

Thesis

1426

PART II

LIVES OF WIVES



Chapter 4: Women and Individualism

Historical note: possessive and magnanimous individualism

In this biographical part we are still interested in the questions raised in the first part about socialisation and transcending socialisation, about 'woman becoming individual and self-responsible' (as well as man, though Lawrence doesn't include him). But if we have looked in Part I at the 'living striving she' as a touchstone of the writer's art and a character in the novel, we turn to her now as a woman of flesh and blood, and if we have been looking at Dickens's and Lawrence's relation with the women in their fiction, we look now at their relation with their wives, Catherine and Frieda. In order to make this change telling, we need a perspective that shows women in their own framework and has some power to explain why the women behaved as they did and the relations were as they were. The perspective I think useful is that of individualism, more precisely the different assumptions of what makes an individual and what makes a relationship that women and men have. These different assumptions I will briefly consider historically first, in the context of society and marriage as a social contract. What interests us in 'Lives of Wives' is after all that smallest of societies, marriage, and what women bring to it.

In human society individualism involves two things:

a notion of property and a notion of personal freedom. Both notions are historically circumscribed, but both go back, as far as we can tell, to the earliest human social formations and both involve notions of hierarchy and of equality. The early social formations are relevant to our question of what assumptions women bring to marriage, and we will look at them below. But our main focus is on the period that saw the beginning of liberalism and individualism. The 17th Century was the watershed between feudalism and capitalism and the principles of political theory it gave rise to still inform our consciousness and still are the basis of women's position in our society. One of the most striking features of the new age that dawned in this period was a new belief in the value and rights of the individual. This went with a new view of equality and freedom. How did this development affect women? To answer this question, we must know of what kind this individualism was and what kind of equality and freedom it generated. For my purposes MacPherson's analysis in The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke is the most useful, though he is not concerned with women'. The best source for women's relation to property is however Aries in Centuries of Childhood, though he too is only incidentally concerned with women.*

Hobbes was the founder of a political theory that assumes human equality in a state of nature. This equality was based on perfect mutual fear, since the

weaker can kill the stronger (a woman can kill a man so that men and women are equal). As everyone can prey on everyone, what Hobbes describes here is a state of total atomization. His 'state of nature', his picture of the past, is in fact a picture of the future: it reflects the conditions of the new possessive market society in which he found himself. Such a society is based on an association of property owners. It turns on unlimited acquisition. Everything can be alienated: land, resources, personal capacities. The individual is the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society. The aim of all individuals is to maximise their utilities. The essence of human freedom is freedom from the will of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Such a society must inevitably split into two classes, the class of those who increasingly acquire, and the class of those who aid them in their acquisition. The former had property for capitalist expansion to start with. They are the truly free members of society. The latter lack property. Their freedom consists in being able to alienate their capacities for wage labour. Political society is a contrivance for the protection of the individual's property in his own person and goods.

From this definition it is clear that women were not members of the civil or political society. From this again we can deduce that they did not develop assumptions of possessive individualism, the kind of individualism that pertains in our society according to MacPherson. If

the essence of human freedom is freedom from the will of others and freedom is a function of possession, then those who have no possessions and are dependent on the will of others cannot be free and can barely be called human. By the 17th century women as wives had long stopped holding their property independently³, and in the following centuries they progressively lost every legal title to property until their economic, legal and political status reached its nadir in the 1830s. The question of their property in themselves, their freedom to alienate their capacities and enter the market society as wage earners is also interesting. Women could not even achieve the limited freedom of men here. Working women did enter the market society as wage earners, but they hardly ever earned enough to be independent. When they married, their wages could be legally claimed by their husbands.⁴

Women comprise a half of every society. How was their status defined where the political society was concerned?⁵ Since MacPherson does not mention them we must deduce something about their position from the way other groups, who were also outsiders, were seen. An excellent source is the franchise debate between the Levellers and their parliamentary and army opponents which MacPherson carefully analyses.

The debate is essentially about at which point a person enters civil society as expressed by the vote. The Levellers were radical by contrast with their opponents among Cromwell's chief officers and in Parliament. They

wanted extension of the suffrage and made statements such as that 'every inhabitant' or 'every person in England' should have the vote. This has led to a belief that they advocated manhood suffrage. MacPherson shows that when forced to clarify the point they state that they are asking for suffrage for everyone excluding wage earners (collectively called 'servants' in the 17th century), beggars, almstakers and vagrants. Their reasons for the exclusion are neatly summed up by Petty:

I conclude the reason why we would exclude apprentices, or servants, or those that take alms is because they depend on the will of other men and should be afraid to displease (them). For servants and apprentices, they are included in their masters. (1962: 123)

'The essence of human freedom is freedom from the will of others, and freedom is a function of possession.' The Levellers wanted the franchise extended to shopkeepers, tradesmen and artisans, small entrepreneurs, even if they lacked a basis in land. 'Every person' was defined even by them as everyone who held property. Their definition of capital was simply a little more modern than that of their opponents. What about the freedom to alienate your capacities for wage labour? Here we come to an interesting paradox. If you 'have lost your birthright' by having entered 'voluntary servitude' you are dependent on the will of others, (1962: 123). In other words you are the proprietor of your own capacities and free, in the sense that you can give up this freedom:

and having once done this you are 'included in your master' who will speak for you in public matters, notably as a voter.

The Levellers made truly noble statements about the equality of the sexes. MacPherson takes this up only in a footnote, but he quotes Lilburne saying in The Freeman Vindicated (1646) that 'all and every particular man and woman' are 'by nature all equal and alike in power, dignity, authority and majesty, none of them having by nature any authority, dominion or magisterial power over one another (1962: 296, note 1). This led to a belief that they advocated female suffrage. We can tell from what I said above that this cannot have been the case. In the only place where MacPherson takes up the question, the footnote from which I have quoted, he makes a revealing remark: 'The Levellers .. seem.. to have taken for granted that women could be assumed to have authorised their men to exercise their political rights. In an age when the typical employment relation was considered similar to a family one, a similar assumed transfer of authority from servant to master would not be an extraordinary postulate (1962: 296, note 1). After this amount of transfer, the one individual who remains is the patriarch who can afford a wife and servants. Feminist commentators sometimes point out that the famous 'individual' of 17th century political theory was really the family. But the assumptions implicit in phrases like 'losing one's birthright' or 'being included in one's

master' suggest that it was an actual individual, the male head of the family who had been individuated by absorbing wife, children and servants and making them part of his assets.

What emerges from MacPherson's analysis is that women are in a class by themselves even among the outsiders. But how is their class defined? The people excluded from the franchise (by common consent even among the opposing parties of the debate) are servants, beggars, vagrants and women (who are not even mentioned). If we compare these groups it is clear that they are distinguished by two variables, freedom and membership in the possessive market society. 'Servants' alienated their capacities for a wage; in doing this they lost their birthright, that is their freedom. They were nevertheless part of the possessive market society, because as 'owners of their own persons and capacities' they were developing their assets. Beggars and vagrants are lumped into one group who, by 'refusing' to work also refused to sell their birthright. They were free but outside society. Women as housewives worked but did not get wages for their work. This means that they did not 'sell their birthright' like servants, but also that they did not claim 'ownership over their own person and capacities' and were therefore not members of the possessive market society. But neither were they free and outside society like beggars and vagrants. The category that they resemble is that of domestic animals, who have no birthright to sell and who are in the society

by virtue of their work without being of the society.

This is of course a reductive view of society. Against it stands the conviction of the Levellers that men and women are equal and alike 'in power, dignity and authority' and the Puritans' understanding of marriage as sweet companionship. The men who said these things did not feel they were the only individuals in the commonwealth or the sole authority in the family. Nevertheless MacPherson's analysis shows (and the very phrases used by the parties to the franchise debate confirm it) that to look at society reductively reveals truths we cannot get at in other ways. And seeing these truths stimulates comparisons between systems and opens one's eyes to alternatives.

Sometimes we hear the voice of women through the pronouncements of a subgroup.⁶ The Puritans' idea of 'sweet companionship' for instance is the self-image of a group that has absorbed a women's image of themselves. From that perspective sweet companionship is neither a chimera nor a male self-deception nor sand in the eyes for women whose real position is quite different. It is an 'invention', something new in human society that contains real if largely potential values. The most obvious value it contains is equality of worth, which is an advance over the purely material equality in medieval property relations in marriage, and over the equality of rights of possessive individualism.⁷ Subgroups are generally the locus of alternatives in society. They 'invent'

alternatives simply by virtue of their position athwart the main system. These inventions always have revolutionary potential, but they become conscious only if a subgroup recognises itself as a dissenting group, and even then they enter rarely into effective historical movements (The Levellers' dictum that 'men and women are equal and alike in power, dignity, authority and majesty' entered in the 18th century into the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and their other dictum that 'none of them have by nature any authority, dominion or magisterial power over one another' has entered the women's movement). But though we hear the voice of women through many subgroups, and though women are the largest of all subgroups, comprising half the population, they have never become conscious of themselves as a dissenting group (discounting the feminists who are only a tiny branch). This is due to the way each is attached individually to a man and a family and detached from association with other women. But it does not mean that women have not 'invented' alternatives to a system in which they find themselves and of which they are not a part.

Women were not untouched by the new importance and value given to the individual in 17th century thought. Only in their case individualism combined differently with marriage from the way it did for men. Men, we have seen, following the precepts of the market society, absorbed women into their individuality as assets, at least on the level of public consciousness. Women, who could not

develop possessive assumptions to the degree men did, turned to an individualism that belongs, anthropologically speaking, to a more primitive heritage of society.² I have called the women's assumptions 'magnanimous', coining 'magnanimous individualism' partly as a contrast to 'possessive individualism', partly as a joke that shows that this kind of individualism was based on giving, but giving with the intention of 'magnifying' the name of the giver. Individualistic assumptions can only thrive in an appropriate communal framework, and women took marriage, the relation between wife and husband, as their 'society'. Though material conditions gave them no choice but to marry, the new conception of marriage as the domain of feeling contained its own challenges and possibilities for self-realisation. The individualistic assumptions women developed were the opposite of self-abnegating. But they also contrasted sharply with the possessive assumptions that developed under the conditions of the market society. The prototype of their individualism is found in the simplest communalist forager societies.

One of the features that made the developing modern family approach primitive conditions was that it became again a unit of consumption instead of production. In the simplest forager societies, where production does not yet exist to any extent, the members of the group that corresponds to our family disperse during the day in order to return home at night to share what they have gathered around the fire. What is shared is mainly food, but it is

also the surprise at what each has found, the difficulties and dangers that attach to the finding so that what people share is the story of the adventure that makes the giver a hero. We have discussed this in the context of individuation, but here the emphasis is on the fact that the gift 'magnifies' the giver. It elicits admiration. Each is in turn admired. Women have an edge over men in this game. They sometimes go out and come back with a new human being (I think that originally birth seclusion may not have had to do with the fear of pollution but may have been managed by the women for the sake of this stunning effect).⁹

The dramatisation of the gift entered into the more developed, comparatively wealthy societies we call societies of reciprocity, because the exchange of gifts plays a large role. In my view, the emphasis should not be on exchange - a gift for a gift - but on the notion of the gift as surprise, the free gift¹⁰ (Reciprocity is, however, an important part of the assumptions we are discussing, and I return to it in the last section of this chapter). The hunting and fishing societies on the American North Pacific coast, for instance, imagine giving and sharing as the force that holds the society together - groups and individuals 'balance' one another by a general mutual giving of gifts.¹¹ These societies are semi-nomadic and divide their year in two: in the summer they disperse in small groups to gather food and lay in stores, in the winter they join up to consume the stores and

celebrate their winter dance. This recalls the foragers' division into a day world and a night world; but here everything has been abstracted and enlarged. The woman's 'gift' to the community lies in their conservation techniques, which makes the winter dance possible; the community's return gift is that the winter dance is called, 'the women's time'. The summer is sociologically distinguished by a hierarchical organisation, competition between groups and individuals and discrimination against women; the winter is egalitarian; rank order and sexual divisions disappear and everyone becomes a dancer. It should be pointed out that the hierarchical organisation is not functional: economic life goes on in spite of it rather than because of it. There is therefore an element of bad faith about the summer organisation that is not present in the winter. The distinction vividly calls to mind what Lawrence and Frieda called 'the men's world', though they had no name for its alternative. It also calls to mind the utopian sociability associated with Caroline Schlegel and the early German romantics, which we shall discuss in Chapter 7.

During the winter dance the central figure is the initiate, who brings out the pattern on the individual level and makes quite clear what is at stake. He spends a long time in isolation, in the forest. There he finds 'a treasure' but loses himself, goes 'wild'. The community 'bring him back' in a ceremony of wooing to which everyone contributes his own secret song. The initiate is 'found'

by this ceremony both in the sense that he 'finds himself', that is 'comes to himself', and that he returns as a member of the human community. He now displays what he has found: the 'treasure' in the form of the song and dance miming his adventures, which represents at the same time himself (his new self) and the gift to the community in the form of the new dance he has 'made'. The treasure is a work of art which enriches the community, an 'object' crafted in the concentrated labour of isolation into which the maker's self has entered. It is a gift that establishes communication between the self and others. The community reciprocates with the gift of admiration and understanding: the initiate is proclaimed 'the greatest'. With his gift he has 'made his name great'.

In their ritual the North west coast societies extrapolate in a symbolic way the master idea of their communal life: that everyone's work is in the nature of a work of art and that the shared benefit and shared appreciation of everyone's effort makes the society hang together. Such societies are the clearest examples of magnanimous individualism. They base themselves on an equality of worth, not on equality of rights. But all human societies hold in fact a variety of assumptions about individualism, some dominant and some suppressed, and magnanimous assumptions are alive in our society.

The figure that first comes to mind as corresponding to the initiate in our society is the artist. It is the artist who crafts an object that contains 'his very self',

exhibits it and demands fame, or 'a name' in return (Artists do in fact live by magnanimous assumptions rather than possessive ones which does not mean that they are not part of the market society: people can live by a number of different assumptions, even contradictory ones). Their work is what sociologists call 'representative activity' - both a work of art and an expression of the self. But a great deal of women's work, though culturally so much less visible, is also 'representative activity'. This must have been so as long as there were 'homes', but to a much smaller extent. When the household stopped being a productive unit and women stopped being independent producers, when the new family became isolated and the household a unit of consumption, women developed magnanimous individualism again as a key idea (This development took place in the broad middle strata where women worked in the home - not among the very poor who did wage labour or among the very rich - it is with these we are concerned here). Magnanimous individualism thrives best in small communities where common meals, festivity and sociability play a role. The conception of marriage as sweet companionship had prepared the way for a move in this direction on the women's part, even before the economic change took place. Women took the family as their 'society' (and quite unaware, made it a counter-culture society, as least in their conception of it). They worked to give the result of their work to others, and with every meal they cooked and loaf they baked they

also gave themselves (Freud had an inkling of this when he said that every time a woman bakes a cake she is really presenting the family with a new baby). There was nothing self-sacrificing about it. Women within the family saw themselves, and still see themselves as 'the greatest' - magnanimous givers who expect without any ado gifts of equal value. This is the basis on which they enter marriage and for which they use their energy and inventiveness, and nothing the church or socialisation can preach to the contrary can change it. They often only become conscious of their expectations when they are disappointed. Their expectations are basically formed on the same pattern as those of the initiate and the artist. Though their work involves 'self-sacrifice' it is far removed from altruism which is based precisely on a giving without expecting a return. They expect a double return: the return of a 'new self' in the form of being 'free', that is self-confident and independent, and a return in the admiration and affirmation of others.

We shall look more closely at the creative impulse inherent in women's work in the last section of this chapter. Here I want to conclude with a general question. Do artists recognise women as their fellow workers? And, if yes, is marriage to an artist the best marriage, in fact the only one in which a woman is sure to be understood? The question is clearly pertinent to the whole of this part about the lives of Catherine Dickens and Frieda Lawrence. One answer is that artists recognise

women very well. They have after all used them as models for a long time and depicted them perceptively, especially in the novel. Another answer is that artists are women's worst enemies and that the source of their enmity seems to be exactly this capacity for recognition: women are treated as rivals. Artists more than any other men have spread the view that women (though so clever, so equal in other ways) are not creative. From Rousseau openly recommending in Emile that creative talent in girls should be stifled to Lawrence saying in his Fantasia that 'women, when they speak and write, utter not one single word that men have not taught them'¹³, artists have been at pains to argue that women cannot be artists. Arnold Bennett, writing as a feminist puts the case inimitably.

Can a decent man, especially a man who is a convinced feminist hold forth the horrid truth to these adventurous valiant creatures? Has he the heart to do it? ... Nevertheless, one must seize and proclaim the truth again. And the truth is that intellectually and creatively man is the superior of woman, and that in the region of creative intellect there are things which men almost habitually do but which women have not done and give practically no sign of ever being able to do. Some platitude must now be uttered. The literature of the world can show at least 50 male poets greater than any woman poet. Indeed the women poets who have reached even second rank are exceedingly few - perhaps not more than half a dozen. With the possible exception of Emily Bronte no woman novelist has yet produced a novel equal to the great novels of men (one may be enthusiastic for Jane Austen without putting Pride and Prejudice in the same category with Anna Karenina or The Woodlanders.) ... Nor has any woman come anywhere near the top in criticism. Can anybody name a celebrated woman philosopher; or a woman who has made a first-rate scientific discovery; or a woman who has arrived at a first-rate generalisation of any sort?¹⁴

Women were not innocent of this attitude themselves. They were only too ready to play servant and muse to a male genius. They never became conscious of their magnanimous assumptions and never expressed them. They did not see themselves as a group and it did not occur to them that they should have practised them among themselves - that men with their different assumptions were the wrong partners.

The point about magnanimous individualism is that it gives us a glimpse of the utopian potential women have as a group. Possessive individualism, for all the solidarity among property owners, makes for a divisive society. With its emphasis on hoarding, it dissociates individuals from one another and dissociates them from society, which becomes nothing more than a device for the protection of their rights. Magnanimous individualism, with its emphasis on giving, makes for an affiliative society. It provides the stimulus of a playful rivalry and promotes people's creativity. There is no doubt about which kind suits human beings better. Moreover, for the first time in history, such a society is within our reach on the basis of technology.

Women and genius

In 1897 Kate Perugini, Dickens's youngest daughter, wrote a number of letters to Bernard Shaw in which she asked his advice on a family matter. The correspondence is mentioned in the Pilgrim Edition of The Letters of Charles Dickens and contains, in germ, the question I want to look at here, in 'Lives of Wives'. She tells him she has in her possession 137 letters from her father to her mother, which her mother gave her shortly before she died in 1879. Shaw summarized the first letter later because she had asked him to burn it, which he did.

Her mother had asked her 'to read them when she was dead and wondered whether they could not be published, to show the world that Dickens once loved her'. Kate, however, felt that they proved 'exactly the reverse'. The letters convinced her that Dickens even before his marriage, had given up all hope of finding adequate companionship in his wife's limited sensibility and outlook.¹⁵

Kate told Shaw she had decided to burn them. In a later letter she adds, as an additional justification for her wish to destroy them, that she thought her mother herself had been careless about the letters until she was very ill. She ends with what the editors of The Pilgrim Edition believe to be 'the real reason for her anxiety to destroy the letters'.

Dickens's heart and soul was not in these letters as you suppose, but some of his Sunday clothes are; and then - here again comes the truth at last - there may be other letters in

which the real man is revealed, minus his Sunday clothes and all charms and with his heart and soul burning like jewels in a dark place! I say there may be such letters, and they may be one day given to the world; in which case how should I be helping my mother or what good would I be doing to future generations by leaving these letters in the tin box to the British Museum; these letters which might have been written to anyone? I am assured that those letters of which I speak have all been burnt, but as little Paul said to Mrs. Pipchin 'I don't believe that story'.
(Letters 1, 1965: XX1)

The letters in which she hoped to find 'the real man revealed' are, of course, those to Ellen Ternan, which seem not to have survived. The editors append a note in which they suggest that 'it seems unlikely that they were quite of the kind suggested by the romantic-minded Kate' (1965: XX1, n. 5).

In 1899 Kate Perugini gave the letters to the British Museum, as Shaw had urged her to do from she first. She attached to them a note, stating her mother's wish 'that at some future date, they should be made public' and her mother's belief that they 'would make it apparent that the separation which took place between them in 1858, was not owing to any fault on her side' (1965: XX11).

Shaw's attitude to the questions involved can be gathered from a letter he wrote to Time and Tide in 1935. I again quote the editors of the Pilgrim Edition.

He claimed to have pointed out to Kate that 'the sentimental sympathy of the 19th century with the man of genius tied to a commonplace wife had been rudely upset by a writer named

Ibsen and posterity might sympathise much more with the woman who was sacrificed to the genius's uxoriousness to the appalling extent of having to bear eleven [in fact ten] children in sixteen years⁶ than with a grievance which, after all, amounted only to the fact that she was not a female Charles Dickens.' According to Shaw 'this was the first time [Kate's] eyes were opened to the fact that there was a case for her mother as well as for her father.' (1965: XXII, n. 2)

What Shaw coyly refers to as 'the genius's uxoriousness' must be sexual demands. Kate Perugini is concerned with verbal communication: adequate companionship for her father, which her mother's limited sensibility and outlook made impossible. Shaw is saying: what did it feel like for the woman to be communicated with almost purely sexually; Kate is saying: how hard for the man not to be able to communicate fully intellectually with his wife. Levi-Strauss has told us that the two codes of sex and language are interchangeable in myth. To this one should add that in real human relations they are not interchangeable; they either work together or, if one or the other is suppressed, they work against one another. Sex and language are the two codes of communication that are important for marriage. But they are also the two codes that are important for the work of the novelist (though one would reverse the order of precedence there). Here I want to look at how they affected the marriages of Catherine Dickens and Frieda Lawrence and what role they play in their husbands' work.

The Perugini-Shaw correspondence brings up further,

related questions. The first of these concerns the question of the man of genius's relation to a woman. Kate assumes, astonishingly in the light of the letters which we will look at below, that 'the real man' was not revealed in them. This is because she assumes that 'the real man' would have 'a heart and soul burning like jewels in a dark place' - a wonderful picture of what 'genius' meant around the turn of the century. She felt it would reflect badly on her mother that she could not evoke these fireworks, even as a young girl before her marriage (and especially if later another woman could). Her mother had even been rather careless of the genius's letters, such as they were. The assumption is clearly that a woman should be the sort of companion that brings out the genius in a man and is this genius's guardian. Catherine Dickens was not the right sort of woman.

Catherine's own voice, as it comes to us through Kate, adds still another dimension to the Perugini-Shaw correspondence. It is the voice of a woman who wants to speak and be heard. Not speak in her own words: Dickens letters are to speak for her. They are to tell the world that Dickens loved her. This can, however, not have been the only thing she wanted to tell the world or she would have destroyed some of the letters especially the first extant one, which we will look at below and to which she added a date with her own hand. They are to do something more: tell the world that the separation was not her fault (We must remember that Dickens told the world it

was her fault). Are they then to tell us perhaps something about Dickens and about herself which we didn't know before? Catherine Dickens is like a mute who is trying to speak in signs. She embodies an assumption that goes with the other assumptions about genius: that the genius's wife is a mute who can only speak through him and in praise of him. But Catherine has on her deathbed kicked up against the role of the mute; and though she will speak through Dickens it will not be entirely in praise of him. She wants the truth to come out.

The questions we want to look at in this part have then to do with communication: sex and language, the man as genius, the woman as mute. They are very clearly worked out in Frieda Lawrence's marriage and become articulate in Lawrence's work. The Lawrences can again act as 'control' to what we want to find out about the Dickenses. But Catherine Dickens's marriage was more typical than the Lawrence marriage and is in this way more interesting.

Let us first turn to the question of genius. Behind the 'sentimental sympathy with a man of genius tied to a commonplace wife', which Shaw mentions, there hides surely a quite different, complacent assumption about complementarity. To this assumption the distribution of attributes is satisfactory, and a proper distribution of sex roles. People think Catherine Dickens commonplace not because they have looked at her but because they

don't want her to be a female Charles Dickens. There is something in the concept of the genius itself that asks for contrast, its opposite, the non-genius. The concept can only exist with the help of such a contrast. As the genius is distinguished by self expression his true opposite is the mute. And as 'genius' in the typical manifestation is male, women in general and the wife of the genius in particular fall naturally into the role of mute.

These assumptions are still alive with us, because they are tied to sex roles in general and belong to the value system in which we live. They are of course for the most part unconscious assumptions and were more so in the 19th century when there was plenty of Shaw's 'sentimental sympathy' about to cover them over. At the turn of the century, however, a striking thing happened; a young Austrian genius, Otto Weininger, took up the whole complex of assumptions - assumptions clustering around the concept of genius and its opposite - and moulded them into a theory. His theory moves as it were on three legs: sexuality, consciousness and genius or hero-worship. In other words it takes in exactly the area of communication we are interested in here. Weininger's Geschlecht and Charakter (1903)¹⁷ not only brilliantly sums up and systematises what was around in the way of antifeminist prejudice in the 19th century, it also provided a 'scientific' basis for antifeminism in the time to come. For our own purposes its particular

merit is the direct and logical connection it makes between the cult of genius and the muteness of women. Reading Weininger one realises to what an extent Lacan has simply given a modern gloss to his ideas. Sex and Character is without doubt one of the most influential antifeminist books. It influenced Lawrence and, in a way we must look at, Frieda Lawrence. It also throws light on the life of Catherine Dickens.

I shall give only a brief and simplified account of Weininger's theory here. His value system is conventional. His arguments are circular and he does not seem to have had the slightest inkling that his 'biological' and 'scientific' proofs are in fact social in character, or at least based on social assumptions.

Weininger was influenced by Freud's theory of human bisexuality.¹⁶ He assumes two totally distinct psychological types, M. and W, man and woman. Generally speaking, all that is good is M, all that is bad, W. In reality no pure type exists, all people are mixtures of M and W. However, women are women and no person who is physiologically a woman can possibly be more than 50% M.

Weininger begins by addressing himself to sexuality, and argues, firstly: woman is nothing but sexuality, man is sexuality and something else. While she thinks only of sex and judges everything by a sexual standard, he knows other things: fighting and games, sociability and drinking parties, discussion and science, business and politics, religion and art. Secondly: woman

is unconscious of her sexuality because she is all sex, while man can differentiate himself from his sexuality and hence be conscious of it (At this point there seems to intervene an unspoken premiss which I find highly interesting: to be conscious of one's sexuality is, or leads to, consciousness, and especially consciousness of oneself).¹⁹ At any rate Weininger concludes: Woman lives unconsciously, man consciously. Woman receives her consciousness from man.

The argument about consciousness is based on what he calls his henid theory. He argues, firstly: consciousness proceeds from the henid state, when an idea inhabits the mind in amorphous form, not yet distinguished from other notions, to full consciousness, when the idea has become a concept that is definable and classifiable. Secondly: while men typically arrive at full consciousness, women typically are arrested at the henid state. Hence M is consciousness, W unconsciousness.²⁰

From this follows the argument about genius and hero-worship. Firstly: men are more perceptive of the outer world and of other people than women; they judge more clearly and reasonably, are more 'penetrating'.²¹ The most penetrating of men is the genius. He is the farthest from the henid state, he sees everything and formulates everything with the greatest clarity and distinction. Secondly: hence, if women are arrested at the henid state - a state of amorphous consciousness - and men are fully conscious, that is capable of forming

concepts and classifying them, then 'genius' is a form of masculinity. Genius is superlative maleness. Weininger says, 'In this way genius declares itself to be a kind of higher masculinity, and thus the female cannot be possessed of genius' (1906: 111). Thirdly: higher consciousness is made possible through harbouring a greater number of psychic contradictions. Men are more complex than women, genius is the most complex human organization of all. A genius can identify with everyone and can make the most heterogeneous characters come alive for us on the basis of being like them and also being their opposite at one and the same time. Fourthly: that 'man' is 'potential genius' is clear from the fact that men have a deepgoing and direct relationship to men of genius (while women have no relation to genius at all). The relation shows itself in hero-worship. Women are incapable of hero-worship, or only capable of it in the debased form of wanting to own an 'interesting' man sexually. Hero-worship then clinches the argument that genius is linked to maleness.

The argument about hero-worship comes as a surprise after what we have heard about the inner contradictions that make up higher consciousness. Is the hero by any chance the one who is superlatively like one and the opposite? Model and antagonist? Bloom's theory in The Anxiety of Influence springs to mind here. At any rate Weininger does put his finger here on a real and serious drawback for women, and especially women artists, in our

culture: the lack of a female 'great tradition', the lack of female models to admire and to define oneself against.²²

Weininger's conventional rejection of the body and all that is 'lower' leads to an interesting thesis about women's muteness. He links it with the fact that women are, as he has it, ontologically liars. They lie to themselves as well as to others. They want to appear virtuous when they are really common and sensual. Nature punishes them for this lie by making them hysterics. Hysteria reveals what is typical in woman. A woman is divided against herself, she is split, and - to our astonishment we hear it - 'the "splitting of personality" is, after all, only possible where there is no personality from the start, as with the woman' (1903: 360, my translation). The hysteric is, to Weininger, the woman who has had a sexual experience or trauma (he is implying a sexual assault in childhood or young womanhood) and who has consciously taken over the male attitude to the event, feeling rage, disgust and humiliation, while deep down, unconsciously, just because she is a woman (to whose consciousness everything except sex is alien) she values it highly, affirms it and desires a repetition of it. 'The chronic lying of woman becomes acute' says Weininger, 'when it extends to the main point, when she has let herself be influenced by the male, ethically negative, evaluation of sexuality. Hysteria is the organic crisis of the organic

untruthfulness of woman,' (1903: 358, my translation).
Woman can never be free: 'In the end a woman is always overpowered by her desire to be raped. She is under the rule of the phallus and ineluctably succumbs to her destiny She is as if under a curse. She may feel the curse for a moment weigh on her, but she can't escape it because its weight is too sweet to her. Her screaming and raging is, at bottom, make-believe' (1903: 374, 375, my translation).

As a congenital liar, of course

Woman has no ontological reality, and hence no relation to the thing in itself [Ding an sich], which, for every deeper understanding, is identical with the absolute, the idea of God. Man in his actuality, the man as genius, believes in the thing in itself. It is for him either the absolute as his highest concept of existing value: in that case he is a philosopher. Or it is the miraculous country of his dreams, the empire of absolute beauty: in that case he is an artist..... Woman has no relationship to the idea. She neither affirms nor denies it; she is neither moral nor anti-moral ...; she is as amoral as she is alogical. All being, however, is moral and logical being. Women are therefore nothing. (1903: 383-4, my translation.)

Surely this is a disarmingly open account of what it means in our culture to have a penis. What Lacan has told us is substantiated here: the phallus stands both for the defined (the 'idea') and the spontaneously creative; it is both public morality and conceptual power. Being itself is finally made identical with morality and logic. Whoever lacks the phallus, therefore, is nothing. 23

His argument leads Weininger, as one would expect, to language. If this 'nothing' creature speaks, it can only lie. Animals (like women) lack ontological reality, but they cannot speak and therefore don't lie.

In order to speak the truth one has to be, since truth aims at something that is, and only he who is something in himself can have a relation to what is. A man wants the full truth, which means he has only one desire: to be Anyone who speaks about a matter without intending to affirm courageously something real, anyone who commands the external forms, without inner conviction, who like a woman, is not honest, he must always necessarily lie! Hence women lie even when objectively they speak the truth. (1903: 384, my translation)

Language is the only fully human form of communication: certain conclusions are therefore inescapable. Woman is really a mute, like the animal, but she is a lying animal.²⁴ She has acquired language as an imitative trick, a form without essence. This has two consequences (which have indeed influenced women's lives profoundly): women cannot communicate (we remember Lawrence's strictures on women 'uttering' in the Study of Thomas Hardy), and there is no point in communicating with them. The only form of communication they can understand is sex.

If we turn now to Dickens's letters to his bride, we see how well the highly abstract Weininger has described a real situation (He was after all a genius in his own right). We also see the power abstraction has over our lives, for convention is a form of abstraction. For

Weininger 'genius' occurs in a social vacuum, in which biology, even anatomy, is destiny. In actual fact 'genius' is the result of an interaction between people. The interaction is partly personal and partly controlled by convention. People have gifts, and other people or social and cultural traditions stimulate (or arrest) these gifts. Dickens was at the time of his engagement a budding genius. Black, editor of the Morning Post, gave him a push that sent him in the right direction. He told him his 'pictures of life' were not good enough, he had to go behind the facade and get at the life of the people he was describing. Black taught Dickens to feel. It is this feeling, in combination with his 'eye', that we call Dickens's genius. When his empathy fails his genius falters. It fails most often in his description of gender relations. Until quite late in his career his genius is weakest when it comes to his heroines.

Dickens respected Black and therefore listened to him. It is clear from the letters exchanged with Catherine Hogarth that Catherine could have given him another push, that could again have sent him in the right direction, this time in the direction of giving him a grasp of the life of women and the psychology of 'young heroines'. But Dickens did not respect Catherine and therefore did not listen to her. The metier in which men and women meet and which Weininger so penetratingly characterises is not conducive to such communication. What Catherine was talking about was only life (and

herself) not art, and the important connection between the two escaped Dickens under the circumstances. Most importantly Catherine had not been taught to be confident enough to be articulate and insist on being heard. So the two talked past one another, and the loss was great to their lives and is great to art.

Catherine Hogarth at the time of her engagement.

Letters never give a full account of a relationship. For one thing, the correspondents are separated and distance has its effect on them. It affects their feelings and what they select to tell one another. The letters Dickens and Catherine Hogarth exchanged during their engagement were not of this kind, however. The two were not separated and what they wrote was barely letters, little more than notes dashed off and sent around the corner by messenger boy. They are immediate responses to the ups and downs of the day and expect an immediate response. The stuff they are made of is transient upheavals and feelings before they had time to simmer down. They give us a more immediate picture of the texture of the relationship than ordinary letters.

We only have the letters Dickens wrote. He apparently destroyed Catherine's letters to him after their separation in 1858. Yet it is Catherine that interests us here. How does one construct the biography

of a famous man's wife? There is plenty of information, but it is, as it were, all negative information, information that has glanced off him. About him there is a lot; he is a full direct source. What does one make of such a situation? The technique that suggests itself is to reverse as it were figure and ground.

Wives are generally 'ground' because of the uniformity and drabness of their lives. To care for the house and men and children makes a background against which the individualist achievements of their husbands stand out with vivid effect.

In actual fact this is more a feature of our literate society where certain things are documented, others not, than of the older, smaller face-to-face societies. Even the extended family was a world large enough to preserve a record of its women members, their personalities and achievements. The nuclear family, however, is the least suitable world. The interaction between a couple becomes too easily one of competition and one-upmanship. The woman tends to lose out because she does not have a group of equals large enough to recognise her and uphold her, even to 'develop' her as it were, while the man has access to the outside world of peer relationships.²⁶ Even more to the point is the fact that women interact in a community and develop their skills and personality in a milieu that is epistemologically different from that of men. Their world is still by and large the world of the ear and eye and

touch, the world where direct experience counts and also the oral world where the record is the spoken word. Their lives have been and still are to a surprising extent, by choice and perforce, outside the world of what is officially authenticated, the world of history. There is a softer tradition whose laws we have never explored and which we indeed hardly consciously register as a tradition. This 'softer tradition' more than anything else makes women 'ground' to their husband's 'figure'. We have recently learnt the value of this softer tradition and want to preserve it, and this puts us in a spot, since in order to make it part of our conscious heritage, to 'read' it, it has to be written. But how does one write the lives of wives, how can one turn a wife, especially an artist's wife into 'figure' instead of 'ground?'

Only by an optical trick that reverses the accepted hierarchy and makes us see 'ground' as figure, delineated and given the shape by what formerly functioned as figure. In other words when the former figure had a convex line we now see a concave line emerging on a new figure, the figure that had up to now been invisible, simply ground. This is what we will do with the figure of Catherine, even if we can get no more than an outline. Even that outline makes an astonishing enough figure if we compare it to what Dickens's biographers and critics have made of her.

