Introduction

Shortly before her death in 1929, Kate Perugini, Charles Dickens's second daughter, described her father to her friend Gladys Storey. Kate returned repeatedly to the time after Dickens's separation from his wife Catherine, when all the children (except the oldest, Charley, the only child given a choice) had remained with their father, and Catherine had been forced out of the family house.[1] She recounted how their father would send his daughters to their music lessons across the street from where their mother lived, and Catherine Dickens would watch them from the windows of her house. "They would drive up and drive away," Storey reports, "but never call to see their mother."[2] Haunted by the "recollection of other lost opportunities to be kind to her mother," Kate turned back to those years, and the fear they all felt of their father: "My father was a wicked man – a very wicked man," she said; "We were *all* very wicked not to take her part."

It is tempting to invoke Kate Perugini as one of a series of witnesses against Charles Dickens, those readers (not least among them feminist critics) who have deplored his treatment of women, not only as a sign of the flatness and unrealistic nature of his fiction more generally, but as the signature mark of his inability to confront the complexity of adult (and particularly sexual) relations.[3] The women Orwell referred to as Dickens's "legless angels" – Little Nell, Agnes Wickfield, Esther Summerson, Amy Dorrit, and all of their dutiful ilk – have been conjured repeatedly as evidence against a writer as insidious as his own "Captain Murderer," who marries young virgins only to turn them to pie-making. At the end of their labors, after they have rolled out the crust and deplored the absence of a filling, Captain Murderer leads them to a mirror, shows them their own faces, cries out "*I* see the meat in the glass!" and, after beheading them, bakes and eats them.[4] The Dickens novel has seemed a similar machinery for the entrapment and consumption of gullible girls, and the novelist's wickedness has seemed inarguable. For

most critics (and indeed, for me at the beginning of this project) the only answer has been to turn to the dark, angry women who punctuate and disrupt the seemingly calm surface of the Dickens novel, characters like Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, Honoria Dedlock in *Bleak House*, Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit*, who seem to challenge the gender order (and gendered flatness) the fiction proffers.

Kate Perugini, however, tells a more complicated and more compelling story, one in which the role of the good daughter is complexly interwoven with that of her angry double: "My father was a wicked man . . . we were *all* very wicked not to take her part." The daughter, in recounting what is easily read as paternal violence, casts her own regretful look back at the mother's house as she proceeds to walk away from it; she seems to be poised between paternal law and maternal absence, unable entirely to turn away from the father whom she reported she loved "better than any man in the world – in a different way of course," but of whom she said also, "I loved him for his faults." She has constructed a narrative in which her father is at once guilty and helpless ("what could you expect of such an uncanny genius?" she asked Gladys Storey) and in which her guilt and complicity are unmitigated. Yet that sense of complicity hardly seems, in our terms, "realistic." As Storey reports,

> Mrs Perugini took her mother's part in-so-far as it was possible to do so. But the situation was a difficult one, since Dickens had sternly impressed upon them that "their father's name was their best possession" – which they knew to be true – and he expected them to act accordingly. (95)

The father's law is crafted explicitly in "the name of the father," and the father's name is, in a narrative of filial inheritance, imagined as the daughter's best (and indeed, at this moment, her only) possession. And as Kate's sister Mamie stressed, "It is a glorious inheritance to have such blood flowing in one's veins"; she was "so glad," Mamie said, "I never changed my name."[5]

Kate Dickens Perugini knows how to tell a good story, but we might note that one reason why her tale reverberates so powerfully is its use of novelistic elements – indeed, to be more specific, of "Dickensian" elements. The daughter's story is a melodrama, her position that almost of a spectator, the innocent child torn between parental loyalties, looking back on her own inaction, and condemning it. The story seems to bear the relationship to the Dickens novel of a second order of fiction, almost as if Kate Dickens Perugini had learned story-telling from Amy Dorrit

or Esther Summerson, but her story serves as more than a gloss of his. As if she herself were a reader and a reviser of the Dickens novel, the daughter's story (both Kate's, and those of the daughters within the novels themselves) makes necessary a rearrangement of the elements at its heart, pointing out the ways the fairy-tale labor of the daughter in every Dickens text – the work of complicity and regret, of bearing the father's name, of casting the backward glance at the mother's house – is integral to the social and fictional work these novels perform. The hesitations and silences, the pensive retrospection of the daughter, the unexpected critical power of the most passive person within the story: all these are present in every Dickens text, and mark the daughter's story as a central place of narrative authority.

