



RECONSTRUCTING FRAGMENTS OF CHARLES DICKENS' (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY THROUGH "DAVID COPPERFIELD"

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Abstract

It is said that Charles Dickens managed to reveal through his literary work more than any historian could have ever revealed through historical documents: the Victorian society with its values and needs. But the writer, too, was part of this society that he described. The paper is an attempt at identifying (auto)biographical data in Dickens' novel "David Copperfield", with a view to shaping the man behind the novel, the writer who corresponded with his readers, but also the child who visited his father in the debtors' prison, briefly, the man in relation to the age he lived in. The first part of the paper will focus on introducing the key concepts, the second part will deal with (auto)biographical data in "David Copperfield", and the last part will contain the conclusions.

Rezumat

Se spune că Charles Dickens a reușit să dezvăluie prin opera sa literară mai mult decât orice alt istoric ar fi putut vreodată dezvălui prin documente istorice: societatea victoriană cu valorile și nevoile sale. Dar și scriitorul făcea parte din această societate pe care a descris-o. Lucrarea reprezintă o încercare de a identifica date (auto)biografice în romanul „David Copperfield” de Charles Dickens, în vederea conturării omului din spatele textului, scriitorul care corespunde cu cititorii săi, dar și copilul ce și-a vizitat tatăl în închisoarea datornicilor, pe scurt, omul în relație cu epoca în care a trăit. Prima parte a lucrării se va concentra pe concepte-cheie, a doua va fi dedicată datelor (auto)biografice din romanul „David Copperfield”, iar ultima secțiune va conține concluziile.

I. According to the “Merriam-Webster Dictionary”¹ the term ‘autobiography’ is “the biography of a person narrated by himself or herself”, while ‘biography’ is “a usually written history of a person's life, an account of the life of something (an animal, a coin, a building etc.)”. The “Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners” describes the term ‘autobiography’ as “a book about your life that you write yourself”, and the term ‘biography’ as “a book that someone writes about someone else's life [...] a. biographies considered as a type of literature”². Our reason for using the term ‘(auto)biography’ in the title is the following: we consider that Charles Dickens wrote a lot of ‘biographies’ of the Victorian society and age – his novels – in which he also included ‘fragments’ of his own life, his autobiography. The fact is we cannot neglect either of these in our current analysis, since our major study material is, first of all, constituted by Dickens' novels, and, secondly, by what other critics say.

Briefly, Victorianism means industrialization, urbanization, expansion of trade, economic growth, invention, democracy, feminism, unionization of workers, Marxism, socialism, Darwinism, utilitarianism, realism, doubt, materialism, (apparent) stability, respectability and domesticity, the Reform Acts, riots and civil disorders, workhouses and the Poor Law Amendment Act, transition, Chartism, and others: “There is much in nineteenth-century history that seems to diminish the stature of man in comparison with impersonal processes over which he had little control; but Victorian England also supplies many reassuring examples of man's ability to organize some sort of social orderliness out of apparently inevitable chaos”³.

As far as the Victorian writing style is concerned, according to J. H. Newman, writing should express the author's mind and life, and the subjects should be treated appropriately; the written page is: “‘the lucid mirror’ of its author's ‘mind and life’; and on it he tries ‘to give forth what he has

¹www.merriam.

²MEDAL, 2002, p. 79, 125.

³Ford, 1990, p. 16.

within him; and from his earnestness it comes to pass that, whatever be the splendour of his diction or the harmony of his periods, he has with him the charm of an incommunicable simplicity. Whatever be his subject, high or low, he treats it suitably and for its own sake”⁴.

The only secret of style was to say what you had to say as clearly as possible and for W. Pater the style and the manner are the man himself, “in absolutely apprehension of what is most real to him”⁵.

Despite the public optimism and positivism, the nineteenth century was also a century of paradoxes and uncertainties. The contrast between social unrest and the affirmation of values and standards which are still referred to as Victorian values, represents an essential paradox of the age: ‘the Victorian compromise’ implied a “double standard between national success and the exploitation of lower-class workers at home and of colonies overseas; a compromise between philanthropy and tolerance (the abolition of slavery, 1833; tolerance for Catholics, 1929) and repression (the punishment of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, 1834; the conditions of the poor)”⁶.

It is normal that the literature of the time should reflect these concerns; the novel as a form became hugely popular and it was the novelists rather than the poets who became literary representatives of the age. There is, throughout the entire Victorian period, a movement towards democracy – as there was in the rest of Europe – and the novel was the perfect shape to express all this. The life of Charles Dickens can be seen to mirror the intellectual patterns of the Victorian age. His novels established him as a comic novelist, a good observer of character; the more serious tone of his works is given by his play on his readers’ awareness of social problems and the growing conscience of the age; his vivid descriptions of workhouses, factories, the conditions and problems of poor children and of the poor generally.