Before we look at the letters let us take a brief

look at the picture of Catherine as it emerges from the Dickens biographies. Shaw's gallant estimate of posterity, which he saw as sympathising with the woman who was sacrificed to the genius's 'uxoriousness' was wrong. The 'sentimental sympathy of the 19th century for the man of genius tied to a commonplace wife' may have changed its tone, but has not abated. The tone critics, biographers, television writers and producers adopt about Dickens's wife is truly astonishing. We know very little about what Catherine Dickens was like, but, where great writers' wives are concerned, it is as if ordinary manners do not apply. I shall give a few random examples. The readers of York Notes (foreign students doing O-level English) are told in the introduction to David Copperfield that Catherine 'was not an ideal companion for Charles Dickens.' David Craig calls her in his introduction to Hard Times 'a slow, shadowy personality' (was he by any chance influenced by Mrs. Gradgrind?). Q.D. Leavis, who uses David Copperfield for a penetrating study of marriage customs and Dickens's ideas about marriage, remarks 'of course Dickens had no experience of a satisfying marriage' ²⁶. Even modern biographers who cannot but see Catherine's personality as the result of the relation with Dickens cannot avoid seeing her from the man's point of view. N. and J. Mackenzie, in their Life say: 'But repeated pregnancies were exhausting Catherine's sexual role, and lacking the personality to keep her in favour with Dickens, she had

no other'.²⁷ Una Pope-Hennessy, in some ways the most perceptive biographer of Catherine's relation with Dickens, says of the young Catherine Hogarth: 'Quiet, silent, unenterprising, Catherine had dull friends, and as she never developed the social gift of discriminating between one person and another essential to intelligent intercourse, she was incapable later on of playing her part as celebrity's wife.' And later on the same page: 'Kate must often have suffered from depression.... Charles had spirit enough for two, but it was uphill work making this lethargic, unimaginative girl understand just how hard he was working and how anxious he was to make their future secure.'²⁸

The letters Dickens wrote to Catherine Hogarth during the period of their engagement from May 1835 to April 1836 are all undated. However, to the first one of the series which Catherine Dickens gave to her daughter because she wanted them to see the light of day and become known to Dickens's readers, she appended a date, May 1835.²⁹ This tells us two things: that she remembered the occasion and that she thought the letter important and wanted to give it a mark, make it stand out (It is longer and more formal than most of the others - certainly not just a note). The letter is well known but it is worthwhile nevertheless to give it in full here.³⁰

My Dear Catherine, It is with the greatest pain that I sit down before I go to bed tonight, to say one word which can bear the appearance of unkindness or reproach; but I owe a duty to myself as well as to you, and as I

was wild enough to think that an engagement of even three weeks might pass without any such display as you have favoured me with twice already, I am the more strongly induced to discharge it. - The sudden and uncalled for coldness with which you treated me just before I left last night, both surprised and deeply hurt me - surprised, because I could not believe that such sullen and inflexible obstinacy could exist in the breast of any girl in whose heart love had found a place; and hurt me, because I feel for you far more than I have ever professed, and feel a slight from you more than I care to tell. My object in writing to you is this. If a hasty temper produces this strange behaviour, acknowledge it when I give you the opportunity - not once or twice, but again and again. If a feeling of you know not what - a capricious restlessness of you can't tell what, and a desire to teaze, you don't know why, give rise to it - overcome it; it will never make you more amiable, I more fond, or either of us more happy. If three weeks or three months of my society has wearied you, do not trifle with me, using me like any other toy as suits your humour for the moment; but make the acknowledgement to me frankly at once - I shall not forget you lightly, but you will need no second warning. Depend upon it, whatever be the cause of your unkindness - whatever give rise to these wayward fancies - that what you do not take the trouble to conceal from a Lover's eyes, will be frequently acted before those of a husband. - I know as well, as if I were by your side at this moment, that your present impulse on reading this note is one of anger - pride perhaps, or to use a word more current with your sex - 'spirit'. My dear girl, I have not the most remote intention of wakening any such feeling, and I implore you, not to entertain it for an instant. I am very little your superior in years: in no other respect can I lay claim to the title, but I venture nevertheless to give you this advice first, because I cannot turn coolly away and forget a slight from you as I might from any other girl to whom I was not warmly and deeply attached; and secondly, because if you really love me I would have you do justice to yourself, and shew me that your love for me, like mine for you, is above the ordinary trickery, and frivolous absurdity which debases the name and renders it ludicrous. - I have written these few lines in haste, but not in anger, I am not angry, but I am HURT, for the second time. Possibly you may not understand

the sense in which I use the word; if so, I hope you never may. If you knew the intensity of the feeling which has led me to forget all my friends and pursuits to spend my days at your side; if you knew but half the anxiety with which I watched your recent illness, the joy with which I hailed your recovery, and the eagerness with which I would promote your happiness, you could more readily understand the extent of the pain so easily inflicted, but so difficult to be forgotten. Ever yours most affectionately, Charles Dickens.

Wednesday Morning
Miss Hogarth. (1965: 61-2)²¹

Kate Perugini remembered her mother as afraid of her father and as 'never allowed to express an opinion'. What strikes one first about these early letters, however (if one reverses figure and ground as I proposed), is that Catherine has a temper and is not afraid to show it. She had treated Dickens to two shows of it in three weeks of engagement, and he knows as if he were there, while he is penning his words, that there will be another explosion when she reads them; that she will feel 'anger and pride' and show 'spirit'. Catherine is not afraid; it is Dickens who is whistling in the dark, at least this is what the overbearing tone of his letter suggests to me. The two are fighting about something; they are pretty evenly matched (if we take Dickens's tone as defensive rather than at face value) and the fight is grim. Since they have just become engaged, we can assume that the fight is about their relationship and their coming marriage.

We do not know what Catherine wanted; but we know

what Dickens wanted because he spells it out clearly, and therefore we know at least what Catherine resisted. There is not one word in the first letter or any of the following about what Dickens did to rouse her temper (Dickens never apologises in concrete terms that would tell us); there is only evidence that he kept on doing something that made her angry and made her distrust him. We shall try to reconstruct what he did presently. What Dickens demands is that she show good temper when she is furious: 'if you would only determine to shew the same affection and kindness to me, when you feel disposed to be ill-tempered, I declare unaffectedly, I should have no one solitary fault to find with you' (Letters 1, 1965: 104). We should probably take this seriously as the only thing he wanted from her. It echoes the fear he expresses in the letter I have quoted in full that 'what you do not take the trouble to conceal from a Lover's eyes, will be frequently acted before those of a husband'. Now Catherine had an unusually sweet disposition, as we know from Dickens himself and also from Kate's memoirs, and Kate stresses that she was 'a lady', meaning she had the self-discipline necessary for evenly kind and considerate manners. But Catherine apparently (and to her credit) did not learn to do what Dickens asked her. We need only look at the very full index of the Pilgrim Edition of Dickens's letters under 'Courtship and marriage' to see that she didn't. Dickens refers to her coldness, anxiety, foreboding, being

unjust, her objection to the stiffness and coldness of his letters, her being low and many, many times to her being cross. She continued to show her feelings. In the face of the evidence we can probably say that she insisted on precisely not doing what Dickens wanted: she would not smooth things over, pretend there was nothing serious the matter between them.

Dickens wanted to work. He was just at the beginning of his brilliant career and in his letters he shares with Catherine the excitement and also the enormous strain which it involves (By far the greatest number of entries in the index are under the heading: 'Dicken's reasons when unable to visit'). Having once settled to his own satisfaction that they loved one another, that they would marry as soon as he could afford to, that he would have a licit sex life and a companion 'to cheer him', Dickens was impatient of any further questioning, any 'trouble'. This put the whole onus of 'troubling' on Catherine and put her into the position Weininger so clearly described of being 'emotional' instead of 'rational'. If Catherine had given way to Dickens's pressure, and learnt to hide her ill-temper, she would simply have become his complement (or less politely, his servant, the woman in charge of his well-being), and would have learnt to live through him, a woman living through a man. Her sister Georgina did this later successfully, and Dickens rewarded her with a lifelong gratitude. But Catherine was of a higher temper

and wanted more. She would not let things slide. She refused to assume that since they loved and were getting married, all that was to settle was settled. If Dickens stood on her toes - we don't know how he did, but we can imagine without great difficulty - she would show that she was hurt and want him to make amends. Dickens was not willing to own himself in the wrong, so much is clear from his letters. Having been 'trifled with' by Maria Beadnell, every hostile emotion, anything critical of him, was put down to caprice' and 'trifling'.³² Catherine quite rightly felt that this boded ill for their marriage. She seems to have lost faith in him.

And now my dear girl I have only time to add that business and want of space combined, compel me to close my letter abruptly.... I am most happy to hear that you have not been 'coss' ... though I perceive you have not yet subdued one part of your disposition ... your distrustful feelings and want of confidence. However that may be, you may rest satisfied that I love you dearly - far too well to be hurt by what in someone else would have annoyed me greatly ... God bless you Pig, and Believe me (if you have any faith in your nature) Ever yours most sincerely. Letters, 1, 1965: 110)

Perhaps that not yet subdued part of her disposition was important, perhaps Catherine was trying to express something that mattered with it. 'You may rest satisfied that I love you dearly - far too well to be hurt....' Perhaps she did not want to be so breezily assured of love and would have rather he had been hurt and had listened to her. The immediate occasions were, no doubt, small things but Catherine must have seen them as

symptomatic of something bigger. Her trouble was that she was simply not allowed to put her case. While she wanted to talk to thrash things out, she was under constant bombardment about how to behave, especially how a girl presently the wife of an up and coming writer should behave (Her father was one of the people who 'discovered' Dickens and helped him on his way; it is therefore probable that her parents too urged her to consider his career). Dickens constantly laid down the law about what a girl, a wife, should be. There is an enormous amount of positive and negative reinforcement in Dickens's notes, considering their briefness and limited number. Any show of self-assertion is condemned: 'The sudden and uncalled for coldness with which you treated me ... surprised ... me ... because I could not have believed that such sullen and inflexible obstinacy could exist in the breast of any girl in whose heart love had found a place' (Letters, 1, 1965: 61). Passive gentleness is encouraged: 'If you knew how much delight it could afford me if I could turn round to you at our own fireside when my work is done, and seek in your kind looks and gentle manner the recreation and happiness which the moping solitude of chambers can never afford, you would believe me sincere in saying that necessity and necessity alone induces me to forgo the pleasure of your companionship! (Letters, 1, 1965: 95). Assailed like this, constantly under pressure to be the model bride, the model wife, constantly urged to consider Dickens's

career, she could not get down to working out what really happened between them.

The most frequent source of trouble was time: time spent writing versus time spent with her. It was a real dilemma: Dickens was in a fever of excitement about his new-found writing career and reading the letters we can understand that he simply cannot break off a sketch which is going well in order to redeem a promise of seeing her. That it was a dilemma however means precisely that Catherine's point of view was not negligible, that she also had a valid grievance. In fact if we take the long view of Dickens's life and work, her point of view makes sense even where he was concerned.

Dickens clearly operated under the assumption: this is a difficult time and I have to jolly Catherine along until we can get married. Once we can be together all the time the difficulties will resolve themselves. There is no sign in the letters that they worked things out - no sign that Dickens ever thought it necessary that they should - only Catherine's protests: her 'flares', her crossness and coldness. Yet this was the only time they had in which to work things out.

Of course they did talk, sometimes after a 'flare' But the letters do not give us a sense that for Dickens the relationship was something growing that had to be tended, that he was curious about Catherine and wanted to explore their differences.

If our little conversation of last night, have presented itself to your mind at all since I left you, I hope it has only been to remind you of my repeated and solemn assurances of entertaining for you a love which no alteration of time or circumstances can ever abate. I have the vanity to believe that the professions must be gratifying to you, knowing the sincerity with which they come from me. (Letters, 1, 1965: 62-63)

I hope your cold is better my dearest girl, and that you have no new complaints either bodily and mental: indeed I feel full confidence after last night that you will not have a renewal of the latter. (Letters, 1, 1965: 88)

By any standards, even the most critical, Dickens love is patronising and oppressive (As a result Catherine did have 'mental complaints', then and all through her marriage). I am not suggesting that Catherine and Dickens were not well suited and should not have married. I think they were suited. What I am saying is that the tone of the notes I have quoted shows that there were things in urgent need of working out, and also shows why they didn't work things out. Catherine rebelled but was made to feel guilty. The letters undermined the confidence that made her 'flare up' at the time of the actual tiffs. They express clearly that Dickens slighted her sense of her own worth and this must also be the answer to the question of what Dickens actually did, how he trod on her toes. He did it by being condescending and overbearing. If we change the figure and ground as I suggested, we can deduce what Catherine wanted and what she was like. She valued herself. She wanted equality,

even if she might not have expressed it in these words. She certainly wanted a properly balanced relationship. If she was often 'low' and had 'no faith', that tells us more about her realism than about her nature. In so far as it tells us about her nature, it indicates that she was scrupulous, not eager to rush into a relationship that was not soundly based. She was not content with something second rate if she could have something first rate. She was a straightforward, decent person, as indeed her whole life shows.

The source of the 'complaints' (perhaps even the physical ones) is that she is bewildered in the face of Dickens's patronising attitude. She cannot defend herself and put him straight. So she responds with temper (and gets in deeper because she is now called 'feminine' and 'irrational'). The flares are actually an insistence on her views and a bid that Dickens treat them seriously. But there is a hopeless gap between their points of view.

Catherine sees the two of them as equals embarking on a difficult undertaking together (their marriage); Dickens seems himself as embarked on a difficult undertaking (his career) and wanting succour and support. To him the coming marriage seems to be a sort of licensing of such support. Catherine was fighting for a workable life. Even if it was a fight in the dark, it had a sensible aim. Dickens was fighting for something much inferior. He won the fight since he had tradition

on his side. But with his condescension, his setting himself up as a husband to be pleased, he was preparing for himself exactly the marriage that became later an unbearable prison to him. It was not that he was not serious about the coming marriage, or had not committed himself properly to Catherine. It was that he did not concentrate on the best. He wanted something inferior (peace, not-to-be-bothered, amiableness) when he could have had the best.

His 'best' went into his work. All his best energy was concentrated there. His emotional life, Catherine, their sex life (however important it must have been as an inducement to speedy marriage) was second best. With Maria Beadnell this reversal of values had not yet set in.³³ But the disappointment and humiliation the relationship with her had involved, had taught him just that: how to make his central relationship a second best.

Why do biographers like Una Pope-Hennessy scold Catherine as an unimaginative girl who could not understand how hard Dickens was working to make their future secure? Why see it always through the man's eyes? Dickens did not work for Catherine.³⁴ And in the end Catherine turns out not to have been so unimaginative with her doubts: his work did not make their future secure. Of course, Dickens had to work. But of what good is work, how good is a writer, a novelist, if he doesn't work out his relationships, if he doesn't give first importance to life?

Why has no one pointed out what is lacking in their letters? The letters of a young man to his future wife are surely important, especially if the young man is a novelist, especially if he is Charles Dickens. Why do biographers say Catherine was lethargic? She shows signs of fight. Why don't they point to a certain lethargy in Dickens?

Why does Kate Perugini say these letters show Dickens in his Sunday clothes - that 'the real man' is not revealed in them? Surely they show quite a frighteningly real Dickens. Surely this young man writing to his future wife is exactly the man who writes so unsatisfactorily about women in his novels. The letters give one a sense of an opportunity lost. Catherine had at that time a lively sense of her value and plenty of spirit. She was in earnest about the quality of their relationship. Dickens was young; he could have learnt something from her about real women. They could have worked out something together about men and women. With her help, he could have overcome what the Beadnell relationship had done to him. In the end it was not what had happened with Maria Beadnell but what his culture had taught him about the relative positions of men and women that was the obstacle. The very way the Beadnell affair rankles shows that he could not imagine an equal relationship between men and women, a relationship in which he would not always be in a position to hand out kindness or criticism as he saw fit, but be also

sometimes in the position of the one instructed or criticised. The letters show him always either unreasonably offended by any breath of criticism from Catherine, or busy neutralising what she had to say through condescension: 'you could not possibly offend me'.

The letters are also interesting as a record of how a young woman is groomed for her functional role in marriage. Catherine was not an unusual girl; her behaviour can be taken to show that young women are not prepared for their secondary, serving role in spite of socialization. They feel that relations of love make for equality. But it is exactly love that is used as the main pressuring agent to make them accept their secondary role. The letters are also interesting on how conventional men are in this respect in contrast to women (not surprisingly, since the convention works for men). Dickens did not exercise his non-conventional imagination where love and the relation to women was concerned until the Edwin Drood period, which means the end of his life.

But the letters are interesting not only as a record of how a young woman was groomed for her functional role, of how Dickens prepared for himself the agonising marriage he later cursed, of how much more conventional men are in these matters than women. Looking at the letters one can also see that they are a record of the stereotyping of women in the novels. It is here that we see the shrew and the 'complaining wife' (who has always

something wrong with her, bodily or mental) take shape; here that saccharine women characters are made, with amiableness raised to the highest feminine virtue. If Dickens had not been so concerned to tell Catherine that to be sweet, young, good and please men was what was wanted, but had looked at her and listened to her with a novelist's curiosity we would have more interesting young heroines in his books. Dickens was not instinctively out of sympathy with women; he was not the masculine writer Gissing sees who writes purely for a male audience, at least not after his very early work. After all we owe the symbol of the dolls' house to him, a really powerful image of the bourgeois woman's plight, funny and sinister at once in a typically Dickensian way. But Gissing put his finger on something: there is a pervading misogyny, which mars his work (to my mind, not to Gissing's) and makes it dull where it could be interesting. This misogyny we can see in the notes to Catherine, both already in action and in the making. It is not that Dickens's women are not interesting; they are often more interesting than his men. It is that the potential for an unconventional and sharp-sighted treatment is there and breaks through in patches but subsides constantly into conventionality. Rosa Dartle couldn't have been created without an instinctive sympathy for women, yet the character as it is developed is also a piece of misogyny.

There is one critic who has seen the connection

between the letters and the stereotyping of women in Dickens's fiction. Geoffrey Best in a review of the first volume of the Pilgrim Edition writes, in the Dickensian, that the early letters to Catherine are

An uneasy mixture of pomposity, touchiness, affection and baby-talk; they show that with whatever regard he had for her as she really was, there was mixed some obsession with an idea to which he was trying to make her correspond: the idea of that busy, blushing, simple, cheerful, bright, fecund, long-suffering and above all, loving little woman who is already fully formed in Sketches by Boz and who was to remain a stock character for the next thirty years. ²⁵

What he does not see, and what is important for us here, is that Catherine resisted the process of stereotyping. None of the critics I have read realise it; Slater, who writes to rehabilitate her, does this by repeating that she is 'no fighter'. But the stereotypes come from Dickens's determination not to be put down by a woman. They are defined against Catherine's rebelliousness.

The letters are then a curious sociological document. Slater's point that they should not be compared with the letters to Maria Beadnell, because here Dickens writes as an accepted suitor, an engaged man, has to be taken into account. Dickens writes during a period when he already had some rights, rights Carlyle bluntly expressed to his fiancée: 'The man should bear the rule in the house and not the woman. This is ... the Law of Nature herself which no mortal departs from unpunished'. ²⁶ For Catherine, however, this was a

period when she was still free and had some ascendancy. She did not rebel after her marriage. The letters Dickens wrote during their marriage do not have the patronising, critical, self-important tone of these early notes.

In conclusion I want to return to the question why Catherine wanted these letters published. On one level the answer is easy: she wanted to show the world that Dickens once loved her, and in one of his first letters he charges her to keep in mind his 'repeated and solemn assurances of entertaining for you a regard which no alteration of time or circumstances can ever abate' (1965: 62). The letter from which I have already quoted his wish that she would only show affection and kindness when she feels like being bad tempered ends: 'Your asking me to love you 'once more' is quite unnecessary - I have never ceased to love you from the moment since I knew you; nor shall I (Letters, 1, 1965: 164). For a woman who had been driven from her home and cut off from her children in early middle age there must have been a certain grim satisfaction in knowing posterity would read these words. But Catherine did not have a vindictive nature; she was, rather, loyal and truthful. What mattered to her is that the truth should come out. And it is true that Dickens loved her. I have selected to quote those of the early letters that throw a light on Catherine as she was and get at what she wanted. They show the pompous rather than the loving Dickens. A lot

of the notes are tender, eager, playful; they show that the two had fun together. Also Catherine is referring to Dickens's letters as a whole. The later letters generally have a tone of affection (His irritation with Catherine can now after all be expressed in their day to day life). For Catherine at the end of her life it would have been important that they show how he needed her and how useful she was: they are indeed full of instructions about what she is to do; like many famous mens' wives she was a sort of social secretary. Quite late in the marriage there is a batch from a walking tour with Wilkie Collins and Augustus Egg: these are love letters, with a ring of true yearning in them.

Catherine is not accusing Dickens exactly of a rewriting of history; she does not want to prove that their marriage was happy. After all it had been harder on her than on him; she had suffered for years before he decided that he couldn't bear it. She wants to show that he once loved her and that the separation was not her fault. On one level the letters as a whole answer that purpose. But on a deeper level and especially in the light of the early letters I have quoted, the question of why she should have wanted them published still lingers. They are not flattering to her. She believed, according to Kate, that they 'would make it apparent that the separation which took place between them in 1858 was not owing to any fault on her side' but they might work against her hope. A woman whose breast harboured 'a

sullen and inflexible obstinacy 'in her girlhood already, might well seem to have faults that led to the separation. If, as we must assume, it was a carefully made decision, she must have been aware of this point. The fact that Kate says she was 'careless about the letters' before, points to some strong resistance. But she must also have realised in the light of her life experience that they are not so much unflattering to her as unflattering to Dickens. Is it too much to assume that she hoped for a posterity skilled in reversing figure and ground, so that she would appear as she was through them? The letters which are flattering to her muffle and conceal her.

Catherine was voluntarily silent in the twenty years after the separation, because she did not believe in revenge. Dickens could have been ruined by what she said. But she was too honest and had too much sense of justice not to want the record to be set straight. She tried to talk to Miss Coutts, a mutual friend, at the time of the separation, about her side of the story that Dickens had published. When Miss Coutts approached Dickens on this subject, he struck back at Catherine with unbelievable venom. He abused her to Miss Coutts, never spoke or wrote to her again, influenced the children against her and cut her off from all their mutual friends. Her attempts to speak had created the terms of her exile. Dickens began at that time to speak to his public more intimately through his readings. There is a

direct relation between the readings and the separation: when he began to speak directly, Catherine became absolutely mute.³⁷ She did not break her silence, but with death approaching she must have decided that she would speak at least indirectly, through Dickens's letters.

Catherine Dickens and the problem of reciprocity

When Catherine married, she became the wife of a genius. Such a marriage is perhaps the most difficult a woman can undertake. Before we turn to a biography of Catherine as a wife, we must look at the reasons for this. We must also return once more to questions raised in the earlier sections, especially the one on women and genius. Our first and main question here is still the old one: how can we write a biography, how can we get hold of something of Catherine's 'self' in face of the fact that all we know about her has glanced off Dickens.

With the help of Dickens's engagement letters and by reversing figure and ground we have gained an outline of her. The young Catherine we have met is quite self-assertive: she wants proper attention, she does not want to be patronised, she wants their life to take a shape she is interested in, she wants to realise her values. All this means enough to her to make her kick up against her fiance's assumptions and behaviour. It means more

to her than the relationship, since she is willing to risk the relationship for it. What is the shape she is interested in? What values does she want to realise?

From the fact that she does not so much put into words what she wants as show 'temper' when things go wrong, we can gather that she is surprised: her expectations are too deep-rooted to be articulate; Dickens's behaviour overthrows something that seems 'natural' to her. We can look at this simply as a will to power, and the early letters as documenting a power struggle between the two. But for a biography such psychological explanations are not enough, the 'self' they show us is both too thin and too universal to satisfy us.

In the same way as Catherine expresses her hurt surprise if things go wrong not in words but signs ('coldness', 'spirit' etc) she probably also expresses her positive expectations by signs: probably little gifts, probably things she herself has made for Dickens. And Dickens responds: he loves her making breakfast for him, in anticipation of the times when she always will. He loves going out into the streets and to the secondhand shops, like a primitive forager, buying things for their home and bringing them back, exultant because they are bargains. These are primitive, important rituals.

For Dickens they are overlaid by the cultural expectation that he is the superior, and she there to serve him. These again are non-articulate expectations.

Catherine has been socialised into sharing this attitude and is on the surface willing to put it into practice. But underneath, her expectations remain rooted in that 'primitive' layer where the two of them exchange gifts, 'bring things home' for one another like primitive foragers. For him it is a weak memory that comes up only briefly out of very deep layers of consciousness in the early days of their relationship. For her it is where her expectations and desires are tenaciously rooted.

In the absence of any knowledge about Catherine's individual feelings, her development during the marriage, her joys and regrets we have to go below the personal level to a more enduring element in order to learn more about her. Here it will be relevant to recall what Lawrence wrote to Garnett in 1914 about the 'psychology' of his characters: 'I don't care so much about what the woman feels - in the ordinary usage of the word. That presumes an ego to feel with. I only care about what the woman is - what she is - inhumanly, physiologically, materially - according to the usage of the word: but for me what she is as a phenomenon (or as representing some greater, inhuman will), instead of what she feels according to the human conception' (Letters II, 1981: 183). And later on the same page: 'Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon ... and my theme is carbon'. It is not easy to say what was carbon for Lawrence. We also

have to go to the carbon below the diamond or coal, but for us it is important to say exactly what sort of layer of consciousness and behaviour we tap here. 'Carbon', that is, the permanent element in the self, can be approached from different angles; there are indeed not one but many types of carbon according to the perspective of the beholder. What I propose to use to fill in the outline of Catherine's figure, which we have gained by reversing figure and ground in Dickens's letters, is neither a psychological nor a sociological element in the ordinary historical sense of the words. But it is a form of sociology; one might call it a sociology of the unconscious, based on an anthropological assessment of the behaviour of men and women. It helps us see what unites them and what divides them, especially with reference to our own culture, and especially in the relation of a wife to an artist husband. It is an exploration of the communication between people that proceeds through signs and symbols. This is an area little explored outside the psychology of the individual, and difficult to explore because our gestures, the signs we make to one another every day are based on assumptions never put into words (Difficult to explore also because the observer is of course in the same boat as the observed). And yet the exploration is important because it gives us an insight into the abiding substance of the personality, especially of women, the 'carbon', which we need, to make sense of a

life like Catherine Dickens's. The assumptions, the 'master ideas' that guide our behaviour unsuspected by ourselves, and come from layers of consciousness much deeper than cultural norms, constitute a solid part of our permanent, non-personal self.

Let us now look at this substance, this permanent self in relation to Catherine and to women in general, because for the historical reasons we have discussed at the beginning of this chapter it expresses itself differently in men and in women. Catherine communicates by signs. These signs are concrete symbols, and the positive signs are gifts. They are both artefacts - what she has made, as when she embroiders a pair of slippers for Dickens - and herself - she is in the gift. Her looks, her clothes, her vanity (she wants to be admired), her making the house pretty as a wife, her cooking, her 'making' babies: each is in varying proportions an object, an artefact and herself.

What can we call a self that is based on the assumption that people communicate through gifts that are both artefacts, things 'made' and things expressive of the self, the maker's personality? It is surely the creative self. It is made up of two movements: an individualistic separatist movement: she must withdraw to question her innermost desires (her 'real self') and then concentrate on how to give them their most accurate expression in the making of the object - all this

happening in actual or metaphoric solitude - and a gregarious communicative movement: she 'displays' the finished object and receives admiration; she gives it as a gift and expects an equal return. The prototype of this strategy of the creative self is childbirth, an organic process so important and mysterious that it lends itself like nothing else to symbol making. The birth house in primitive cultures can symbolise both the time of withdrawal and solitude needed and the 'labour' of artistic creation. In a Kwakiutl myth of the origin of the winter dance - their yearly ritual of social rebirth - the villagers build their first winter dance village on the site of the heroine's birth hut in the forest. It must be clearly understood that I am not speaking here of a cult of the mother or a celebration of female fertility. Birth is the metaphor for creative activity (both for the creative self in action and for the 'gift' that results from creative activity: in the myth, the heroine's baby daughter, born in the birth hut, becomes the first winter dancer - going in her turn into 'isolation' in the forest).³² There was also a counter-current in which the birth process and its symbolism became degraded even in archaic societies and the birth house unclean, a place of unspeakable mysteries.³³ But no other society would have lost the sense of connection between birth and creative force so utterly as to be able to speak of 'witless pregnancy' as we did in the 18th Century and later (and some feminists

do now). For women, who know by experience how much psychic power is expended in a birth, how it involves the will, the feelings and the imagination, birth has always remained a powerful symbol for their creative selves. They have always felt themselves to be the original 'geniuses', at least while they were young and strong (The word genius, which is totally patriarchal in its Latin origin and refers to male potency and productivity, goes back to an Indoeuropean root that includes 'giving birth' and 'child'). Shreds of both kinds of the old symbolic associations cling still to Victorian births: it was the time of the women, when men were excluded and part of the house became the sacred birth hut, and at the same time a sense of 'unspeakable mysteries' and something unclean hangs over it.

We have said that the creative self is made up of two movements, separatist and communicative, but one could also say that it has two modes, an active one that is reflexive, and a passive mode when it is other-directed. In its active mode the creative self is self-absorbed (in that it values only itself and its activity), busy, and a giving self (in so far as the very process of producing is a 'bringing forth', a giving). In its relation to the other the creative self has passive qualities: it is attentive, or curious; it adopts a 'waiting' or passively 'helping' stance in as much as it does not impose anything of its

own but 'draws out'; and it is an 'admiring' self. The passive mode of the creative self is almost entirely overlooked in our culture, because of our ethos of possessive individualism, but it is consciously cultivated in traditional cultures, and flourishes with us as 'good teaching'.

It is quite clear that the creative self, both in its two movements and its two modes belongs to intersubjectivity. It needs communality. This may sound tautological, since the notion of a self is recognised as depending on that of the other or others (unlike the notion of the ego which is intrasubjective). But even if all 'selves' depend on 'others', the creative self depends on the other in a special way. It is different in its relation to the community from all other selves, for instance from the destructive self (to take as an example its opposite, with which it, however, overlaps). Its relation to the community is necessarily positive (even when its productions are critical) and its community must be intercommunicative. It is never a predatory self. It cannot impose, or trick, ruthlessly or benevolently, but is dependent on communication. Though by its very nature critical of tradition and even destructive, it depends on 'a hearing'. It flourishes in a festive community that has laid aside its economic worries, that is, an egalitarian community. It needs equality because of the need for self-expression and mutual giving. It is

clamorous for what it has done (what it is), as a gift held up for admiration and enjoyment, not a principle to be imposed upon another and an extortion for a return.

All people have this creative self, but they have also a great many others. There is the caring maternal self (which is as strong in men as in women) as well as the self-imposing, and extortionate self. But only the creative self leads to an egalitarian communality, while the others all lead to hierarchical relationships. It flourishes in peaceful, though playfully combative, communities (playing rivalrous games which everyone wins). It needs equality and peace, and creates them, because it is fundamentally a patient or 'listening' self. It is connected to everything and everyone through listening: it listens to its own innermost movements, to the non-human world (from which it takes its material and to which it returns new objects) and to its human others. Listening makes a positive and respectful connection. Women have, for historical reasons and reasons of the division of labour, preserved the creative self alive to a greater extent than men. They want 'free play'. Men want power. The very fact that women have retained the 'magnanimous' model of individualism rather than acquiring the 'possessive' one delivers them into the power of men more certainly (There is an exact parallel between the white and the more 'primitive' races, like the Amerindians, who meet white civilization with generosity and curiosity, and

the expectation of mutual giving, mutual attention and admiration. Their very intelligence and generosity makes them victims). Moreover, as we have seen, something happened in the 19th Century to widen the gap between men and women. If women have generally been able to keep the creative self more alive than men, it is also clear that it could take on new guises and a new lease of life with the bourgeois woman as she emerged from the industrial revolution. She was housebound, and had been freed from the economic struggle in which her working class sisters were involved. She lived in a nuclear family, with great ideological stress on the married relation. She necessarily had to take her husband as her 'society' and her house as her field of creative action. It is here that the misunderstanding between men and women occurs and women defeat their own intentions.

The first, main and inviolable rule if people live from the sources of the creative self is that each one of them is sovereign. They must be allowed to go their own way. And yet they are totally dependent on others: dependent on their attention and interest, their suggestions, their constructive criticism. The creative self feeds on stimulation from the outside.

This presupposes in the other or others not only tolerance but an anarchic predisposition: there cannot be laws, or restricting fixed traditions, only respect and a lively curiosity and support. A community of

people who live from the creative self is therefore fluid. This presupposes in turn equality and mutuality or reciprocity.

It is gestures that spring from these underlying assumptions we have to pay attention to when we write the biography of women whose lives we only know in the outline. But Catherine Dickens's case was still a peculiar one. She was not just a housewife but the wife of an artist, a genius. Artists are the honorary and honoured women of our society. Imagine, then, a woman with such (non-articulated, preconscious) predispositions coming together with a man who is an artist. Her creative husband has the same assumptions; he deals like her in 'gifts'. His gifts are, like hers, both objects and gifts of the self. On one level it would seem a perfect fit. But there are two snags, and they are inter-related. The first is that the husband has chosen a different 'society', a different sounding-chamber for his art. He is directed outward: his 'society' is the world. He has turned to an audience, a readership, and the intense stimulating relation that characterises communication between creative selves is all with his readers. This is the community in which his sense of equality and mutual respect is rooted. The other snag is that, because the wife has willy-nilly chosen the house as her field and him as her society, she has made herself an involuntary captive. He sees her creative activity not as that of

a free and sovereign being, but as the activity that makes his work possible - as his due as a man and an artist - in plain words, as a servicing. This is very different from being mutually supportive in the sense we have been defining. If she cries out against the lack of reciprocity, he points to the fact that he 'works for her', supports her in the economic sense. But the mutuality of creative selves is of course fundamentally different from such an arrangement. Yet she does not have the language to explain it; there is no cultural standing for what she demands. She gets confused.

Even under such conditions, however, a happy mutuality is still possible. It depends on a strict division of labour. On the surface the two spouses accept the convention of inequality and male superiority. Below, in what Freud called the preconscious, they form as it were a secret society of creative selves. The notion of gender roles plays the mediating part. The wife enters the husband's society as audience and gives him the support, criticism and admiration he needs. She herself rules supreme in the house. The husband enters her society as a passive member, giving her the appreciation she needs and the benefit of his benign critical support.⁴⁰

This division-of-labour society is, of course, an adaptation. But the pure community of creative selves I have sketched does not exist; it is an ideal case. All actual communities have to adapt to the exigencies

of practical life.

Our culture does not allow the ephemeral creative activities of the wife in the house to be given the same value as an 'immortal' work of art. But below this cultural judgement men and women still have the sense that it is the activity that matters, that the creative activity itself is the real value; that in life the unfolding and sovereignty of the creative self is the most important thing of all. There are 'artistic' societies such as the Balinese who have this sense so strongly that they insist that all works of art must be ephemeral.⁴¹ With us this sense is, however, fragile, because it lacks cultural recognition.

In part the Dickenses managed to create such a division-of-labour society. Dickens always read what he wrote to Catherine, and she was to the end of the marriage his 'creative other' in this sense that he valued her criticism and needed her admiration. But they never achieved the delicate balance of a truly mutual 'society' and this was due to Dickens's temperament.

One of the main characteristics of the creative self is its energy. We have seen from the critics' voices that what strikes people about Catherine is her lack of energy; Dickens on the other hand is generally acclaimed a demon of energy, a veritable Quilp. Here is the crux of their relationship. Dickens had the sort of energy that simply appropriated everything near

it. He was lacking in respect for his wife's 'field' and in tolerance for her ways. He used his creative self to oppress and oust her creative self. His energy overflowed into her sphere. There was no room for her. After she had been married some time, she had no space any more to exercise her energy in. A passage from Mamie Dickens's memoirs of her father will illustrate this point, to which we will return. 'Charles Dickens at Home. By his Eldest Daughter' appeared in the Cornhill in 1885, fifteen years after Dickens's death. Mamie adored her father; she did not befriend her mother again after the separation, not even after Dickens' had died.

There was not a corner in any of his homes from kitchen to garret which was not constantly inspected by him, and which did not boast of some of his neat contrivances. We used to laugh at him sometimes and say we believed that he was personally acquainted with every nail in the house. (Jan. 1885: 39; my emphases)

These matters of individuality versus communality, of communication through signs and words, versus 'deafness', are then the 'carbon stratum' that gives us our clues to Catherine's life. We shall see that Dickens became more and more obsessed with his wife's inefficiency and could not be content to wait for what she would produce. Catherine was a 'Tilly Slowboy' and had to work intensely to her own rhythm from within. Interference disorientated and discouraged her. We said that the creative self is a patient self. It is

patient with itself - it listens to its own creative processes - and it is patient with the other, delighting in the role of midwife. Dickens was not patient with Catherine. As a husband and father he had too much power. The social tradition that gave him this power was stronger than his instinct for a reciprocal relation with his wife that would satisfy his own creative self at a vital level. Other factors enter, which we will discuss. One was his attitude to sex, another his tendency to split his relation with Catherine by giving her sisters roles to play that were by right hers. Here he was interfering disastrously with the sovereignty of her creative self. In all this Catherine was handicapped herself by a tradition that assumed her muteness and encouraged her compliance, leaving her indeed puzzled about what was happening.

In the rather narrow division-of-labour society of marriage, reciprocity can in any case only flourish in a meagre and lopsided way. With an encroaching on the other's spheres such as I have described, the mutuality shrinks still further and there is no reciprocity any more. The 'exchange of gifts' has turned into tyranny and obedience. But the worst is that admiration, that first, immediate return the creative self craves, is replaced by disdain. Disdain and ridicule are deadly to the creative self which is built on insouciance and a sort of boasting self-confidence. We must remember that the creative self, because it is uninhibited (it

has to 'find out about itself'), is quite an unpleasant self. It coincides in no way with the Victorian idea of what is ladylike. There must have been a division in Catherine herself, caused by the fact that she was indeed a lady (in the best sense, however). Before she was married she still had the confidence to believe that the two were not incompatible: she asserts her creative and unpleasant self. She shows an ugly temper. She insists. Later she becomes pleasant but less and less expressive. She loses her energy. She complies. 'Catherine is all that is amiable and compliant' Dickens wrote to Forster in the letter in which he explains that he cannot live with her. He himself is unremittingly unpleasant and energetic. But it is my belief that when he injures their mutuality he injures his creativity too, for all that he had a different 'society' to appeal to. There is a strain of creative weakness in his work where women are concerned that has to do with his disdain for Catherine.

