.[41]

This connection is brought out very clearly when David meets Steerforth again after the years of absence. He has just seen his first professional stage production of Shakespeare, and the mystery of that event prepares him for romantic love:

> But the mingled reality and mystery of the whole show, the influence upon me of the poetry, the lights, the music, the company, the smooth stupendous changes of glittering and brilliant scenery, were so dazzling, and opened up such illimitable regions of delight, that when I came out into the rainy street, at twelve o'clock at night, I felt as if I had come from the clouds, where I had been leading a romantic life for ages, to a bawling, splashing, link-lighted, umbrella-struggling, hackney-coach-jostling, patten-clinking, muddy, miserable world. (p. 344)[42]

40. See p. 288, where she shows him how to study from his schoolbooks. Since David has to be shown how to use them, it is clear (as it is in any case, given the educational methods of the day) that they are not novels.

41. For descriptions of Agnes as "calm," "placid," "quiet," "tranquil," see pp. 279, 280, 288, 326, 430, etc.

42. The play is Julius Caesar, significant for the way in which it, too, links love and morality. And notice that David finds something altogether new and better in the historical events, when they are displayed as literature, than he found in them before from his history lessons: "To have all those noble Romans alive before me, and walking in and out for my entertainment, instead of being the stern taskmasters they had been at school, was a most novel and delightful effect."

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He now sees his own past life through the play, as if it is "a shining transparency, through which I saw my earlier life moving along" (p. 345); and into this charmed picture enters "the figure of a handsome well-formed young man dressed with a tasteful easy negligence which I have reason to remember very well" (p. 345). Steerforth has returned; the mystery of literature opens onto the other mystery.

What is more, the literary association is unmistakeably linked with the generous and loving feelings that draw him to Steerforth:

> At another time I might have wanted the confidence or the decision to speak to him, and might have put it off until next day, and might have lost him. But, in the then condition of my mind, where the play was still running high, his former protection of me appeared so deserving of my gratitude, and my old love for him overflowed my breast so freshly and spontaneously, that I went up to him at once, with a fast-beating heart, and said: "Steerforth! won't you speak to me?" (p. 345)

Here David shows that love in life interacts in complicated ways with fantasy, memory, and projection. That, indeed, insofar as it involves endowing a perceived form with a mind and heart, in this way going beyond the evidence, it is always a kind of generous fiction-making. All love is, in that sense, love of fictional characters; and literature trains us for that element in love. This fiction-making, we clearly see here, need not be pernicious or self-deceptive. His fantasy has led David outside himself to see Steerforth with love and to focus generously on his actual presence. Fantasy and a genuine relatedness are mutually supportive, as the imagining of the play makes him more keenly aware of what is outside him, and prompts a generous outpouring of feeling.[43]

These are only the most obvious links between erotic/romantic love and literary narration in the novel. What we need now to record is that, through very many hints, the character and effect of Steerforth himself are linked with the novelist's task, until we cannot help asking who wrote the text we are reading, and what is happening to us as we read. Steerforth makes his first appearance in the novel as writing: "There was one boy—a certain J. Steerforth—who cut his name very deep and very often" (p. 131). Writing and an erotic romanticism are unmistakably linked; writing itself is eroticized and romanticized as bold, deep, cutting onward movement, dedicated to the particular, to a proper name. And consider the attributes of Steerforth as romantic charmer. "He is such a speaker . . . that he can win anybody over; and I don't know what you'd say if you were to hear him sing, Mr. Peggotty" (p. 196). "Steerforth could always pass from one subject to another with a carelessness and lightness that were his own" (p. 349). We know of "his natural gift of adapting himself to whomsoever he pleased, and making direct, when he cared to do it, to the main point of interest in anybody's heart" (p. 367). "How lightly and easily he carried on, until he brought us, by degrees, into a charmed circle" (p. 375). He "could become anything he liked at any moment" (p. 402). He charms even Rosa Dartle with "the fascinating influence

43. Compare Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984) on projection and love. On endowing a bodily form with life, see Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York, 1979), Part IV.

of his delightful art" (p. 495).[44] Aren't these all traits of a good novelist? And aren't these, as well, the arts that are being practiced on us, even as we read? The novel is written, for a great part of its length, from the moral point of view, clearly, the point of view of the compassionate spectator. But now we see, too, another art that writes it; and we are made to ask whether it isn't that art that is, somehow, more organizing, more fundamental.