II. The full title of the novel which constitutes the object of our analysis is “The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (Which He Never Meant to be Published On Any Account)”. The words used in this title may be thus interpreted: ‘history’, ‘adventures’ and ‘experience’ may represent the character’s process of becoming, the shaping of identity; but the word ‘observation’ is the one drawing our greater attention: is it the observation of life and everything else by David Copperfield – the character constructed by Dickens -, or is the observation of David Copperfield – the child – by David/Charles Dickens – the grown-up? In trying to answer this question, we will also deal, in a comparative manner which will make use of the text of the novel and, mainly, of John Forster’s biography of Dickens – “The Life of Charles Dickens”, first published in 1872-1874 – with such aspects as: style of the novel, childhood, education, the figure of the father and the debtor’s prison, marriage, London. Before proceeding, we should mention the fact that John Forster was not only a biographer of Dickens, but also a close friend and adviser.

“David Copperfield” was first published in serial form (1849-50) and represented a climax in Dickens’ realistic descriptions of the society of the time, his faith and optimism. Dickens himself said of the novel that “I like this the best”⁷ and, indeed, it marked the high point of the first phase of his writing – where the hero “could achieve success, marry his (rather vapid) sweetheart Dora, and, after her death, the faithful Agnes, and where even the debt-ridden Mr. Micawber achieves respectability”.⁸ The novel is partially picaresque; it is inscribed by David in wonderings as a boy from Suffolk to London, from London to Dover and Canterbury, back to London as a young man, eventually to Switzerland and back again.

Briefly, “David Copperfield” is the story of David (born in England in about 1820), the protagonist, followed from childhood to maturity, through a series of adventures which include his stepfather’s ill treatment of him, David’s own struggles to get a proper education and his working in a factory in London, the constantly debt-ridden but gentle Mr. Micawber who

⁴Apud Buckler, 1958, p. 14.

⁵*ibidem*, p. XVII.

⁶Carter, 1997, p. 272.

⁷*ibidem*, p. 275.

⁸*ibidem*.

befriends David, David's two marriages with two different women, his becoming a father, and other events related to David and involving other equally well created characters. The fact that there are no railways in the novel, as in "Dombey and Son", locates the action in the 1820s at the latest.

Briefly, with the risk of doing Dickens an injustice since this is not all it can be said about his life, but for the sake of the current analysis, the writer was born at Portsmouth on the 7th of February 1812, being the second of eight children. His childhood experiences include his father's imprisonment for debt, Charles being sent to work in a blacking warehouse at the age of twelve, receiving little formal education but teaching himself shorthand and becoming a reporter of Parliamentary debates; after a slow start with "Sketches by Boz" and "The Pickwick Papers" (1836-1837), he became a publishing phenomenon and his characters the centre of a popular cult.

It has often been said that critics find "David Copperfield" hard to discuss, from various reasons that we can only guess: is it a simple, or a primarily comic book, or one for children mainly, or a book displaying the simplicities or complacencies of feeling of the English middle class; or a skeptical text "unmasking Victorian ideology, especially in such areas as class, or sexuality"⁹, or a nostalgic autobiography? When dealing with the problem of (auto)biography, one should know, first of all, that Dickens' son born on the 15th of January 1849 was named Henry Fielding in recognition of the style (eighteenth-century, picaresque and masculine in tone) of the novel that Dickens had just begun writing. In Chapter IV, David Copperfield mentions the books he reads: "Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, The Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, Robinson Crusoe, [...] the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Genii"¹⁰, books which had been left by his father in a "little room up-stairs"¹¹. All these books reflect the idealization of the eighteenth century and its novelists and, together with the numerous characters in the novel, relate an early interest in "individual physiognomies, in grotesquerie and characterization derived from the popular stage"¹².

But this fragment from the novel also brings to our attention the figure of the father: the father who had left a collection of books, a father who appreciated education, similar to Dickens' father who would have liked his son to go to school instead of being forced to work in a factory; the same figure of the gentle father can also be found in "Little Dorrit". The same happens with the idea of imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea Prison and the image of the little child visiting, or even living with, his/her incarcerated father. Here is the way in which Dickens portrayed his father, according to Forster's "Life of Dickens"¹³: "I know my father to be as kindhearted and generous a man as ever lived in the world. Everything that I can remember [...] is beyond all praise. By me, as a sick child, he has watched night and day, unweariedly and patiently, many nights and days. He never undertook any business, charge or trust, that he did not zealously, conscientiously, punctually, honourably discharge. His industry has always been untiring. He was proud of me, in his way, and had a great admiration of the comic singing."