Writers have seen fragments of the complex I have described here. Lawrence often mentions in his theoretical writings that the one thing truly necessary is to keep one's creative self alive. Musil, writing on marriage, comes to the conclusion that admiration is the essential part of marital companionship.⁴² None of them see that women have paid the price for the absence of these essentials much more heavily than men.

The dis-placement of a wife is of course something

that happens in many marriages; but in the Dickens marriage it happens to such a degree that it becomes its most striking feature. It is from the perspective of these shifts that we can build up a picture of Catherine's life. There is no point in giving a chronological account of her life with Dickens. That would be Dickens's life, with her on the fringe; and it has been done many times. We can get a sense of her life-flow - a flow that was dammed at so many points by Dickens that it finally stagnated - only if we look at the history of their life together under a variety of aspects. The themes are pregnancies and births, moves, houses and entertaining.

Chapter 5 Marriage

The marriage began well for Catherine. She was nineteen when she met Dickens and was engaged to, or courted by, the painter Daniel Maclise. Maclise was at that time already established, a Fellow of the Royal Academy, Dickens a parliamentary reporter, who had just started a new job at the Morning Chronicle. His 'Street Sketches' in the Chronicle had aroused Catherine's father's attention and he had brought Dickens back to the Hogarth home with him. Apart from the 'Sketches' Dickens was famous at that time only for loud waistcoats and a hideous liveliness. When one looks at the pictures of Dickens and Maclise one can see the reason for Catherine's choice. Dickens is physically attractive, Maclise is not. Maclise was an excellent person, intelligent and warm hearted (and he remained a tender and devoted friend to Catherine) but Dickens, on the miniature he gave Catherine as an engagement present glows with life. This life quality is striking in many of the early pictures: his eyes shine, his hair springs up finely and freely (Maclise had a balding front), his skin positively breathes. On the miniature he looks, moreover, a conceited little animal, captivating in a way the mature Maclise could not be. Physical attraction is a sound basis for a marriage choice and Catherine in fact loved Dickens all her life. She chose him because he was what Lawrence called 'a fine spring of life'.

Catherine herself was lovely. There is a picture of her painted by Maclise before she was married in which she sits, half lying, leaning back in her seat. She too glows with vitality, and her posture shows that she glories in her physicality and the power it gives her.² Her 'sensuality' has been remarked on by the critics; Hebe Elmslie calls her 'innocently voluptuous'.³ If innocence is meant to mean ignorance I am not so sure about it. It seems to me (still judging from the Maclise portrait of 1836) that Catherine was aware of her power to attract, at that time, and gloried in it. It was the basis for her self-confidence. Hence her temper when Dickens began to be overbearing: she felt she was someone to be listened to.

For Dickens the marriage also began well. At the Hogarths he met for the first time civilized people, who gathered round them: artists and critics, who had easy, warm relations, even to outsiders like him, and were well bred enough to be thoroughly unpretentious. This was so different from the stuffiness and stand offishness of his former, chosen, in-laws, the Beadnells, that he must have felt a surge of astonished joy and liberation. As with the Beadnells, the social standing of his in-laws was important to Dickens, and here he met, for the first time, with culture.⁴ The combination of ease and culture must have enhanced Catherine immensely in his eyes, and she did in fact have a 'graciousness' all her life which he never matched. A letter to his uncle,

written just before his marriage, shows how much he valued Catherine for the 'connection' she represents.

My dear Uncle - the great success of my book and the name it has established for me among the publishers, enables me to settle at an earlier period than I first supposed possible; I have, therefore, fixed Saturday next for my marriage with Miss Hogarth, the daughter of a gentleman who has recently distinguished himself by a celebrated work on music, and who was the most intimate friend and companion of Sir Walter Scott, and one of the most eminent among the literati of Edinburgh. ⁶

This is one of Dickens's 'boasting letters'; he tended to exaggerate in his letters, when he felt exuberant, all his life. In fact this habit of boasting is closely related to the assumptions of magnanimous individualism, which he and Catherine shared and which united them and divided them, as I shall show. George Hogarth, Catherine's father, had been a Writer to the Signet in Edinburgh and advised Sir Walter Scott after the financial crash of 1826. By no stretch of the imagination can one call him Scott's intimate friend and companion, but he was a friend. He was not one of Edinburgh's most eminent literati, but he did edit an anthology of poetry. He was, however, a distinguished musical critic. In London he was editor of the Evening Chronicle, as well as music critic for the Morning Chronicle, for which Dickens worked as a reporter. He asked Dickens to write a series of sketches for his paper, on the strength of which Dickens asked for his salary to be raised from 5 to 7 guineas a week. After

Hogarth had got into the habit of taking Dickens home with him to Chelsea, which was almost 'country' still at that time, Dickens had offered to read the galley proofs for the 'distinguished work on music'. He mentions to his uncle, a 'Musical History, Biography and Criticism', which came out in 1835. Georgina Hogarth, Catherine's mother, also came from a musical family. Her father was John Thomson, the friend of Burns who edited six volumes of folk airs with lyrics from Burns, Scott and Byron, persuading Haydn and Beethoven to write accompaniments for them. We do not know whether she and the older children Dickens met in the house sang and played instruments, but we can suppose it. We know that she was a lively and decisive woman, while her husband was quiet. Catherine, with her famous slow smile took after her father. Both her parents were kind, but her mother was her champion all her life; it was she who stood up to Dickens and she who, when Catherine was in trouble at the time of the separation, acted decisively while her father was indecisive. Some biographers claim that she did not like Dickens from the start, but there is no evidence for that; the letters show that the two got on well for the first few years and were particularly close after Mary, Catherine's sister had died. Mrs Hogarth had ten children (some biographers make it fourteen), and only very restricted means; nevertheless she dispensed a warm and widespread hospitality, keeping open house especially for the young and striving who were not well

off, like Dickens.

The stimulation Dickens got from being thrown suddenly into this musical environment must have been enormous. Catherine herself had a love of music and knowledge of music which far exceeded Dickens's, but in those early times they came together in co-operating on an operetta 'The Village Coquettes'. Dickens was working on his Sketches by Boz during the year of his engagement (1835-36), but also found time, in the musical milieu of the Hogarth family, to branch out into the theatre and what we would now call 'musicals'. Hogarth had given him an introduction to Braham, the famous tenor and impresario, and Braham's stage manager, a John Pritt Harley, asked Dickens to write a farce in which he, Harley, could appear. This was the beginning of a whole crop of one-acters, of which the musical The Village Coquettes was one. Catherine had been involved in the libretto (Dickens mentions in a letter how he is beginning 'the second act ... with a Scene founded on your suggestion' and later adds how much he likes the second act: 'I think it will tell') but we don't know whether she also had a hand in the musical arrangement.⁶ The music was composed by Hullah, a friend and fellow student of Dicken's sister, Fanny, at the Royal Academy of Music. For Catherine this venture brought the friendship and enduring regard of Braham. He visited them in August 1836 at Petersham, where she and Dickens spent their first married summer holiday. Six years

later, in 1842, when Braham and his wife were visiting the Governor-General of Canada, they met the Dickenses again, who were on the last leg of their American tour; and here, we get one of those sudden flashes of light on Catherine, thrown by a snippet of gossip: 'The Charles Dickenses arrived and ... though neither Braham nor his wife much cared for him, they found Mrs Dickens delightful, and, for the sake of her company, had to lead the same flamboyant life that the young novelist favoured' (Even before their marriage Dickens relied on Catherine to give him 'all the news about Braham', as he says in a letter).

This musical and co-operative enterprise of Dickens's and Catherine's, The Village Coquettes, has a more than intrinsic importance, because with it Catherine's milieu and Catherine's talents extended into the marriage. Dickens was slow in working on it, and it links Catherine's family and the atmosphere of her family life with her early married life. In early December 1835 Catherine's father looked it over for Dickens; on their honeymoon, in April 1836 Dickens was working on it. In July 1836, when they had been married four months, the Dickenses gave a party and dress rehearsal in their 'three rooms', Dickens's old chambers. Una Pope-Hennessy describes the occasion in her Life.^e

The family collaborated in trying music and libretto out on Saturday evening, July 23, at Furnival's Inn 'before a few confidential friends, literary and musical'. Macrone was bidden by Dickens in a civil note ... 'Mrs

Dickens desires me to say that if you will with Mrs Macrone join the friends who wish to hear it, she will be most happy to see you'....
At the end of the first act Macrone offered to purchase the copyright. (1945: 61-2)

Dickens read. Did Catherine, Fanny and perhaps Mary sing? Did they play and if so, what instruments? The addition of a touch of business is pure Dickens. But the air of the whole thing, the fun of the combination of slapstick with skill, the doing something quite demanding with few means and in retriected conditions is typical of Furnival's Inn. 17 Furnival's Inn, the bachelor chambers Dickens had not managed to let, and into which they moved for the first year of their marriage, was a place in which the particular genius of their marriage flourished. It will be worthwhile looking with some care at the question why Furnival's Inn was so 'genial' for the Dickenses. The answer will go some way toward explaining why other, later, places were so uncongenial to Catherine.

Furnival's Inn

'Furnival's Inn' - I am using the name as a descriptive label for Catherine's first year of marriage - was quite a complex set up.² First of all, not two, but three people lived there. Catherine's younger

sister, Mary, moved in with Catherine and Dickens as an almost permanent visitor. Secondly, the gloomy chambers in the old house, which Dickens had associated with 'moping solitude', were transformed by the trio; some of the ease, informality and unassuming friendliness of the Hogarth home moved in with the two young women, and the chambers became a place of happiness. Old places that aren't worth bothering about - bare boards, lumber and dust - have a curious symbolic relation to the libido and can have a liberating effect on it. Something like this must have happened to the three young people. Thirdly, and conversely it was also the place where Catherine met the 'reality principle' of her marriage, which for her took the form of childbirth, and where Dickens chose for his muse something particularly unreal, namely his idea of Mary. For Mary it was quite simply the place and time of her happiness before her death.

To judge from his letters, Dickens returned to his batchelor habits immediately after his marriage. He worked in the mornings; then, when he had accomplished something, he arranged with a friend an excursion to some attractive place. London was within reach of the country then; they would walk or ride; often they made some recommended inn, which did good chops or had special cider, the point of their excursion. At night Dickens would invite his friends to his rooms, where he had a good fire and two lovely young women to welcome them and serve them with hot punch. Among their friends were

already his publishers and other influential men of the day. But the entertaining was simple. Catherine and Mary, who lived their own life during the day, seem to have created a genuine atmosphere of sociability and dispensed a warm and gay hospitality that must have pleased and amused them both. If there was a touch of the pasha and his hareem about the set up - and what man would not be delighted to show off two beautiful young women to his friends - they entered into it as a joke played on the men and a game.

The joke was that it was very much a woman's place, their place. They had it to themselves much of the day; and if Dickens felt like a pasha, he was, from their point of view, also someone who lived on the fringe of its real life and was himself a visitor. Mary refers to him in one of her letters as 'such a nice creature and so clever!'¹⁰ If Catherine had been alone with Dickens she would have been lonely much of the time. Having Mary there made the place into a sort of commune. The two sisters were close; in spite of the age difference they were friends. Catherine's marriage had precipitated them both into a wonderful situation of independence (At home, there were a lot of young children, restricted circumstances and a lot of work - neither of them probably had much freedom there). We can imagine the sisters living a carefree, somewhat bohemian life. In their cramped quarters, 'three stories high', there cannot have been much to do; neither elaborate

housekeeping nor elaborate cooking would be possible. Mary boasts in one of her gossip letters to a friend about the elegance of the set up ('furnished most tastefully and elegantly, the drawing-room with Rosewood, the dining room with Mahogany [sic] furniture - I hope you are satisfied with this description!'), (Letters, I, 1965: 690), but we know from Dickens's letters that the furniture was odds and ends, much of it picked up second hand. The sisters must have walked out together, window shopping, and have had a great time at home playing at housekeeping. There is an air of festivity and play about Furnival's Inn which comes out in Dickens's letters of the time and the few letters of Mary's we have. This is exactly the atmosphere in which magnanimous individualism thrives. It suited both Catherine's and Dickens's temperament, and Mary who was almost a child still would be very happy in it. The three formed a little society. For Catherine it was perfect. She could be lady bountiful in many different ways; she could treat Mary as her guest and heap kindness on her; she could act with Mary as hostess to Dickens's friends, the two young women enhancing one another; she could think up surprises for Dickens - in Furnival's Inn she presented him with a child, that most surprising gift and work of art magnanimous individualism knows of. Mary would do things for them both. At the time of Catherine's lying-in she managed the little household, looking after Catherine and Dickens for a whole month.

She must have been very proud. She and Dickens could also do things for Catherine together. On the day of Catherine's confinement, driven out of the house, they hunted for a bedside table for Catherine. Dickens writes a year later:

This day last year Mary and I wandered up and down Holborn and the streets about, for hours, looking after a little table for Kate's bedroom which we bought at last at the very first Broker's we had looked into and which we has passed half a dozen times because I didn't like to ask the price ... She came back again next day to keep house for me, and stopped nearly the rest of the month! (Letters, I, 1965: 630)

Dickens would read to them in the evening, sharing what he had accomplished during the day, wanting to be admired. Here is a sample of Mary's admiration; she seems to have admired his skill in marketing himself more than the actual writing:

His literary career gets more and more prosperous every day and he is courted and flattered on every side by all the great folk of this great City - his time is so completely taken up that it is quite a favour for the Literary Gentlemen to get him to write for them. He is going to begin a novel very soon. '1

Dickens testifies to how happy they were when he writes in his diary, a year after the birth of his first child 'I shall never be so happy again as in those Chambers three stories high - never if I roll in wealth and fame. I would hire them, to keep them empty, if I could afford it.'12 At that time it seemed to him that

the happiness was due to Mary. This is because by then Mary was dead. But from Mary's letters it is clear that he was happy with Catherine; that they were in fact all happy together:

I have just returned home from spending a most delightfully happy month with dearest Catherine in her own house! I only wish you could see her in it ... she makes a capital housekeeper and is happy as the day is long - I think they are more devoted than ever since their Marriage if that be possible - I am sure you would be delighted with him he is such a nice creature and so clever he is courted and made up to by all the literary Gentlemen. (Letters, I. 1965: 689-91)

In another letter she mentions how Dickens is 'constantly studying [Catherine's] comfort in every thing' (The Dickensian, 63 [1967], 77) - in other words, in the Furnival Inn framework, reciprocity with Catherine was possible for Dickens.

One of the characteristics of societies dominated by magnanimous individualism, we remember, is a sort of playful rivalry, a competition which everyone wins. Much of the sociability in such societies has actually the form of competitive games: singing and poetry competitions, eating competitions, races. In our own society, one of the corners into which magnanimous individualism has withdrawn and in which it still lives on is convivial games playing. Dickens himself was an exuberant boaster and games player. He had the temperament that goes with magnanimous individualism to an almost ludicrous degree: swaggering, highly inventive

and creative, histrionic, with tendencies to aggressiveness and violence. He would not have been out of place among the Kwakiutl Indians, who live to 'make their name great' with feasts, performances, and displays of 'giving away'. Like them, he insisted quite literally that he was 'the greatest' and, again like them, invented a string of names for himself to underline this greatness. He called or signed himself habitually 'The Inimitable'; in his letters there also crop up 'Albion's Sparkler', 'The National Sparkler', 'The Immortal Creature', 'The Gifted Man', 'the Incomparable Author'. This is fun, and expresses the spirit of magnanimous individualism in an older, more primitive form than is usual among our artists. We must remember, however, that in magnanimous societies everyone is in turn 'the greatest'. Everyone boasts and tops everyone else with his swagger. The egalitarian principle that is an ingredient of magnanimous assumptions takes the sting out of the one-upmanship and doing one another down, and acts as a check on the tendency to aggressiveness and violence. Reciprocity - the principle of balance which these societies have worked out from the smallest material detail to the finest psychological nuance - has been institutionalised in these societies and is part of their political organization. We have a remnant of the spirit but few rules except the rules of politeness; and between men and women, especially if they are married, no rules at all.

Catherine, for all her difference from Dickens, and though a lady did not boast or swagger, had the magnanimous spirit to a high degree. Her wit was of the laconic and slow kind, that bursts out in a sudden firework of drollery and is of great sweetness. Dickens was delighted when Catherine exercised her magnanimity as a 'capital housekeeper ... happy as the day is long' in the family circle, or as a beautiful and gracious hostess to his friends. In the halcyon days of Furnival's Inn the house was a field where he did not pretend to compete. But when Catherine showed herself a sparkler in one of the fields he regarded as his own he was not so happy. Unfortunately Catherine's social and creative talents lay along the same lines as his own, with the exception of music. She liked people and was good with them (and was particularly good with children). She liked the theatre, acting and games playing and had a knack for words. There is a curious story from the autumn of 1841 when Dickens had taken a house at Broadstairs and filled it with his friends and relations as he liked doing: Maclise was there, the Macreadys, Dickens's parents, sister Fanny and brother Fred among many others. A game of inventing outrageous phrases and puns was in progress, each capping the other with more ludicrous ones. Catherine joined in the game, and immediately Dickens 'pretended to be disgusted ... and vowed he was deteriorating under this bad example'. So, whenever Catherine made a pun she would do it' "turning

up her eyes in affected terror of his wrath and terminating in a pretty little moue" while Dickens went through a pantomime of tearing his hair and writhing in attitudes of anguish' (Johnson 1953: 348): a comedy of threat and propitiation. Another talent they had in common was acting. Dickens was of course a brilliant actor, with a great love and knowledge of the theatre. No one can describe his astonishment when he found that Catherine could act too. On their American tour in 1842 he put on a play for a local charity in Montreal. 'Only think of Kate playing! ... and playing devilishly well, I assure you!' he wrote to Forster, and added to the name of 'Mrs Charles Dickens' on the playbill eight exclamation marks (Letters, 3, 1974: 247). Dickens was keen on Catherine helping him in the world, but sensitive about competition. In time the playful rivalry of Furnival's Inn and of the early time of high jinks which these two incidents show became a real rivalry, and he became oppressive.

Catherine had of course no thought of rivalling Dickens in the world. Her 'field' was their home life. But for this she had to be able to be the centre and focus of the home, its dominating spirit. In Furnival's Inn she was successful in this. With the help of Mary's presence it was a woman's world, Catherine's world. They were all stars then, and all admired each other. It is ironic that only in Dickens's bachelor chambers, a place he never meant as a home for her, was Catherine really at

home. When they moved to Doughty Street she began to lose her footing, and from then on she became with every move more insecure and more of a stranger in her own house.

Dickens was ambitious. That he had an unusually developed 'creative self' and an unusual penchant for magnanimous individualism does not mean that he was not thoroughly a part of the possessive individualism that rules his time. He was a first rate businessman, who died possessed of £93,000. In fact he is a remarkable example of straddling the two worlds. He was both playfully competitive and fiercely, vindictively competitive. He was generous and loved display, but he developed an iron will and insisted that things were done his way. He was fond of beautiful houses and luxury, and wanted marble staircases, chandeliers and elegant rooms, conservatories where he could turn winter into summer, scents, silks and jewels. He wanted Catherine to be an exquisite ornament in this setting, a gleaming and sparkling hostess.

Catherine was a good hostess, as we know from contemporary testimony. She had a genuine interest in people which made her gracious and kind. The Maclise portrait of 1846 shows that she was also glamorous. But Dickens's schemes became more and more ambitious, and he put more and more pressure on her. Finally, the strain became too much. The strain was not all to do with Dickens; it also had to do with Catherine as a child-

bearer. I shall below, in two separate sections, go more fully into the questions of what childbirth and the many moves to new houses meant for Catherine. Here I want to anticipate the two subjects briefly, in order to bring out what changed their relations from the playful equality that the Furnival's Inn set-up had allowed. Dickens, as we said, had 'the world as his field', and he had a lot of worldly ambition to fire him. He was fiercely competitive: socially, so that houses and parties had to change from Furnival's Inn ease, and personally - he had to shine, he had to be the greatest. His need for self assertion (which is a personal psychological factor) led to a passionate insistence on having his own way and a habit of doing Catherine down. Catherine lost her dominance in the house and became hostess-as-servant. She lost her dominance over her children. She had no field anymore. She became, finally, a wreck. It was not that she did not put up a gallant fight. In the autumn of 1850, after she had borne her ninth child, Dickens had arranged to do some amateur theatricals with Bulwer Lytton and Catherine took a role in one of the farces. But this time she was unlucky, and did not gain the astonished admiration of her husband once more. I quote the incident as Johnson tells it, both for the story he connects with it and for the tone in which he repeats his story.

Almost at the outset Kate, who had the part of Tib, ... managed to fall through a trapdoor on the stage. Her ankle was so severely sprained that Mrs Lemon took her place. With the

course of years in fact, the clumsiness that Dickens had noted in America and humorously exaggerated in Tilly Slowboy seemed to be growing more marked. Richard Horne, who had been at Broadstairs with the Dickenses during the summer and often dined with them at Devonshire Terrace, observed that bracelets would even slide off her arms and fall with a splash into her soup, while Dickens threw himself back in his chair, laughing uproariously, his eyes streaming with mirth. Kate's lack of physical control strongly suggests nervous disturbance and Dickens's laughter sounds like the hilarity with which we hide secret irritation from ourselves. But in behaviour Dickens was all solicitude. (1953: 721)

By the time Catherine had been laughed at and jeered at for years (and borne children year after year) she did not know anymore whether she was on her head or her heels.¹² Dickens's laughter, and his gesture of throwing himself back in the chair, reminds one of Quilp (I shall look at the relationship between Catherine's clumsiness and Quilp in a separate section below). It also reminds one of another strangely Quilpian scene. When a young woman called her husband darling at Dickens's table, Dickens laughed so much that he lay on his back waving his legs in the air. Quilp stands for cruelty, but also for a vitality so overwhelming that it becomes destructive of everyone around. It is the creative vitality, which in a magnanimous society, plays such a happy role, gone rogue. Johnson's commiseration with Dickens adds to a scene almost more painful than one can bear the spectacle of a good biographer's callousness to Catherine.

Catherine had her first child on January 6th, 1837. Labour began early in the morning and lasted all day. Her mother and mother-in-law were both there to help her. As we have seen, Mary and Dickens were banned from the scene on that day, and roamed Holborn trying to get a little table for Catherine's bedroom.

Since Catherine, Dickens and Mary had moved into Furnival's Inn in April 1836, Catherine must have been pregnant all during the Furnival's Inn period. We do not know how she felt during that period, whether she was ill or well; but a pregnancy is always an important experience in a woman's life. We do not know whether she could share this experience with Dickens. But from a letter Mary wrote after the child was born we know that the sisters shared the physical experiences childbirth involves, and that Mary felt intensely for Catherine. The fact of the pregnancy, which no doubt made Catherine proud and happy, gives, then, the Furnival's Inn period its own special aura, which I have so far neglected, and the closeness of the two sisters over the experience makes Furnival's Inn even more of a woman's world than we have considered. No wonder they took a rather cocky tone about Dickens - 'such a nice creature and so clever'.

The birth, however, seems to have been difficult, to judge from the protracted labour, and about a week afterwards Catherine became ill. We do not know what the physical diagnosis was - from Mary's letter which I

quote below, it sounds like an inflammation of the breasts that made nursing impossible - but that a very severe postnatal depression came into play is clear. Dickens wrote to his publisher Bentley that she was 'in a very low and alarming state' throughout the latter half of January, and that he had to stay with her all the time because only when he was with her would she eat. Dickens himself was overworked and run down at that time, suffering from violent headaches. He was bringing out Pickwick Papers and had begun Oliver Twist. He had also for the past few months been house hunting. To have a break and recover they went, all of them - Catherine with baby, Mary and Dickens - for some weeks to the cottage in Chalk where Catherine and Dickens had spent their honeymoon.¹⁴

Mary's letter gives a vivid picture of what Catherine was going through.

... I know your kind heart will be anxious to hear of my dearest Kate, who I am sorry indeed to say has not gone on so well as her first week made us hope she would. After we thought she was getting quite well and strong it was discovered she was not able to nurse her Baby so she was obliged with great reluctance as you may suppose to give him up to a stranger. Poor Kate! It has been a dreadful trial for her ... it is really dreadful to see her suffer. I am quite sure I never suffered so much sorrow for anyone or anything before.... Every time she sees her Baby she has a fit of crying and keeps constantly saying she is sure he will not care for her now she is not able to nurse him. (The Dickensian, 63 [1967], 77)

This is the first time we hear of Catherine breaking down. Like other young women, she must have been quite unprepared for the rigours of childbirth. Her history, as we glimpse it from the letters, shows that she was courageous and cheerful in the face of difficulties. The insecurity caused by Dicken's treatment of her may have reacted on her nerves, but we see her overcoming the effect again and again. Human relations are complex, and there was enough in Dickens's relation to her that was positive for her to recover her courage. But with childbirth she came up against a barrier that was unsurmountable. Her first confinement was a sign, though it could not be read as such at the time: she was not made for having children. In fact she was physically and mentally quite peculiarly unfit for constant childbirth. She suffered from prenatal and postnatal complications and the births seem often to have been difficult and unusually painful. Both Catherine and Dickens were depressive people, and in both cheerfulness and gregariousness were a defense against depression (in Dickens, at his 'low' times, sociability tended to take on proportions of maniacal intensity). Her incessant pregnancies broke down Catherine's defences by putting quite an unfair strain on her constitution.

Not only did Catherine have far too many difficult and dangerous pregnancies and births, she also had to bear Dickens's jeering at her fertility.¹⁵ Here it is interesting to reflect how sensitive Dickens was on the

subject of his own productivity: he impressed on Catherine and others who threatened to impose on him that he held his 'inventiveness on the stern condition that it must master my whole life', in other words that he must be let do as he liked without any interference whatsoever.¹⁶ Catherine might have replied that in bearing children she was also involved in a mighty creative task, a task she could only do if she were not interefered with in her own domain. What she really needed was of course more than non-interference: like Dickens she needed interest and applause. But if there are indeed mothers of ten who radiate vitality and calm, they are always women who are dominant in their own sphere. Catherine had all the strain of her task and no place for rest and recuperation. It is, however, doubtful whether she could have flourished under any conditions that involved constant childbearing. That she recovered her strength and beauty after a complication at her tenth birth that made having more children impossible, probably means that the physical drain on her resources had been her main handicap.

To return to what happened after the first birth. Dickens had been looking for a larger house for several months, tramping the streets with Mary, while Catherine stayed at home, first expecting her confinement then recovering from her postnatal illness. At last he found a three story, twelve room brick house in a genteel neighbourhood, which he liked. He bought the lease for

three years, and the trio moved in on Lady Day, 25 March 1837. 48 Doughty Street was at first a continuation of Furnival's Inn, only with more room to play with. To fill up some of the rooms Dickens's brother Fred, a youth with a comic gift, joined Mary as a member of the family.¹⁷ They took up their old social life with friends and had impromptu musical evenings with Fanny, who had got engaged to Burnett, a singer like herself. Dickens, who was busier at that period than he would ever be again (in a busy life) would sometimes bring his writing down from the study to enjoy the company while he scribbled away at his monthly instalment of Oliver Twist with a facility for not being disturbed he shared with Lawrence.

On the 6th of May, a little more than a month after they had moved to Doughty Street Mary suddenly died. She was seventeen. Her death was totally unexpected; she had been to the theatre with Catherine and Dickens (ironically to see a performance of the operetta they had so gleefully performed in Furnival's Inn a year before) when she was suddenly taken ill; the next day she was dead. Dickens says in one of his letters that the doctor suspected heart trouble, but no definitive diagnosis seems to have been possible. The blow to all of them was devastating. Mrs Hogarth, who had been called, fainted at the death bed and remained unconscious for a week. Catherine was hit hardest: she had started a new baby, and the shock brought on a miscarriage.

Dickens experienced a return of the agonising pain in his left side (probably a kidney condition), that had plagued him as a boy but that had, by that time, almost left him. For the only time in his life he found himself unable to complete his serial numbers. There was no Pickwick Papers at the end of May, and the instalment of Oliver Twist in Bentley's Miscellany for June was missing.

In this crisis Catherine showed her mettle. Her first concern was her mother, who was clearly in danger herself, and this call on her resources made her strong. Dickens was not too far gone in his grief to admire her for her noble rallying. He sums up the whole tragedy, as well as his feelings for Catherine in a letter to a friend. What is strange is that he mentions Catherine's miscarriage only as an afterthought, as if it were the least of afflictions. The letter was written in May 1837 and is also interesting in showing how quickly Mary's canonization took place. After describing her illness and death he goes on:

From the day of our marriage the dear girl had been the grace and life of our home, our constant companion, and the sharer of all our little pleasures. The love and affection which subsisted between her and her sister no one can imagine the extent of. We might have known that we were too happy together to be long without a change. The change has come and it has fallen heavily upon us. I have lost the dearest friend I ever had. Words cannot describe the pride I felt in her, and the devoted attachment I bore her. She well deserved it, for with abilities far beyond her years, with every attraction of youth and beauty, and conscious as she must have been of everybody's admiration, she had not a single fault, and was in life almost as far above the

foibles and vanities of her sex and age as she is now in Heaven. Mrs Dickens has had a trying task, for in the midst of her own affliction she has had to soothe the sufferings of her bereaved mother, who was called here in time to see her child expire, and remained here in a state of total insensibility for a week afterwards. She has borne up through her severe trial like what she is - a finehearted noble-minded girl. I have removed her to a quiet cottage in Hampstead where we think of staying for some weeks to come; and the first anguish of her grief being passed she is quite resigned and cheerful. From their earliest infancy to this moment she can call up no single recollection of an unkind word or look having ever passed between them, and she looks forward to being mercifully permitted one day to rejoin her sister in that happy world for which God adapted her better than for this. I should have said that the affliction we have suffered brought on a miscarriage, but that she has perfectly recovered from it. (Letters, I, 1965, 263)

Dickens and Catherine must have talked about Mary intensely, exchanging their thoughts, because Catherine writes in almost identical terms about her, though her diction is simpler and less rhetorical and her grief comes over therefore more immediately. The letter also written in May is to a cousin:

Is it not dreadful to think she has left us for ever, although it is a blessed change for her, for if ever there was an angel she is one. She was only too good for this world. Since my marriage she has been almost constantly with us and my dear husband loved her as much as I did. She died in his arms. We have both lost a dear and most affectionate sister and we have often said we had too much happiness to last, for she was included in all our little schemes and pleasures, and now everything about us brings her before our eyes." (Quoted Slater, 1983: 111)

In the autumn Dickens writes to Mrs Hogarth, who had

sent him a lock of Mary's hair: ' I have never had her ring off my finger by day or night.... I wish you could know how I weary now for the three rooms in Furnival's Inn, and how I miss that pleasant smile and those sweet words, which, bestowed upon our evening's work, in our merry banterings round the fire, were more precious to me than the applause of a whole world could be. I can recall everything we read and did in those days, and could show you every passage and line we read together,' (Paroissien 1985: 38).

If only Dickens could have remembered Mary as she was when they all lived in Furnival's Inn and she called him 'a nice creature'. The erotic overtones in his memories of her, which most biographers and critics eagerly hunt in his letters and fiction, the half disguised desire to be married to her as well as to Catherine seem to me harmless. After all, all good human relations tend to be slightly, warmly, touched by sex and desire and are none the worse for it. All Dickens's relations to sister, sister-in-law and daughter were slightly erotic. What is important and had disastrous consequences for Catherine's life and for his writing was that he attached a cult of purity to her memory. She had been a normal highspirited girl when she was alive, but because she died a virgin she became a symbol of purity for Dickens. Her purity was moral and physical. Dickens wrote to Forster about 'that spirit which directs my life and ... has pointed upwards with

unchanging finger for more than four years past' (quoted Slater, 1983: 101). Physically this purity was an absence rather than anything concrete, and this pure absence became his ideal of womanhood. He made Mary his muse. She inspired his most empty female figures, or rather, she is the emptiness in his young heroines. He was willing to learn from a dead Mary, a Mary who existed only in his imagination, what he wouldn't learn from the living Catherine, namely what women are like. Catherine would probably have been more interesting to learn from than Mary in any case, because she was a more difficult, more sexual and self-contradictory young woman than Mary, or so it seems at this distance. However that may be, the fullness of Catherine's adult life experience in its physical and psychic aspects was cheapened when Dickens made Mary his muse.

Catherine and childbirth, Dickens and birth control

The following two sections cover the most important period of Catherine's life, her life as wife to Dickens and as a mother. Because my account of this period is not chronological and of necessity selective, I would like to give an overview first. Regarded schematically and from a distance Catherine's life shows a pattern, an undulating curve as it were, of clearly discernible

periods of happiness and unhappiness. The curve is charted around places and births as reference points. Furnival's Inn, and the birth of her first child, Charlie, was a time of happiness (Even the grief over Mary's death, and the loss of their second child in a miscarriage caused by that grief, did not diminish the happiness, because it brought Catherine and Dickens closer together). The period of constant moves and pregnancies and births that began with the move to Doughty Street in 1837 and the birth of her second child, Mamie, and ended with the birth of her tenth child in 1852, soon after the move to Tavistock Terrace, was one of deepening unhappiness. Dickens wrote to Forster when the marriage was breaking up: 'what is befalling me now I have seen steadily coming, ever since you remember when Mary [Mamie] was born' (Letters, 1, 1965: 392). This is of course hindsight, said at a time when he had decided to get rid of Catherine, and biographers have rightly pointed to evidence of unity and happiness in the intervening period. We should take recollections of such emotions seriously, nevertheless, because they mark some sort of wavering and turning of the will. Dickens could have reversed the trend that began then at many a later point in his life. There is no 'fate' in these matters as he rather superstitiously believed. What his memory marks, however, and marks rightly, is the point when he first became unwilling to make an effort.

There was a short interval of peace during this period, after Catherine's ninth child was born, when Dickens writes very tender letters. The reasons for his change of attitude are interesting and we shall look at them below. Years later, brooding in her isolation over the breakdown of her marriage and deciding that she was not guilty, whatever Dickens said or the public believed, Catherine called on that period for proof. In 1870, shortly after Dickens's death, a caller found her 'looking well, being calm and speaking of matters with a certain becoming dignity. She is resolved not to allow Forster, or any other biographer, to allege that she did not make Dickens a happy husband, having letters after the birth of her ninth child in which Dickens writes like a lover' (Slater, 1983: 156).

The period after the birth of their tenth child, Edward, nicknamed Plorn, was again a time of happiness. As I have mentioned earlier Catherine, who was only thirty-eight, regained her health and good looks when she was freed from the compulsion of constant pregnancy and childbirth. The old (and very deep) attraction between them seems to have made itself felt again. It was in this period that Dickens wrote her the most interesting and amusing long love letters during a tour in Italy, which he undertook with Wilkie Collins and Augustus Egg in 1865.

The reappearance of Maria Beadnell Winter in early 1855, or rather Dickens's extraordinary response to her

letters, mark the end of this short period of happiness and the beginning of the separation. The separation period was the most overtly humiliating and painful one for Catherine, but also one in which the injustice done to her took a demonstrable and graspable form and she could give her humiliations a name and protest against them. With Dickens's acquiring Gad's Hill Place in 1857 as a second, and country, residence, and her own move to the little house in Camden Town in 1858 the separation was publicly sealed. The last twenty-one years of Catherine's life, in Gloucester Crescent, Camden Town, was a period that began in extreme bitterness and loneliness but ended with a measure of peace and even of happiness.

We turn now to the most significant events in Catherine Dickens's life as a young woman: her frequent pregnancies and childbirths. There are two contradictory ways of referring to a birth: delivery and confinement. One refers of course to the secrecy surrounding the birth process, the other to being separated from a burden carried for nine months. But when I call this part 'Catherine Confined' I am suggesting that in Catherine's case pregnancy and childbirth had an unduly limiting effect on her life. Not because they sequestered her - we shall see that she did amazing work as a hostess in spite of constant pregnancies and frequent ill health associated with them - but because of the unhappy role of 'overfertile wife'

it forced upon her in Dickens's eyes and possibly also those of his friends. To be treated with disdain on account of events of your life that have - psychologically and physically - the greatest significance and that demand that you risk your life and prove your courage every time is surely more wounding to one's self-esteem and 'confining' psychologically than anything else. Yet many women have to bear this disdain as a matter of course, even today, as the tone of our smoking room stories, among others, shows.

It is in their approach to childbirth that men and women are perhaps, unconsciously, most different. For most young women childbirth is an occasion for magnanimous individualism. Like the female members of societies that live by magnanimous assumptions, they feel one up on men because they can 'go away' and come back with that most astonishing of gifts, a new human being. If we picture a very simple communal society, small and nomadic, such as is perhaps not found any more in its entirety among contemporary societies, we can imagine that no other gift brought back to the group from foraging could excite greater astonishment and admiration. We must remember, however, that in these nomadic forager societies childbirth was an infrequent event. Children in nomadic societies have to be carried by their mothers, and it is not possible to carry more than one child at a time. Births were therefore limited by various methods of birth control, some of which I

shall mention below. What is important for our context is that constant childbearing is against the principles of magnanimous individualism, and that women where they have control over their own bodies on the whole resist it. Childbirth is for women always a unique event. It demands a gathering of all their energies. It takes patience and tenacity and the courage to face pain even when it is 'normal' and 'easy'. It is hard work, with the most astonishing reward. Childbirth is probably the prototypical great adventure in which someone goes out to meet an impossible test and comes back a hero, victorious and with a treasure: the basis of all hero stories. At any rate to be constantly bearing spoils the unique value of the event, both for the 'hero' - the mother - and for the others who are meant to be stunned and moved to admiration by it. It also absorbs too much of a woman's vital energy and makes it difficult for her to play the magnanimous role in her family she really wants to play.