One strange exchange makes the connection more complex still. Shortly before Steerforth departs for Yarmouth, he makes of his Daisy a singular request:

> "Daisy," he said, with a smile—"for though that's not the name your godfathers and godmothers gave you, it's the name I like best to call you by—and I wish, I wish, I wish, you could give it to me."
> "Why so I can, if I choose," said I. (p. 497)

This extraordinary response reminds us of the novelist's power to give names to things, to transform evil to good, guilt to innocence—or to move altogether beyond that distinction, if he so chooses. The novel can, if it chooses, fulfill our hopes for innocence and the ubiquity of morality; or, if it chooses, it can simply love Steerforth as he is and allow his charm to remain, as it does remain, untouched, at the novel's heart. David has neither changed Steerforth to Daisy nor simply condemned him; and yet he might have done either had he so chosen.

And there is something more. We are made to recall that, as so many other suggestions have indicated, Steerforth *is* in a sense the author of this novel, the creator of its erotic charm. Perhaps, then, this author has, in writing the novel, called himself David or Daisy, has separated out, given separate representation to, a strain of innocence and purity in his complex heart. Dickens's Preface, read as a part of the narrative, reminds us of the complex relation of the passionate and tumultuous Dickens character to his own many-sided creation. For he has, after all, made himself into Daisy—but into a Daisy so wrapped up in Steerforth that he sees him and loves him without condemnation, despite the allure of morality. And he has made as well, in this scene, a Steerforth who wishes to be Daisy, whose selfishness is qualified by a real love of Daisy. He has made, then, in the relation of the two, a love that lies beyond strict morality and the distinction between guilt and innocence, and yet at the same time a love that moves us as something whose

44. Rosa Dartle is the one other character in the novel who both passionately loves Steerforth and sees him as a whole. But her self-absorbed jealous vindictive love is strongly contrasted with David's nonjudgmental generosity. Like Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit*, she shows how a preoccupation with resentment and judgment undercuts the generous outward impulse to love that is for Dickens essential to the moral life. And in the scene in which Rosa harshly confronts Em'ly we are made to understand how thoroughly her stern judgmental morality, which has its origins, unmistakably, in the fantasy of persecution and injury, differs from David's morality, which has its origins in a different sort of fantasy, loving and concerned with the projection into the world of images of the figures who are most loved. Dickens clearly links the latter sort of imagination with the power to write a novel; and through Miss Wade's narrative in *Little Dorrit* he shows us that imagination of the former sort is incapable of constructing a narrative in which the reader can participate as a friend. In the present passage, in which narrative art charms even Rosa, Dickens indicates that the generous impulses involved in fiction making have the power to overcome the angry impulses connected with revenge.

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human value is not to be dismissed because it cannot be seen from the spectator's viewpoint. (And if Steerforth is Daisy he cannot, as we know, be killed at sea—so the identity question raises, for us, the possibility that Steerforth in some sense lives on.) The exchange continues:

> "Daisy, if anything should ever separate us, you must think of me at my best, old boy. Come! Let us make that bargain. Think of me at my best, if circumstances should ever part us!"
> "You have no best to me, Steerforth," said I, "and no worst. You are always equally loved, and cherished in my heart." (p. 497)

He keeps the bargain, even to the end of his writing. This novel, we now begin to see, contains the writing of J. Steerforth; it contains, as well, the writing of sympathetic morality. It is written by and in the tension between these two apparently irreconcilable viewpoints. But it contains, as well, something further, something not precisely equivalent either to the charms of romantic/erotic love or to the judgments of morality—a movement of the loving heart that mediates between those two worlds, and insists on joining them in a coherently, if complexly, loving work of art. There is a profound question, in fact—the question asked in the novel's opening sentence—about who the novel's hero is, and who its author.