A significant part of that authority comes from the very opacity of the story itself, for the story raises more questions than it, in itself, can answer: Why the daughter? Where is the absent mother? What is the law of the father, and what is the daughter's status before it? In whose name is this story to be told, and whose "part" is it to take? Even my brief account of this biographical material suggests some of the frames we are tempted to put around this story: the daughter's fear of the father's anger; our own psychological readings of the daughter's "seduction"; the difficulty of divorce and custody battles in the mid-nineteenth century; the daughter's powerlessness under law; the power of narratives of inheritance, possession, and self-possession; the necessary absence of the daughter's "proper" name in the realist novel. To account for the story's power is to go beyond its power as a fiction, to locate in it the place where the social, the formal, the legal, and the psychological seem to meet. Kate Perugini's story meets up with other stories of names, daughters, and possessions, where notions of property and women's status before the law (their existence as "legal persons") and their ability to freely plot and narrate (their existence as "characters" and "agents") come together.[6] But it also points to the curious doubleness of the daughter's position "before" the law: as at once under its strictures and prior to it. This doubleness, which stands in for the fixity and the fluidity of both narrative and the law, is at the heart of the daughter's story, and the story I am telling. The seeming inevitability of the Dickens novel (that machinery for turning women into cultural meat pies) was a product of the filial ambivalence it represented; reading with the daughter in mind makes a necessary difference in "the Dickens novel."

But this reading also opens up more general questions about the daughter, the novel, and the law. What the Dickensian daughter shares

with larger stories of daughters and culture is her role as the site of value, for daughters in English law are not so much possessors but transmitters, not only of material property, but of ideology, memory, and faith.[7] Indeed, the only narrative William Blackstone imparts about daughters in his *Commentaries on the English Law* is of a "Jew of immense riches," whose "only daughter having embraced Christianity, he turned her out of doors."[8] The story of the daughter *out* of doors is of values gone wandering: with her departure, the transmission of culture is no longer so certain.[9] The daughter bears a similar role in property law, where (only rarely herself the inheritor of value) she guarantees, by her chastity and virtue, the proper progress of property through the inheritance plot. This is again to identify the daughter's legal role as akin to a central narrative function. The daughter must convey the father's message (often in the face of paternal violence) into the new certainties of the closural plot, that is, a plot whose closure promises resolution and an end to conflict; but she must also make her way into the new forms of plot (and of property) that narrative makes possible.

This is one secret of the romance plot: to transmit is also to transform, and when the daughter takes "property" (value, meaning, the father's word) into the streets, she is also in an open space within the laws of genre and inheritance. To move the plot forward, to do the work of narrative and inheritance, the daughter must move outside the father's house: just as narrative can happen only at the crossroads, so the daughter's story depends on leaving the space of domesticity. This displacement built into the daughter's plot displaces narrative perspective as well: as Alison Milbank has noted, daughters in the streets "reveal the private house as itself a market-place." Quoting Ian Ousby, Milbank reminds readers of the origins of the word "detective": to detect, etymologically, is to "take the roof off."[10] This is what the Dickens narrator (in *Dombey and Son* and in *Household Words*) notoriously wants to do; this is what the daughter's wanderings always make possible, the opening up of the paternal roof to the streets and throughways. It is the daughter who reminds us of the real nature of the social: "economics," as Ruskin noted, takes its roots from *oikos*, the household; to set the house (the family, the nation) in order, as Florence Dombey, Esther Summerson, and a host of other good daughters have noted, is to move beyond the father's house into the wider streets, and to set in motion a wider progress. That progress widens the daughter's sphere, setting free various forms of narrative and social possibility, but it is not itself without dangers. And this is the other secret of the romance plot: the

daughter must survive the ending, but she will not always survive it intact.