Catherine had no luck with those most stunning gifts a woman can present to her group, her children. She had too many of them, but more important than the numbers was Dickens's attitude to her pregnancies and births. For magnanimous assumptions you need a group; they function as a form of communication where they are shared. Where they are not shared the signals are sent out in vain; and of course a community of two is a group very vulnerable to such breakdown. In a sense Catherine's very magnanimous assumptions militated against her. It

has struck all the biographers and critics, even those unsympathetic to Catherine, that Dickens talked as if he had nothing to do with Catherine's pregnancies, as if getting pregnant was a perverse habit of hers and she insisted perversely on presenting him with children he did not want. All this means is that Dickens abandoned magnanimous assumptions inside marriage after the first few years, but that he was well aware of them. Husbands are generally, even if subliminally, aware of these assumptions, and, by ignoring the metaphoric quality labour, birth and the gift of a child have for a woman inside this system of communication they use her own notion of herself as a 'giver of children' to make her, and her alone, responsible for the births.

On the surface the Victorian cult of domesticity (for which Dickens was himself responsible to a considerable degree) would seem to lend itself to magnanimous assumptions. It is based on the idea of separate spheres and on women's moral superiority, on an idealization of motherhood and of wifehood. Now if women are superior to men in any sphere at all, then the old assumptions on which patriarchal hierarchy rests must be abandoned. Patriarchy means the inherent superiority of men. So on the one hand the cult of domesticity had implications of companionate marriage, and this made it an opportunity for women to revive magnanimous assumption. (These assumptions wait in the wings, as it were, in any case; magnanimous individualism exists in

the interstices of any sort of society). But there is a curious Victorian self-contradiction inbuilt in the cult of domesticity, so on the other hand it had quite opposite implications. It limited women to the house, making them prisoners, and rendered them powerless in a very concrete way, economically and legally. These factors would not initially be seen by women as influencing their magnanimous assumptions. The house would seem a refuge in which they could share these assumptions with their husbands. But after a certain time the women would be faced with a gap between their interpretation of their role and their husband's. This gap is well documented in Victorian biography. It comes out in what Virginia Woolf says about Leslie Stephen; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's mother is said to have conceived her first child (Elizabeth) in love, the others in fear. We need only look at what 'moral superiority' means in the cult of domesticity to understand the gap. It means virtues men do not have, or only have to a lesser extent. They are the virtues of self sacrifice and altruism, tirelessness in looking after others' comfort and well-being, purity and chastity. All these virtues confine, and contain in themselves subservience. The patriarchal notion of male superiority is not contradicted but affirmed by them. They encourage men to expect service from their wives, with all the deference this implies, and encourage them not to be overcareful about their own temper or their manners.

They are virtues that solicit despotism. But when there is force, companionship goes.

Both Catherine and Dickens shared in these contradictions about marriage. In Dickens they are obvious. His life, even before marriage, furnished many incitements to develop his will in a despotic direction - his forced labour in the blacking warehouse, the humiliations inflicted on him by Maria Beadnell and her parents, the vicelike grip of his publishers - and he learnt early that to insist on having his own way paid. He is unusual in that he laid down the law not only in his own house, to his wife and children, but in the outside world to people he depended on, at the risk of his career. But however noble of him it was, at times, to battle for his rights and that of others, the habit of imposing his will and forcing others to give way grew on him and became a blind force, an irrational obsessive need. This is well recognised by his biographers who seem to admire him for it rather than not: one of the chapters in Johnson's biography is called 'The will in command'. Yet this was the man who longed for domestic peace and companionship and celebrated them in his fiction. He was not aware in life (though he became critically aware in his fiction) that the particular use of the will to which he had trained himself makes companionship impossible and was the cause of his unhappiness. He continued to long for 'the one companion he never had' but did not realise that the fault lay not

in the women who disappointed him but in the assumption that his will must be law to them. So he forced one woman after the other - Catherine, Georgina, Ellen Ternan - to act out with him this drama of Victorian contradiction.

In relation to Catherine, Dickens's will was already well developed in the engagement period; but there Catherine met it with an equal determination to have the relationship on her own terms. Yet Catherine's attitude to marriage is self-contradictory too. On the one hand she believed Dickens, not her own instincts, about her bad behaviour (tempers, crossness, 'spirit') in the engagement period and became 'amiable'. This was an internalising of the strictures against female independence; she cannot have failed to realise that she had accepted male rule and her own female role as subservient. On the other hand Catherine, perhaps because of her genuine love and respect for him, never expected anything less than a magnanimous relation with Dickens. But one cannot without harm to oneself bury one's demands (her temper had been caused by her demand to be treated as an equal) and expect to see them fulfilled with each new morning. The tension Catherine created within herself had a paralysing effect and made her withdraw and slump in later life. With this she signed her own warrant in the eyes of her society: it is not morally superior to slump; no angel in the house has ever been seen slumping. The true Victorian woman - the

true woman - is perennially cheerful, a support for others.

Dickens was invulnerable because in the last resort the contradictions he involved himself in were hypocritical. The assumption of power makes invulnerable. Catherine's contradictions on the other hand were 'honest contradictions', closely bound up with reality, and they made her vulnerable.

Dickens abandoned magnanimous assumptions inside marriage after the first few years (His magnanimous practice had always been modified by the fact that it was a 'division-of-labour magnanimity' as I have said). He pushed his magnanimous assumption away from the real into the ideal sphere, into a world where the companion he had never had was waiting for him. In real life he could pity Catherine at times for her suffering in childbirth but he could not see the children anymore as 'gifts' or Catherine as an adventurer bringing him the astonishing fruits of her courage and daring. He subsided into the conventional assumption that a wife (a good wife) is a helpmeet (that is serves her husband, especially by furthering his career) rather than a fellow adventurer in the exciting business of life. His conventional self, at war with his 'creative self' and victorious over it in the family context demanded a helpmeet, not an equal in a wife. In this he became, in the terms of my analysis, a true Victorian gentleman. This is an important point for our later discussion of Catherine's life, since it is

said to be Dickens who suffered from the Victorian constrictions of the marriage, and who broke them.

Immediately he withdrew his creative self (which we remember plays an active and passive role in the relation), the gap between his assumptions and Catherine's became unbridgeable. Catherine was a woman - simple, very straightforward, with a bubbling wit but quite unostentatious, without pose - who could not live by any other than magnanimous assumptions. This may have been connected with her individuality, which lay in her honesty, generousness and sense of justice. She was a conventional Victorian woman who internalised the ideal of amiability (once she had shed the sullenness of her girlhood). She was willing to help and serve her husband, to admire his gifts (in both senses of the word) and leave him alone in the making of them. But to her they were gifts to herself, in the first place, gifts which she requited with gifts of her own in reciprocal exchange. In other words, she had an ineradicable sense of equality. This gave her the dignity her contemporaries noticed, especially at the time of the separation. But her very dignity made her vulnerable in a way the 'true Victorian woman' - the woman who had effected a compromise, who did not live in inner tension but was basically keyed to serving men - was not. This stubborn, inconvenient dignity, built up by her magnanimous expectations, could be assaulted and destroyed by force. It made her unexploitable but it

exposed her to humiliation. We need only compare Catherine with Georgina, her sister who came to live with the Dickenses six years after Mary's death. Georgy, Dickens's 'dear little housekeeper', fulfilled the patriarchal Victorian ideal, not Catherine, in spite of the fact that Catherine had children and Georgy never married. Georgy had no magnanimous assumptions: she revered Dickens in a way Catherine was incapable of and was thoroughly exploitable. Catherine's magnanimous assumptions made her strong in this one respect: she could not be exploited. What she did she did out of her own will and desire, and where the desire was spoilt for her and her will failed she slumped. She did not live eagerly and happily through and for others as Georgy did. Dickens, however, had determined, I said, that his will and his alone was to be effective in his house. People who cannot be exploited can be forced, and if Catherine was not a voluntary helpmeet and dear little housekeeper she had to be forced to be one.

In this it was Catherine's misfortune that she had a sexual relation to Dickens, Georgina's fortune that she hadn't. Because of the largely determinate nature of sex and procreation Catherine was vulnerable as a sexual mate and a childbearer. Magnanimous assumptions about childbearing would have shielded her, but they would have to have been shared - without Dickens to share them they crumbled. Consequently it was in the sexual field that her dignity and unexploitability became ambiguous and

questionable. Sex is the prototypical pleasurable reciprocal activity, but its equitable balance is immensely delicate; it is like no other activity open to exploitation and force, especially in marriage. Because its pleasure is so largely pleasure given to the other, desire is stretched to accommodate the other's and exploitation can enter here when it is impossible in other areas of living together (Victorian ideas about women's sexuality would not have helped either). Its symbolic possibilities for human consciousness are high, too, like those of childbirth, but because of age-old moral restrictions they are far less positive. Sex is associated with force, mastery and control for the male, with humiliation and pain for the female. Hence, if there is a gap in the conception of a relationship between a man and a woman - a discrepancy in what a relation means - it is dangerous to enter upon a sexual relationship and have children. If the woman expects equality, the man submission and service, her sexual and procreative life will become the focus of defeat for her.

In a hostile cultural climate, in the absence of birth control, the mere biological fact that it is the woman who is the childbearer can be a sort of humiliation for her. But was the Victorian world, which we associate with domesticity and fecundity, hostile to childbirth? The question is complex, and I will discuss it below. At any rate Dickens was thoroughly conditioned to a male world in which frequent

childbearing was a sort of malicious trick women played on men.

When he was writing Nicholas Nickleby he made up, or perhaps retold, a story that exactly foretells his attitude to a wife who out of perversity has a child every year. The hero, an innocent who does nothing but hunt and drink, has married in a fit of absentmindedness, and has now to live with someone who has a mind of her own.

Nor was this the whole extent of the baron's misfortunes. About a year after his nuptials, there came into the world a lusty young baron, in whose honour a great many fireworks were let off ... but next year there came a young baroness, and next year another young baron, and so on, every year either a baron or a baroness (and one year both together) until the baron found himself the father of a small family of twelve. Upon every one of their anniversaries the venerable Baroness Von Swillenhausen was nervously sensitive for the wellbeing of her child the Baroness Von Koeldwethout; and although it was not found that the good lady ever did anything material towards contributing to her child's recovery still she made it her point of duty to be as nervous as possible ... and divide her time between moral observations at the baron's housekeeping and bewailing the hard lot of her unhappy daughter. And if the Baron of Grogzwig a little hurt and irritated at this took heart, and ventured to suggest that his wife was at least no worse off than the wives of other barons, the Baroness Von Swillenhausen begged all persons to take notice, that nobody but she sympathised with her dear daughter's sufferings; upon which her relations and friends remarked ... that if there was a hard-hearted brute alive, it was that Baron of Grogzwig. 18

When the baroness is 'on the point of making a thirteenth addition to the family pedigree' the baron decides to

commit suicide (shades of the Victorian father in Virginia Woolf's Orlando). But instead he takes heart, remembers that one can deal with 'scolding wives' - apparently having a lot of children was enough to make one a scolding wife, - talks 'to the baroness soundly', takes up his old hunting and drinking life with his retainers again and lives happily ever after.

Nicholas Nickleby was written in 1838, the year Dickens's second child, Mamie, was born. Mary, Catherine's sister, after whom Mamie was named, had died the year before and Catherine had had a miscarriage brought on by the shock. At Mamie's birth, only ten months after the miscarriage, she suffered from a severe unspecified post-natal illness. This was the time Dickens referred to when he wrote to Forster more than twenty years later: 'What is now befalling me I have seen steadily coming, ever since the days you remember when Mary was born'. . (Letters, I, 1965: 392). Slater, in Dickens and Women speculates: As with her first child born the previous year, Catherine seems to have suffered badly.... It may have been that Dickens was less sympathetic with her on this occasion and that this created difficulties, or there may have been some other cause of marital friction at this time.' (1983: 113)). The next year, when Catherine was pregnant again, we find Dickens writing to his friend the actor Macready asking him to be godfather to the coming, third, child (Katie, born 1839). From the letter it is clear that he did not

want more children. He says he is expecting the child 'to be the last and final branch of a genteel small family of three which I am told may be looked for in that auspicious month when Lord Mayors are born and guys prevail.' (Letters, I, 1965: 571).

The tone is always jocular, the jokes are always shared with men. This shows how much Dickens's attitude really was a convention (The misogyny in Nicholas Nickleby belongs in tone to the Regency). Later he discusses with women friends why great men so often have unsuitable wives, or complains about Catherine's lack of hardihood, as before the fifth birth when he says 'her health is perfectly good and she might rally, if she would' (Letters, 4; 1977: 3); and at the time of the separation he is openly abusive about Catherine to other women. But the birth jokes are always for men friends. Gissing says in his Life that Dickens was a man's writer and admires him for his depiction of older women. Nicholas Nickleby certainly bears out this judgement.

One hopes Catherine did not know of these jokes. There is certainly no trace of them in his letters to her. But the attitude that inspired them must inevitably have had a desolating effect on her in time. Dickens never mentions her pregnancies or births at all in his letters. Even if he is writing immediately after a confinement (as in the letter of 20 August 1850, written after the birth of their ninth child, for which Catherine had stayed in London while Dickens was with the

family in Broadstairs) he does not ask what sort of a time she has had. One wonders whether he and Catherine discussed her pregnancies and births at all. One wonders whether they had indeed any language for their physical, sexual life together. If there was no communication, if their sexual activity as well as the births were 'deeds of darkness' confined to a wordless limbo, the gap this created may well have been filled with the sort of attitude expressed in the Nickleby story. In the absence of any words, childbearing might well become a weird mechanical maleficient thing. The jokes would then hide a sort of scare. This shows how extraordinarily important a mediating symbolic practice like living by magnanimous assumptions is. It binds these physical events through metaphor to known, individual, psychic life. It also shows why women are interested in living by magnanimous assumptions.

In another letter to Macready Dickens describes fears he suffers as Catherine and he are awaiting the birth of the new (third) baby in October 1839. 'I go to bed every night to horrid nightmares, concerning a nurse who is not to be found, a doctor with a nightbell that can't wake him, and a cab with a motionless horse and wheels that go round without moving onward' (Letters, 1, 1965: 593-94). In January 1841 Catherine was very ill with the birth of her fourth child, Walter. Apparently she started labour but could not proceed to the birth and remained in this agonising state for two

weeks (Johnson, writing from Dickens's point of view, tells us that 'Dickens was roused at four in the morning [of 23 January] by what seemed to be birth pangs' but that the event delayed itself for more than two weeks, till 8 February, Catherine continuing extremely unwell all that time [1953: 307]). It was at the time of these two experiences that Dickens conceived and wrote The Old Curiosity shop (published in Master Humphrey's Clock from 25 April 1840 to 6 February 1841). Master Humphrey's Clock first took shape in his imagination as visions of the contents of 'a dark silent closet': 'I have a notion of this old file in the queer house' he told Forster, '... of his affection for an old quaint, queer-cased clock ... Then I mean to tell how he has kept odd manuscripts in the old deep dark silent closet where the weights are; and taken them from thence to read' (Letters, 2, 1969: 4). The Old Curiosity Shop has as its central image an old dark house full of lumber in which the child, Little Nell, grows up and which she leaves. These are mother images, womb images, birth images. But unfortunately the child is Dickens himself. The birth experiences he shared with Catherine drove him back on himself; they stimulated his imagination but moved it, as it were, in the wrong direction. His imagination reverted to old womb fears and womb fascination; he felt pity for himself; he did not come to grips with what was happening now and outside himself. Neither Catherine with her suffering and triumph nor the new child with its

fresh possibility and promise was vivid to him. Such a tendency to introversion would be compounded if Catherine and he had no language in which to discuss Catherine's birth experiences. Dickens was personally secretive and never, at least until much later, told Catherine about his hidden wound, the period in the blacking warehouse and his consequent unforgiving hatred of his mother. Under the stress of experiencing 'maternity' once more the old traumas were activated, and Dickens did not have the strength to separate the past from the present and deal with his new experiences, those of Catherine's trials, in a humane and companionable way. Catherine's suffering and struggle seemed a form of inattention; he felt deprived and abandoned again. He vacillated between self-pity and outrage. Nell is an image for his self-pity; but The Old Curiosity Shop also contains Quilp as a main character. I shall return to Quilp and the imagery of The Old Curiosity Shop in the last section of this chapter. It may be relevant to what we are discussing here that in the period of Catherine's fourth and fifth confinement (the fifth took place after their tour of America), Dickens wrote the two novels that have wife battering as a prominent theme, The Old Curiosity Shop and Martin Chuzzlewit.

Slater, always anxious to exonerate Dickens as well as Catherine, says that Dickens's 'facetious and apparently heartless jokes about Catherine's pregnancies in his letters to friends' did not 'begin ... until after

his fourth child has been born' (1983: 121). It seems to me from the evidence that Dickens did not expect to have a fifth child at all. Adrian tells us in Georgina Hogarth and the Dickens Circle that their fifth child, Francis, was born 'exactly eight months and five days after Dickens, congratulating a friend whose wife had just presented him with offspring, had confessed "I hope my missis won't do so never more"'.¹² When some friends, amongst them Maclise and Forster, invited him to a celebration dinner he accepted in a letter describing the life in the house during Catherine's confinement: 'Nurses wet and dry; apothecaries; mothers-in-law; babies; with all the sweet (and chaste) delights of private life' (Letters, 4, 1977: 21). (This is one of the very few occasions when he hints at the sexual impatience and irritation Catherine's confinements caused him). A month later he writes 'Kate is all right again, and so, they tell me, is the Baby. But I decline (on principle) to look at the latter object' (Letters, 4, 1977: 47).

By this time Georgina Hogarth, Catherine's younger sister had joined the household, to help Catherine with the children. In the light of Georgina's later attitude to Catherine one wonders whether she took in something of what Dickens felt about Catherine's confinements. She was so young at the time, not yet fifteen, that it is unlikely; but then she saw the drama repeat itself another four times before Catherine left.

In October 1845, pregnant with her sixth child, Catherine suffered a severe prenatal depression. It is probable that this was the aftermath of a depression she had suffered from earlier that year in Genoa, when Dickens had been absorbed in hypnotising Mme de la Rue and she had been prey to mortifying feelings of loneliness and rejection. I shall return to this period and the question of Dickens and mesmerism in the next section. Again the birth was delayed when it was expected. Dickens had accepted an invitation to a meeting of the Manchester Athenaeum, but had to withdraw because he could not 'win any cheerful consent from her to my being absent' as he wrote (Letters, 4, 1977: 413). Four days later labour had still not begun and he wrote to a mutual friend, Beard, 'I call her Joanna Southcote' (Letters, 4, 1977: 416), and another thirty-six hours later to another that she had finally given birth to 'what is usually called (I don't know why) a chopping boy' (Letters, 4, 1977: 419). This was Alfred.

Catherine's most difficult and dangerous delivery was her next, in April 1847, when her seventh child, Sidney, was born. The pregnancy had been a disturbed time. She had conceived the child in Lausanne, then moved with Dickens to Geneva, then to Paris, where he walked the Paris streets at night with Georgy, leaving her alone. Then her eldest son, Charlie got scarlet fever in England while being crammed for Eton. Mrs Hogarth looked after him, but Catherine and Dickens

rushed over, Catherine highly pregnant. As their own house was still let, they took lodgings near the Hogarths. In these cramped lodgings Catherine had her child. The birth was so difficult that the specialist, hastily sent for, had seen only one other like it in all his professional life. Catherine was in intolerable pain, but suffered no worse effects than at the other times, to Dickens's relief. In December of the same year, however, she was taken violently ill on a holiday journey in Scotland and had a miscarriage in the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow. She was rushed from the station to the house of friends, while Dickens proceeded to the celebration of the first anniversary of the Glasgow Athenaeum and a banquet. A few days later she returned to Edinburgh with Dickens but was so ill again after the journey that the doctor forbade further travel for the time being. Dickens gives an account of the anniversary programme in a letter to Georgy. After describing his own part - 'the Inimitable did wonders. His grace, elegance and eloquence enchanted all beholders' - he comes to Catherine's: 'Kate didn't go! having been taken ill on the railroad.' He thinks that the reason for her absence will out 'like murder' because 'to hope to veil such a tremendous disgrace from the general intelligence is out of the question' (Letters, 5, 1987: 216). It is hard to say what a young girl would have made of such a communication.

Four months after this miscarriage Catherine started her tenth pregnancy (tenth unless there were other, unreported miscarriages). In her fourth or fifth month she had an accident, when her pony chaise overturned, but she was not hurt. When the birth approached she was afraid, however, because she had had such a difficult delivery only twenty-one months before, at which she had suffered such desperate pain. Dickens had learnt about the use of chloroform meanwhile and promised Catherine that she was to have it. His decision proved to be a blessing, because the birth of her eighth child, Henry, on 15 January 1849 was not a normal one, as had indeed been predicted, and she might have died. Dickens was very proud of his success: 'The doctors were dead against it, but I stood my ground, and (thank God) triumphantly.' It spared her all pain (she had no sensation, but of a great display of skyrockets) and saved the child all mutilation. It enabled the doctors to do, as they afterwards very readily said, in ten minutes what might otherwise have taken them an hour and a half; the shock to her nervous system was reduced to nothing; and she was, to all intents and purposes, well the next day' (Letters, 5, 1981: 487).

In an abnormal birth instruments are used, and if the mother is under anaesthetic they may be used more freely and roughly than if she is conscious and can cry out. There may be a kind of subterranean shock and injury that remains undetected until some other shock -

say another birth - activates it again. It is possible that something like this happened to Catherine, in spite of Dickens's optimistic assessment of success, because her next birth, the year after, was succeeded by a number of 'nervous misfortunes' for which there is no collective name. She had the child, Dora, in August 1850 while her family was on holiday in Broadstairs, remaining alone in London, with her mother caring for her at the confinement. The baby was delicate, and one notices in Catherine and the child from the start a sort of fumbling for balance, a curious series of misfortunes, which are like fightings off and succumbings to some nervous or mental threat. At this time Dickens was involved in amateur theatricals with Bulwer Lytton and the Watsons at their country places Knebworth and Rockingham Castle. It was here that Catherine who had taken a small part, fell through a trapdoor on the stage, and severely sprained her ankle on the first occasion. In itself this would not be significant. But it is around this time that Dickens's jeering at her as clumsy and a 'Tilly Slowboy' becomes so noticeable that all the biographers mention it. She also seemed not to have got on with her hosts, which was very unlike her. In February the baby fell seriously ill with 'congestion of the brain' (a form of meningitis?) and was not expected to live, but recovered (Letters, 6, 1988: 280, 284). In March Catherine fell ill with what Dickens called 'an alarming confusion and nervousness'. She had 'a tendency of

blood to her head' and suffered from 'giddiness and dimness of sight' (Letters 6, 1988: 311,314). Because of what Dickens later made of this illness, it is worth looking at Johnson's account of it carefully.

As Dickens reflected on it now, it seemed to him that he could detect signs of this trouble in Kate as far as three or four years back. He wrote Dr. James Wilson, to whom it was recommended that he entrust her, that her case was 'a nervous one', and that when they met in person he would 'state what Dr. Southwood Smith has particularly requested to me to mention to you as rendering great caution necessary.' Instead of living in Dr. Wilson's house, for reasons 'founded on my knowledge of her', she would stay in some cheerful cottage in the neighbourhood. Dr. Wilson replied by urging that she stay in his house after all. But Dickens refused emphatically; he was sure, he said, that she could not possibly form a favourable impression of Malvern if she were in any house but her own. This belief he based on 'what I have lately observed when we have been staying in the country houses even of intimate friends.' The words clearly refer to their recent visits to Knebworth and Rockingham and unmistakably hint as much of psychological disturbance as they do of physical illness. (1953: 730)

What 'giddiness and dimness of sight' unmistakably hint at is total exhaustion. Whether it was constant childbearing, the possible shock to her system of the instrument delivery, the children and the constant moves with a large household Dickens imposed on her, or her insecurity as a woman - Dickens was by that time in the habit of referring to her pregnancies as 'that uninteresting state' or 'an anti-Malthusian state' (Letters, 6, 1988: 146)- or insecurity about her social status because of his constant jeers, or, as is probable,

all of these things together, Catherine was exhausted. Being divided from her small baby, who stayed in London, made the 'cure' in Malvern a difficult time. She was subjected to 'a rigorous discipline of exercise, air and cold water' (Letters, 6, 1988: 314); but before she had a chance to recover, a fortnight later, the baby suddenly died, apparently without any preparatory illness. Dickens happened to be in London and was fetched from a dinner of the General Theatrical Fund. He stayed with the little corpse while Forster went to bring Catherine back from Malvern. Forster was carrying a letter from Dickens, written with her precarious state in mind, to prepare her. This wonderful letter must have done more for Catherine than any air or cold water because it breathes Dickens's love and trust in her. He had been writing tender family letters after Dora's birth already, and together with this letter they may have bred a hope in Catherine that helped her weather the shock.

Now observe. You must read this letter very slowly and carefully. If you have hurried on so far without understanding (apprehending some bad news), I rely on your turning back and reading again. Little Dora, without being in the least pain, is suddenly stricken very ill. Mind! I will not deceive you. I think her very ill. There is nothing in her appearance but perfect rest. You would suppose her quietly asleep. But I am sure she is very ill, and I cannot encourage myself with much hope of her recovery. I do not - why should I say I do to you, to you my dear! - I do not think her recovery at all likely. I do not like to leave home. I can do nothing here, but I think it right to stay here. You will not like to be away, I know, and I cannot reconcile it to myself to keep you away. Forster with his usual affection for us comes

down to bring you this letter and to bring you home. But I cannot close it without putting the strongest entreaty and injunction upon you to come home with perfect composure - to remember what I have often told you that we never can expect to be exempt, as to our many children, from the afflictions of other parents - and that if - if - when you come, I should even have to say to you 'our little baby is dead', you are to do your duty to the rest, and to show yourself worthy of the great trust you hold in them. If you will only read this, steadily, I have a perfect confidence in your doing what is right. (Letters, 6, 1988: 353-354)

The baby who had died after only a few months of life was called Dora, like Dickens's heroine in David Copperfield. David Copperfield was written in the course of 1850, the year in which she was born. The strength and understanding of Catherine that Dickens shows in the letter I have just quoted comes from his writing this book. David Copperfield (begun as an autobiography, but then cast in fictional form) was a form of self-analysis for him. It loosened the hold some deep seated anxieties had on him by bringing them into the open, giving them objective form; and this new freedom enabled him to look around and see other people and his relationship to them more objectively. It made him mature. Especially his relationship with Catherine profited, as the letters at the time of Dora's birth show. The relationship between creative work and human relations is quite clear here and extremely interesting. His self-absorption, his pity for himself was intense at the time of writing. When he came to the blacking

warehouse part, he fell on his left side, where he had an inflamed kidney that had given him trouble at that time in his life (and occasionally since); and the injury delayed his getting off the first number. When he came to his marriage (not the wooing of Dora which recalls Maria Beadnell but the actual marriage relation), he was still full of self-pity, and Catherine's fecklessness, untidiness and inefficiency as a housewife are cruelly caricatured. Nevertheless, the mere fact of writing about what drove him to constant irritation in everyday life and a constant sadistic urge to force his will on Catherine, loosened the hold of this irritation and made him question the urge. In the book David learns tolerance. In life, Dickens suddenly saw that Catherine was a loving wife and a loving mother, and that he and the children depended on her. The fact that they were apart for a good deal of this year, 1850, may have helped him to see her and his relation to her more objectively. In June he went to Paris without her, in August he and the family went for their usual summer-autumn holiday to Broadstairs while she stayed at home for the birth. After Dora had been born his tone is particularly warm. 'I am quite delighted and can stick to my work bravely, hearing such excellent accounts of you... I am happy that you have named your day for coming down, please God. We all want you very much, and I think you will be thoroughly pleased with the house and garden' four days after Dora's birth (Letters, 6, 1988: 152). The next

day 'I received your letter with the utmost delight this morning, and never thought your handwriting so good' - Catherine's handwriting was one of the perennial sources of irritation (p.153). The next letter, a few days later ends 'They all send their loves and desire me to say that they are looking forward to Friday week. I hope I shall know tomorrow when I shall be in town. I think it will be Friday, and I don't forget that I am engaged to dine with you (pp. 156-157).' And the last before she comes down: 'They are all in great force, and send their loves. They are all much excited with the expectation of receiving you on Friday - and would start me off to fetch you now, if I would go' (p.162).

(Dickens's jokes remain insensitive, however. Five days after Dora is born he writes to Catherine 'I am uncertain of my movements, for, after another splitting day, I have still Dora to kill - I mean the Copperfield's Dora' [p.153]). These were the letters with which Catherine was going to prove to the world that as late as their ninth child she had made Dickens a happy husband. She could also have used them to prove against his allegation at the separation, that she was not a bad mother and could make her children happy children.

But in the next year, when Catherine is pregnant again, Dickens's tone changes. The maturity gained from the self-analysis in David Copperfield profited him permanently as an artist (for instance he wrote much more easily from then on), but as a man he lost it again.

Moving always induced a despotic mood in Dickens, as we shall see in the next section, and in the autumn of 1851, when he decided to buy Tavistock House, he was at his most tyrannical. Every fitting had to be precisely as he said. At the same time it was clear that Catherine, in view of her pregnancy, her recent illness and the dreadful shocks she had suffered that year must be involved in the preparation of the house, must feel that it was her home. Yet Dickens could not bear any interference. He calls her an imbecile in his letters to friends and jeers at her self delusion in thinking she is any help: Catherine 'is all over paint and seems to think it is somehow immensely useful to get into that condition' (p. 533). When Catherine had her tenth child, Edward, in March 1852, Dickens wrote to a friend 'Mrs Dickens and the seventh son - whom I cannot afford to receive with perfect cordiality, as on the whole I could have dispensed with him - are as well as possible' (p. 627). Another he told that mother and son were in 'a blooming condition' and added 'I am not quite clear that I particularly wanted the latter' (p. 629). To still another he wrote 'I have some idea ... of interceding with the Bishop of London to have a little service in St. Paul's beseeching that I may be considered to have done enough towards my country's population' (p. 756). It proved not to be necessary: Nature (not God) granted his wish. Catherine suffered a complication at that birth that sterilized her.

Dickens was not alone in this tone about childbirth. Livingstone, his great contemporary, a man more famous than Dickens himself at his time, can be cited as rivalling him in this vein of humour. He called his wife's frequent pregnancies 'the great Irish manufactory'.²⁰ Mary Livingstone had a child every year; she bore and lost them again with dizzying speed under the unspeakable conditions of his African excursions. She was saved having as many children as Catherine only because Livingstone abandoned her for a long stretch of time in England, where she lived in poverty and neglect. When she was finally allowed to join her husband again, because she fitted in with a new plan he had, he got her pregnant on the boat out, before they had even started upriver, and she had to be left behind. He was ashamed of his 'incontinence' on this occasion, but only because the incident attracted public notice and he felt people would think him a fool for having got her pregnant at such an awkward time. For another thing 'this is a great trial to me', he wrote in his journal, 'for had she come with us she might have proved of essential service to the expedition' (Jeal 1985: 197). Livingstone makes an interesting comparison with Dickens in other respects. He used his will in the same way as Dickens, but he had a harder apprenticeship. He came from a poorer family; his father, like Dickens's had some claims to being a gentleman: he was self-educated and combined being a travelling salesman in tea

with religious proselytising. Livingstone's childhood was made up of the actual hardships Dickens only imagined. He started working in a factory at the age of ten, from 6 in the morning till 8 at night six days a week; went to school for two hours at night and did cattle watching for a farmer on Sundays. This went on for twenty-three years. Then he put himself through medical school, working now in the factory only in his free time (Jeal, 1985: 8; 14-15). Like Dickens he had a reputation almost of sanctity at the end of a life that contained many a dark secret. For our context it is his attitude to women that is most interesting; it can be summed up in what he told his brother-in-law around the time of his marriage: 'I have never found two agreeing unless one were a cypher' (Jeal 1985: 61). Is this the reason why there is a parallel between Mary Livingstone and Catherine that goes beyond their role as overfertile wives? Mary, like Catherine, was accused of drinking (in her case justly), slumping and being mentally disturbed - 'queer and disagreeable moods, dull dumpy and discontented' wrote a fellow missionary (Jeal 1985: 252).

What one inevitably asks oneself in the face of such dislike of childbirth is : why didn't Dickens use contraception? As we have seen he mentioned in a letter of 1838 already that the third child then expected (Katie) would be the last. Did he think his mere wish would prevail, did he not know about birth control or did he, for some hidden contradictory reason, not want to use

it? Contraception was available in the 19th century, especially to someone of his class and circle of acquaintance. Knowledge of it spread as, with developing technology based on the vulcanization of rubber, sheaths and pessaries became available in the 1840s. The case of George Eliot, only seven years younger than Dickens, shows that effective birth control was within the reach of someone of their class at the time. George Eliot was one of the few women who recognised and rejected the blandishments of magnanimous individualism as practised in the family. She made up her mind that she did not want children, and she took effective steps.

The history of birth control, which has not been fully explored yet, is fascinating when looked at in conjunction with an individual fate like Catherine's. According to the statisticians, innovations in contraception techniques do not cause but succeed a lower birth rate. In other words in periods when people want (for various reasons) to limit their families, they first use time honoured methods that have only a moderate effect on the birth rate, and the population goes down slowly. As this process goes on, new methods are publicised or new technical inventions come on the market (the pill and the IUD came on the market for instance in the mid-sixties, after the anti-birth trend had started). The economic pressures of industrialization apparently resulted in a wish for smaller families. This would fit in with assumptions of possessive individualism. I have

to hand only the figures for America, and there were no valid national censuses before the end of the 18th Century, but the figures are telling. While the average birthrate in 1800 was seven children, it was in 1850 five point four children and in 1900 three point six children. In other words during the peak period of industrialization - the 19th century - the birthrate had halved.²¹ And this was the century that saw the rise of the cult of domesticity, the idealization of motherhood. The background to a fate like Catherine's, an attitude like Dickens's is clearly complex.²²

In England the cause of birth control was espoused by Bentham, who was, however, very cautious about making clear statements. Because of the extraordinary duplicity of a society that was fiercely philoprogenitive in idea and ideal, but secretly interested in controlling births, it was not safe to speak openly. Apparently he thought women should be in control of contraception, and advocated the vaginal sponge (Weiner, 1980: 417). His disciple Francis Place, a much more active revolutionary than Bentham, published the first book in English to advocate birth control in 1822, Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population. The medical profession had for some time used sponges to adjust the angle of the uterus, and both Bentham and Place had realized the potential of this technique for female-controlled contraception. Place's book was not the success he had hoped for, and a year after the publication he produced

handbills on which contraceptive methods were described. He especially hoped to reach the working people. Place's handbills are remembered mainly today because the young John Stuart Mill was caught distributing them and went to prison. Place referred on one of his handbills to 'a piece of sponge, about an inch square, being placed into the vagina prior to coition and afterwards withdrawn by means of a double twisted thread, or bobbin attached to it'. Other methods he recommended on the bills were withdrawal and a lint tampon. All three methods are ancient and were already in use in the early 19th century when Place made propaganda for them. Moreover, houses of prostitution sold condoms in England, and had done so from the 17th century on (Weiner 1980: 417). These were primarily to avoid infection; but prostitutes must protect themselves from conception and apparently the Victorian gentleman learnt about contraception from prostitutes.

There appears to have been no period in the history of human society when birth control was unknown. The most common female methods are douches, pessaries and vaginal sponges, often in combination with spermicides. Male methods are coitus interruptus and condoms (mentioned in England for the first time in the 16th Century). Coitus interruptus is the most ancient, widespread and effective method known. Then there were methods practiced by both partners: abstinence (often in the form of taboos in primitive societies and often only

affecting the woman), abortion, and infanticide.

Abortion was dangerous to the mother: infanticide was the most effective and universal method of controlling family and population size until modern times. It can be practiced directly or indirectly, and people in many cultures are unconscious of practising it.

The most widespread methods practised in the early to mid 19th century - the period that affects the Dickens marriage - were withdrawal and vaginal douches. We can assume - though not with certainty - that Catherine Dickens had no knowledge of birth control. Her own mother had fourteen children, which would have set her an example of unquestioningly accepted fertility (On the other hand a mother of so many children is also most likely to rebel, and has a chance of gathering information from midwives. Mrs Hogarth cared for Catherine during her confinements and knew of her suffering and the danger to her life; she was also the only one in the family who stood up to Dickens. It was not impossible therefore that she gave her daughter some advice). Otherwise Catherine led the typical life of the respectable middle class matron who is cut off both from women in touch with folk tradition and from fashionable 'fast' women who know and use the latest devices. But what about Dickens? True, he did not frequent prostitutes and could therefore not learn in this, most usual way. But his work with prostitutes and social reform must inevitably brought him into contact

with the facts and practices of contraception. Also if he did not frequent prostitutes some of his friends did, and in any case he had a circle of acquaintances among whom there were men who would have been knowledgeable about such matters. As he complained more and more about having so many children and his friends urged on him that 'enough is enough', the subject of birth control must have come up. Wilkie Collins must have been knowledgeable about it, but the friendship with him came too late to influence Catherine's fate.