But before we try to answer that question, and to describe the mediating attitude, we must return to the gesture of Agnes, examining the limits of moral spectatorship as the novel presents them. The failure of Agnes to inspire love in the reader is one of the novel's most insistent problems. One tends to suppose that it is inadvertent, a defect of Dickens's craft. But Dickens has given us enough hints about the subversive and Steerforthian character of novel writing and the imagination of the writer that we are motivated to question this first judgment. The novel's final lines strike us at first as merely cloying and not terribly effective:

> 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. (p. 950)

But there is a chill behind the sweetness. And the hand that points upward is, we sense, as cold as death. For, unmistakably and quite deliberately, Dickens has made the gesture of morality equivalent to the gesture of death. In the one previous appearance of this gesture in the narrative, the one on account of which David remembers the gesture, thinks it as characteristic of Agnes, and projects it onto the Agnes who is standing at his side, it means, quite simply, that Dora, his frivolous child wife, has died. Agnes comes downstairs from her patient's bedside to David, who is staring with grief at the dead body of Jip, Dora's little dog.

> "Oh, Agnes! Look, look, here!"
> —That face, so full of pity, and of grief, that rain of tears, that awful mute appeal to me, that solemn hand upraised towards Heaven!

As Agnes displays the proper emotions of the judicious spectator, her hand points upward, both toward heaven and toward Dora, lying dead upstairs. Her gesture connects death and uplift. In the ascent to heaven we see the death of romance, of playfulness, of childhood, of trifles (and "trifles," as David has just been thinking, "make the sum of life" [p. 838]). And, since good angels make it their business to vanquish bad angels, it is the death, as well, of Steerforth, of erotic romance.

In the chapter that follows, David makes the connection between Agnes's moral role and death explicit: for he suggests to us that the figure she represents in the stained glass window of his imagination may be none other than the Angel of Death:

> And now, indeed, I began to think that in my old association of her with the stained-glass window in the church, a prophetic foreshadowing of what she would be to me, in the calamity that was to happen in the fullness of time, had found a way into my mind. In all that sorrow, from the moment, never to be forgotten, when she stood before me with her upraised hand, she was like a sacred presence in my lonely house. When the Angel of Death alighted there, my child-wife fell asleep—they told me so when I could bear to hear it—on her bosom, with a smile. (p. 839)

Here, there is a movement of thought from Agnes's upraised gesture to the idea that she is a "sacred presence"; but this figure is closely associated, more or less elided, with the thought of the Angel of Death who visits the house. And the "her" on whose bosom Dora falls asleep is, in the narrative, Agnes; but in David's sentence the pronoun most naturally refers to the Angel. In this complex and ambiguous passage, we see how closely David links Agnes with death. Furthermore, at the close of the novel, David once again, and this time explicitly, imagines Agnes presiding at a death—in this case, his own. And she presides with that same gesture, "pointing upward." The gesture represents morality, and represents it as a death in the heart, a cessation of generous outward movement.

This ambivalence toward Agnes (characterized, always, with images of composure, rest, stained glass, tranquillity, as contrasted with Steerforth's restless horizontal movement) is deliberate. And even though the internal plot of the novel ends with a moral marriage, children, and the victory of Agnes, the real plot has a more complicated ending. For it ends, we must realize, with the writing of the entire novel; with the adventures of thought, emotion, and memory that take the hero as author into the shadowy world. It ends with the victory of the novel-writing heart.