The question of how the daughter enters culture, how she conveys property and value through the closural rituals of the marriage plot, returns us to the question of the daughter and the law, the formal means by which the individual enters the social order. Charles Dickens and Kate Perugini told their stories of daughters under a particular dispensation of the law, one very much under attack in the period of Dickens's great fiction. The debate over the Married Women's Property laws was one of the signal parliamentary concerns of the time, drawing the attention of peers and radicals, pushing towards the rationalizing of the law with which Dickens was in other ways associated, one that separated the law from custom and rendered it (in theory) more purely transparent, less a subject of mystery.[11] And the laws governing female property were nothing if not mysterious. The question of whether a wife maintained her rights over separate property – rights which did not exist under "coverture," in which a "husband and wife are one person, and that person the husband" – cut deeply into questions of what constituted a separate person, and the nature of modern (bourgeois, civic) identity. The daughter holds out the possibility of an individual identity lost within (and needing rescue from) plots of property. Until she enters the state of marriage (and should she legally depart from it) she maintains a perfect, that is, contractual, individualism: she can move as a free agent, maintaining her own property, the right to her earnings, the right to contract debt, the right to sign her name as a legal person. That space of possibility is a space of fiction – indeed, we might note that both property and daughters seem to call out for plot, wandering otherwise in that space of cultural indeterminacy, before the relative worth of property and persons is determined.

But here again the doubleness of the daughter's plot returns to haunt the Dickens novel. For all his support for various forms of legal reform, of demystifying the law, the attraction this story holds for Dickens is the daughter's potential separation from her own agency, her lack of a solid legal identity, her association with fictions. From at least the time of Shylock, daughters and ducats have made for stories of property and dissolution; for Dickens, they carry the additional burden of a modern subjectivity at once enabled and disenfranchised by the law. The law, as Susan Stewart has noted, may be "written and . . . subject to temporality and interpretation," but it has developed as a "a particularly idealized and transcendent form of writing," one that limits the fictions of

personality it permits.[12] What Stewart identifies as the ambivalence of "the role of the law in positioning subjectivity [and] the tragedy of one's entry into the domain of the law as an enabling subjection," is an ambivalence at the heart of the Dickens project: to exist purely as a legal subject (to be made "rational") is to lose other versions of subjectivity.

This is linked for Dickens to problems of persons and property, the attendant problem of becoming too much (and too exclusively) a legal person. Models of rational, possessive individualism which drew him on (of people with purchasing power, the power to plot and possess) also disturbed him, suggesting that people might become – for others and for themselves – only objects. The daughter's powerful alienation before the law (that she exists as a token of her father's authority, that success in the marriage plot means the daughter's successful disappearance into the "shadow" of coverture) offered a tool for the fiction, a way of plotting outside a modern, legally determined subjectivity, a way of exploring the other notions of identity the daughter embodied. For in the daughter's enclosure within, and alienation from, the paternal house, we catch a glimpse of the fictionality of the structures we hold most dear: our sense of the family as at once a tribe and a household; of the home as a refuge and a site of patriarchal violence; of the private as at once a sign of personality and individuality, and a sense of loss, of deprivation from the wider world.[13] In the Oxford English Dictionary, the daughter stands for relationship: among the collected definitions of daughter are "the relation of female to her parents . . . (the feminine term corresponding to son)"; "a female descendant; a female member of a family, race, etc."; "a woman in relation to her native country or place"; "a term of affectionate address to a woman or a girl by an older person or one in a superior relation"; "Anything (personified as female) considered in relation to its origin or source." The daughter, in language as in law, is incapable of singularity, is always a term of exchange, conveyance, relatedness. But in order to convey, the daughter must be made foreign; to recount her story, she must depart from her own plot. It is that impossibility of being that Dickens draws on in his fiction – and that presents such telling ambiguities, such productive gaps, in the unfolding of her story. In Kate Perugini's anecdote, as in the Dickens novel, the daughter stands poised between worlds, between houses, unable quite to choose. Her alienation is her fortune; her equipoise is the space of other fictions of subjectivity.