The period of John Dickens' incarceration from February to May 1824 obliged Dickens, the child, to "discover an unwonted independence and, perhaps most influentially, a real familiarity with the streets, alleys, byways and short cuts of London"¹⁴. He has regularly walked to and from Hungerford Stairs and the Marshalsea when visiting his father: Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Micawber are both incarcerated for debt, respectively in the Fleet and the King's Bench Prison, and William Dorrit shares much of John Dickens' experience in the Marshalsea; Newgate Prison appears in "Sketches by Boz", "Oliver Twist", "Barnaby Rudge", "A Tale of Two Cities" and "Great Expectations"; Heep and Littimer become "'model' prisoners in a new 'model' prison at the end of "David Copperfield"¹⁵.

⁹Dickens, 2004, p. 12-13.

¹⁰Dickens, 2004, p. 66.

¹¹*ibidem*.

¹²*ibidem*, p. 13.

¹³Apud Dickens, 2004, p. 888.

¹⁴Sanders, 2003, p. 9.

¹⁵*ibidem*.

In 1822 the Dickenses moved to London, in a small suburban house in Bayham Street, Camden Town; this house, according to Andrew Sanders (2003: 4), was almost certainly the model for the Cratchits' modest house in "A Christmas Carol", and the cold winter of 1822 may well have contributed to the pictures of snowy Christmases in that story and in the "Pickwick Papers"; and "Camden Town was a slightly dowdy, lower middle-class district".¹⁶ Images of London's darker and dirty suburbs, ill-lit alleys and muddy pavements can be found in almost all of his novels. In chapter 27, David Copperfield goes in search of his friend Traddles who has taken a house close to Bayham Street and finds the address: "not as desirable a one as I could have wished it to be ... the inhabitants appeared to have a propensity to throw any little trifles they were not in want of, into the road: which not only made it rank, and sloppy, but untidy too, on account of the cabbage leaves".¹⁷

However, it was from Bayham Street that Dickens first began to explore the vast, varied metropolitan spaces, and John Forster describes the excitement and emotions stimulated by excursions from the northern suburbs: "There were then at the top of Bayham-street some almshouses, and were still when he re-visited it with me nearly twenty-seven years ago; and to go to this spot, he told me, and looks from it over the dust-heaps and dock-leaves and fields (no longer there when we saw it together) at the cupola of St Paul's looming through the smoke, was a treat that served him for hours of vague reflection afterwards. To be taken out for a walk into the real town, especially if it were anywhere about Covent-garden or the Strand, perfectly entranced him with pleasure. But, most of all, he had a profound attraction of repulsion to St Giles's. If he could only induce whomsoever took him out to take him through Seven-dials, he was supremely happy [...] 'Good Heaven!' he would exclaim, 'what wild visions of prodigies of wickedness, want, and beggary, arose in my mind out of that place!'"¹⁸.

Dickens' mother attempted to provide a second income by setting up a private school for girls in a house in Gower Street North, where the family also moved; but the school and the second income remained a dream and the family slipped further and further into debt. The atmosphere at the Micawbers' house - 'Mrs. Micawber's Boarding Establishment for Young Ladies' - described in Chapter II of David Copperfield probably resembles the atmosphere at 4 Gower Street North.

Dickens, who had grown up in London from the age of ten, revels in the intimate knowledge that enables him to trace his characters' steps district by district and alley by alley; but, as narrator, he deploys London in a diversity of ways. For example, Oliver, in "Oliver Twist", never identifies with the city, which remains a place of fear and wonder to him, and characters are, to a certain extent, inseparable from their environment, products of it¹⁹. And "Bleak House" starts with: "London. [...] As much water in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth [...] Dogs, undistinguishable in mire"²⁰. In "Great Expectations", Pip's sense of thwarted ambition reworks Dickens' autobiographical fragment about his time as a "poor little drudge"²¹ in London which he had previously incorporated into "David Copperfield" - "and I became, at ten years old, a little labouring hind in the service of Murdstone and Grinby"²² - : "Dickens' shame at being watched as he worked in the window of Waring's Blacking Warehouse lingers on in Pip's dread"²³ "that some unlucky hour I, being at my grimest and commonest, should lift up my eyes and see Estella looking in at one of the wooden windows of the forge"²⁴. On his way to London, "the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before [Pip]"²⁵ and on arriving to London: "while I was scared by the immensity of London, I think I might have had some faint

¹⁶*ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁷Dickens, 2004, p. 408.

¹⁸Apud Dickens, 2004, p. 889.

¹⁹Dickens, 2000, p. 17.

²⁰Dickens, 1994, p. 1.

²¹Dickens, 2008, p. 11.

²²Dickens, 2004, p. 164-165.

²³*ibidem*.

²⁴Dickens, 2008, p. 98.