It is made abundantly clear that this heart and its activities are concerned with morality. And yet we know perfectly well that Agnes would not approve of this book, or of her husband insofar as he occupies himself as its author. For the activity of memory brings the author, once again, into the living presence of James Steerforth, as in the present tense, again and again, he relives their evening adventures in the moonlight. In those moments he does not reject Agnes; he keeps her in a sanctuary in his heart. And yet he significantly departs from her and from her judgment—and in a way, we feel, in which he does not depart from himself, from his own morality and his own heart.

For we feel that there is, somehow, morality *in* the willingness to enter into that world of love, loving Steerforth without judgment. That the book is not simply

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displaying to us a tension or even an oscillation between two viewpoints that it shows as irreconcilable—but that it shows us, as a coherent movement of one and the same heart David's movement from the one to the other. David is himself in all his adventures. There is romance in his morality, morality in his romance.

To get clearer about this coherence, we can return to the novel's opening, where David tells us in no uncertain terms that there is a certain cast of imagination that is characteristic of him as novelist, and that this is also a morally valuable way of confronting the world:

> . . . I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. Indeed, 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; the rather, as I generally observe such men to retain a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood. (p. 61)

David tells us that he is not like most grown men in his childlike attention to and memory for the particularities of the world, in the freshness and susceptibility with which he confronts things. Adult life is seen as blurring the sensibilities, dulling the capacity for pleasure and delight. To write this novel, David has had to escape that blurring. It is clear that this perceptual freshness and this gentleness are what has permitted him to see the entire world of the novel as he wonderfully sees it. And so in this way, insofar as the novel has, through its vividness, a moral power, this childlike imagination has shown itself to be supportive of morality and moral responsiveness. It sees all around, with an intensity that brings sympathy to our hearts.

And yet we know perfectly well that it is this same susceptibility to delight and to the sensuously vivid, this nonjudgmentally loving attitude to the world, that has permitted David to fall in love and to be led outside of morality.[45] What I believe David indicates here, and shows in the construction of the novel as a whole, is that the posture of the heart that is best for morality—most vivid, most gentle and generous, most active in sympathy—is also more susceptible and less judgmental than Agnes' heart is, and is bound, in its mobile attention to particulars, to fall in love, and to feel for the object that it loves a non-judgmental loyalty that no moral authority, however judicious, can dislodge. (Agnes, we recall, was never really a child. Substitute for her dead mother, guardian of an alcoholic father, she makes her first appearance with keys at her side, "as staid and discreet

45. As a child, David, we recall, played the role of Tom Jones "for a week together" (p. 106). And he has much in common with that hero, in his combination of warmth and goodness with erotic susceptibility. David is at pains to insist that he played "a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature"; and in general that the "harm" that was in some of the books "was not there for me; I knew nothing of it." But we are encouraged by his later eroticism to be somewhat skeptical of these protestations—especially since the narrator plainly knows very well what "harm" there is in *Tom Jones*. And it would indeed be a strange reader of Fielding's novel who did not notice its physical, earthy, and erotic content. The entirety of *David Copperfield* is in many ways a continuation of *Tom Jones*, but with the more romantic understanding of love that it now recommends.

a housekeeper as the old house could have" (p. 280).[46] Love is, in a sense, outside of morality, in the sense we have described. And yet it is a natural movement of the most truly human morality, and its fitting completion.[47]

In the act of writing this book, an act of which neither Steerforth nor Agnes would have been capable, David achieves a human completeness that they both fail to attain. His moral spectatorship and his love are, though in tension, all of a piece. His love is full of sympathy and loyalty, his sympathetic spectatorship of loving susceptibility to the particular.