To take on the daughter's separate story is to re-encounter the nineteenth century story of individuals from a different perspective, for the

story of Dickens's career in many ways articulates (forming as much as echoing) the history of the modern subject. Indeed, in many ways Dickens gave us the modern subject. In his own ambivalences about individuals and institutions, the growing gloom of his autobiographical fiction, and his somewhat feverish anxiety about the market relationships that danced around his authorship (copyright, public readings, the incredible fanfare of a Dickens publication) we can see the shadows of larger arguments about what it means to write, to own, and to publish in the nineteenth century, and the way Dickens came to represent the author for his culture. For modern critics of the novel, that has been the story of Dickens's own disenfranchisement as a laboring boy at Warren's Blacking Factory, and the way he reassembled his own identity through authorship; the way he wrote himself into the heart of his culture. The story of lost identity and resumed connections is most marked in Dickens's most "autobiographical" novel, *David Copperfield*, which has had a talismanic position in critical accounts of Dickens and his career, and what it meant to be a novelist at mid-century. But *David Copperfield* also tells a complicated story of gender, identity, and writing, one in which coming-to-identity, successfully traversing the marriage plot, and becoming an author are one. One place to begin to question the authority of the Dickens plot and its "proper" dispensations of daughters (its proper "housing" of their alienated stories) is to return to *David Copperfield*, the ur-text for so many readings of Dickens's career, and ask if it tells so certain a story of closure, homecoming, and gendered identity, and consequently, if its inheritance is so clear.

David Copperfield takes as its point of origin not a story so much as an image, which stands as both the central visual icon for the novel and a repeated point of narratorial coherence. We see David making his way along a hot, dusty road towards Dover, orphaned, set upon, robbed, struggling to reach the aunt he hopes will love him. This image recurs throughout the book, returning even at the moment of greatest happiness, when he and Agnes declare their love at the novel's end:

> We stood together in the same old-fashioned window at night, when the moon was shining; Agnes with her quiet eyes raised up to it; I following her glance. Long miles of road then opened out before my mind; and, toiling on, I saw a ragged way-worn boy, forsaken and neglected, who should come to call even the heart now beating against mine, his own.[14]

David as narrator begins here to blur again into that young boy, sharing his "toil," the toil of telling the story again and again, offering it in a series of alternate versions, but always seeing that same young boy,

always still being that young boy. The scene raises the saddest of autobiographical questions: does Agnes see only the moon, or the "ragged way-worn boy" she never met? Does Agnes ever hear the story of David's progress, or is "even the heart now beating" against hers a mystery to her? There is little textual evidence to suggest David ever tells all of his story to anyone – Uriah's threat to reveal David's past is his greatest hold over David – and we might hear in this almost conclusive paragraph the autobiographical fragment's assertion, that the middle-aged Dickens had never met the "one friend" to whom he could tell the complete story. "Even now," Dickens claims in the fragment, "famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life."[15]

The power of this narrative extends not only over the novel or Dickens's oeuvre, but over the act of novel-reading itself. Long the center of seminal works on the importance of Dickens's fiction for our understanding of the modern novel and its readers, for recent critics rethinking the Dickens novel, *David Copperfield* has been the entry point for new stories of identity and reading. D. A. Miller has suggested, in a powerful rereading of the novel, that there is something in *David Copperfield*'s very universality ("Davy who?" is the question with which Miller begins) that makes possible the reading of Victorian fiction. The novel, with its double obsession with eccentric characters and the boxes they both carry and are, confirms our own expansive and individual subjectivity, and offers the comforting assurance that we are *not* characters ourselves.[16] The various containments of fiction allow us, as readers, to roam free – to wander.

Something in *Copperfield*'s self-consciousness about fiction lends power to that effort of consolation. *David Copperfield* (the novelist's "favourite child," as he called it in its preface) is a novel about a novelist – Dickens's only novel to make that claim explicitly – and it begs to be read as autobiographical, at the same time that it is notoriously vague on the actual writing of fiction. Not only, as Mary Poovey has argued, does it work to domesticate literary labor, it also reflects Dickens's increasing ownership of his own fictional authority: as Alexander Welsh has suggested, it is the novel that comes not at the beginning (as most critics read it) but at the end of a certain crisis in Dickens's authorial self-representation, a representation that has as much to do with copyright as with consciousness.[17] As Miller might put it, the novel convinces us that we own interesting versions of ourselves (selves that do not come in small packages); as

Welsh might put it, *David Copperfield* was the novel in which Dickens claimed ownership of himself and his literary "creations."