One is forced to conclude that Dickens did not want to limit his family, or rather that there was an urge stronger than the urge to limit it. Looking at the dates of Catherine's pregnancies and births, and collating these with what we know of Dickens's plans and travels it looks in fact as if he did know about birth control and practised it successfully when he cared very much that a plan of his should not be interfered with. After Catherine had had her fourth child in 1841 Dickens made plans for going to the States. He was determined to travel the country, to explore the Wild West and to have Catherine with him. All these plans were put into practice in 1842, and Catherine was not pregnant again until the spring of 1843, the longest gap in her series of confinements. (There may of course have been miscarriages, but on the whole Dickens reports these). The time when he decided for the first time to live with his family abroad presents a similar picture. Dickens

told Forster in November 1843 that he planned to spend a year on the continent. Catherine was pregnant at the time, and he put the plan into action only when the baby had been borne (on 15 January 1844) and could be weaned, that is in July 1844 (The original plan was to leave the baby behind, but in the end the five months old creature came along). Catherine was not pregnant again until toward the end of their stay in Genoa, after Dickens had explored Italy and climbed Vesuvius with her.

Both Johnson and Slater suggest that Dickens dismissed birth control because of his hatred of Malthus and political economy. Slater speculates: 'Why did Dickens not avail himself of contraceptive devices to avert these frequent pregnancies of Catherine's? Mainly, I expect because the intrusion of prudential consideration into the intimate expression of connubial love would have been even more repugnant to a man of his temperament than the 'moral restraint' propaganda directed to the teeming poor of Victorian England by the followers of Malthus. Catherine's fecundity just had to be accepted as part of God's will' (1983: 121). Somehow this just does not sound like Dickens. The question is complex even where the objection to Malthus and political economy is concerned. It is true that in 'The Chimes' Dickens castigates political economy for oppressing the labouring classes so totally as to make copulation even in marriage a sin. But we have seen that political economists tried to disseminate the knowledge of birth

control especially to the workers, especially so that they might enjoy themselves freed from the constant threat of unwanted pregnancies. Not utilitarian philosophy but the conservative element in 19th century English society was outraged by the thought of contraception and sexual enjoyment. Where did Dickens stand here? It is true that he invented for his dummy books titles such as 'Malthus's Nursery Songs', and called Catherine's pregnancies her anti-Malthusian state. But the sarcasm cuts both ways. As for Slater's explanation, Dickens was generally not the man to let anything come between him and what he wanted. It was his will rather than God's he was interested in. As we have seen, he may have used birth control when a birth would have materially interfered with his plans. The urge stronger than the urge to limit his family may have been the urge to control Catherine and eliminate her as a rival. As Adrienne Rich says 'Motherhood without autonomy; without choice is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control'. For Dickens total control in the world of the family was a necessity. He preferred wife control to birth control. This is the subject to which we shall turn now.

Houses

In the last section we have seen Catherine very much

bound by contingency. The procreative life is ruled by a determinacy from which, in the absence of birth control, women cannot escape. Catherine had to submit to her many pregnancies, to the illnesses and dangers attending on them (physical and psychic) and to the effect the fear of pregnancy must have had on her sex life. In this section we see Catherine by contrast in a man-made world, the home, where she is ostensibly free. The home was the woman's world, especially in the Victorian conception of things and the woman mistress of the home. In reality the case was of course not so simple. In the home a woman was bound by two contingencies; her husband's will, and the cultural ideology that shaped her persona as a woman and as mistress of the house. Because men are culturally dominant, this persona had a great deal to do with her husband's will and her freedom as mistress of the house was severely limited by the cultural ideal that saw her as naturally engaged in an untiring service of husband and children (It was Ruskin who, intelligent enough to see the paradox, worked out the ideology of the queen-slave in his 'Of Queens' Gardens)'). Yet these two contingencies are not absolute like the procreative one. Because they are cultural and social they leave a certain margin for judgement and resistance. They are contingencies from which one can emancipate oneself, even if only to a small degree, when one perceives the motive behind them as wrong. What would we be looking for if we wanted to detect such a movement of resistance? Marx

said 'Alle Emanzipation ist Zurueckfuehren der menschlichen Welt, der Verhaeltnisse, auf den Menschen selbst' ('all emancipation is a bringing back (a returning) of the human world, of existing conditions, to the human being itself')². I take this to mean that if we ask ourselves what we really want, whether the sort of human being we are under existing conditions is the sort of human being we want to be, we are on the brink of emancipation. If we are looking then at Catherine as mistress of a house, and as a member of a family and social circle, this approach leads us to ask two questions: (1) what were the pressures on her in this area and how ineluctable were they? (2) what sort of human being was she, how did she show disagreement with what was imposed on her, what indications are there of what she wanted for herself?

Taken together, the two questions and their answers should show us whether there was some degree of autonomy in Catherine's life. If the pressures were not so great as to crush her entirely, if we can show a spark of resistance, Catherine belongs to the history of human emancipation, in however rudimentary a way. She is then not totally self alienated. We must proceed along two lines here: enquire into the nature and amount of pressure and into her reaction and behaviour. The pressures are well documented, but about herself (her reaction and behaviour) we have little to go on (Her letters to Dickens for instance were destroyed by him).

We must resort again to the technique of reversing figure and ground; make the evidence we have shed light on the shadowy background (as much of it is 'glaring' evidence, that should not be too difficult); change our optic habits, to make 'spring out' as significant pattern that which we have been conventionally trained to overlook.

This double inquiry is really an inquiry into the tenet of 'feminine superiority', and brings us back to a subject we have already taken up. The virtues that make women superior are the virtues of submission and powerlessness. Even a normal equality, however, can only be understood as the right to share power within a given field (If the cult of domesticity decreed that women are the morally superior partner, and the field for morality is the home, then women should have wielded more power than men in the house). But here we come up against the question whether women do in fact want the sort of power men wield. One could describe male power as it is exercised in the home (the pater familias's power, whether personal or legal) as of the invasion and conquest type, a power that neglects and violates boundaries (This is also true in our culture of the type of power men use outside the home, in the political world and vis-a-vis nature). The boundaries in question here are those that make up the personal integrity of the other members of the family and of their own space; areas of privacy, of competence and so forth. Imposing one's will on others, jealousy, meanness and wounding

behaviour generally, are ways of violating these boundaries and invading territory that does not belong to one. Cultural norms tacitly allowed this to a husband and father, and Dickens wielded such power in his family. It must be said at once, however, that Catherine was not interested in sharing it. Catherine was neither jealous nor mean, nor did she show any signs of wanting to impose her will on others. Like many women she was interested in a totally different form of power: that given by expanding one's own scope - the power of making (Typically, she competed with Dickens by writing a cookery book and published it with his own publishers). It could perhaps be called a power in depth instead of a power of invasion. It is a rivalry in excellence that has as a precondition the other's integrity and intactness.³ As I said earlier it is a game that nobody wins since to be despoiled of power would put an end to the game, while the male game is really an endless series of despoilings. Here then we find the first and basic indication of what made up 'the human' for Catherine; but it is also the first sign that she was not in perfect harmony with the ideal of feminine virtue (It would demand a woman who is in Ruskin's terms 'royalty' to enter any egalitarian, competitive, smacking-of-the-market place relation). She did not have the moral superiority of the true Victorian woman.⁴ And this made her vulnerable, because she lived before the time when women made a public attack on male power and the male

concept of power.⁶

Let us look at Catherine's fate historically for a moment before we turn to the details of her everyday life. It astonishes one how easily Dickens managed to put her away, how little public indignation was expressed on her behalf at the time of the separation. One would expect an outcry. In 1820 when George IV tried to put away Queen Caroline public indignation against him and popular adulation of the Queen was so high that he had to desist.⁶ Yet Caroline had far less to commend her than Catherine, who is after all, to all intents and purposes, a veritable embodiment of the ideal of a Victorian wife and mother; homeloving, chaste, a mother of many children who loves her husband and lives for him and the children, gentle, compliant and gracious in manner. Why did she not get more public sympathy? Even a lifelong friend, Lemon, who had sat innumerable times at her hospitable table and played with her children while they were small, and who undertook to represent her legally at the separation, abandoned her early on in the negotiations. What was it about her that lost her support? Did the public smell something like unVictorian activities?

It also astonishes one that Dickens scholarship, which holds up to the light every detail of Dickens's life, has not gone into this question properly.⁶ The facts as we see them today are that Dickens, growing more radical, could not accept any longer the limitations of a

Victorian marriage (and a 'Victorian' wife) and 'broke out' by putting Catherine away. But these very facts would make one expect vigorous public protest on Catherine's behalf. If Catherine, who seemed to conform so perfectly in all that mattered to the ideal failed to get public sympathy, and even alienated the private sympathy of those who knew her well, we might consider the possibility that the fault lay not in her but in them, that she offended against prejudices so hidden they were unnamable, a code that could not be openly discussed. This raises the question: what did the Victorians really want of a woman, who was the 'true' Victorian woman?

We will return to this question when we have got the evidence to consider it more carefully. Now we turn to Catherine's private and domestic history, her life as a housewife. Houses are a form of private space. Though Catherine lived in a number of palatial houses (some of them actual palaces), her problem was precisely that of private space. In our culture the idea that women need a space for themselves is fairly new.²⁹ This may be due to the fact that when they were more vigorously involved in economic domestic production - throughout the classes - they did have 'a space' as a matter of course; that of their competence. Both sexes' 'space' was respected in the form of their necessary economic contributions. There are certain traditional societies in which the respect for a 'personal space' is inbuilt in the

language.¹⁰ To respect people's space means allowing them a home. We have reacted against the emotional overtones in words like space and home in our European languages as against romantic sentimentalities. Yet they are a record of real human needs.

Children have always been a basis for self-confidence for women, and middle class housewives of Catherine's time started taking their children as their 'space', their claim to respect. Catherine could not develop this area of personal space for herself - she was literally dis-placed where the children were concerned. Knowing that Dickens did not want them, wounded by his jeering yet helpless to control her fertility she began to fear her pregnancies. But she was more seriously displaced by the fact Dickens was such a brilliant father. Though he disliked his children at birth, he loved them as older babies and toddlers. Throughout their infancy he played and romped with them, thinking up the most imaginative games and treats, and later involving them in theatrical performances he directed.¹¹ He kept them in a state of breathless admiration; he dazzled them to an extent that made them forget their mother. Catherine, Tilly Slowboy, simply couldn't compete. When the children were older they themselves took their famous father's cue and despised her. Their attitude - simply a reflection of their father's - embittered the separation far more for Catherine than the humiliation of having been put out of her home alone. As

they grew adult, Dickens's spell seemed to wear off and they returned to their mother - though this happened with the boys rather than the girls. We talk of 'stealing affection'. What was stolen from Catherine was her 'space', her home in the family.¹²

Dickens behaved altogether like a very natural father. When the children grew out of their infancy and developed personalities of their own, he became uneasy with them and a note of dislike begins to creep into his letters again. He tended to push the boys out of the family circle as soon as that was possible to schools and in their teens if possible abroad, preferably to the colonies (The two girls on the other hand tried to keep as close to him as possible¹³). His son Walter, for instance was interested in becoming a writer and showed some aptitude. Dickens decided that he should try for a nomination and at the age of sixteen he sailed for India as a cadet in the East India Company's 25th Native Infantry, though he had never shown any interest in being a soldier or in things military in general.¹⁴ Of the boys indeed only Harry knew how to stand up to his father but this was because unlike the others he had a clear idea of the education he wanted. All the others were wax in Dickens's hands, curiously soft and uncertain, a fault he blamed on the heritage from Catherine. It seems more likely that they had been overimpressed at an early age by Dickens's almost magic performances, overmanipulated by his energetic and decisive ways with them, by the

constant conjurer's surprises he produced out of his hat.¹⁵ Here, as in Catherine's case, Dickens violated boundaries. Neither his children nor his wife could live their own lives near him. He had a need to manipulate them constantly, even if through kindness. In a sense this need was simply the innocent urge to shine, to dazzle and astound, to be the greatest: 'the Inimitable', 'Albion's Sparkler'. But if such an urge is allied to power (and Dickens wielded absolute power in the family) it becomes the sunny side of a reign of terror. To be kept within proper bounds it has to be subordinated to some sort of rules of the game, such as the reciprocity of magnanimous individualism. If it alternates with overcensoriousness and fits of rage, the people at the receiving end of such kindness don't know whether they are on their heads or their heels. Both Catherine and Dickens's children did not know whether they were on their heads or their heels. Curiously enough, this is again an image of uprootedness, of that lack of space or home Catherine suffered from.

There were, however, still the houses. It is a rare woman who does not enjoy making a home and Catherine seems to have been a capable housekeeper (Dickens's letters to her make that clear: he discusses practical matters with her right to the end and obviously trusts in her skill and relies on her discretion¹⁶). But there were two things that militated against Catherine where her houses were concerned: the frequency of their moves

and Dickens's obsession with having things 'just so'.

The Dickenses moved house, with a family of small children, twenty three times in twenty years of marriage, as near as I can make out. In this I am counting all the full scale moves that included buying (or leasing) the four London houses they lived in after they moved out of Furnival's Inn in 1837: 46 Doughty Street, 1 Devonshire Terrace, Tavistock House and Gad's Hill Place (just outside London); the seven houses they had abroad - the Villa di Bella Vista and Palazzo Peschieri in Genoa, two houses in Boulogne, two houses in Paris, and one house in Lausanne; and the twelve houses they rented in England for their summer-autumn holidays. In this I am not counting their holidays without the children, or Dickens's journeys and stays abroad by himself. Obviously Dickens needed the stimulation of change for his writing. Catherine must have become adept at packing, but the strain of constantly uprooting small children and herself must have been immense. From the letters it is clear that every time, hardly had they settled in when Dickens (always avid for company to counteract the strain of his work) fired off invitations to his friends and filled the holiday houses with houseguests (To Dickens's academic biographers, who comment that Catherine of course had 'only a supervisory task' I recommend trying this life for a year or so.¹⁷) When he had bought a new house in London and done it up he always gave a spate of big dinner parties to show it

off.

Catherine happened to be pregnant every time Dickens bought a new house (except the last), and this not only made the moves more of a strain, it cut her off from identifying with the decision and making these houses properly her home from the start. Dickens always did the house-hunting by himself, preferably in company with one of Catherine's sisters. When they still lived in Furnival's Inn, Mary tramped the streets with him, later Georgy. Such tramping together makes for a bond of companionship, the debates over the houses' points for a sense of choice and ownership, of power of decision where to put down one's roots. The fact that Catherine missed all this, time and again, must have slowly eroded her sense of home.

Much more estranging still must have been the fact that Dickens did up the houses by himself. Again this can be seen as a sign of exuberance, of a bubbling over of energy. Dickens was so concerned with rising in the world (because of the insecurity of his childhood but also, as Gilmour in The Ideal of the Gentleman shows, simply as a man of his time) and had such dreams of splendour, that he simply forgot that the house was Catherine's too, that indeed by Victorian standards and those of his writing the house was her world and he only the humble guest at her hearth.

Dickens concerned himself fanatically with every detail. Consultations with upholsterers and paperers

almost drove him mad, but obviously exhilarated him. Accounts of the splendours of his houses - every one larger and more magnificent than the last - fill the pages of his biographies. By 1845, when he was redecorating Devonshire Terrace, he must have been aware that Catherine was somewhat left out, because he planned the drawing room as a surprise for her, the walls papered 'in blue and gold or purple and gold - to agree with the furniture and curtains - I should like the skirting board to be painted in imitation of Satin wood - the ceiling to have a faint pink blush in it - and a little wreath of flowers to be painted round the lamp - Gold moulding around the paper'. On this occasion Catherine also heard that the hall and staircase were to be painted 'a good green' and could veto it.¹⁰ The other occasion is the one I have already mentioned, when, after her illness and little Dora's death, he tried to involve her in the decorating of a house he had just bought, Tavistock House. Unfortunately Dickens was not only exhilarated but also at his most irritable when moving and Catherine was the butt of his irritation. On this occasion he writes to the Watsons, with whom Catherine had been staying a few months before and who had apparently not liked her much: 'She is all over paint and seems to think that it is somehow being immensely useful to get into that condition.' It is Catherine's eagerness to do something that cuts one to the heart in this more than anything else. Johnson finishes his

account of this decorating with the words: '... he was genuinely delighted with the outcome. Every detail about the house was exactly as he - and he only - had determined that it should be' (1953:749).

Dickens talked about having to take over because Catherine was apathetic. He got it the wrong way round: she was apathetic because he took over. Having had her decision-making power taken from her, she became paralysed. Challenge would have invigorated her (and indeed whenever there was a challenge she met it). With his surplus of nervous energy Dickens had quite simply invaded her territory, violated those boundaries that are part of the integrity of the personality, taken from her her 'personal space'.

For all this Catherine stood up extraordinarily well to Dickens's behaviour for many years of the marriage¹². Dickens's mother had said how well matched the two were. That they were happy together - at first most of the time, in patches almost to the end - is documented by many sources, among them Catherine's avowal that she made Dickens 'a happy husband' as late as her ninth child's birth (1850). Catherine describes herself here as the active agent of that happiness - naturally, since she had been accused of being incapable of making anyone happy, least of all her genius husband, in the separation documents. But in fact, because of Dickens's extraordinarily forceful temperament, happiness or unhappiness in the family depended almost totally on him.

When he was in good spirits everyone breathed freely and joined the fun, when he was irritable everyone 'quails' (his own word)²⁰. Catherine made a good match for him because she could counter his sometimes almost maniacal high spirits with a witty, dry common sense of her own. An episode that happened at Broadstairs in 1841, where they were summering with their four small children, illustrates this complementariness well. Dickens was playing a game of pretending to be in love with a young woman of their acquaintance. Eleanor Christian has described this episode herself in her memoirs of Dickens.

Dickens seemed suddenly possessed with the demon of mischief; he threw his arms around me and ran me down the inclined plane to the end of the jetty till we reached the tall post. He put his other arm around this and exclaimed in theatrical tones that he intended to hold me there till 'the sad sea waves' should submerge us.. I implored him to let me go and struggled hard to release myself. 'Let your mind dwell on the column in the Times wherein will be vividly described the pathetic fate of the lovely [Eleanor] drowned by Dickens in a fit of dementia! Don't struggle poor little bird; you are powerless in the claws of such a Kite...' By this time the gleam of light had faded out and the water close to us looked uncomfortably black. The tide was coming up rapidly and surged over my feet. I gave a loud shriek... he still went on with his serio-comic nonsense shaking with laughter all the time, and panting with his struggles to hold me. 'Mrs Dickens!' A frantic shriek this time, for now the waves rushed up to my knees; 'help me' make Mr Dickens let me go - the waves are up to my knees!' 'Charles' cried Mrs Dickens echoing my wild scream, 'how can you be so silly? You will both be carried off by the tide (tragically but immediately sinking from pathos to bathos) and you'll spoil the poor girl's silk dress!

Slater, who uses this episode in a discussion of

Dickens's Quilpishness, comments that Catherine was at this stage of their marriage, evidently not 'so afraid of Dickens that she dared not express an opinion'.

Apparently she said afterwards, 'It was too bad of you, Charles; remember poor E. cannot afford to have her dress destroyed. Of course you'll give her another?' Only to get the answer 'Never! I have sacrificed her finery and my boots to the infernal gods!' ²¹.

One could translate Dickens's mother's remark about how well matched the two were as an extraordinary aptitude in Catherine to put up cheerfully with Dickens. Wherever she had room to manoeuvre, she did well. Far from being unenergetic by nature, as Dickens later claimed and all the biographers repeat, she seems to have been physically brisk and lively. There are many accounts (most of them from Dickens's own pen) of how she joined even in his most hare-brained schemes, for instance in their tour of the Highlands in July 1841, when they trudged in pouring rain through the Trossachs, or when she climbed an active Vesuvius with Dickens in ice and snow at night, in February 1845 (at the beginning of her sixth pregnancy) (Johnson, 1953: 341-43; 550-51). She was also physically energetic while she was pregnant. A neighbour in Devonshire Terrace remembers that she always knew when another Dickens baby was on the way, because Catherine promptly started taking a walk twice a day (Adrian, 1957: 271, n.18). We hear of her climbing mountains and going for day-long rides on muleback as

late as 1846, when she had six children. This also was the year when she spent some time in Lausanne alone with Georgy and the two sisters went on alpine excursions together, so that it does not look as if Dickens was the only motivating power for such exertions (Adrian, 1957: 21). That she was mentally alive and energetic is shown by the cookery book she published in December 1851, two months before her tenth child was born. The book is badly organized - Catherine never pretended to be tidy either practically or mentally - but it is full of high spirits. The first joke is that Catherine took her pen name from the last role she ever played in Dickens's theatricals, Lady Maria Clutterbuck. This was a part in a farce called Used Up they produced at Rockingham Castle, where as we have seen, Catherine was not happy. Now she seems to be saying 'Used up, my eye'. The introduction is a rollicking pastiche of Dickens's own style. She is pretending that she is a widow who after her husband's death is letting her friends in on the secret of how she kept his affection.

The late Sir Jonas Clutterbuck had, in addition to other virtues, a very good appetite and an excellent digestion; to those endowments I was indebted (though some years the junior of my revered husband) for many hours of connubial happiness (Johnson, 1953: 750).

That this is aimed at Dickens is clear from the the fact that the book is called What Shall we have for Dinner? and is a record of the Dickenses' family meals, as

Catherine's eldest son, Charlie, later confirmed in his memoirs.²² The meals are extraordinarily rich and heavy and reflect without any doubt both Dickens's own taste and the fact that he wanted Catherine to keep the sort of 'groaning board' for his friends he described in his stories, especially in A Christmas Carol.

Cookery books are a lot of work. Catherine has had very little acknowledgement from the biographers for having accomplished such a task when she had just emerged from a serious illness and the shock of her little girl's death and was pregnant with her tenth and last child. Even Slater (in his section on Catherine in Dickens and Women), who understands something of Catherine's state of mind at that period feels bound to say: 'It may well be that Dickens, wishing both to flatter and distract her at this time, suggested that she publish a collection of her menus for the benefit of other women', and, 'Dickens I am sure wrote the jokey preface for her' (1983:132). If Dickens had written the preface, it is very likely that he would have mentioned the fact in one of his many chatty letters to friends. Is it not more natural to give the credit to Catherine first? The humour is her own, would-be-innocent brand. That she was capable of the style of the preface is borne out by the few scraps of letters that survive in her hand (Slater, 1983: 109). Perhaps she thought up the whole thing as a surprise for Dickens, Bradbury and Evans, his publishers conniving? (It is true Dickens would have mentioned that in his

letters). Other biographers hint at worse things than that the whole was really Dickens's idea (thought up for the tenderest of reasons), or that he wrote the preface. Adrian in his Georgina Hogarth comes up with two motives for Catherine. The first is jealousy of her sister in the household: 'Perhaps it was fear of being superseded as mistress of her new home (Tavistock Place), which led Catherine to assert her worth by publishing'. The second is a sense that she must hold on to Dickens: 'Was Catherine perhaps hoping to prove to her husband that she could be creative in her own right - aside from bearing children? Or had the strain of marital insecurity driven her for consolation to a preoccupation with menus and recipes? Or did she choose thus to remind Charles that he had once found pleasure in her domestic endeavours? Wistfully her preface declares that "attention to the requirements of his appetite secured me the possession of his esteem to the last"'. (1957: 32)

Catherine shows her mettle most clearly as a hostess. She did an astonishing job entertaining for Dickens over the years. Entertaining is of course a complex professional skill for which Catherine should be given credit. She was not a society hostess; she had no social ambitions for herself and though she presided her work was executive and managerial. Her guests were Dickens's friends, not her own, so that her task was a task she did for Dickens. About her own social life we know little. Public dinners were usually male affairs

and wives were generally excluded from the smart literary gatherings - a witty (and bitter) Jane Carlyle had to sit at home, as we know. We do not know whether Catherine minded not sharing this part of Dickens's life. She may have enjoyed the quiet evenings; she was a music lover and may have gone to concerts or the Opera of which she was a connoisseur. Johnson explains in a passage about Dickens's social life that Catherine stayed at home also, partly, because Dickens socially outgrew her ('she could not sustain a role in society'; 'she hardly sparkled') and, partly, because she was always pregnant: 'Kate was often obliged by pregnancy to stay at home' (1953: 267). Both reasons are echoed by all the biographers. One asks oneself why these reasons did not count against Catherine as a hostess. If for instance pregnancy took such a toll on her - if she could not even sit at someone else's table - how do the biographers explain that these same pregnancies did not stop her from doing a constant heavy job of entertaining at home? This fact is never mentioned, yet the evidence is there for all to see. Let us look for a moment, somewhat schematically, at Dickens's famous Twelfth Night parties, aligning them with Catherine's pregnancies and with the moves, that were such an occasion for party-giving for Dickens and must have made entertaining so much more of a chore for Catherine. They form only a small part of her entertaining load, of course, but they make good examples because of their glitter and because of their regularity.

These Twelfth Night parties must not be seen as standing by themselves. They were part of the large and varied Christmas celebrations Dickens insisted on every year for his friends (many of whom were of course also Catherine's friends in those years). These Christmas dinners culminated in the Twelfth Night party for Charlie's birthday (January sixth). They were elaborate brilliant children's parties, fancy dress balls, dinners, late night theatricals (whose preparations turned the household upside down for weeks beforehand). Dickens was very anxious that his guests should be impressed and he was always particularly anxious to show off a new house on these occasions. Let us now run through a list of a few of them to see what they involved for Catherine.

In 1839 Catherine had a baby (Katie, on 23 October) just before the Dickenses moved to Devonshire Terrace (in November). Dickens was proud of the new large house and began a round of parties that culminated in a huge Twelfth Night celebration. In 1841 Catherine was entering the last month of a pregnancy when she gave the usual Christmas and Twelfth Night parties. She was very ill later in January, before her fourth child, Walter, was born on February eighth. In 1844 Catherine's fifth child, Francis was born nine days after a huge Twelfth Night party, on January fifteenth (Adrian comments: 'Catherine was ... hardly presentable to do the honours' [1957:16]). Dickens had then already decided to move his family to Genoa, but waited till the baby was weaned. In

1846/7 the Christmas celebrations were in Paris. While she was expecting her seventh child, Catherine had been moving from Switzerland to Paris, and from there rushed to London to be with Charlie who had come down with scarlet fever. She gave birth to the child in temporary lodgings; her most difficult and painful birth. In 1849 Catherine's eighth child, Henry, was born again 9 days after a huge Twelfth Night celebration (on the same day as her fifth, January fifteenth). In November 1852 the Dickenses moved into Tavistock House. This was the year of Catherine's nervous breakdown and of her ninth child's death. Again Dickens was so proud of his large and superbly appointed mansion that he gave a spate of parties on moving in, crowned by magnificent Christmas and Twelfth Night entertainments. Catherine was then seven months pregnant with her tenth and last child.

Catherine must have been competent, because according to her guests she radiated calm and great kindness. We have a number of thank-you letters written after Twelfth Night parties, as well as some memoirs of the occasion and they give a picture of Catherine as a warm and gracious hostess.²³ The last great Twelfth Night celebration at the Dickenses was in 1857. (The parties tended to get bigger and more magnificent as the houses got bigger). For this occasion Dickens rehearsed Wilkie Collins's The Frozen Deep. Dickens and Collins played the male leads, Charlie took a part, Catherine's two daughters took the female leads and Georgy played

another part. Rehearsals started in October and Catherine kept open house: according to Johnson there were 'diners constantly in the house, four stage carpenters practically boarded there' (1953:867). The play was rehearsed for Charlie's twentieth birthday, and he remembers vividly what a great job his mother did on this occasion: 'You will form some idea of the number of people who were continually in the house', he says in his 'Reminiscences of my Father', 'when I tell you that the butcher called in person on my mother one day, to point out that he was supplying such an abnormal quantity of joints that he thought it his duty to mention it to her, in order to be sure there was no mistake'²⁴. Twelfth Night was first night (with other performances following on the eighth, twelfth and fourteenth of January) and almost a hundred guests crowded into the children's schoolroom to see the play. Everything turned out splendidly. A thank-you letter to Catherine from a Mary Howard catches the glamour and is at the same time, with hindsight, a very poignant document.

I want to tell you how inexpressibly beautiful and affecting the whole thing was ... It carried me to such a rich revaluation altogether of God's best and greatest gifts to humanity - the wonderful power and talent displayed, and the beauty and grace of all those lovely young people, your children ... I cannot imagine human felicity greater than yours, my heart thanked God for you, and still does, and I think of you and yours as being extremely crowned with the blessing of God's love. Of course I include Miss Hogarth in the lovely family group, where she seems like another daughter. (Morgan M. S., quoted Adrian 1953: 275, note 56)

This is a tribute to the atmosphere Catherine could create in spite of the distraction of carpenters, innumerable joints and calling butchers and much greater strains of which we hear nothing. The letter is poignant because it was the last Twelfth Night celebration over which Catherine presided; The Frozen Deep was of course the vehicle of the break up of the marriage; in a few months' time Dickens would abuse Catherine, her daughters shrink from her, and Georgy, 'like another daughter', abandon her sister and side with Dickens.

The Twelfth Night parties are only a small part of what Catherine achieved as a hostess. To what she did positively for Dickens by making it possible for him to entertain his friends in the atmosphere and style he wanted should be added what she did negatively so to speak by entertaining privately the people who called and whom he wanted to avoid. This was an important part of her task as a hostess. It was particularly useful to Dickens when they were abroad. On their American tour for instance, when he was intolerably mobbed and lionised, he would retreat to their hotel bedroom and lie down while she talked to callers and would-be autograph hunters in the sitting room. In Genoa, when Dickens wanted to work, she would sit endlessly talking to the local worthies who were calling on the great but eccentric English writer.

One asks oneself in the face of such achievements, on so many levels, why Catherine has a reputation for being unenergetic and incompetent. The answer is of course that

Dickens called her both. And the answer behind that is: Catherine was energetic when there was a challenge, she rose to occasions, otherwise she was easygoing and lazy, while Dickens was just simply energetic. He relaxed as energetically as he worked. He made up for the enormous strain of writing, the isolation and immobility it imposed, by being gregarious, avid for sensation and constantly on the move. The strain Catherine's work imposed was different: for relaxation she looked for quietness and peace. She would also do things in an easy slipshod manner, while Dickens was fanatically precise. Eleanor Christian, who knew her as a young woman and liked her (the same Eleanor whom Dickens almost drowned at Broadstairs), makes a rather intelligent remark about her easygoingness and its consequences. Speaking of the separation she says: 'where she was wrong was in neglecting to assert herself in the beginning. She was indolent and easy-going and allowed herself to be ousted out of her proper place.'²⁵ Long before she was ousted (Mrs Christian is thinking of Georgy taking her place) her easygoingness, her doing things in a slipshod way and her clumsiness all drove Dickens mad. She will send a letter to Rome with a carelessly written address; Dickens breathes indignantly: 'How any Frenchman or Italian could ever make out the first necessary condition - that my name begins with a D- I cannot imagine'²⁶. He makes fun of Catherine's clumsiness in a letter to Forster from their American tour in 1842: 'You recollect her propensity?

She falls into, or out of every coach or boat we enter; scrapes the skin off her legs; brings great sores and swellings on her feet; chips large fragments out of her ankle-bones; and makes herself blue with bruises' (though, to do him justice, he feels ashamed immediately and adds: 'She really has made a most admirable traveller .. never screamed or expressed alarm under circumstances that would have justified her in doing so even in my eyes; has never given way to despondency and fatigue, though we have now been travelling incessantly, through very rough country, for more than a month .. has always accommodated herself, well and cheerfully, to everything; and has pleased me very much and proved herself perfectly game.' (Letters, 3, 1974: 204) At other times the tone is more acid, though still jocular. His letters to friends have, already from the 40s on, occasional asides about Catherine, such as 'by a happy touch of Kate's accustomed cleverness' or 'it is more clear to me than ever that Kate is as near a Donkey as one of her sex can be' (Letters, 3, 1974: 271) or (during the doing up of Tavistock House) 'gradually falling into a state of feverish imbecility' (Letters, 6, 1988: 523). If he could talk to friends like that we can be sure he did not spare her face to face. While she irritated him with her slowness or indolence, he would spend his energy getting at her. In itself the difference of temperament would probably not have made an unbridgeable gulf between them. They had too much in common: they both liked people and both needed time for

quiet reflection. But ultimately it was the reason for their growing apart. Catherine was rather shy and quiet²⁷: she simply retired from Dickens's onslaught. Dickens complains, increasingly over the years, that Catherine doesn't understand him. She must have, in sheer self defense against his despotism and his jeering, withdrawn her mind from him, and in the end she would really not understand him any more. As for Dickens, he never understood her.

That Catherine ran the house to the end (and not Georgy) is clear from Dickens's letters. In his last letter to her before the separation, from November 1856, he discusses the new cook and her possible bad effect on the other servants with her (Dexter 1935:253). But Catherine did not run the house as its mistress. Dickens found it hard to delegate anything, and about the house he was fanatic. Not that he did the practical work himself, like Lawrence, but he supervised every detail. His letters to Catherine have an echo of this; she had to follow his minutest instructions.²⁸ It mattered enormously to Dickens what impression his house made; he clearly saw it not as 'their house' but as an extension of himself. But even this does not quite explain his obsession with neatness.

There is evidence from letters and memoirs that Dickens policed the house from top to bottom every day, looking for dirt and untidiness. I have already quoted what his daughter Mamie said about him: 'There was not a

corner in any of his homes, from Kitchen to garret, which was not constantly inspected by him' (The Cornhill 1885: 39). What Mamie leaves out here was that the inspection was intensely personal. Johnson tells us how it affected the children. 'The two girls shared a room at the top of the house, which they were allowed to decorate as they pleased, but Dickens insisted that they keep it with military precision. Every morning he inspected their bureau drawers and left 'pincushion notes' to reprimand any untidiness or praise something new and pretty as quite 'slap-up' (1953: 751). This speaks of course not simply of obsessive neatness; it speaks of an obsession with control. We have no evidence of how that obsession affected Catherine, but it is not hard to guess. The boys were treated more roughly. They had their own pegs each in the hall, and 'woe betide the one who failed to use his'. Alfred remembers brushing his coat inside the house once, when his father came in and 'I never by any chance committed that particular offence again afterwards' (Johnson 1953: 752). Dickens was proud of his discipline. During the holidays the boys had to keep their bedrooms clean themselves. Dickens writes to a friend in 1856 from Boulogne, 'Each in his turn is appointed Keeper for the week and I go in solemn procession (Georgina and the Baby ... forming the rest of it) three times a day on a tour of inspection.' It is all very funny. But one wonders what Catherine felt about Georgy policing the house with Dickens. We don't know how close the sisters were before

the break-up but Dickens's constant praises of Georgy and downgradings of Catherine must have had their effect on each of them and on their relation. The sisters were far apart in age, and there are no letters from Georgy, as there are from Mary, that show that she cared for Catherine and felt for her. Georgy adored Dickens uncritically and may have taken his lead. Catherine may have been untidy. It was a family failing and belonged to her mother's warm and impulsive way (which Dickens, who had been fond of Mrs Hogarth to begin with learnt to detest). Georgy may have carefully modelled herself on Dickens and stamped that failing out in herself.

Dickens's obsession with housekeeping is not an isolated case; the house lends itself curiously to imposing one's will (And it is not so uncommon as folk wisdom would make us believe that it is the husband who has the obsession). 'Neatness' is a frequent occasion for tyranny. Dickens's fanaticism with things being 'just so' may have gone further than is usual - the fact that not even a piece of furniture could be moved from the place he had decided on smacks of fetishism - but essentially it was an expression of the rule of the head of the house. ²⁹ Mrs Christian is right in saying that Catherine should have stood up for herself from the start. But this is easily said and not so easily done. Dickens had the Victorian ideals on his side: neatness, cleanliness, tidiness among others. This made it even more difficult

for Catherine to rebel.