There is one more arm in this novel that we must now consider. And its gesture shows us, I think, how the novel understands the mediating link between the other two. For the third arm that recurs prominently in David's memory is the arm of Peggotty, who lovingly supports his dying mother's head. Peggotty foresees, long before, that she will want that arm, and at the end she takes it:

> Daybreak had come, and the sun was rising, when she said to me, how kind and considerate Mr Copperfield had always been to her, and how he had borne with her, and told her, when she doubted herself, that a loving heart was better and stronger than wisdom, and that he was a happy man in hers. "Peggotty, my dear," she said then, "put me nearer to you," for she was very weak. "Lay your good arm underneath my neck," she said, "and turn me to you, for your face is going far off, and I want it to be near." I put it as she asked; and oh Davy! the time had come when my first parting words to you were true—when she was glad to lay her poor head on her stupid cross old Peggotty's arm—and she died like a child that had gone to sleep! (p. 186)

The gesture, connected with the reflection that a loving heart is better and stronger than wisdom, is, above all, a gesture of loving attention, support, and connection. It is different from our other two gestures, in that it cannot be imagined, even as a gesture, without imagining two people; it is a relation. It is different, too, in that, rather than pointing to or standing for something—even for the presence of someone uniquely loved—it actively *does* something. Agnes' static gesture of uplift,

46. The portrait of Agnes captures in a striking manner the features of a certain sort of child of an alcoholic parent, as these are emerging in the recent clinical literature. The inability to play or to enjoy childhood, the difficulty in feeling and expressing strong emotion, a judgmental attitude to self and others, a fear of vulnerability—all are striking similarities.

In this connection, we can perhaps understand why Agnes is so drawn to David, who has an emotional robustness that she lacks and needs. And though for the most part Agnes remains in her ambivalently drawn moralizing role, the narrative permits her one expression of nonjudgmental individualized love. When she is about to confess her love for David, she repeatedly insists, "I am not myself" (pp. 934–35). And when they do embrace, there is, in Agnes' life, a moment of childhood: "And O, Agnes, even out of thy true eyes, in that same time, the spirit of my child-wife looked upon me, saying it was well." Does this single moment produce a more lasting evolution? The descriptions of Agnes at the end of the novel allow us to doubt this. And indeed, since David speaks of the fresh imagination as something *preserved* from childhood, it seems unlikely that someone who had to that extent been completely deprived of a childhood could ever securely or stably attain it.

47. Dora shows, however, that the childlike imagination is insufficient, without further development, for adult morality. Frozen in early childhood, she lacks both dimensions of David's further development: the erotic and the moral.

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Steerforth's sleepy gesture of erotic presence, neither of these in itself does good for someone in this world. They are, merely, gestures. But this gesture is also an action, an action of love and unquestioning unjudgmental loyalty, of attention and responsiveness to a beloved particular. By being connected with Peggotty, the gesture is linked with the gentle childlike imagination that neither she nor David has ever lost. By being connected with the advice of David's father, it is also connected with the father's love of novels. And the fact that the gesture is a gesture of love and support toward David's mother shows us, even more fundamentally, its significance in his imagination, a way in which he understands, through that gesture, the link between his own delight in particulars and the two worlds of romance and morality.

For David's childlike imagination is not only drawn to the world by a general delight in the perception of the particular. It is drawn, from the first, by a very passionate perception of one particular above all. David's mother is the first particular thing he loves, the first object of the fresh delight, the gentleness, and the pleasure of which he tells us. And his connection to his mother combines, from the first, in a coherent way, perceptions of her beauty and kindness with incipient moral attitudes—above all tenderness, gratitude for support, and a corresponding desire to support and protect; and combines both of these, clearly, with intensely romantic feelings. (This is dramatized in many ways: in his remembrance of his mother's grace and beauty; in his jealousy of Murdstone even before his villainous character is known; in his developing fantasy of himself in the role of his mother's rescuer and true support, a fantasy deeply involved in his novel enacting—for we are told whom he casts as the villain, whom as the hero, and the identity of the heroine can hardly elude us; and finally in the extraordinary fantasy, before his mother's grave, in which he imagines (wishes) that the dead baby in her arms "was myself, as I had once been, hushed forever on her bosom" [p. 187].)