But both these stories – the story of origins in which the young boy comes to be a hero; the story of creation in which the young boy grows up to be an author – have a great deal also to do with gender, and a series of less orderly narratives of origin, creation, and ownership, all of which are linked in this text to writing, and which have not offered the same point of entry for recent evaluations of the novel. The conventional view of *David Copperfield*, taking much of its tone from Gwendolyn Needham's "The Undisciplined Heart,"[18] has argued that David's recognition that "there can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose" (the recognition that will lead him away from the "first choice" of an undisciplined heart, Dora, towards its real and final choice, his "sister" Agnes) is also the recognition that will lead him to write true novels of human endeavor and suffering, and will lead him to "make use" of his painful earlier experience. This trajectory leads David from his flirtatious mother's disastrous marriage to the murderous Mr Murdstone; from his lodgings with the wordy and spendthrift Micawbers to his residence with his gruff, loving Aunt Betsey; from his efforts to shape the character of his child-bride Dora to his recognition that he loves Agnes, the woman who has loved him all along. In this economy, that is, childhood sufferings make art stronger; bad marriages discipline the heart; and you grow up to marry your muse, rather than your mother. At the end of this "progress," which ends with the patently absurd fiction that David has been up all night writing, he turns to the face next to his, and he sees Agnes, pointing "upward, always upward" – towards inspiration, spiritual fiction, and death.[19]

Initially, then, the son's progress is equally towards authorial and sexual maturity, a story in which women can play only a passive role. But David's relation to his muse is more complicated than this. The hero's initiation into narrative not only has a considerable sexual charge to it, but carries with it considerable gender confusion. In the midst of his neglect at the hands of his stepfather, David finds a collection of novels that belonged to his father, which give him precisely that sense of himself as a hero that will allow him to survive his abandonment. When he is sent off to school he wins the affection of the older boys by his ability to retell those stories – though, as he makes clear, his narrative abilities already err on the side of creation rather than copying, for he invents as much as he remembers – a useful talent for the prospective auto-biographer. But it is here that the female story-teller enters the novel. As

David sits in the darkened room telling stories to his hero, the far more senior boy Steerforth, who will represent David's class and sexual ambitions throughout the novel, he says, "it was a tiresome thing to be roused, like the Sultana Scheherazade, and forced into a long story before the getting-up bell rang; but Steerforth was resolute" (145). Here, the blushing, shy David has become "Daisy" for his hero Steerforth – who goes on to wish that David had a sister, for "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" (140). Perhaps, though, he already does; certainly, "Daisy" (to whom Steerforth is a "person of great power," and who goes to stare at him as he sleeps) already connects his story-telling power with passivity: "I admired and loved him, and his approval was return enough."

Story-telling, gender, and power are linked and confused throughout the novel – and David's exclusive control of authorial enterprises seems less than totally secure. To put it most simply, not only David but everyone in the novel wants to be a story-teller. "This is my grumpy, frumpy story" says David's Aunt Betsey (757), when she has told her story of the return of her violent, abusive husband, from whom she was separated before the novel began, and who has been blackmailing her all through the remainder of the novel. In another such self-dramatizing moment,

> "I am well aware that I am the umblest person going," said Uriah Heep, modestly; "let the other be where he may. My mother is likewise a very umble person. We live in a numble abode, Master Copperfield, but have much to be thankful for. My father's former calling was umble. He was a sexton."
> "What is he now?" I asked.
> "He is a partaker of glory at present, Master Copperfield," said Uriah Heep. "But we have much to be thankful for." (291)

Everyone in this novel tells a story of origin and growth, in which even "glory" may be only a road upwards, a temporary ("at present") position, and it is hardly clear why David's carries any particular weight.

But here we rejoin my initial argument about the daughter's story, for women's stories throughout the novel carry a special emotional significance, one that will extend not only to the novel's angry women, but to its eccentrics and its good daughters – and cast a skeptical gaze over David's (and perhaps Dickens's) narrative powers. David's nurse, Peggotty, tells the story of his mother's death, a story marked off as "Peggotty's narration," ending "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 –