It is difficult for us to form an idea of the ideological pressures that was put on young women around the time of Catherine's marriage. A spate of books came out in the 1830s and 40s variously called Woman as She is and as She should be (1835), Woman in her Social and Domestic Character (1839), The Daughters of England (1845), Woman's Worth, or Hints to Raise the Female Character (1844), Female Improvement (1836), Woman as Wife, Virgin and Mother (1838), Woman's Mission (1839), Woman and her Master (1840), The Women of England. Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits (1839), The Mothers of England. Their Influence and Responsibility (1843), The Wives of England. Their Relative Duties. Domestic Influence and Social Obligations (1843), the last three by the famous Mrs Stickney Ellis.³⁰ The rhetoric is unremitting; there is little or no relation to the reality of the lives of wives. Mrs Ellis sometimes shows a grain of sense (lost in a wood of words) for instance in what she called the philosophy of good household management:

Not only must the house be neat and clean, but it must be so ordered as to suit the taste of all, as far as may be, without annoyance or offence to any. Not only must a constant system of activity be established, but peace must be preserved, or happiness will be destroyed. Not only must elegance be called in to adorn and beautify the whole, but strict integrity must be maintained by the minutest calculation as to lawful means, and self-gratification must be made the yielding point in every disputed case. Not only must the appearance of outward order and comfort be kept up, but around every

domestic scene there must be a strong wall of confidence, which no internal suspicion can undermine, no external enemy break through.³¹

Though this is the typical home as haven and as fortress against the rude world it has a certain egalitarian tone (It has to be read however more as admonition to wives than to husbands). Other voices sound a more sinister note:

It is a man's place to rule and a woman's to yield. He must be held up as the head of the house, and it is her duty to bend so uncomplainingly to his wishes that the rest of the household will follow her example, and treat him with the due respect his sex demands.³²

With grace to bear even warmth and peevishness, she must learn and adopt his tastes, study his dispositions and submit in short to all his desires with that grateful compliance, which in a wife is the surest sign of a sound understanding.³³

The last means if I understand it right that a man must be allowed his storming ('warmth') and bad temper. It recommends not only self-sacrifice, as they all do, but subjection. 'Sound understanding' is the thorough, realistic adaptation to her position as a slave which is seen as the only sensible attitude in a woman. We shall return to this theme of adaptation when we discuss Mrs Stephen, and in a later section Georgy.

Dickens's domestic rages are well testified to, by himself and others. It is strange that the main biographies have not taken them more into consideration when discussing the marriage and separation. Slater

(1983) and particularly Bowen in his Charles Dickens and his Family: A Sympathetic Study (1956) are the exceptions. Bowen is indeed sympathetic to both partners:

On the one hand we have Mrs Dickens's lack of personality and failure to take a strong line from the first, her negativeness, her indolence, and on the other his dominant personality, his meticulous precision, want of consideration, and tendency to seek for relaxation outside home life. The opinion which will be formulated here is that the primary factor in the separation was the irritability, and one may even say, bad temper which Dickens gradually developed as a result of years of overwork: for cause and effect must, in justice, be recognised. He became irritable, impatient, unreasonable and in his worst phases, liable to rages which he could not control. Mrs Dickens appears to have been lacking in the fortitude and strength of character necessary to cope with these extremes of mood. This, with a steadily increasing family and responsible household duties, for Dickens entertained lavishly and frequently, led to nervous overstrain and finally to a definite neurasthenia. Sympathetic understanding was lost and in time estrangement followed. The entrance of Ellen Ternan into his life was in the nature of a climax to long-standing and increasing differences in his domestic life. It was not a cause. (1956:98)

Written as it is from the point of view of Dickens (and his family) this seems as fair an account as can be given. Our own perspective is different; and writing from Catherine's point of view alters the picture or rather introduces new elements. A different cause and effect must here, in justice, be recognised. We know a great deal about how Dickens felt (he has left us in no doubt about it); we have hardly any direct evidence on Catherine. In reconstructing her life (her attitudes and her feelings) we must fill in the picture from what

experience and sociological investigation have taught us meanwhile about women's lives: consider the social pressures put on women, their legal disabilities, listen to the combined evidence of reformers and feminists. The evidence collected by Women's Aid tells us for instance that domestic rages like Dickens's are a general phenomenon whose ultimate cause is that husbands are culturally permitted to give way to them. It is a general social phenomenon, statistically comparable across countries and classes within Western culture.³⁴ This does not mean that Dickens was not seriously overworked: it rather stresses that Catherine, who was also seriously overworked could restrain herself and preserve reasonable manners. Another thing the statistical findings of Women's Aid have taught us is that a certain kind of sadistic tyranny cannot be effectively combated within marriage. 'Strength of personality' rouses rather than subdues it. Bowen can only recommend it to Catherine because he has no experience of the actual situation. Women had (and have) their own strategies in coping with it; we shall go into how Catherine reacted and what were the options for women of her time below.

The rages are described most vividly by Dickens himself, usually in a humorous vein in letters to friends. In 1842 he describes himself to Miss Coutts 'to be so cross and surly, that the boldest fly at my approach' (Letters, 3, 1974: 367). In 1848 he tells Mrs Watson what writing his Christmas story involves: 'sitting and

frowning horribly at a quire of paper' and falling into a state of irascibility 'which utterly confounds and scares the House. The young family peep at me through the banisters as I go along the hall; and Kate and Georgina quail (almost) as I stalk by them (Letters, 5, 1981: 419).' He can also be despondent about his temper as when he writes to Mrs Watson in 1851 'I am still feeble and liable to sudden outbursts of causeless rage and demoniacal gloom, but I shall be better presently' (Letters, 6, 1988:266). Slater connects Dickens's behaviour with the Quilpish element in the relation between Dickens and Catherine:

There was, one suspects a definite element of Quilpishness in the bond between Dickens and Catherine. Her softness and mildness, especially if accompanied by an air of 'bashful sensuality' must have been deliciously provocative to a man like Dickens. Some jokes in Dickens's letters suggest that he was well aware of his own Quilpishness: on one occasion he refers to himself and Catherine as 'Bully and Meek', on another to his having exerted 'despotic connubial influence' to prevent her from attending a wedding, and on another to keeping a strict watch over her housekeeping 'concerning which we hold solemn weekly councils when I consider it my bounden duty to break a chair or so, as frugal demonstration. (1983:114-15)

Again one is struck, as in Bowen, by a curious remoteness from what such scenes really mean. They float in an ambience of psychology or literature; they are not brought back, in Marx's words, 'to the human being itself'. Eyewitness accounts other than Dickens's own come from Kate Perugini, Dickens's beloved daughter Katie

(in Gladys Storey's Dickens and Daughter, and from occasional visitors. Mrs Perugini can hardly bring herself to speak of the things she remembers. She is torn between an overgreat love and awe of her father and her sense of justice. We will look at what she says presently, when we consider Dickens's behaviour in the context of the cult of genius. Of visitors' accounts, Harriet Martineau had the following from Dickens's publisher, Frederic Evans (of Bradbury and Evans). He said, according to her, that he and even W. H. Wills, Dickens's 'worshipper',

had for 2 years declined their annual visit to D's country house, because 'they could not stand his cruelty to his wife.' I asked what 'cruelty' meant; and he said 'Swearing at her in the presence of guests, children and servants'... swearing often and fiercely. He is downright 'ferocious' now and has quarrelled with almost every friend he had. Next to him Forster behaved worst, - aggravating his discontent with his wife, who 'is not the sort of woman they say' Mr E declares. 'Dickens had terrified and depressed her into a dull condition, and she never was very clever.'*

Slater warns us not to accept Evans's testimony 'without any corroboration from other sources'.** And yet there is corroboration in Dickens's own letters (where the difference is largely one of tone) and in Kate Perugini's memoirs. It is all a matter of the 'tone': to me the appalling story another visitor, Robert Horne, tells is corroboration, but in Johnson it appears as an example of how Catherine was a source of irritation to Dickens. I have quoted the passage before but will repeat it in this

context:

With the course of years [Catherine had sprained an ankle at rehearsals in 1850] ... the clumsiness Dickens had noted in America and humorously exaggerated in Tilly Slowboy seemed to be growing more marked. Richard Horne, who had been at Broadstairs with the Dickenses during the summer and often dined with them at Devonshire Terrace, observed that bracelets would even slide off her arms and fall into her soup, while Dickens threw himself back in his chair laughing uproariously, his eyes streaming with mirth. Kate's lack of physical control strongly suggests nervous disturbance and Dickens's laughter sounds like the hilarity with which we hide a secret irritation from ourselves. (1953: 721)

In Johnson's picture of things Catherine was naturally so clumsy that Dickens had to resort to humour to hide his growing irritation. This is a turning of effect into cause from our point of view. Mr Evans's 'Dickens had terrified and depressed her into a dull condition' seems more perceptive as well as more humane.

One of the best analyses of domestic tyranny comes from Virginia Woolf in Moments of Being. She knows from her experience with her father that the pivot for scenes is often money. Because men earn, while women's work for them is unpaid, there is an unconscious male assumption that the materials with which women work - for instance the food for the daily family meals - should not cost anything either. Household accounts form therefore a typical occasion for a show of rage. We remember that Dickens describes himself as keeping a strict watch over Catherine's housekeeping and refers jokingly to how he

breaks a chair or so 'as frugal demonstration' when they do the weekly accounts together. Virginia Woolf shows us the reality behind such playful words. I shall quote here, in spite of the length, both her description of the scenes to which her sister Vanessa (as well as she herself) was exposed while she kept house for her father and her comments. Though Sir Leslie Stephen was a very different man from Dickens, and the physical expression of his histrionics is different, the account again gives us a perspective on the general rules governing male and female behaviour. The facet Virginia Woolf does not consider, because it does not fall within her purview, is the effect such behaviour has on a wife.

Over the whole week... brooded the horror of Wednesday. On that day the weekly books were shown him. The books were presented. Silence. He was putting on his glasses. He had read the figures. Down came his fist on the account book. There was a roar. His veins filled. His face flushed. Then he shouted, 'I am ruined'. Then he beat his breast. He went through an extraordinary dramatization of self-pity, anger and despair. He was ruined - dying... tortured by the wanton extravagance of Vanessa and Sophie [the cook]. And you stand there like a block of stone. Don't you pity me? Haven't you a word to say to me? and so on. Vanessa stood by his side absolutely dumb. He flung at her all the phrases - about shooting Niagara and so on - that came handy. She remained static. Another attitude was adopted. With a deep groan he picked up his pen and with ostentatiously trembling fingers he wrote out the cheques. This was wearily tossed to Vanessa. Slowly with many groans the pen, the account book, were put away. Then he sank into his chair and sat with his head on his breast. And then at last ... he would look up and say half plaintively: 'And what are you doing this afternoon Ginny?' - Never have I felt such rage and such frustration. For not a word of my feeling could be expressed. This, as far as I can

describe it is an unexaggerated account of a bad Wednesday. Even now I can find nothing to say of his behaviour save that it was brutal. If, instead of words, he had used a whip the brutality would have been no greater. How can one explain it? He had been indulged of course ever since he broke the flower pot and threw the fragments at his mother.... Delicacy excused that. Thus as he grew older there was the genius legend to which I have already referred. Men of genius are very ill to live with. But there are certain qualifications to be noted. These scenes were never indulged in before men. Fred Maitland for example resolutely refused to believe in them when Caroline Emilia tried to insinuate that Leslie had a temper. If Thoby had presented those books or George [two brothers] the explosion would have been suppressed. Why had he no shame in front of women? Partly of course because the woman was his slave - being the most typical of the Victorians. But that does not explain the self-dramatization, the attitudinizing, the histrionic element, the breastbeating, the groaning which played so large a part, so disgusting a part, in these scenes. His dependence on women perhaps explains that. He needed a woman to sympathise, to flatter, to console. Why? Because he was conscious of his failure as a philosopher, as a writer. But his creed made him ashamed to confess this need of sympathy to men. The attitude that his intellect made him adopt with men, made him the most modest, the most reasonable of men. [Illegible] Vanessa, on Wednesdays, was the recipient of much discontent that he had suppressed and her refusal to accept her role, part slave, part angel of sympathy, exacerbated him so that he was probably unconscious of his own barbarous violence: and would have been horrified had anyone said straight out 'You are a blackguard to treat a girl like that'. I cannot conceive how he would have taken an honest expression of opinion.... But the fact seems that at the age of sixty five he was almost completely isolated, imprisoned. Whole tracts of his sensibility had atrophied. He had so ignored, or refused to face, or disguised his own feelings, that not only had he no conception of what he himself did and said; he had no idea of what other people felt. Hence the horror and the terror of these violent displays of rage. These were sinister, blind, animal, savage. He did not realize what he did. No one could enlighten him. He suffered. We suffered. There was no possibility of communication.

Vanessa stood silent. He shouted. 27

Unlike Leslie Stephen, Dickens was not unconscious of 'his own barbarous violence', as we have seen. He refers to it often, through he blunts the point by doing it in a jocular way. The time of the separation was in a sense the longest fit of rage he entered into. There were many reasons for this rage, but the decisive one was that he needed something to distract himself from knowing what he was doing. When he entered into the period of separation he wrote letters to Forster that broach the subject of his incompatibility with Catherine. These letters are full of self-blame - he blames her in a sense less than himself - and it is the tenor of this self blame that is interesting here. It links up with what Virginia Woolf says about Leslie Stephen and the question I have asked at the beginning of this piece: why Dickens got away with so much at the separation, why Catherine's case roused so little public sympathy.

After an extremely heady time in the summer of 1857, rehearsing The Frozen Deep in his own house with Ellen Ternan (and her mother and sister) and taking it then to Manchester, Dickens felt flat. He went on a walking tour in Cumberland with Wilkie Collins in September and from there wrote two letters to Forster about his marriage.

Poor Catherine and I are not made for each other, and there is no help for it. It is not only that she makes me uneasy and unhappy, but that I make her so too - and much more so. She is exactly what you know in the way of being amiable and complying; but we are strangely ill

assorted for the bond there is between us. God knows she would have been a thousand times happier if she had married another kind of man, and that her avoidance of this destiny would have been at least equally good for us both. I am often cut to the heart thinking what a pity it is, for her own sake, that I ever fell in her way; and if I were sick or disabled tomorrow, I know how sorry she would be and how deeply grieved myself, to think how we had lost each other. But exactly the same incompatibility would arise the moment I was well again; and nothing on earth could make her understand me, or suit us to each other. Her temperament will not go with mine. It mattered not so much when we had only ourselves to consider, but reasons have been growing since which make it all but hopeless that we should even try to struggle on. What is now befalling me I have seen steadily coming, ever since the days you remember when Mary [Maimiel] was born; and I know too well that you cannot, and no one can, help me. "☐"

No mention of his temper, no thought that Catherine might like him better ill because he would have less energy than to insult her, because she would be a little more in charge then. No mention that Catherine was happy with him and loves him still and only asks that he behave reasonably. Everything is due to some vague malign destiny. But there is another facet to Dickens's attitude which Slater picks up. He tells us not to laugh unsympathetically at Dickens's anticipation of the joke line 'My wife doesn't understand me' but to 'recall that he was no ordinary straying husband but an "uncanny genius" as his younger daughter put it and that he had a curious, almost objective appreciation of his own uniqueness. Regarding himself as the phenomenon that he indeed was, he can feel genuine pity .. for his wife' (1983: 141) The sense of his own uniqueness comes out in

the other September letter to Forster. Forster may have remonstrated, because Dickens writes,

To the most part of what you say - Amen! You are not so tolerant as you might be of the wayward and unsettled feeling which is part, I suppose, of the tenure on which one holds an imaginative life, and which I have, as you ought to know well, often only kept down by riding over it like a dragoon - but let that go by. I make no complaint. I agree with you as to the very possible incidents, even not less bearable than mine, that might and must often occur to the married condition when it is entered into very young. I am always deeply sensible of the wonderful exercise I have of life and its highest sensations, and have said to myself for years, and have truly and honestly felt, this is the drawback to such a career, and it is not to be complained of.... But the years have not made it easier to bear for either of us, and for her sake as well as mine, the wish will force itself upon me that something might be done. I know too well it is impossible.... Nor are you to suppose that I disguise from myself what might be urged on the other side. I claim no immunity from blame. There is plenty of fault on my side, I dare say, in the way of a thousand uncertainties, caprices and difficulties of disposition, but only one thing will alter that, and that is, the end which alters everything.
(Paroissen 1985:122)

Slater has an excellent comment on this letter.

"There is plenty of fault on my side...", but this "wayward and unsettled feeling" he has been careful to explain, is a necessary concomitant of "the imaginative life". In other words, Catherine's contribution to their marital difficulties stem from her inadequacy, his own from his genius' (1983:142). But Slater has himself told us a page back that Dickens was 'no ordinary straying husband'. He is himself impressed by what Virginia Woolf calls 'the genius legend'.

'Men of genius are very ill to live with' - the genius legend was useful not only to Leslie Stephen. Georgy for one fervently believed in it, and made it a basis for her decision to side with Dickens at the separation. Adrian tells us in his Georgina Hogarth and the Dickens Circle: 'Reverence and veneration were ever to be her words for the proper attitude of the world toward Dickens. . . If the idol sometimes tottered on his pedestal, his worshipper was ready with the convenient philosophy "a man of genius ought not to be judged with the common herd of men". This she was to apply to his major transgressions as well as to more venial faults such as the nervous irritability and moody outbursts which beset him when the fit of creation was upon him' (1957:14).³⁹ That this attitude was strongly shared by everyone surrounding Dickens is clear from his daughter Katie's divided attitude. Katie could not bring herself to write the biography of her father and mother which she began, and burnt what she had written. But as death approached, she was tortured by the thought of the injustice to her mother the 'Dickens lie' represented and made her friend Gladys Storey promise she would write the book for her after her death.⁴⁰ She gave her the material, most of it in the form of verbal reminiscences, which Storey published in 1939 as Dickens and Daughter. What prevented her from writing the book herself was that she was tortured by her love for her father, even more than by a sense of justice. Now she did without any doubt

love Dickens greatly, but she was an old woman by then and it seems to me that what really prevented her, and what she took for love, was the public awe of him, which she shared, and her terrified sense of flying in the face of accepted opinion and overthrowing a national idol. Her comments on Dickens's behaviour to her mother are all of a curiously fragmentary, breathless kind (The presentation is not helped by the scatty way in which her friend Gladys Storey repeats them). Her dividedness over the issue, the sudden spontaneous way in which she blurts out things about her mother and father when really something else is under discussion, the sense of a forbidden topic, a dangerous task that may bring down vengeance, makes the book an interesting document on mother-daughter relations.⁴¹ There is a constant sense of taking a deep breath, steeling oneself to begin. 'She grappled with her thoughts, deliberating their issue. "The Truth must be told", was no hasty or impulsive decision, but one taken after months of contemplation, in a mind active and clear in memory; which remained irrevocable in that purpose to the end' appears on page 218 in a book of only 230 pages. The truth has already been told here and there, but fragmentarily. 'Mrs Perugini said that she could sum up the mistakes in her father's life on one half sheet of notepaper, and that she would commence with the words: "What could you expect from such an uncanny genius?"' (1939: 91). Or 'as his daughter Kate put it: "My father did not understand women". Yet for himself and for his

family this giant created untold misery, a misery which, like a stone thrown into a pool, made wider and wider the circle until at last it was lost. When through his error he made his family suffer, his own sufferings far exceeded the suffering capacity of an ordinary man' (1939:100). Or 'He wished, he said, that he had been "a better father - a better man." He talked and talked, how he talked." "I know things about my father's character" continued Mrs Perugini "that no one else ever knew; he was not a good man, but he was not a fast man, but he was wonderful!" (1939:134)⁴². Or 'my father, with all his greatness was what my Auntie [Georgy] called me - "intolerant"' (1939:212). After having sidled up to the subject indirectly for so many pages, and taken a deep breath on page 218 there is a dramatic breakthrough on the next page.

'I loved my father better than any man in the world...' she observed after one of these long silences. 'I loved him for his faults'. Rising from her chair and walking towards the door she added: 'My father was a wicked man, a very wicked man.' And she left the room. On her return she continued: 'My poor mother was afraid of my father. She was never allowed to express an opinion - never allowed to say what she felt.' Following another considerable silence she said: 'Ah! We were all very wicked not to take her part; Harry does not take this view, but he was only a boy at the time and does not realise the grief it was to our mother, after having all her children, to go away and leave us.⁴³ My mother never rebuked me. I never saw her in a temper. We like to think of our geniuses as great characters - but we can't' (1939:219).

Here the relevant elements are finally brought

together and recognised as interdependent: Dickens's despotism, the way he imposed his attitude on everyone around him (but also that Catherine remained true to herself and was reasonable to the end), and the fact that the genius legend is responsible for the lie.

But realising that geniuses are not necessarily great characters is not enough. What Katie gets close to but can't grasp and the biographers see as little as Dickens did himself is that there is a missing link between the strenuous work Dickens did as a writer and his despotic behaviour. The one does not lead straight to the other. No woman genius would be allowed the same indulgence. The attitude that 'genius' implies specially licensed relations to ordinary mortals ('geniuses are very ill to live with') has an inhibiting effect on the development of equal relations between the sexes. The genius legend is the pattern for the man/woman relation. Dickens did work hard and held the tenure of his imaginative life on all sorts of special licenses, but he was despotic because he was a man. One need only look at the evidence collected by Women's Aid to realise that this is so. Katie tells us that 'nothing could surpass the misery and unhappiness of our home' during the separation, and that her father 'was like a madman'.⁴⁴ It was hell for Dickens too, but it was a hell he had prepared for himself when he decided that his will and his alone should rule. He began to behave despotically before he was a genius, as a young reporter when he told his betrothed that she must learn to suppress

her temper and adapt to him⁴⁵ (The difference was that Catherine was not yet afraid of him then and let him know what she felt - it is exactly this that makes relationships, and houses, 'not-hell').

Dickens's complaints about suffering from bondage to a dull and spiritless mate become more passionate as his plans for the separation mature, as we shall see. His biographers all agree to the basic premiss - Dickens could not go on imprisoned by marriage with a person like Catherine - and at the same time all deplore his excesses in denouncing her and the lies he stooped to. The facts of the case are quite different: Dickens himself made this bondage for himself when he insisted on absolute power in the house, and Catherine's indescribable lassitude (he complains of it in a letter I have not quoted) is only the outcome, taken to an extreme, of the submission he demanded. But when he denounces her later he is putting his finger on real things in Catherine's behaviour. The terms of his abuse, which sound so indecent and shock even his most sympathetic supporters are not taken from the air.

This brings us to the question; did Catherine never get angry? Did she never show any rage, was she passive under Dickens's treatment - even when he told her to leave the house? This is the most interesting part of our inquiry into Catherine's relation to her houses, to 'home' and 'a place of one's own'. The only real place of one's own anyone ever has is in the end of course what the

Beaver Indians call one's 'personal space', that is one's good relations to oneself. We have seen that this space does not depend solely on oneself: in interpersonal life it has to be 'respected' by others. We could therefore rephrase our question: was Catherine totally self-alienated?

We must always remember that against such a way of using one's will as Dickens practised within the family nothing can directly be done. Catherine was afraid of Dickens (with reason: his vindictiveness is something we are coming to). Katie says she didn't dare open her mouth. She had the pressure of Victorian ideology against her - he had it with him.

What could Catherine do, in her historical situation? What are the means of rebellion a woman can use? Let us list them:

- 'Unfaithfulness' the first, most obvious, most easily come by;
- to go (but where? - she is economically dependent);
- to fight (does not help);
- to subvert her job as helpmeet, mother, housewife;
- to talk (relief - also frightens husband);
- to get ill;
- to claim legal redress (possible for women after 1857);
- to become an alcoholic.

Before we examine these options in regard to Catherine I want to make a general point. All the

biographers (sympathetic or hostile) agree that Catherine was a gentle woman. Dickens himself stresses it: 'I will warrant my Wife to be as gentle a little woman, and as free from affectation and formality of any kind as ever breathed' he wrote to a friend in 1844. And we have seen that in 1857 still he could say to Forster 'She is exactly what you know in the way of being amiable and complying.' Katie introduces the controversy over Catherine in her book by saying: 'there was nothing wrong with my mother; she had her faults, of course, as we all have - but she was a sweet, kind, peace-loving woman, a lady - a lady born' (Storey 1939: 22-3).⁴⁶ As we have seen she also says 'I never saw her in a temper'. (Adrian, Georgy's biographer calls her 'meek and colourless' (1957: 209). There are only very few voices to make us realise that this is not a fair description of Catherine because it is not a full one. How could a woman who harboured such 'sullen obstinacy' in her breast as a young girl and whom Dickens had to take to task so severely for temper and 'spirit' have become this totally sweet and gentle creature? Hans Christian Anderson, who was very fond of her and also praised these qualities, had an inkling of something more. He thought Catherine had a 'calm, feminine and retiring nature, but when she spoke, her large gentle eyes assumed a particular brilliancy, a good humoured smile played around her mouth and the sound of her voice was something so attractive that, since the meeting, Mr Anderson has always imagined

Agnes to himself as possessed of these attributes' (according to Slater 1983:161).⁴⁷ But the really surprising and dissenting voice is Biglow's in Retrospections of an Active Life. John Biglow, an American, met Catherine at a dinner party given by Thackeray in 1860 and thought her 'not a handsome woman, though stout, hearty and matronly; there was something a little doubtful about her eye, and I thought her endowed with a temper that might be very violent when roused, though not easily rousable' (according to Slater 1983:409 note 56). It is a relief to meet Catherine with the light of battle in her eye.

On two occasions we see Catherine's anger coming to the surface. Once was on her deathbed. There is much evidence that Catherine continued to love Dickens after the separation⁴⁸, and to avoid a painful arousal of her feelings she and Kate made a pact never to speak of him. Catherine broke this pact twice, once when her eye fell on Dickens's photograph and she said: 'do you think he is sorry for me?'⁴⁹ and when she was dying. There she seems to have expressed real rage with Dickens. Katie told Shaw in 1897:

During every day almost of that time she spoke to me, whenever I was alone with her, of my father. All her grievances against him came out. Fortunately for myself I heard from her own lips the worst she had to tell me. Of course I did what any daughter would do. I tried to soften her remembrance of him. In a way I succeeded. (quoted Slater, 1983: 158)

The other time was during the period of the separation; and at that time she seems to have tried to translate her anger into action. As this active anger has its source in the time before she was separated we have to look at it in connection with the question about the means of rebellion that were available to a woman.

Catherine did not use the first or the last option on my list as far as we know. There has never been a breath of a suggestion that she might have been unfaithful. There were, however, persistent rumours that she drank. Harriet Martineau wrote to a friend in 1858 (the year the separation became public) 'No, - she does not drink, but if she does not now take to the bottle or to suicide, she will show that she has some strength' (according to Slater 1983:155). It is in fact rather surprising that Catherine did not become an alcoholic because I believe that the other rumour, that she 'overindulged in food and drink' may have been true. This self-indulgence was I think one of the ways in which she responded to Dickens's treatment and I see it as constituting a part of one of the means of rebellion open to a wife: to subvert the ideal of helpmeet, mother and housewife. For a woman in Catherine's position to decide that it is about time to learn to love herself since no one else loves her and do something for herself is a revolutionary and sound decision. Catherine may have decided to cosset herself by being lazy, eating and drinking, going more often to concerts and the opera to bring a little beauty into her

life. It may sound ridiculous to say that indolence and eating for comfort are a form of defiance, but when we consider the pressures of the ideal brought to bear on women I think it can be defended. That Catherine became fat is an established fact⁵⁰. A visitor to the household wrote in 1857 that it had become obvious 'that, for some time, the relations between host and hostess had been somewhat strained; but this state of affairs was generally described to the irritability of literary temperament on Dickens's part, and on Mrs Dickens's side to a little love of indolence and ease, such as, however provoking to their husbands, is not uncommon among middle-aged matrons with large families'.⁵¹ We have another piece of evidence that Catherine subverted her job as helpmeet, mother and housewife. Katie, who stresses throughout her book what a good mother Catherine was (though over-anxious) is also reported to have told a friend that 'her mother was heavy and unregardful of the children' (Adrian 1957:57). The contradiction has given Katie a reputation for inconsistency, but if one considers Catherine's situation (and takes into account the great sensitivity children have to their mother's behaviour) one can easily see how a usually tender and even-tempered mother might become over-anxious under pressure and at other times heavy and unregardful. Catherine had had enormous demands made on her, with very little return; it is natural that there should have come a time when she withdrew and brooded on herself.

Illness is another way out of a situation that has become unbearable. Illness is really the classical case of the sort of behaviour we are talking about here. I have called this behaviour rebellious or defiant. It is, however, two-sided - a double response to an impossible situation. On the one hand illness is the result of a breakdown - physical or nervous - which is in turn the result of overstrain: overgreat demands and pressure, torture, misery, isolation or an amalgam of them. On the other it is the, usually unconscious, defiant decision to save oneself. This again is ambiguous, because it is at the cost of one's own substance. But because women, especially as wives have no autonomy, all their behaviour has this ambiguous character, which comes out so clearly in the case of illness: it is both response and action, both a result of what has been done to them and a protest against what is being done to them; it is self-destructive and self-assertive.⁵² Alcoholism is another example; but to a greater or lesser extent the ambiguity affects all the items on my list.

Catherine was seriously ill in 1851 with dizziness, focusing troubles and other symptoms, as we have seen either as a result of exhaustion or from some physical cause that was not diagnosed or probably both. But illness was not her way; she seems to have been physically too strong. When she stopped bearing children after Dora's birth in 1852, and the situation with Dickens eased for a time she recovered her health

permanently. Even the strain of the years of separation did not lead to another breakdown.

This leaves us with four other possibilities for Catherine according to my list: to fight, to go, to talk, to claim legal redress. Fighting we have already dismissed. Catherine was a fair person: she tried to stand up to Dickens when he was wrong. But Dickens was never so adamant as when he was wrong, and the only time Catherine persisted in her resistance to his will (in Genoa in 1845) she had a nervous breakdown (See Bowen, 1956: 91-92)⁵³.

Whether Catherine 'talked' while she was married to Dickens we don't know. She was a reticent woman at all times. Her mother knew of her situation but it is not clear whether they discussed it until Dickens told her to go. Georgy also knew the situation but it does not look as if the sisters had been close enough for Catherine to make a friend of her. A letter from her to Miss Coutts shows that she was ready to talk when she had been publicly insulted. This letter had such dramatic results that I must discuss it in the context of the separation. This leaves us with two items: to go, and to seek legal redress.

The issue over whether Catherine in fact wanted to go, or said she wanted to go is complicated. We have only Dickens's and Georgy's word for it in two letters that are highly sententious public-relations statements. Dickens's so-called Violated Letter in which his statement appears is generally thought a highly fantastic

document. Georgy's letter echoes his statement exactly.

Dickens: For some years past Mrs Dickens has been in the habit of representing to me that it would be better for her to go away and live apart; that her always increasing estrangement made a mental disorder under which she labours - more, that she felt herself unfit for the life she had to lead as my wife and that she would be better far away. I have uniformly replied that we must bear our misfortune, and fight the fight out to the end, that the children were the first consideration, and that I feared they must bind us together 'in appearance'. (Dexter 1957: 274)

Georgy: My sister has often expressed a desire to go and live away, but Charles never agreed to it on the girls' account; but latterly he thought it must be to their advantage as well as his own and Catherine's to consent to this and remodel their unhappy home. (Dexter 1957: 290-1)

That it was Dickens who wanted Catherine to go, and who put her out is clear from the letters and has never been doubted by anyone. But a veritable battle of opinions exists over whether Catherine herself wanted to go. Her aunt, Helen Thomson, writing to Catherine's former personal maid who knew her well, says '[Catherine] had no desire to leave her home and children so long as that home was endurable to her'. Bowen, who makes a careful study of the Violated Letter statement by statement (and who comes to the conclusion that Dickens must have been mentally unbalanced when he wrote it) seems to agree with her:

Then comes the statement that 'Mrs Dickens has been in the habit of representing to me that it

would be better for her to go away and live apart.' The probable explanation of this may well have been some tearful expression of inability to please him and some mournful remark that she would be better were she out of the way, an attitude far from uncommon to anyone in a neurasthenic state of mind. (1956:111)

Angus Wilson accepts Dickens's statement but gives it a special twist. He thinks Catherine wanted to go because she felt she was not up to being the wife of such a brilliant man (Dickens at least allowed her a reason for being unfit - that she was mad):

I do not suppose that she ever entirely disliked the position and affluence that being Mrs Charles Dickens brought her, although twenty years later, so Dickens said, she urged her own departure from household in which she felt ill at ease. But though many liked her, few seem to have done so without a certain patronage.⁴

If this appears hard to beat for callousness about someone in Catherine's situation, Adrian is a promising runner up. But he mentions that Georgina tried to prevent Catherine from going (Dickens simply mentions generally in the Violated Letter that Georgy 'has remonstrated, reasoned, suffered and toiled, again and again to prevent a separation between Mrs Dickens and me') and he gives a reason for her doing it that links her to the question:

The roster of Catherine's inept and careless acts, each petty in itself, had so lengthened with the years that her husband's jangled nerves were now raw. Governing his own life by 'habits of punctuality, order and diligence'.... Dickens could not tolerate a lack of these qualities in anyone, much less his wife. Nor could he bear her plaintive reproaches and passivity.

Finally, his very intolerance of her burdened him with guilt. In the uncomfortable position of a buffer between the two, Georgina tried alternately to reduce friction and conceal it. Often Catherine tearfully insisted that she wished to leave the house and live apart, but Georgina 'remonstrated and reasoned... again and again to prevent a separation.' This she had good cause to do, for not only would such an event have meant public disgrace ..; for her it would mean a painful choice, either alternative fraught with woeful consequences. (1957: 42)

Clearly only the two people who doubt Dickens's and Georgy's word that Catherine wanted to go (Bowen and her aunt) have any real imaginative grasp of her situation at all. But I think it is likely that Dickens and Georgy are speaking the truth. I think Catherine did say she would go, and Georgy and Dickens did try to stop her. This is what I think the situation for each of the three looked like.

The reason Catherine wanted to go was of course because, in her aunt's words, her home had been made unendurable for her. But it was an act of despair; she had nowhere to go. The ambiguity of action we have discussed reaches an extreme here. Catherine would say she must go, and intend to go because circumstances were so humiliating that to stay was impossible, but she also would say it as a threat, the only weapon she had to bring Dickens to his senses. Born of defeat it was also her strength. It was a defiance, a protest action, a rebellion against the code of the good wife. And Dickens was extremely sensitive to scandal. Catherine cannot have been unaware of her power.

Georgy would try to prevent the separation because, as Adrian says it would mean the loss of her home (a very comfortable and glamorous one) and her life with Dickens. What was she to do if Catherine went? Become a governess? She could let Catherine go if something happened that would make her presence in the house essential to Dickens - so vitally essential that it would override the fear of scandal (One didn't live with a departed wife's sister in those days). Only then would her place in the house be secure. Georgy, like Catherine, was fighting for a place of her own.

Dickens could not let Catherine go until he found a way of doing it that exonerated him. His relation with his reading public was at stake - he had to keep up public appearances, but he was also very concerned about his popularity. He was the writer of domestic bliss and of the woman as the heart and centre of the home. By his own account he tried many ways of disposing of Catherine without becoming involved in a scandal.⁵⁵ Catherine's aunt sums them up in a letter to a Mrs Stark in 1858. She calls them 'absurd' or 'insulting' proposals

of her going abroad to live alone, or keeping to her own apartment in daily life, at the same time to appear at his parties still as mistress of the house, to do the honours and to visit their friends in turn with him, and at another time proposing that when he and his family lived in the town house, she would occupy with a servant the country house or vice versa.⁵⁶

Catherine apparently turned them all down because of the

deception they involved. She must have felt true rage by then. Finally Dickens hit on the perfect solution. It is embodied in the Violated Letter. If Catherine herself had urged the separation, then he was exonerated. All he needed to do was to present the truth in the right way. He embroidered it a bit by throwing in that she was mad - not saying so outright but hinting at it in an aside interpolated in the statement that for some years past she had been in the habit of saying she wanted to go. It is in fact strange how the statement of her mental disorder is interwoven with her desire to go - the two strengthen one another: not only does she want to go because she is mad, she is mad to want to go.

Dickens has hit on the fact that Catherine was involved in unVictorian activities. If he reveals these she will be condemned and public sympathy will be on his side. The fundamental guilt will be hers; whatever he does, he will be exonerated (He was right). He picked his accusations to chime in with current prejudices and fears, (Perhaps he did it almost instinctively; the Violated Letter is in a weird sense a work of art, as we shall see when we look at it as a whole in the chapter on the separation). What he accuses her of are violations of the very ideal he himself had helped to set up and popularize. To adopt a husband's taste and submit to his desires (bearing with grace even 'warmth' and peevishness), as we have seen, is in a wife a sign of sound understanding. A good wife and helpmeet does not

say she wants to go. Catherine is a bad mother: 'In the manly consideration I owe my wife, I will merely remark of her that the peculiarity of her character has thrown all the children on someone else' (Dexter 1935: 273). Here again is that spectre of peculiarity, of madness, this time in connection with the most sacred task of a woman's life, motherhood. Catherine is that Victorian bogey the 'wrong' wife (foisted off on the hero), the madwoman in the attic.

Claiming legal redress is of course closely allied to the subject of 'going', and both belong to the context of houses, of having a place of one's own, in a woman's life. I will return to both in the chapter on separation; but I want to say in this context a few words about the legal situation. Dickens like many responsible and reform-minded people had been exercised by the impossibility for ordinary people to claim divorce. While these reformers would repudiate divorce by mutual consent (which had been legal practice in some German states since the Reformation⁵⁷) with horror as a form of continental levity, they wanted divorce for serious moral breaches like adultery and desertion to be within the reach of even impecunious people. Dickens had put the case for it in Hard Times. It is interesting that he turns the usual situation around: a respectable powerloom weaver is deserted by his drunken wife who returns to extract money. Johnson has no doubt that Dickens saw some of his own predicament in that of his

hero: 'how Dickens felt about both his personal unrest and the dangerous state of society emerges unmistakably in Hard Times through the portrayal of the workman Stephen Blackpool. Bound in marital ties that he can no longer bear, he asks .. what he can do, only to find out that for him there is no way , he must simply submit to his fate' (1953:821-2).