²⁵*ibidem*, p. 146.

doubts whether it was not rather ugly, crooked, narrow and dirty”²⁶. The solitude and the want of and longing for education expressed in “Little Dorrit”, “Oliver Twist” or “Great Expectations”, besides “David Copperfield”, have also been recorded by Forster: “Taking pity on the solitary lad, he [a cousin by marriage, James Lamert] made and painted a little theatre for him. It was the only fanciful reality of his present life; but it could not supply what he missed most sorely, the companionship of boys of his own age, with whom he might share in the advantages of school, and contend for its prizes. His sister Fanny was at about the same time elected as a pupil to the royal academy of music; and he has told me what a stab to his heart it was, thinking of his own disregarded condition, to see her go away to begin her education, amid the tearful good wishes of everybody in the house”²⁷.

“David Copperfield” is considered to be, of all Dickens’ novels, “most typically Victorian, observing the conventions and principles associated with Victorian Realism”²⁸. It embodies a more positive and optimistic view of the condition of man in contemporary society, and, from the point of view of action and structure, it draws more closely to the quality and proportions of everyday life. Maybe this optimism can be traced back in Dickens’ life. Although his birth had been relatively humble, he had never attended a public school and neither a university, Dicken’s amazing literary career opened in 1833 with stories published in the “Monthly Magazine”. According to Sanders²⁹, Dickens was not a gentleman by birth, breeding or education; he had experienced little in the way of social and educational privilege and lacked both inherited status and financial resource, and influential school and university friends that could have helped or advised him in his career. From 1834 Dickens’ career as a journalist, and then as an author, advanced by rapid strides. In 1837, his 17-year-old sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, died suddenly in Dickens’ arms, probably of some kind of heart disease: he was emotionally devastated, and some critics have seen this profound attachment to Mary as exaggeratedly perverse and eclipsing his love for his wife. Dickens was to reanimate his grief for Mary in describing the death of the equally angelic Little Nell in “The Old Curiosity Shop”; she also constitutes the model for Dickens’ young, loving, passive, generous-minded heroines such as Rose Maylie in “Oliver Twist”, Agnes Wickfield in “David Copperfield”, Amy Dorrit in “Little Dorrit”.

In the 1830s Dickens had a romantic disappointment: he was attracted to Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a banker whom he met in 1830; the affair, disapproved of by her parents, ended in 1833, but there remained the material for the portrait of Dora Spenlow: “I loved Dora Spenlow to distraction! She was more than human to me. She was a Fairy, a Sylph, I don’t know what she was – any thing that no one ever saw, and everything that every body ever wanted. I was swallowed up in an abyss of love in an instant”³⁰.

In 1836 Dickens married Catherine Hogarth; David Copperfield first marries delightful but naïve Dora who dies from a miscarriage, and then the mature, sensible and lovely Agnes Wickfield who had always secretly loved him, and they have several children together.

III. In conclusion, what made “David Copperfield” be considered such an autobiographical novel is, first of all, and besides its similarities with Dickens’ own life, the text’s interest in the past and the retrospect. There are four chapters which contain this word in the title (Ch. XVIII “A Retrospect”; Ch. XLIII “Another Retrospect”; Ch. LIII “Another Retrospect”; Ch. LXIV “A last Retrospect”). Nevertheless, David Copperfield writes in the present tense, “canceling the past as past, thus making the past present.”³¹ The novel “is haunted” by the events of Dickens’ own life, but also by literature: Charlotte Brontë’s “Jane Eyre: An Autobiography”, the poetry of Wordsworth, Burns and Byron, Carlyle’s “Sartor Resartus”, the writings of Scott, Shakespeare and Chaucer.

²⁶ *ibidem*, p. 149.

²⁷ Apud Dickens, 2004, p. 888.

²⁸ Williams, 1974, p. 153.

²⁹ Sanders, 2003, p. 14-15.

³⁰ Dickens, 2004, p. 397.

³¹ Dickens, 2004, p. 23-24.

For both author and narrator there is, as we have also seen from Forster's "Life of Dickens", the memory of places: David Copperfield and Mr. Micawber visit Chatham (the place where Dickens had spent five years of his childhood) in different moments, and London becomes synonymous with aspects of Dickens' writing. The city moves in time, it becomes an image of the psyche which continues its attachment to things no longer existing.

Not only Dickens, but David Copperfield too, draws attention to autobiographical writing: before writing David Copperfield, the narrator says he has already written a story based on his experience, as a way of getting out of a three-year-long emotional crisis, caused by the death of Dora, Ham and Steerforth, and the emigration of so many friends. He comments in the novel on the validity of autobiography: "the memory of most of us can go farther back into such times than many of us suppose; just as I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy"³².

This quotation clearly suggests the fact that the text of the novel is based on a whole history which belongs to Dickens himself, a history containing other life stories, that of the real people behind his characters. Thus, "David Copperfield" is not only an autobiography, it is a search for a lost identity, a struggle to reconstruct a new identity out of old pieces and fragments.

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³²Dickens, 2004, p. 24.

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