

## Dickens and goodbye

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I hate saying goodbye to friends whom I don't expect to see again for a long time. The pain of separation combined with the uncertainty about when we will meet again and the awkwardness of feeling that I need to say something special at the moment of parting always make me feel uncomfortable and inadequate. I much prefer the quick handshake and 'see you soon' or the brief brush of the cheek to protracted farewells or professions of lasting affection. The recent increased security measures at airports actually help me out in this regard. No more waiting at departure gates. No more hanging around. One friend who recognizes my discomfort has found a good solution. He simply says, 'I know you hate saying goodbye.' He smiles, we laugh and shake hands, and that's it.

Dickens knew all about goodbyes. He knew the mixed emotions that they often evoke, and he knew the value — economic as well as aesthetic — of setting them down on paper. The sentimental farewell and its more profound analogue, the deathbed scene, are standard fare in his fiction. Think of the end-of-term party for little Paul at Dr Blimber's in *Dombey and Son* or the death of Jo in *Bleak House* or Nell's long march toward death in *Curiosity Shop* and the many separations she must undergo before she reaches that destination. Think of the eerie keening sound heard by Kit as he hurries toward the church where he hopes to find her still alive.

There was a curious noise inside. It was difficult to determine what it was. It bore a resemblance to the low moaning of one in pain, but it was not that, being far too regular and constant. Now it seemed a kind of song, now a wail — seemed, that is, to his changing fancy, for the sound itself was never changed or checked. It was unlike anything he had ever heard; and in its tone there was something fearful, chilling, and unearthly.<sup>1</sup>

'It' is of course the sound of grandfather that he hears, and in the old man's anguished wordless cry (he has not yet allowed himself to acknowledge Nell as dead) I recognize the source of my discomfort at saying goodbye, the unspoken fear that underlies each separation from someone I love.

Dickens knew also about the difficulty of saying goodbye to the readers of his novels and to the figures of his imagination. His Prefaces, written at the close of each serialization, testify to the mixture of pleasure and pain he experienced on such occasions: 'how 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 for ever', as he put it in his Preface to the 1850 edition of *Copperfield*.<sup>2</sup> As early as *Pickwick*, he had written:

It is the fate of most men who mingle with the world and attain even the prime of life, to make many real friends, and lose them in the course of nature. It is the fate of all authors or chroniclers to create imaginary friends, and lose them in the course of art.<sup>3</sup>

Dickens also knew enough to recognize false sentiment and self-pity when they get in the way of genuine feeling. Think of Pip's tearful farewell as he leaves for London at the end of the first stage of his expectations. 'Good-by, O my dear, dear friend!': he apostrophizes the finger-post at the end of the village instead of directing these words to Joe, the friend who actually deserves his affectionate regard. Or again, consider David Copperfield's account of his response while still at school to learning of his mother's death:

I am sensible of having felt that a dignity attached to me among the rest of the boys, and that I was important in my affliction.

If ever child were stricken with sincere grief, I was. But I remember that this importance was a kind of satisfaction to me, when I walked in the playground that afternoon while the boys were in school. When I saw them glancing at me out of the windows, as they went up to their classes, I felt distinguished, and looked more melancholy, and walked slower. When school was over, and they came out and spoke to me, I felt it rather good in myself not to be proud to any of them, and to take exactly the same notice of them all, as before.<sup>4</sup>

It is a complex observation. The adult narrator recognizes (without harshly passing judgment on) an element of innocent hypocrisy in his younger self's reaction to the news of his bereavement and especially in his exaggerated performance of the melancholy that earns him distinction in the eyes of his schoolmates. At the same time the passage alerts us to the possibility of a similar capacity for self-deception and inauthenticity in the responses of his older self. I confess that I recognize a part of myself in David's description, and I marvel at how well Dickens understood something about me that I might otherwise have had difficulty acknowledging, now or in the past.

At the heart of Dickens's perception of the importance of experiencing loss is his belief that the recognition of common mortality unites people as a community, strengthens the bonds of affection that hold them together. As he leaves Pip in London for what he thinks may be the last time they will ever see each other, Joe Gargery offers this homely bit of blacksmith poetry: 'Pip, dear old chap, life is made of ever so many partings welded together'.<sup>5</sup> Joe's wisdom lies in his acknowledgement that 'partings' are inevitable, but

also that they contribute to, indeed help to shape and create, ‘life’. We should not forget that this perception comes from a novelist whose characteristic mode of publication consists of ‘partings’ strung together — serial installments that, taken as a whole, form a chain that binds author and readers in an imagined community.

Writing that grounds itself in the common experience of loss is pedagogical, even political in its thrust. It promotes what Sarah Winter, in her excellent recent book *The Pleasures of Memory*, calls ‘epitaphic reading’.<sup>6</sup> Winter builds her argument largely on *The Old Curiosity Shop*, but she could just as easily have taken *Dombey and Son* as her centerpiece. Here is Dickens, in his 1848 Preface to that novel (the reference in the second paragraph is to the death of little Paul):

I cannot forego my usual opportunity of saying farewell to my readers in this greeting-place, though I have only to acknowledge the unbounded warmth and earnestness of their sympathy in every stage of the journey we have just concluded.

If any of them have felt a sorrow in one of the principal incidents on which this fiction turns, I hope it may be a sorrow of that sort which endears the sharers in it, one to another. This is not unselfish in me. I may claim to have felt it, as least as much as anybody else; and I would fain be remembered kindly for my part in the experience.<sup>7</sup>

Reading Dickens in 2012, we can all share in the sorrow that Victorian readers felt at the death of Paul Dombey, and in so doing we endear ourselves, as Dickens says, one to another.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Angus Easson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 646 (Chapter 70).

<sup>2</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Nina Burgis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. lxxi.

<sup>3</sup> Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by James Kingsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 875 (Chapter 57).

<sup>4</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield*, pp. 106–07 (Chapter 9).

<sup>5</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Angus Calder (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 246 (Chapter 27).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Winter, *The Pleasures of Memory: Learning to Read with Charles Dickens* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. lv.