This was in 1854. The Matrimonial Census Act which brought divorce within the reach of even the impecunious came into effect in 1857. But it turned out there was a rude shock in store for the nation: not only were there more petitions than anyone had dreamt, but women availed themselves of it as claimants. Divorce had naturally been thought of as being for men (Dickens in Hard Times was simply expressing what everyone felt). Women were after all made differently: they were long-suffering, forgiving. To the Victorians there could not be a more unVictorian activity for a woman than suing for divorce. Provision had of course been made in case a husband was involved in such heinous crimes as incestuous adultery or bigamy (Horstman, 1985: 20). These exceptions for women were extended in the 1857 act to adultery with desertion or with cruelty. But no one believed that women would overcome their inherent refinement and delicacy of feeling to the extent of exposing themselves to the publicity of the divorce courts. Women, however, did. Though it was almost impossible for a woman to get a divorce - she had to

prove cruelty with the help of outside witnesses and had to establish that it caused physical illnessSM - 40% of the petitioners were women. Horstman in Victorian Divorce writes in the section 'After the 1857 Act':

Equal worry for reformers arose when they discovered that wives petitioned for divorce. Advocates for reform had long operated on the premise that divorce would be for husbands, and Punch, even after the passage of the Act with grounds for wives included, had not expected wives to seek divorce. If grounds for wives had remained what they were before 1857 - bigamy and incest - the prediction would have come true. This addition gave wives more opportunity. And they took it. .. Lord Campbell discovered that wives, rather than suing for a judicial separation after their husband's adulteries, 'merely' added a charge of cruelty and sought a divorce instead - 'a most disastrous consequence' he wrote. Either wives feared the stigma of divorce less than the cruelty of their husbands or there was more cruelty than there had been expected. In any case, reformers had badly misjudged the women of England. (1985: 85, My emphasis)

What Catherine did is difficult to ascertain because so much relevant correspondence has been destroyed, but there are indications that she thought of suing for divorce. Who would have thought it of Dickens's 'meek little wife' (Bowen, who likes her, writes sorrowfully still in 1956 that she must have acted on bad advice). One indication is that Mark Lemon who was acting for her in the separation suddenly withdrew his support and refused to have anything more to do with the proceedings. He was editor of Punch; Horstman's evidence throws light on his attitude if Catherine broached the subject of

divorce to him. Catherine's part of the correspondence has been destroyed.⁵⁹ What is known for certain is that she held out against Dickens for a judicial separation.

This defiance, this thwarting of his will and overlooking of his kindest chivalrous impulses (had he not spoken of the manly consideration he owed his wife?), flabbergasted Dickens and bred a rage that only died with him. The situation was indeed dangerous for him. The divorce bill had been passed to punish transgressors against the marital bond. Dickens had reason to be uneasy on that count (Horstman for instance implies that Dickens published his statements in Household Words and the Violated Letter out of fear of divorce - to forestall Catherine). Another embarrassing circumstance for him was that not only he, but two of his brothers left their wives in 1858 - three Dickens brothers leaving their wives in the same year must have looked bad.⁶⁰ The publicity surrounding any divorce was very great and Catherine's petition would have made a sensation. Whatever the outcome, whether she had won or not, Dickens would have been ruined. Catherine must have been conscious of this. She must herself have been deeply outraged to consider such a step. She suffered from none of the self-deceptions that colour all his statements of the time and was not involved like him in building false fronts, juggling and manouvering. She loved him (this and the thought of what it would do to her children must have held her back), but her sense of justice was so

deeply offended by his behaviour before she left and by his calmness afterwards that it too demanded satisfaction.

Two incidents closely connected to the theme of this section - houses as spaces of one's own - precipitated the crisis of her leaving. One concerns a misdirected bracelet. The incident is well documented but cannot be dated with certainty. Some biographers, for instance Pope-Hennessy (1945:371), connect it with the rehearsals and performance of The Frozen Deep in the summer of 1857 and I would myself agree with that dating; others think it happened in the Spring of 1858 and precipitated Catherine's leaving directly. Dickens had fallen in love with the eighteen year old Ellen Ternan during rehearsals. They took place in Catherine's house, Tavistock Place. Ellen, her mother and sister had the freedom of the place. They were all three of them professional actors (as well as a third sister who was not in the play) - Mrs Ternan is said to have been distinguished. They were a team of fine independent professional women. But it is inevitable that they took advantage of Dickens's great generosity without worrying too much about the feelings of their hostess, whom they probably hardly knew.⁶¹ Dickens bought Ellen a golden bracelet and had it engraved to commemorate their working together⁶². The jeweller, seeing his initials, sent it to Catherine instead. Dickens saw in a flash the serious threat to his reputation and that only one step could

save him from scandal: Catherine must take the bracelet herself to Ellen. He had used Catherine for similar purposes before, for instance when he arranged that she should call on the Winters with an invitation to dinner that would enable him and Maria to meet (Paroissien, 1985: 107). This time, however, Catherine, wounded beyond bearing by Dicken's behaviour and embarrassed by his flirtation with a girl younger than his daughters, refused. But Dickens was adamant. Katie found her mother sobbing at the dressing table, putting on her bonnet to go out. She is said to have stamped her foot and shouted with flashing eyes 'you shall not go'.⁶³ But Catherine went.

The other incident can be dated to the time after Dickens's walking tour with Wilkie Collins in Cumberland, in the autumn of 1857. His letters home from that tour were addressed to Georgy, leaving Catherine out pointedly. When he returned he moved to Gad's Hill Place. Catherine had spent the summer there with the children and Georgy, but she was now somewhere else, though where is not clear. Her parents were still in Tavistock House, as was usual when the Dickenses were away on holiday. Dickens was in a very excitable state. He had talked to Collins about his love for Ellen, but got no advice that satisfied him. He suddenly thought of something - a gesture that would terminate his marriage by a last interference in Catherine's sphere, the house, and act at the same time like a slap in the face. He

sent a former servant (Catherine's former personal maid) the key to the house and asked her to have the connecting door between the marital bedroom and his dressing room boarded up and the space filled in with shelves. An iron bedstead was to be put for him in the dressing room. Catherine found these arrangements completed when she came back (Her parents had been there while they were under way and cannot have been unaware of them. [Johnson, 1953: 911]). Not only was she symbolically deserted, she was forced to sleep in a room separated from Dickens's by only a thin partition so that she must have been aware of his every move.

Johnson comments on this incident (Dickens had asked for the changes to be made quietly as he had rather not have them talked about): 'But for all his desire that it be done quietly, the closing of that door after twenty-one years of married life was, in the tragedy of Dickens, as symbolically significant as Nora's slamming of the door in A Doll's House'. (1953:911) This is surely an extraordinarily inappropriate comparison. Nora slammed the door on a house in which she could not be herself and would never have had even a minimum of self-responsibility if she had stayed. She therefore went into voluntary exile. Dickens had despotic almost godlike power in his house. Slamming the door against Catherine was an act of self-responsibility got out of hand, self-responsibility that had taken on absolute proportions. He shut the door on someone who was

powerless, who had never stood in his way and had always supported him. Catherine was sent by his gesture into involuntary exile. One might say that she was moved from her house into a doll's house (Just as Dickens had once moved his father, when he could not stand him any more, to a 'doll's house' in Devonshire). Biographers comment on the handsome arrangement made for her (see Slater 1983: 151). Why should she be moved at all from her house and home, the home of her children? If Dickens was a rebel, why did he not leave himself? Or if Catherine was a victim, why was she punished and the aggressor went free? While she was banished, Dickens had at times four houses simultaneously in his possession.

Excursus: Quilp as trickster: Dickens and sex

We do not know anything about Dickens's sex life as a real life experience. In his books he was deliberately reticent because of his special relation with his public: he saw himself, and wanted to be, the writer who would not bring a blush to the young person's cheek. We do ^{know} he was himself, and wanted to be, the writer who would not bring a blush to the young person's cheek. We do know, however, about what might be called his fantasy sex life through the imagery of his art. Reading this imagery is a risky business, but I do want to look here, briefly, at

this 'fantasy sex' from the point of view of how it affected Catherine.

Any investigation into images must be, by its nature, tentative and hypothetical. We are dealing here with genuine unconscious symbols, which are always overdetermined.' They have different meanings according to the point of view from which they are approached; it does not however follow that these meanings are not inherent in them. The factual support for my hypothesis of what the images mean comes from anthropology and especially the work that has been done on myths. At the centre of my investigation stands the question of Catherine's clumsiness. Not: was Catherine really clumsy? not even: did Dickens's alternative jeering and raging make her clumsy? but: what did her clumsiness (imagined or real) mean to Dickens? What did he make of it, and how did what he made of it reflect back on her and on their life together? To these questions the answer in the absence of biographical evidence must necessarily be indirect. It is here that Dickens's fantasies, above all the figure of Quilp, are immensely suggestive. And to get hold of their suggestion, to bring out their extraordinary psychic vitality and at the same time pinpoint their failure in human imagination I find it useful to compare them with myths.

The question of what Dickens made of Catherine's clumsiness, and how what he made of it reflected back on their life together is, on the 'mythical' level, so

closely connected with the theme of houses that this section can be seen as a postscript to the last section. There we had to do with real houses that exist in the world. Here we have to do as it were with 'inner houses', houses as images of female inner space, houses as they exist in the imagination. I have already touched on Dickens's 'inner houses' when I mentioned Catherine's prenatal difficulties and Dickens's nightmares about the coming births in the section on Catherine and childbirth. I said that what was stirred up there seems to me to have found expression in his art, especially in his interest in dark closets and the mouldering, lumber-filled houses, an interest that found form finally in The Old Curiosity Shop.

In this biographical and speculative section, we are not interested in how Dickens's life influenced his art (the legitimate question for the critic) but how his art or rather that which precedes it, his imaginative habits, influenced his life. This is a legitimate question for the biographer of his wife, because these imaginative habits would influence their life together at a deep level, and modify or mould Catherine's experience of life distinctly. Dickens's habits on the everyday level were vividly and fiercely fed from his habits on the imaginative level. Catherine was a casualty of these imaginative habits. Because Dickens was a man and master in his house, her fate was in a sense the outcome of these habits, the same habits that fed his art.

There was very little she could do about it: the combination of Dickens's and her own ignorance about what was going on and Dickens's economic power as husband saw to that. After having discussed the aspect of Catherine's freedom of action, this is an aspect of the marriage that still needs stressing.

Mark Spilka in Dickens and Kafka² sees Dickens and Kafka as two essentially comic writers, related to one another in a special vision that makes the world grotesque. This is the child's vision, to whom adults and their doings appear frightening, inexplicable and mechanical.³ Sex is one of these frightening, inexplicable activities, in which the mechanical comes to the fore, and the human and controlled is lost in the animal and uncontrolled. It is therefore the quintessentially grotesque, and associated with all that is clumsy, ungainly, inhumanly rigid, automatic and mechanical in human behaviour; also with the brutal and the savage or primitive. Like any other human activity that is mechanical and ungainly, it is also funny. The laughter is meant to exorcise the horror and perplexity.

According to Spilka, neither Dickens nor Kafka ever grew up. He suggests that Dickens's sexuality was monstrous, repressed, full of fear and loathing. The two writers can be compared because they were arrested at an infantile stage and could see the world from a childish point of view and because sex as a form of involvement in adult relationships terrified them.⁴ The important

point of the theory is that their art is adult: the fact that they retained the childish point of view meant that they could open perspectives that allow us to see ourselves more clearly than before. 'The concept of an arrested or childlike sensibility does not imply neurotic art' Spilka says at the beginning of his discussion of the 'technique of the grotesque' (1963: 60).

Anyone who knows the myth cycles of the Amerindian, Oceanian or African peoples (among others) is familiar with what Spilka calls the child's vision here. What he isolates are the characteristics of the trickster stories, a special genre among myth cycles. The stories are told for fun and are a form of our 'dirty story'. In the North American cycles with which I am most familiar the hero is a trickster, who lives in myth time, before men and animals were separated; separation and 'real time' do in fact come about through his tricks and misadventures. One of his characteristics is that he is totally unco-ordinated and unintegrated; for instance, he cannot recognise parts of his body as his own. Another is that he is totally immoral (He is as far as I know always male). The two come together in his behaviour. Coyote carries his penis (which is enormous) coiled in a basket on his back; when he sees girls bathing he sends it out to seduce them all. Raven appears as a sort of monster baby. He wriggles out of his cradle to shit all over his mother's, the chieftainess's, house.⁵⁵ He also projects his

clumsiness through a clever trick. He constructs a mechanical toy figure who drums and dances in the village square in the night. This puts the people into a heavy trancelike sleep full of dreams. While the contraption (fashioned from seashells and gravemats) grotesquely shakes its limbs and makes music, Raven (who is still a baby) makes love to all the women of the village including his mother.⁶ Clumsiness, the mechanical and determined in the human that makes us appear subhuman, sex and incest come together here, as well as the horror and fascination of the grotesque. These are also the ingredients of this aspect of Dickens's and Kafka's art. Spilka's statement that the two writers were infantile, while their art is mature seems a bit sweeping to me. There is nothing arrested about the people who tell the trickster stories; the genre is handled skilfully and subtly and the stories have a psychological depth which calls for profound respect. Yet they are childish stories: they are told for the frisson the grotesque gives us and arouse the embarrassment and horrified laughter which we remember especially from our childhood, especially about sex, clumsiness or maimedness and cruelty. I think the genre can be used in a mature or an immature way. I would call Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' mature art because of the brilliant way in which the clumsy and grotesque is externalised in the beetle's rigid carapace and unwieldy shape. With grace and integration as we understand it gone, the 'human centre'

becomes invisible, even unimaginable; but it is there, the protagonist remains conscious of it. By my standard of 'charity' it is not only the art that is mature here but also the writer, because charity to oneself is the most difficult kind of charity to achieve. I would also call David Copperfield mature art, though not so mature as Kafka's. Though all the grace and integration is lodged in priggish David Copperfield, and all that is inept, practically and mentally, is projected on to poor Dora, David does in the end learn to accept otherness. It is true Dickens kills off Dora too quickly for David to have to learn to live with his acceptance, but since he subsequently learns to accept Agnes (difficult in another way), a step forward in human relations has been made. In life this means Dickens has gained a measure of self awareness and self criticism; and I have given evidence in the section on childbirth that the maturing David Copperfield brought reflected on his behaviour to Catherine.⁷ The Old Curiosity Shop I would call immature art. I have touched already on how closely its main imagery is related to Dickens's phobias and obsessions. I can see no evidence that the writing of it helped him to distance himself from them, and his behaviour to Catherine remains phobic and manic for all the expression of his phobias and manias in his art.

Yet The Old Curiosity Shop is a fascinating book. Personally I find myself responding more strongly to it than any other of Dickens's books except David

Copperfield. One should also not write off the fact of its enormous popularity at Dickens's time. The most intense response of Dickens's audience was to Little Nell. We are fascinated today by Quilp - raffish, callous, brutal, Quilp - a trickster if ever there was one. We respond to his gusto with a mixture of delighted awe and repulsion. This means I think that we have shed some Victorian inhibitions and are a bit nearer in our frank response to the audience of the traditional trickster story narrator. Neither their response nor our own is, however, a response to art. In fact we have entered here with Dickens a realm which is neither that of the 'mature' or the '^mimmature', nor of 'art' or 'non art' but which lies behind these categories, the realm of archetypes. Normally we block our access to this realm - it offends our notion of ourselves as civilized. Under Dickens's guidance we enter it delightedly. It is a form of homecoming, a form of recognition.

But we are entering it of course through art. The Old Curiosity Shop taps the realm of archetypes as a work of art. Archetypes are images which are in themselves neutral but whose expression (given that we are human) can never be neutral; the art that links them in image clusters and associates them with the plot always declares itself as mature or immature. Dickens's closeness to the realm of archetypes at the time of The Old Curiosity Shop makes his art vital, but it doesn't make it mature. Carey's thesis in The Violent Effigy is

that Dickens writes well whenever his imagination is touched - and there is no doubt that Quilp touches it at a profound level. It is true that each time that happens we respond with interest. But as a criterion this seems to me a short-term view of art; we are interested in a limited, local sense in the images as they come up. In a long-term sense Quilp's story is eminently forgettable; Quilp himself turns out curiously hollow and non-existent in the end. The images may well remain. We are fascinated by the vividness with which Dickens reminds us of ourselves. Archetypal images always lead us back to ourselves. But from the artist we expect something more; we expect some sort of promise, the shape of something new; in leading us back we expect him to also lead us forward to ourselves.

What is particularly interesting in our context is that the images, though they are universal have different values (or are differently interpreted) according to gender. For men the trickster is an exuberant self-affirmation; as I have said he is always male.²⁰ To women (and though this is a feminist perspective I would say it is the ordinary woman's response, though often buried) he seems destructive; in myth the era of 'humanness' his activities open is one of mastery over nature which supersedes a more humane era. And here it is important to remember that archetypal mythical images always have simultaneous spatial (or cosmic), historical and psychological dimensions. As 'woman' is

equated with 'nature' it is also an era of mastery over women. In other words, we touch here on the roots of the men-women relation as we know it.

Let us look at some more images of the trickster myths before we turn to Dickens and Catherine. In the Raven myths of the Northwest coast (as in other trickster cycles) 'the house' plays an important symbolic role. It is an image of the universe, and at the same time of the womb. I have already said that Raven's house is his mother's house. The trickster brings disorder and chaos to the house; he cannot be socialized, and finally by defiling it he brings on the deluge. Water rises in the house and fills it to the roof beams. People drown but Raven escapes upward, to the sky. From this catastrophe rises a new kind of human being (divided from the animals) and a new kind of 'time' (what we would call a linear conception of history).

How can we bring these images into connection with Dickens? Did he identify with the trickster, that dirty, unco-ordinated, unteachable creature who is lecherous even in the cradle? Clearly not in life. In life Dickens was fanatically clean and tidy, proud of his physical co-ordination and the grace and swiftness of his movements. Sex frightened him, according to Spilka; indeed, Spilka thinks, as I said, that he saw it as repellent. He would have repudiated every characteristic of the trickster. But in life he had a foil who had these characteristics: Catherine.

Catherine must have stood in Dickens's life for sex. It is unlikely that he had much sexual experience outside the long association with her (In the case of his other, later, association with Ellen Ternan, he seems to have fought for a long time against the temptation to put it on a sexual basis - Ellen stood for purity). Is it not possible that Catherine was what she was in Dicken's eyes because of his fear of sex? Biographers have taken him at his word; Johnson for instance thinks he separated from her in the end because of her clumsiness.

The truth was worse than that he had ceased to love Kate. In scores of ways she rasped him beyond bearing. Even in Italy, four years earlier, when he had felt during his absence a momentary recurrence of tenderness for her he had been unable to restrain his impatience at her inability merely to address an envelope legibly. Daily contact with her clumsiness, lassitude and inefficiency set his teeth on edge. For Dickens who knew exactly where every article should be in every room in his house, who inspected his children's bedrooms like a drill sergeant every morning, who had a precise place on his desk for every ornament, whose every movement and gesture was made with precision, poor Catherine's mishaps were as irritating as if they were deliberate. (1953: 907)

We do in fact know very little about what Catherine was like: it is at least possible that she was not clumsy (or unusually clumsy) at all, but that she appeared to Dickens as clumsy because she embodied sex for him. According to Spilka's theory he had to exorcise his fear and loathing with laughter; this is only a short step away from making her into a grotesque.

We have only his word for it that she was clumsy; none of the visitors remarked on it, nor did either of her sisters who lived with her. We have the visitors' word for it that Dickens roared with laughter, rolled on his back, kicking his legs, 'eyes streaming with mirth' at what she did or at the use of endearments between married couples (If her bracelets slid off her arm and fell with a splash in the soup this is a sign of nervous collapse rather than inherent clumsiness).

It is possible that Dickens in his imagination made Catherine responsible for their sex life, just as he dissociated himself from responsibility for the birth of the children. This would explain his inability to approach their sexual relation rationally and use birth control. Johnson, we have seen, mentions the precision and assurance of his gestures: in other words Dickens was proud of his grace and control in contrast to Catherine's fumbling and stumbling. His fanatical tidiness in the house, the way he kept the children 'in order', the way he insisted that it should be he himself who created the lightfilled luxurious atmosphere of their houses can all be seen as pointing the contrast with Catherine's incompetence and unpracticalness that creates chaos. Again there is no real evidence that she was unpractical, while there is some evidence to the contrary. But what she was or was not, is not really the point: even if she should have been sexy, a bit clumsy and not very practical the point is that Dickens

made her stand for these things. Like a scapegoat she was made to bear that which he could not cope with in himself.

Dickens's obsession with a lightfilled, elegant and airy house, impeccably clean and tidy, in which life has the appearance of total manageability and order, has to be seen in relation to another obsession that surfaces in his art. Critics often point out that one of the persistent images in his art is a dark, rambling, ramshackle house, often built above water into which it subsides. This house, they have also noticed is associated with his mother.⁹ It is actually a mother symbol or womb symbol, but not in any direct sense. It is something like a mother imago in the sense in which Melanie Klein uses the word, that is, not as an image of the mother as she is but as it suits him to imagine her. Dickens was extraordinarily like his mother, as the drawings of the two suggest.¹⁰ His mother had his hunger for sociability (she was at a ball the night before he was born) and his talent for storytelling.¹¹ As was customary at the time she taught him to read and write, and because she was a superior person with intellectual pretensions she taught him the rudiments of Latin, a thing his father could not have done.¹² Her actual image must have been one of reason, brightness, order, light. Nevertheless Dickens associates her with dark decaying houses, treacherous with rotting floorboards, often lapped by the filthy water of the

Thames. The house is terrifying, often filled with sinister lumber, full of dirt and vermin, spiders in every corner, mice and rats scampering about. The mother's unforgivable sin was of course that she got him the job in the blacking factory, just such a house above the Thames, and that she wanted him to stay on there instead of going back to school (She, who symbolised school, learning and advancement to him). But this treachery is only the symbol of an older treachery (he could equally have blamed his father for the blacking factory): the vermin, the scampering mice and rats, remind one that Dickens had a great number of brothers and sisters, mostly younger, with whom he had to share his mother's attention. Freud says vermin in dreams represent siblings. But they must represent any annoying unnecessary creatures that take the attention of the main person, the source of love and comfort away from one because Dickens's psychodrama repeats itself with another disappointing woman, Catherine.

From the lumber of the dark houses grows the figure of an unprotected pure innocent child: Little Nell, David Copperfield and others. With them Dickens identifies. David Copperfield is even rewarded, after a sojourn through many houses with a bright orderly home and a wife who is housekeeping personified.

In life Catherine fused with the mother imago. She is sex, she threatens his bright orderly houses with her

chaotic unpracticalness, she fills them with a scampering swarm of creatures whom he can only control with the utmost severity. She herself has to be controlled with great severity, as the earliest letters already show. Apart from that he keeps terror at bay by making her grotesque and laughing at her. And he always keeps a nice tidy pure sexless practical young girl at her side who serves to point the contrast and with whom he can identify. Perhaps behind Catherine as the dark mother imago stood the bright image of his youthful mother, so that he was eternally, against his will, attracted to her. This he exorcised by setting up her young sisters at her side. As we shall see in the next chapter, all he was doing in this was repeating a childhood pattern.

Before looking at Quilp, let us sum up the trickster cycle images and the images of Dickens's own 'myth' we have looked at so far. We should also ask how the traditional narrator places them, so that we can ask how Dickens places his imagery.

In the trickster myths there is first the image of the trickster himself. His main characteristics are that he is not fully human (part person, part animal) and lives in myth time, before people and animals have been separated. He has no co-ordination, is clumsy and somewhat mechanical (though he is strong and can be agile; his clumsiness can be projected outward), does not recognise parts of his body as his own (rather like a baby who plays with its toes or a dog who chases its

tail) but is very cunning and full of tricks and pranks. He is dirty, cruel and immoral. He has an immensely long penis and/or is very lecherous; he is incestuous and rapes his mother. He cannot be socialized; he defiles his mother's house. He brings about, however, what socialization is after: a sense of linear time, order, division and delimitation.

The house was the second image we discussed. In the myth it stands for the womb and the universe at once. In The Raven myths it is the mother's house and the mother is chieftainess: it is therefore an image of female dominance.¹⁴ The house is associated with a third image, that of water. The tricksters' behaviour brings about a flood; water rises in the house and destroys the old world and the myth people. This must be a birth image; not only is the water the amniotic fluid, but some dam suddenly bursts, the water is released, and from this stems the change to 'real time' and division.

In the trickster myths these images are firmly placed. The placing is not the work of the individual narrator. Individuals can give a different, distorting emphasis by telling a shortened version (though I suspect that this is mainly done in telling the story to whites). But the cycle always replaces the right emphasis. The placing is done subtly, without moralising. There is delight and awe and horror about the rampant egotism and the bad manners of the trickster and a certain male

chauvinist complacency and even admiration but the overall sense is 'this is what we are like'. There is a clear sense of a threat of the growing mechanicalness of the world and of the division of the individual from his sources in the world and in himself (This may seem remarkable in cultures with stone age technologies, which are not remotely urbanised, but it is present). The trickster introduces mechanicalness and exploitation of nature where there was union. But as the images are always individual as well as universal, and as the water rising in the house is also an individual birth image, the sense seems to be: people have to be born. There has to be an end to union, a beginning to ego insistence and loneliness.

In Dickens's 'myth world' we have so far looked at four images: the house, vermin, water and the angel child. Let us sum them up once more in relation to his novels. The house is dark, old and mouldy, filled with vermin, and often built by or above water. The water (of the Thames for instance or the canals of Venice) penetrates it and seems to mingle with it. The most direct account of it comes into David Copperfield, as the bottling factory (It is on the basis of these autobiographical writings that we know that this house is indissolubly connected for Dickens with his mother). It is, however, present in some form in every book he wrote. In the early work its presence is very prominent: Oliver Twist is full of a whole collection of houses that are

variations on the theme; Monk's hide-out (where he interviews Bumbles) shows the connection with water particularly clearly, and there is the thieves' place on Jacob's Island.¹⁶, but in his last book, Edwin Drood it is still there, in a guise appropriate to the plot.

Water in Dickens's houses is present from its slight form as damp and mould (or poisonous watery 'vapours' in the Italian houses) to an actual undermining by river, canal or ditch water.¹⁶ The water is always dirty, slimy, a smelly bilge, full of refuse. The rats that are almost always mentioned, even if only in an aside, seem to belong to the water (though there is also an assortment of 'dry vermin', mice and spiders, as there is a 'dry dirt', dust and lumber). Though the houses are rotting, the water never engulfs them (They are often propped up; in some cases even the props are rotting).

The images of the angel child that grows out of this house is too well known to need describing. She is sometimes a little boy but much more often a girl.¹⁷ Here the prototypical image is not David Copperfield, who is treated with some distance and irony, but Little Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop.

Little Nell brings us to Dickens's treatment of Quilp. The Old Curiosity Shop is filled with houses and escapes from houses, even houses that take revenge. The house Nell grows up in is dark, mysterious, cavernous, filled with lumber and owned by Quilp (From it Nell escapes into the free air and a delightfully

unfrightening mobile house, the caravan). Quilp has two houses, the one near the Tower where he lives with his wife and mother-in-law and his own house, or rather shack, by the Thames. In writing the story Dickens identified with Nell. She is what he sees as his core: the innocent, bright, persecuted child, pitching its puny strength gallantly against an evil world. It is, however, also generally recognised today that Quilp is a self-portrait. If we accept this we clearly must ask: what sort of self did Dickens then portray here?

The biographical relation for which there is most evidence, and which biographers stress, is the relation between Dickens's marital set up and Quilp's, including the mother-in-law. Quilp's mother-in-law, Mrs Jinwin, seems to be indeed a portrait of Mrs Hogarth. According to Johnson (1955: 332), Thomas Wright thinks that Quilp's set-ups with his mother-in-law are probably word-perfect replicas of Dickens's own quarrels with Catherine's mother (Thomas Wright adds that Quilp 'was, in a sense - in his love for monkey tricks for instance - Dickens himself as seen through the eyes of Mrs Hogarth'). The parallel is rather more precise. Mrs Hogarth was to the best of our knowledge the only person who protested against Dickens's treatment of Catherine and who encouraged Catherine to resist it. That is exactly what Mrs Jinwin does in the book. The Old Curiosity Shop was written in 1840, long before Mrs Hogarth actually helped Catherine to rebel. But perhaps

the pattern had established itself early. In the book the mother-in-law is ridiculed and routed, partly by her own daughter's infatuation for Quilp.

Mrs Quilp's infatuation with Quilp is another link with the Dickens marriage biographers point to. Slater writes,

When considering what suggestions about the novelist's own marital relations may be gleaned from his early fiction, contemplate the figure of Quilp, the anarchic, super-energetic dwarf who capers through The Old Curiosity Shop with such grotesque vigour.... It has long been recognised that in Quilp ... the novelist was joyously (but who can tell how consciously) embodying his own ⁴aggression. Quilp has a wife, a 'pretty little mild-spoken, blue-eyed woman', over whom he maintains an impish reign of terror. She is kept in a perpetual flutter by his bizarre antics, such as drinking boiling tea and pulling hideous faces, and her arms are 'seldom free from impression of his fingers in black and blue colours.' Nevertheless she is infatuated with him and makes clear to her scandalised neighbours how conscious she is of his sexual magnetism: "'Very well", said Mrs Quilp, nodding her head, "as I said just now it's very easy to talk, but what I say that I know - that I'm sure - Quilp has such a way with him, when he likes that the best-looking woman here couldn't refuse him, if I was dead, and she was free, and he chose to make love to her. Come!"' (1983: 114)

Quilp is a wife batterer. Wife battering, called 'wife torture' by the Victorians in their forthright and earnest way, has always been a subject for jokes, especially if the wife is fond of the husband, especially if she shows it in a sexual way. Dickens, who knew a lot about wife battering (the evidence for this in his work would repay research) was not above such a joke, as

The Old Curiosity Shop shows.

But does he really need to embody his own aggression? It seems he got rid of it quite naturally as a husband and father. Also 'joyously' embodying it seems a bit strong when we look at what Quilp actually does. Dickens himself said that he had 'heaped together in him all possible hideousness'. And 'impish' reign of terror? What Dickens shows, immediately following the scene quoted, is real terror, and plenty of reason for it, not a being 'kept in a flutter' by 'bizarre antics'. But before going into Mrs Quilp's reasons for terror let me quote another passage from Slater which I think does touch on the sources of Dickens's comedy here, namely fear of sexually mature women and the fantasy satisfaction of 'slaying' them by the sheer magnetic power of his male personality. Slater is speaking of Dickens's comic female creations here:

Only one male in the comic world of Dickens is a match, and more than a match, for this army of embattled females and that is the superbly anarchic dwarf, Quilp... It has often been suggested that this demonic character embodies and expresses his creator's repressed aggressiveness and enacts his deepest secret desires. Through him alone we might add, Dickens can triumphantly overthrow that great and alarming female conspiracy which is such a prominent feature of his comic vision. In Quilp's absence the neighbourhood Amazons, under the generalship of his mother-in-law, invest [sic] his house and seek to stir up his submissive little wife to rebellion, telling her that 'if she had no respect for herself she ought to have some for other women, all of whom, she compromised by her weakness.' They proceeded to swap stories of successful husband subjugation: 'Another lady recounted her own personal struggle and final triumph,

in the course whereof she had found it necessary to call in mother and two aunts, to weep incessantly night and day for six weeks.' At the height of their excitement, however, Quilp suddenly appears among them, and, within minutes, he has utterly routed them by the sheer force of his comic/sinister personality. (1983: 354)

What Mrs Jiniwin says at her daughter's clandestine tea party may be biographically accurate: Mrs Hogarth may have used the same words:

'If he is!' interposed the mother.... If he is! He is the greatest tyrant that ever lived, she daren't call her soul her own, he makes her tremble with a word and even a look, he frightens her to death, and she hasn't the spirit to give him a word back, no, not a single word. 'e

It is certainly accurate about Mrs Quilp, expecting her punishment after having been caught entertaining her neighbours. It is odd that a character like Mrs Jiniwin, who is ridiculed, should be given words that are so obviously true.

Being left alone with his wife who sat trembling in a corner with her eyes fixed upon the ground, the little man planted himself before her, at some distance, and folding his arms looked steadily at her for a long time without speaking. 'Oh you nice creature!' was the words with which he broke silence; smacking his lips as if this were no figure of speech and she were actually a sweetmeat. 'Oh you precious darling! Oh you delicious charmer!' Mrs Quilp sobbed and knowing the nature of her pleasant lord, appeared to be quite as much alarmed by these compliments, as she would have been by the most extreme demonstration of violence. 'She's such' said the dwarf with a ghastly grin - 'such a pearl, such a ruby ... I'm so fond of her!' The poor little woman shivered from head to foot; and raising her eyes to his face with an

imploring look, suffered them to droop again and sobbed once more. 'The best of her is' said the dwarf, advancing with a sort of skip, which, what with the crookedness of his legs and the ugliness of his face and the mockery of his manner was perfectly goblin-like; - 'the best of her is that she's so mild and she has never a will of her own....' 'Mrs Quilp! Am I nice to look at?' ... Mrs Quilp dutifully replied 'Yes, Quilp'..... 'Mrs Quilp.' 'Yes, Quilp'. 'If you ever listen to these beldames again I'll bite you.' (pp. 81-82)

What Quilp actually does to her, on this occasion, after having ordered her about for a bit and made her run for his brandy, his water, his cigars, is make her sit up on a chair behind the door all night. If he hears her make a restless movement of fatigue he grins with joy.

As a wife batterer Quilp is perfectly realistic. Indeed one marvels at Dickens's knowledge and accuracy. All the well-known techniques are there, from the introductory caressing - threatening rhetoric to the climax of punishment. Like a seasoned wife beater Quilp punches and hurts only where the marks won't show, for instance on the arms which are covered in sleeves. He is also casually planning Mrs Quilp's death. But as a character Quilp is surely not realistic, nor is Mrs Quilp. They are types, and the realistic comedy of wife battering is only part of it. The question is, types of what?

Quilp is a trickster, I said, so we will first look at how his characteristics compare with those of the trickster type. Like the trickster he is not fully

human. Dickens makes him quite consciously part man, part animal. His animal side is the dog (one is reminded of the greatest of tricksters, Coyote). Dickens is consistent in his imagery: the dog image accompanies Quilp from beginning to end of his story. He is introduced as a man who has 'fangs' that give him 'the aspect of a panting dog' the moment we meet him in Chapter 3. When, in the next chapter, he discovers his wife entertaining her neighbours, it is quite natural for him to threaten her with 'I'll bite you' and accompany the threat 'with a snarl'. At the very end of his story, in Chapter 67 just as nemesis is overtaking him he says 'where I hate I bite'. But he also often has 'the old doglike smile' on his face and shakes himself 'in a very doglike manner'. Dickens's mind is indeed so filled with this image that he pictures him constantly 'dogging' someone's footsteps or shout 'I'll not be dogged'.

Like the trickster Quilp is cunning; his dirty tricks are of a capitalistic kind but he is also full of the typical trickster's pranks and violent practical jokes. Unlike the trickster, however, he is physically fully integrated. He does not have the trickster's typical half-finished unawareness - his ignorance of where his body ends and the outer world begins, his clumsiness and many mishaps. Quilp is in control; and he is always agile except in his last moments.

He has, however, the trickster's mechanicalness.

This is one of the traits Dickens stresses: he is like a horrifying galvanised toy. His movements are jerky; his sudden skips and hops frighten his wife into fits. He eats like a machine, indiscriminately, like a garbage disposer. In the morning after he has kept his wife without sleep all night, he 'by no means diminished the impression he had just produced [by making a dog's face at Mrs Jinwin with his tongue lolling out] for he ate hard eggs shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and watercresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking, bit his fork and spoon till they bent again, and in short performed so many horrifying and uncommon acts that the women were nearly frightened out of their wits and began to doubt if he were really a human creature' (p. 86).

Here the animal likeness which Dickens's language stresses (lolling tongue) turns into the mechanical: no animal, only a machine would drink boiling liquid and bend metal. As in the trickster stories this animal/mechanicalness is funny. It goes with the trickster's strength and energy, and his callousness, his brutality and cruelty. In all of these the trickster is cheered along by narrator and audience, just as Dickens cheers Quilp and we follow (That Quilp cannot be socialized, like the trickster, is shown by his mother-in-law's attempts to stand up to him, which always end in her retreat and his triumph. She is frightened of the

'ugly creature'. These attempts, by a mere puny woman, make for much of the comedy - they also show how absolute his power is). The animal/mechanicalness also goes with Quilp's lecherousness, as it goes with the trickster's in the myth. In the myth this is the central joke. The people who tell these myths are not embarrassed by sex as we are, but they are horrified by the determined and mechanical in the human, and they respond to the trickster's mechanical sexuality with horrified laughter. Here Dickens departs from the archetype and links up with his private myth. He also belongs to a different culture and the cultural emphasis falls differently.

Dickens clearly cannot be as outspoken about Quilp's lechery as the traditional story teller about the trickster's, but he makes up for this handicap with an imagery so vivid it leaves us in no doubt on the subject.¹² Quilp's sexuality is connected with his animal/mechanicalness, and as this was connected with biting and eating, so his lechery is (in the best mythical-symbolic tradition of substituting 'above' for 'below') a form of cannibalism. Before he threatens his wife with biting her, he exclaims in his caressing way "Oh you nice creature" ... smacking his lips as if this were no figure of speech and she was actually a sweetmeat'.