Romance, morality, and a mediating attitude of loyal support and connection are linked for him because they have been linked from the start. The pattern of all his relationships, however various, contains these basic ingredients, the ingredients that mark his earliest fantasies and encounters. And love conquers retentiveness and stern judgment in his heart because loving support, linked with novel-reading, from the first got ahead of the fear of punishment, linked for him with the Murdstones' religious moralism.[48]

David's movement from morality toward Steerforth, and his refusal to judge the person he loves, are, then, motivated not only by romantic desire, but by a complex attitude in which desire is linked with active loyalty and support, fantasy with the true perception of the particular. (Steerforth is, to be sure, a parental figure, protective and supportive; but David also, clearly, supports and protects him in his recklessness.) And this active love is linked strongly with susceptibility to romance and erotic desire, through the portrait of the childlike imagination as delighting in the sensuous world. If Agnes, in the novel, represents wisdom—as there is much reason to think she does, learned and religious as she is—David's

48. Dora, by contrast, is shown to lack the particular type of relationship to her parents that would promote onward movement toward adult erotic and moral attitudes. Her determination to go on playing and to refuse responsibility is encouraged by those around her.

love emerges as the love that is "better and stronger than wisdom." If Agnes is the judicious spectator, he is, as a mobile participant, stronger than the spectator. His very susceptibility to extramoral danger is part of his strength, and part of the strength of his love. Morality, at its most generous and best, is something mobile and even volatile, something actively caring and sustaining. Its gestures will be nothing more than gestures of death, if it does not retain its capability to move beyond itself into love.

In this way, the novel powerfully criticizes, as morally limited and ungenerous, an image of moral judgment dominant in the Scottish-English tradition, substituting for it a more romantic, yet, it is also suggested, also a more deeply moral norm. At the same time it continues, in its own way, the task that Smith assigned to the novel: the task of constituting its readers as moral subjects, according to this new and broader conception of morality. Only now, instead of surrendering romantic fantasy before the judgment of judicious perception, instead of dispelling the shadowy world by calling in the daylight of judicious spectatorship, the reader is encouraged to bring that fantasy and mysterious excitement into the world of reality, and to use the energy of fantasy toward a just and generous vision.[49]

The novel gives us no assurance that a single love, a single human relationship, can by itself contain and combine the sympathy of the spectator, the mystery of the erotic/romantic, and the mobile love of particulars that mediates between them. For although David's complex attitude seems to have its origin in a single relationship, he represents himself, in later life, as finding the mediation only in the act of novel-writing itself. Like other novelists with tumultuous or problematic personal lives (I think, among others, of Proust), Dickens too—insofar as he makes himself, for us, a character—represents himself as finding only in his craft the moral synthesis he imagines. But the reader is shown, nonetheless, a paradigm and a possibility. If we do not cling rigidly to the ideal of the judicious spectator, but allow ourselves a more kinetic sympathy, susceptible to the fresh perception of the particular, we may find less tension and discontinuity than Adam Smith did between the romantic/erotic and the moral. And we might even discover that in a single adult relationship all of these attitudes could be more or less coherently combined, and could even support and sustain one another, constructing among them a world in which general sympathy, erotic moonlight, and active generous loyalty live together in conversation. Something like the world of this novel.[50]

49. The novel itself represents itself as a true vision of reality propelled by fantasy of a particular sort.

50. This paper was first presented at a conference on Love at the National Humanities Center; I am grateful to Jean Hagstrum for organizing the conference and inviting the paper. At the conference it had the benefit of stimulating comments by David Halperin, whose Proustian skepticism about the romantic attitudes expressed here produced a lively discussion and provoked me to develop more fully the parts of the paper dealing with the generosity of fantasy. I am also grateful to Amelie Rorty, to Michael de Paul, to Henry Richardson, and to Christopher Rowe for helpful comments, and to audiences at the Tri-College Colloquium at Amherst College, at Randolph-Macon College (Ashland), at Furman University, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and at Whitman College, for their helpful remarks. Above all I am grateful to Rachel for reading the novel well and getting me to read it again.

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