Carey has pointed out in The Violent Effigy (1973: 22-4) how easily Dickens's imagination runs to cannibalism, especially his sexual imagination, where

young women are concerned. He draws our attention to how Quilp admires the blue veins under Little Nell's transparent skin and enjoys her violent trembling when he invites her to become the second Mrs Quilp. But these are only glimpses, while in the relation between Quilp and Mrs Quilp Dickens has made it the main theme. Quilp and Mrs Quilp (she is never referred to by a name of her own) are not people, they are a type of sex. Quilp is a walking penis - the penis as cannibal.

The moment we think of Quilp as a penis and of him and his wife as Dickens's idea of sex, all the imagery falls into place. The very first sentence that introduces us to him in Chapter 3, where we first see him, makes this clear to the initiated: he was 'so low in stature as to be quite a dwarf, though his head and face were large enough for the body of a giant' (p.65). Only we aren't initiated of course and Dickens laughs up his sleeve at us.²⁰ The gusto of the descriptions of Quilp derive from the fun Dickens gets out of having us and thinking of the penis as a mannikin, an independent agent. In this form he can celebrate its strength and energy, its weird insistence, its being accountable in its movements to its own will alone and nobody else's. He can also laugh at its mechanicalness, the convulsive movements and sudden jerks and bounds (and the way they frighten the other sex), its slyness and cunning, though he leaves out the clumsy fumbling helplessness and sense of 'not belonging to the body' which the myths also

emphasise. He rather stresses the control the penis wields, its absolute power, its 'lordliness' as Lawrence would have had it. In fact here Lawrence and Dickens meet, only Dickens does so much better what Lawrence tried to do. Where Lawrence is over earnest, over explicit and over insistent, Dickens roars with laughter at Quilp and at how he and Quilp are tricking the reader. He identifies with his penis, and having sent it scampering off as Quilp, just trusts that the reader will subliminally understand. As we indeed do when we respond with fascination to the verve and zest of the Quilp passages.

But Mr Quilp can only be seen in relation to Mrs Quilp and here the picture changes and reactions divide, mostly by gender. If Quilp is the penis as cannibal, then Mrs Quilp is simply the vagina as victim, the thing to be eaten and destroyed in the process. Her corresponding female sexuality is merely instrumental, and passive; passive moreover in the double sense of inactive and suffering. In the picture of the vagina as 'meek blue-eyed little woman' we find none of the comic accuracy and fun we found in the picture of the penis as mannikin, (Mrs Jinwin, who resists men is of course a picture of a non-vagina). The fun is of a Punch and Judy kind: the actions of the penis are threatening, brutal, punishing. The comedy comes in here in the assurance that in spite of this treatment the vagina is voracious: Mrs Quilp wants Quilp all the time, Dickens

hints. In Chapter 3 where we are introduced to Quilp he says:

Ask Mrs Quilp, pretty Mrs Quilp, obedient, timid, loving Mrs Quilp. But that reminds me - I have left her all alone, and she will be anxious and not know a moment's peace till I return. I know she's always in that condition when I'm away, though she doesn't dare to say so, unless I lead her on and tell her she may speak freely, and I won't be angry with her. Oh! Well-trained Mrs Quilp! (pp. 68-69)

And in case we should think Quilp is flattering himself and Mrs Quilp is cocking a snook at him (since she is in this case actually giving tea to her neighbours while he is away) Dickens underlines his point by making Mrs Quilp say to her neighbours that in spite of his dirt and barbarity not one of them would turn Quilp down; he could marry anyone he pleased. 'Quilp has such a way with him....' The insinuation is, vaginas cannot resist penises. They are not fastidious. They like to be bullied. If you hurt them they ask for more. This old chestnut is all the comedy and accuracy Dickens can come up with on the topic of female sexuality.

If the Mr and Mrs Quilp relation is indeed Dickens's picture of sexuality, his sexuality was infantile, oral and sadistic. But is it? Spilka seems to think so: he calls Quilp a 'frenzied adolescent' and says that Dickens must 'suppress the fact of womanhood' (in Little Emily) 'since he is unable to connect sex with goodness in adult life' (1963: 49). Carey thinks that the fact that sex 'is not banished but driven underground' in the

novels for reasons of propriety makes it 'emerge in perverted and inhibited forms' (1973: 154). Yet oral and sadistic fantasies are part of what underlies even adult normal sexuality. And if I am right about Quilp, sex is not driven underground in The Old Curiosity Shop (or more precisely in the Quilp strand of the book), but emerges in archetypal, wish-fulfilling and surrealist-allegorical forms. At least the last of these forms belongs to art, and the two former have always had a place in art, especially in fairy tale and myth. It all depends on the artist's 'placing' of the fantasy material. Placing is done, consciously and unconsciously, through the imagery that sets the scene for a figure like Quilp, the 'landscape', human and material, he scampers through. Here Dickens is extremely interesting. Quilp is 'placed', it seems to me, as a product of the slums, in relation to capitalism. He is grotesque, partly, because he is squeezed out of shape (in the sense in which Jackson first used the image for Dickens's characters²¹) by the pressures of his environment. He himself squeezes others as rack renter, profiteer and userer. Spilka has covered this angle of Dickens's art in general in his chapter on 'Imprisoning Worlds' (1973: 84 ff). The wife battering Quilp practices can hardly be dissociated from this social 'placing'. And yet the sexual relation on the level on which we are looking at it here - the surrealist level, where Mr and Mrs Quilp are allegorical figures, cock and

cunt - does not seem to be placed to me, for two reasons. Mrs Quilp as an allegorical figure does not stand for anything real, anything human; she stands for an absence and a thing. Spilka says, rightly where the social context is at issue, that in the end Dickens's value is human worth, that 'the condition he attacks is not poverty or injustice, but dehumanization, or the reduction of humanity to thinghood' (1973: 85). Well, in relation to women this value seems to me to be breaking down. Dickens himself reduces women to thinghood, and he has never thought about the social conditions that reduce their humanity. In Mrs Quilp that which she stands for - female sexuality - seems to me reduced to thinghood. As a result she is colourless while Quilp, who stands for male sexuality, sparkles with life. The other reason I have for thinking the sexual relation is not 'placed' is the evident and inordinate delight Dickens shows in it. He delights in the virtual non-existence of female sexuality and the consequent forcing and violation that mark male sexuality. These are the conditions that make the penis triumphant. Sex is confused with rape and hurt: what is at issue is in fact not sex at all but power. Dickens shares in the confusion (as I said, he identifies with the penis), his fantasy shows that he himself is 'squeezed out of shape' in this instance by social and cultural conditions (We must remember that Spilka says Dickens was afraid of sex: the power fantasy would appease that fear).

A passage I have already quoted sums up the nature of the somewhat self-contradictory fantasy precisely. It is a fantasy about sex that makes Mrs Quilp - the vagina - at the same time flatteringly voracious ('she knows not a moment's peace till I return') and purely passive and receptive ('she doesn't dare to say so, unless I lead her on and tell her she may speak freely'). But the main thing is that she is under the man's thumb: 'Oh well-trained Mrs Quilp'==. Yet again the tone makes us feel that Dickens knows this is a male fantasy and is laughing at himself and his confreres.

And sex and passion do of course have to do with power, Dickens is basically right. The trickster myths explore the connection in the image of the house. The house is a female image. As I said, it stands in the myth for a woman's spaces: not only the actual place of the hearth and home, over which she rules, but interior female spaces, vagina and womb. Womb and vagina are muscular, powerful organs. The vagina encloses the penis in intercourse in its muscular grip and gives a sense of being powerful enough to crush it. The fear this generates finds expression in the myth image of the vagina dentata; here it is the vagina, not the penis that is the cannibal. But it is the womb whose power has particularly impressed our human imagination, for the womb not merely can 'make us', make people, but with contractions of great muscular power push us out of our 'home' into the world. This expulsion is accompanied by

floods of water; what has been our element suddenly becomes a threatening force. The experience is the same for us all, women and men; hence the archetypes of house and water. But women possess these inner spaces biologically; they can in their turn 'make' and 'expel' people. They are like God, and the house is therefore, in the imagery of the myth, also the world, the universe, and the water the deluge. Men have to find other ways of coming to terms with the experience of birth.

In the trickster myths there is a struggle but also a balance of power between men and women. On the Northwest Coast, where Raven is the trickster, people lived in huge cedar houses, so the image of the house is important. Among the northern coastal people, where society was matrilinear it extended to the universe. In their world picture people live on the inside of a sphere, not the outside as with us (our picture must give us a tremendous sense of exposure). They see the sky as a crystal bowl of light that rests upsidedown on the rim of the earth. The 'light-of-the-sky' (which is not the sun but an element) is associated with a female divine being. Earth and sky form a womb here for people to dwell in, which gives women's power cosmic dimensions. In this world the trickster, who is male because men are more nakedly faced with the problem posed by birth, begins his activities. He is destructive and obscene, but he is also a great demiurge who reshapes the earth's surface, creating natural features such as rivers and

mountains and peopling them with fish and game: making the world livable in for 'real people'. He is hostile to his mother and at war with her but the two are also well matched and work together. When he provokes her wrath and the deluge, the catastrophe does not destroy him; on the contrary he escapes upward, to the sky, which becomes his real element. Water is punitive and divisive in this imagery but also renewing (as in the Judaic/Christian myth of the flood). It brings about disunion with the old world and the mother, but the other side of this is birth into a human existence. The new existence is at the same time less perfect than the old and fuller of possibility and promise: people are self-responsible in it and have to make their own way to 'home' and 'union'.

All these concepts are familiar to us (from the Bible, from great literature like Milton's Paradise Lost), but the image of the house as a female symbol is so deeply buried in our unconscious that it is virtually lost to us. In Dickens's work it comes to the surface. Let us return to the house images in the Quilp story to see what he makes of it.

Quilp lives in two houses in the story (I discount Nell's house here, where he also lives part of the time): in his town house on Tower Hill, which we will call Mrs Quilp's house because he lives there with her and her mother, and in a house on 'Quilp's Wharf' which is peculiarly his own.

Mrs Quilp's house practically leans on the Tower; it is certainly in the shadow of the Tower. The room where the ladies meet for tea in the first scene is described as 'a cool, shady, lazy kind of place, with some plants ... interposing pleasantly enough between the tea table within and the old Tower without' (p.74). The Tower is a masculine sexual symbol here (it is continuously 'rhymed' with 'bower' in the text, a place, where Mrs Quilp sits; and the chapter describing both, Chapter 4, opens: 'Mr and Mrs Quilp resided on Tower Hill; and in her bower on Tower Hill Mrs Quilp was left to pine the absence of her lord [p.72]). But the tower is the Tower of London, and it is also a symbol of coercive power. Like the Tower (also a cool and shady place), Mrs Quilp's house is a prison; and Mrs Quilp is the prisoner. The analogy is followed through. As in the Tower, once you are an inmate you lose control over your own actions; obedience must be your watchword ('Obedient, well-trained Mrs Quilp!'). You are bullied and forced to do what you don't want to do, you are tortured and may in the end be executed (Quilp whimsically dwells on the possibility of doing away with Mrs Quilp). The fact that the house is definitely not Mrs Quilp's, though she lives there, is brought home to us by an odd little touch of Dickens's: Mrs Quilp doesn't cook. Meals are eaten, but the food is ready made, the kind you buy from street sellers, 'prawns and water-cresses'. Cooking is one of the activities that makes a house a

woman's.²⁴ This house (like the Tower) is 'a lazy kind of place'. If you are identified with the symbol of coercive power, are in control, you come there for pleasure: Quilp comes for food and bullying Mrs Quilp (which together add up to sex in his world). For business he goes to his other house. The house on Tower Hill gives the most perfect picture of that Victorian sanctuary, the 'home as haven'.

The house on the wharf is definitely Quilp's; in contrast to Tower Hill cooking goes on there, and Quilp is the cook ('He ... heaped more fuel on the fire; and ... dined off a beefsteak, which he cooked himself in somewhat of a savage and cannibal-like manner [p. 614]'). But it is also unmistakably Dickens's old blacking factory. It has all the familiar features. The wharf is a rotting, rat-infested place strewn with junk. Water is more in evidence than ever. The lane leading to it is frequented by 'amphibious' creatures and has 'as much water as mud in its composition' (Quilp owns whole rows of mouldering houses in these filthy, muddy lanes). The yard of the wharf abuts on the Thames mudflats at low tide, dirty water at high, all described with great relish. Quilp's actual house is the counting house, a ramshackle, wooden 'dirty little box', again filled with junk.²⁵

In the last few days of his life, Quilp lives immured on the wharf. Now water from above is added to water from below: he is enveloped in a London fog.

Dickens's imagery is filled with a curious warring of elements at this point; images of 'home' and yearning for home alternate with images of being out in the cold and lost forever, hearth-fire images alternate with water images. The imagery goes far beyond what is called for by the plot. Everyone knows that writing of Little Nell's death affected Dickens deeply; he wept, and the world wept with him. It seems to me that writing about Quilp's death must have been in some ways nearer the bone for him, though I have never heard this pointed out, and he himself didn't mention it.

The day in the highest and brightest quarters of the town, was damp, dark, cold and gloomy. In that low and marshy spot, the fog filled every nook and corner with a thick, dense cloud. Every object was obscure at one or two yards' distance. The warning lights and fires upon the river were powerless beneath this pall, and, but for a raw and piercing chilliness in the air, and now and then the cry of some bewildered boatman as he rested on his oars and tried to make out where he was, the river might have been miles away. - The mist, though sluggish and slow to move, was of a keenly searching kind. ... It seemed to penetrate into the very bones of the shrinking wayfarers, and to rack them with cold and pains. Everything was wet and clammy to the touch. The warm blaze alone defied it, and leapt and sparkled merrily. It was a day to be at home, crowding about the fire, telling stories of travellers who had lost their way in such weather on heaths and moors; and to love a warm hearth more than ever. - The dwarf's humour, as we know, was to have a fireside to himself; and when he was disposed to be convivial, to enjoy himself alone.... To this end he lighted up fresh candles and heaped more fuel on the fire; and having dined off a beefsteak, which he cooked himself in somewhat of a savage cannibal-like manner, brewed a great bowl of hot punch, lighted his pipe, and sat down to spend the evening. (pp.613-614)

Quilp's idea of having the house to himself, of ensconcing himself safely, proves illusory. Even the hearth turns hostile; water and fire together turn against him. When he bars the gates to fortify the wharf he shuts himself away from the only help that could have come to him; in his haste he overturns the stove so that his little house goes up in flames, and, losing his way in the thick fog, he falls into the Thames. Quilp 'drowns like a dog'.

The imagery of Quilp's end is again powerful far beyond what is called for by the death of a comic character, the hero of a mere subplot. If I am right in saying that Quilp is an archetype modified by Dickens's own unconscious, that he is the trickster and the penis as independent agent (in surrealist fashion) and that Dickens identified with him, the defeat described here is indeed a great one. There is guilt: Quilp is a villain and his death is well-deserved. The water is purely punitive here; it does not lead to renewal, only to death. If we can make the parallel with the myth where the house in combination with the water is a womb and birth image, there is also fear or timidity. Dickens's imagery shows that he is afraid of a birth and wants to stay in the womb, that being driven out spells misery and death for him. He does not trust himself, he doesn't have the confidence that he will fly upward like Raven and escape the flood. There is awe: he is horrified by

the water (it is never life-giving, always foul and stagnant) but he unquestioningly accepts its superior power: it is stronger than him and his deathdealing force.

The house on Quilp's Wharf is then the obverse of the house on Tower Street. But as it is Quilp's own house, where he withdraws and which he defends from outsiders, we must assume that this is where he seeks reality. We can assume it because it is the blacking factory resurrected and because of the persistence with which this same image comes up throughout Dickens's work (I am naturally speaking of a private, hidden reality here). But if this is reality, then the Tower Hill house is a fantasy, and is not 'placed'. It is an infantile fantasy, growing out of the terror and awe with which women are invested. The fantasy of the one is so directly dependent on the 'reality' of the other that I think a placing is out of the question. It is true, the tone about the Quilp of the Tower Hill house is especially ironic, and irony is a distancing device. But using irony can also distance us from our true emotional responses and obscure our insight into the self. The same is true of humour. Identifying with his comic creations and laughing heartily at them does not mean that Dickens understands their secret sources or that he is laughing at himself in any but a self-indulgent sense. Equally, in life, making fun of Catherine in letters to friends, laughing at her

clumsiness at table, even calling the two of them Bully and Meek does not imply self-knowledge.

Slater, we saw, thinks Quilp as a comic character is 'a match and more than a match for [Dickens's] army of embattled females' (that is his female comic creations). But if Quilp is indeed a symbol of the penis, and water (in connection with the 'warehouse') a symbol of (punitive) female power, Dickens's estimation of male (phallic) power was low. In the Trickster myths the two destructive powers (or destructive shows of power) engage, balance one another and enter into a fertile fusion. Raven escapes the water and becomes immortal; his life work is in some way opposed to his mother's, but human beings can only live and be human in the tension between the two. In Dickens Quilp is got by the water. He drowns like a dog. He has wielded absolute power over his woman and now retribution overtakes him. In other words fear and guilt are indissolubly connected with sexuality for Dickens. He cannot match the mother, he can only defy her. Quilp is a brave picture of defiance, but a show of power will only bring more guilt - in the end she will get him. The (punitive) power of the water as Dickens renders it at the end of Quilp's story cannot be fought, it is truly irresistible.

As the word passed his lips [a murderous wish] he staggered and fell - and next moment was fighting with the cold, dark water! - For all its bubbling up and rushing in his ears, he could hear the knocking at the gate again... For all his struggling and splashing, he could understand ... that they had wandered back ...

that they were all but looking on while he was drowned; that they were close at hand but could not make an effort to save him; that he himself had shut and barred them out.... It was of no avail. The strong tide filled his throat and bore him on, upon its rapid current. - Another mortal struggle and he was up again, beating the water with his hands, and looking out with wild and glaring eyes that showed him some black object he was drifting close upon. The hull of a ship! He could touch the smooth and slippery surface with his hands. One loud cry now - but the resistless water bore him down before he could give it utterance and driving him under it, carried away a corpse. - It toyed and sported with its ghastly freight, now bruising it against the slimy piles, now hiding it in mud or long rank grass, now dragging it heavily over rough stones and gravel, now fighting to yield it to its own element and in the same action luring it away, until, tired of the ugly plaything, it flung it on a swamp - a dismal place where pirates had swung in chains through many a wintry night - and left it there to bleach.... And there it lay, alone. (p. 620)

It was inevitable that marriage and childbirth would resurrect these atavistic fears. If Dickens had married another woman, it would have been the same. His daughter Kate recognised that; Gladys Storey writes 'Mrs Perugini was of the opinion that had her father married Maria Beadnell or Ellen Ternan, the ultimate result would have been the same, for he "did not understand women"'. As Catherine conceived and bore child after child she impressed him unwittingly with the power of the womb, but any sexual relation would have done it. The loathing and fear, the infantilism, is exactly as Spilka says. But what my study of Quilp shows is that the infantilism is connected with the boasting and the cruelty. They are part compensation, part defense. In Quilp Dickens

had adapted the trickster archetype to his needs.

This still leaves the question why in life he made Catherine into a sort of trickster figure, the counterpart to his most untricksterlike neatness, tidiness, punctuality, order. There are two answers to this question. First Dickens himself could play the trickster when he was in the mood; but it was a charming, cleaned up, playful trickster. Wright, we remember, thought that Quilp was Dickens as seen through the eyes of Mrs Hogarth. Second, though Quilp is so near the savage archetypal figure that he is unmistakable, there are certain essentials missing. He has all those trickster attributes that make up a being in control: energy, strength, agility, callow cruelty and brutality, cunning, sadism, egotism. But one of the important points about the trickster is that he is not in control. He is what he is because he also has a characteristic clumsiness, lack of bodily integration and co-ordination, unfinishedness, a tendency to injure himself, a certain stupidity. All these are attributes of Catherine.

Dickens has neatly split the trickster in two. Quilp has the attributes that make us laugh with the trickster - horrified, but with him - because he is in control. Catherine has the attributes that make us laugh at the trickster. Look how neatly Dickens has divided the trickster's animalness and mechanicalness: Quilp only got the side that can be used for a show of

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Chapter 6 Separation

Which of the three can one trust? How is life to be served here - and whose life? It is a play about death perhaps, the death of the hunter, in this case a woman, who returns from her trip in the forest of sexual competition with two bleeding carcasses and a feeling of futility. (Elizabeth Hardwick on Rosmersholm')

The weak hand that could never help or serve my name in the least has struck at it. (Dickens on Catherine in a letter*)

In this last Chapter on Catherine Dickens I want to pick up the question of the separation once more, but this time as if it were a problem play involving three actors: Dickens, Georgina Hogarth and Catherine. What was the nature of the conflict between them? What were their motives, what strategies did they employ? How were we, posterity, influenced by these strategies in our judgement? Indeed, what is the truth about this drama, and can we, as posterity, look for a general truth here, that still concerns us, as we might with a problem play?

We have already met with a reference to drama in discussing the separation: Johnson, Dickens's greatest modern biographer, thought that in walling up the connecting bedroom door Dickens performed a radical symbolic act as significant and far-reaching as Nora's slamming the door on her doll's house. Crass though this is, in itself, the reference to Ibsen in the context of the separation is not entirely misplaced. It seems to me probable that another Ibsen play, Rosmersholm, is

based on Ibsen's understanding of the 'problem' behind the Dickenses' separation. We know that Dickens's work provided intuitions for Ibsen. Why not Dickens's life? For a dramatist interested in marriage and women, and, as Joyce says of him, interested in the sort of conflict which is 'almost independent of conflicting actors and has been and is of far-reaching importance' the story of the separation might well seem to have possibilities, to contain a problem worth writing about.³³

If the inspiration for Rosmersholm did indeed come from Catherine's situation and from what Ibsen imagined might have been her sister's actions, the play is interesting to us as a foil to what really happened. For Ibsen, as for Johnson, Dickens's actions in the separation must have had a connection with radicalism, with a struggle to free himself from Victorian conventions, but Ibsen, who sees these things from women's points of view as well as men's is more cautious and ambiguous in his judgement.³⁴

In Ibsen's play an independent young woman comes into the household of an aristocratic clergyman and his wife as help and companion to the ailing wife. Rebecca West is practical, intelligent and cheerful, and transforms the gloomy house into a place of sunshine. The wife, Beate, loves and admires her, and trusts her so much that she becomes entirely dependent on her. For Rosmer, the master of Rosmersholm, however, she embodies liberation. Under the spell of her progressive ideas he

finds the courage to break with the church and turn to the liberalism he has long favoured. They keep his defection from respectability a secret, but they plan a future in which he will use his influence for the cause of progress. They keep it a secret from Beate too, who, they agree, must be protected from the shock and anxiety it would cause her. Beate suffers from a nervous illness and is mentally disturbed. She is therefore naturally also excluded from the heady 'new' relationship the other two have formed, a relationship based on personal freedom and complete equality. Beate goes mad; she kills herself by throwing herself in the mill race. The action opens about a year after this event.

The play turns on Rebecca's growing realization that she has driven Beate to her death. She thought of herself as an independent, liberated woman, but she has done it for love of Rosmer, to get Rosmer for herself. Rosmer has his own problems. He was unhappy with Beate and shrank from her because of her obsessive sensual passion for him. The relation to Rebecca seemed free and pure by comparison. He has however, hesitantly come to love her and wants to marry her. Rebecca's gradual realization of her motives and strategies and her bit by bit confession of them now affect them both. The first effect on Rebecca is to make a physical union with Rosmer impossible. She cannot marry him. It has become morally impossible for her just when he is finally awakening to desire. Rosmer realizes two things: that

the 'high' relation with Rebecca also was based on 'low' passion and that Beate whom he thought mad and unconscious of what was going on has in fact killed herself to make way for them, for his new life. Her love was pure enough for the ultimate self-sacrifice. Dismayed by those discoveries he begins to withdraw: from Rebecca, from his liberal position, from his political plans. Rebecca fights on the side of life; she implores him to forget the past and hold on to what they achieved together. But Rosmer is what we would now call emotionally immature; once wounded in his self-esteem, his thoughts follow destructive paths. His problem becomes now: how can he trust Rebecca again, who has deceived him and revealed herself as a criminal? Only if she can prove to him that her love for him is as 'high' as Beate's was. There is only one test - but what would his life be without Rebecca? The play ends with the heroics that Ibsen often closes his drama with once he has lit up all the problems. Rebecca and Rosmer kill themselves together, following Beate into the mill race. This throws doubt even on Beate's motives. Was it perhaps what she really wanted? Was she planning to 'get' Rosmer with her self-sacrifice?

The obvious dramatic highlighting apart, one can see how Ibsen might have been moved to write this play by what he knew about the triangle in the Dickens house. If he did, he must have thought the role Georgy played in the drama important. Elizabeth Hardwick's picture of

the hunter who returns with two bloody carcasses from her trip in the forest of sexual competition is too lurid, it obscures the subtle movements of will and desire Ibsen gives in the play to the character of the independent young woman of no means, who fights for a place for herself in the world. Also his emphasis is on the pair's horrified realization of the life Beate must have lived - her loneliness and exclusion, her full knowledge and total silence, while they pursued the exciting intellectual intimacy for which she was thought unfit. This makes Beate's sacrifice loom very large.²⁶

Ibsen may be forgiven for thinking that such subtle moral searchings went on in the Dickens household once Catherine had left. His reasons for making the parallel are obvious. He would be conscious of the growing radicalism in Dickens's writing. Dickens's hints in the 'Violated Letter' about Catherine's mental disturbance would make up to the picture of an ailing wife slowly going mad (Ibsen would also have the shrewdness and humanity to doubt this picture). Georgina, he knew, had entered the household to assist Catherine, and from Dickens's assertions he knew she had taken over her duties. Dickens's praise of her as intelligent, an excellent housekeeper, a ray of sunshine and the best companion he ever had, together with the fact that she was unmarried and became his executor, would make up the picture of an independent young woman, interested in his radical ideas and likely to enter into a free and equal

relationship with him. In the absence of any knowledge about Ellen Ternan, Ibsen might well speculate about the deeper nature of the attachment between them. His own radicalism and feminism would also make him see the situation from Catherine's point of view. It is not difficult to guess that she suffered from being excluded from the delicious intimacy between Georgina and Dickens. But Ibsen would be struck by Dickens's repeated assertions that Catherine herself wanted to leave and that she left, at the end, of her own free will. It would suggest the possibility of a heroic self sacrifice to him. What was more likely than than dawning realization of their motives and strategies, confession and renunciation on the part of those who had been left in possession of the field? Georgy's lifelong self-sacrificial service to Dickens, in the house and as his literary executor, her refusal to marry - all could be seen as an act of penance.

From all we now know about the Dickens household after Catherine had left we can be sure that such subtle moral searchings did not take place. Nor was Georgy a hunter returning with two bloody carcasses from the forest of sexual competition. If we must keep to the image, she was more like a retrieving dog. She had none of the fierce independence that make Rebecca West a heroine. Rosmer in the play, though highly refined and intellectually enthusiastic, is hesitant where action is concerned, physically cold and difficult to rouse to love

or hate. Here it was Dickens whose desires set things in motion - his reactions were tempestuous, as we know, and his will peremptory. And yet Ibsen's intuition about the characters was right: the drama hinged on Georgy. Dickens realised it, and so did her family at the time of battle. Catherine probably realised it too late. When Dickens was so furiously angry at Catherine's family's accusations, part of his anger was fear that they would influence Georgy and that he would lose her. If Georgy left, his plans were doomed. Georgy may not have been a heroine in the sense that Rebecca was, but she was the linchpin in the drama. Each of the actors' fates would have been quite different if she had acted differently; each depended on her decisions. To understand this we must look at each of the three actors separately.

'Which of the three can one trust? How is life to be served here, and whose life?' asks Elizabeth Hardwick of the triangle in Rosmersholm. The same can be asked of the Dickens triangle. Let us look at Dickens's desires and motives first. I shall use a kind of shorthand here in talking about 'unconscious' and 'conscious' wishes. In fact both kinds of the wishes under discussion have conscious and unconscious elements. But I use 'unconscious' for immoral wishes, 'conscious' for those moral ones we generally use to hide the immoral ones from ourselves and others. Dickens had, from 1857 on, one obsessively strong unconscious wish: to live

with Ellen Ternan, to possess her sexually. But he also had, simultaneously, a strong conscious wish: to protect Ellen Ternan's purity. She was not to be dragged down into the sensual mire in which he had lived with Catherine. There may have been an element of healthy protest against his earlier emotional habits in this: not to mix her up with 'mother' and the dirty water imagery that spelt sex for him. The wish to protect Ellen Ternan's purity also goes with another conscious wish: to do nothing to endanger his hold on his reading public. Dickens's need for respectability was intense because of his fear that he might lose the sympathy of his readers and with it his reason for working and his social identity. The roots of this need again go down into childhood confusions: 'mother' who equals 'sex' means 'going down', because of the role his mother played in the blacking factory episode. Toward the end of his life, when Ellen Ternan had disappointed him too, he took indeed his reading public as his only reliable love.

Dickens's conscious wish to protect Ellen Ternan's purity afforded him moral indignation against those who dared suggest that he wanted to live with her: Catherine, her mother, other members of her family. Outsiders did not know of his infatuation, with the exception of a few close friends like Wilkie Collins. But Dickens felt a positive need to publish it. In the 'Violated Letter', which was meant to explain that the separation was for longstanding domestic reasons, he

cannot keep himself from mentioning 'a young lady for whom I have a great attachment and regard', whose name has been slandered by 'two wicked persons' (Catherine's mother and her youngest sister). He continues:

there is not on this earth a more virtuous and spotless creature than that young lady. I know her to be innocent and pure, and as good as my own dear daughters. Further, I am quite sure that Mrs Dickens, having received this assurance from me, must now believe it, in the respect I know her to have for me, and in the perfect confidence I know her in her better moments to repose in my truthfulness.'

Dickens probably did not live with Ellen until a year later. His daughter Katie was probably mistaken when she thought that already in 1858 he had a child by her, which died. But he is throwing sand in the public's eyes and in his own here. In fact he was faced with two wishes which clashed and excluded one another. The unconscious wish to possess Ellen sexually was so strong that everything else had to make way for it. But we shouldn't underrate the strength of conscious wishes, just because they are used to cover up the immorality of the 'real' ones. Dickens's wish to protect Ellen's purity with its concomitant of respectability, was just as obsessional. And he had trained his will to brook no opposition. He was used to getting what he wanted. He wanted both. How was that to be managed?

Here Georgy comes in. Georgy also had two strong wishes, one unconscious, one conscious. We have already discussed these and can be brief. Her unconscious wish

was to live with Dickens and not to be forced to leave his luxurious house where she had a comfortable position. Her conscious wish was to serve genius, to sacrifice her whole life, herself and her values in this exalted service. This could include a sacrifice of sisterly loyalty.

In Georgy's wishes Dickens found his solution. If Georgy stays in the house after her sister has left, people will talk about Dickens's relation with her. A relationship with a sister-in-law is incest, and the scandal will be prodigious. It will be slander, because Dickens's relation to Georgina is platonic (as is his relation to Ellen). It will therefore afford the insiders moral indignation. But because of its shockingness, the scandal will hide the real crime: that Dickens wants to live with Ellen and is presently living with her.

The solution worked perfectly. No one knew about Ellen Ternan until well into this century. Dickens protected her purity in this sense effectively. But what about his reputation? The scandal that linked his name with Georgina's was nationwide. On his first extensive reading tour in 1858 he was told by a friend in Glasgow that a local newspaper editor had wanted to know whether it was true that Mrs Dickens's sister-in-law had three children by him.⁶⁴ He and Georgina were particularly vulnerable to the talk of London, where they were both known. The gossip so shocked Thackeray, who

knew about Ellen, that he let himself be drawn into an overhasty defence. Johnson tells the story:

Meanwhile all clubland and literary London had been humming with rumour. Going into the Garrick Club Thackeray was told that the separation was caused by a love affair between Dickens and Georgina. 'No such thing' he said with his usual clumsiness, 'It's with an actress'. His intention was only to scotch the more scandalous story, but the remark came back to Dickens, who wrote him furiously denying all charges against Ellen Ternan and himself. 'We shall never be allowed to be friends', Thackeray said sadly 'that's clear'.*

Apparently Dickens could weather the storm of the incest scandal by the sheer fire of his just indignation. He was innocent, and innocence must tell. He seems to have been unconscious of the fact that he used the scandal, and used Georgy to get what he wanted. In a public statement in Household Words he breathed fire against slanderers, but he also uses the statement to show his moral fibre. His belief in himself is so invincible it is infectious. He turns the table on the slanderers; he rises as a hero and martyr from the ashes of their slander. He wins by sheer self-propaganda.

By some means arising out of wickedness, or out of folly, or out of unconceivable wild chance, or out of all three, this trouble ['some domestic trouble of mine of long standing'] has been made the occasion of misrepresentations, most grossly false, most monstrous and most cruel - involving, not only me, but innocent persons, dear to my heart ... - and so widely spread, that I doubt if one reader in a thousand will peruse these lines, by whom some touch of the breath of these slanders will not have passed like unwholesome air. Those who know me and my nature, need no assurance under my hand that such calumnies are irreconcilable

with me ... But, there is a great multitude who know me through my writings and who do not know me otherwise; and I cannot bear that one of them should be left in doubt, or hazard of doubt, through my poorly shrinking from taking the unusual means to which I now resort, of circulating the Truth.¹⁰

The truth was that both Dickens and Georgy embarked from that time on a double life. Georgy knew about Ellen and received her unofficially at Gad's Hill, while officially denying her existence to the end of her life. Her service to genius consisted at bottom in lying, deceiving, suppressing evidence and perpetuating the legend about Dickens that has come to be known as the Dickens Lie. Domestically she was on the one hand the children's loving aunt and Dickens's untiring housekeeper. And she really was these things. On the other hand she never did much in the house except see that Dickens's personal wishes were fulfilled; she seems to have seen to it that the Dickens boys were sent to the far corners of the empire as soon as that was possible; and she spoke slanderously about Catherine for the rest of her life (The children genuinely loved her, however; only Katie's mind was visited by fleeting doubts about her when she discussed her Life of her mother with Gladys Storey: she mentions that 'Auntie was not quite straight', and indignantly repudiates her father's claim that she was an excellent housekeeper or ever ran the house'). Dickens became a divided man. The gap between his life and his writing widens perceptibly from that time on. His writing becomes more radical, while

he becomes more conservative in his life and everyday opinions (He would have depicted Georgy's actions in his fiction as heinous: love and support between sisters is one of his sacred maxims. Georgy would have been a villain. Yet in life he called her a saint). He is haunted by fear of discovery. His relation to his public becomes more and more intense and personal: he excites himself with the possibility of self revelation in his readings, he begins to prefer the story of Syke's murder of Nancy above all others. He is constantly on the verge of confession: I am a criminal.¹²

Let us turn to Catherine's motives and strategies now. How did she fit into all this? The dovetailing between Dickens's and Georgina's desires is so neat that there seems no room for desires of her own. But Catherine was no passive victim. She had in fact considerable power. One word from her could have altered the course of events. This word was 'No'. One of the questions which we can never answer with entire certainty is why Catherine didn't say no. Why did she not influence Georgy? Why did she not tell Dickens that if he did not want to live with her, he could leave the house? No one can (or could even in 1858) legally drive a wife out her house or separate her from her children because he thinks she is stupid and doesn't understand him or because she is mentally disturbed or a bad mother or any of the other things Dickens gave as reasons for the separation. A wife could be forced to a judicial

separation for adultery; a husband for adultery, but only with the aggravation of incest or cruelty, as in the case of divorce. A separation for other reasons could only be based on consent, and Dickens constantly stressed that Mrs Dickens consented. If Catherine had insisted on staying in her house, no one could have driven her out of it.

This 'if' is of course purely theoretical. Dickens was the household god of his own house; his removal was inconceivable, to himself as well as anyone else. He could make life impossible for Catherine and the children, and he did, but no one can drive a husband from his house for that. It never occurred to him that he might go. And it did not occur to Catherine that she had a right to say 'this is my house'. Women may live by the magnanimous individualism of the division of labour in marriage, but their sense of equality is not practical and economic; it is emotional, based on the expectation of mutual love and good will. Dickens had brought it home to Catherine in the most brutal way that love was at an end between them (as far as he was concerned) and that she could expect no good will. Both her good sense and her pride told her that life with him was impossible. But the fact still remains that she, who had run all the houses they had lived in and borne ten children to grow up in them showed no sense of ownership, though the law had begun to recognise women's claims. She valued herself, but she did not value her

work and her achievements.

Catherine too was moved by two strong wishes, as elemental and as urgent as the wishes of Dickens and Georgina, but of a different kind. She wanted to keep her children from harm. And she wanted justice; or rather, she wanted the truth to be known. These wishes, taking off in different directions, as they did, involved her too in conflicting actions.

The first motive, to protect her children, is not so easy to deduce from the pattern of events as is the second and the motives of the other two actors. I believe that Catherine failed to appeal to Georgy while there was still time to get her on her side, and that she perhaps even encouraged her in her course, or at least was grateful to her for her decision to stay, because she wanted her children to have a motherly protector, someone to whose care they had been used (She would have also understood perfectly Georgy's motives for staying - the motives of a penniless young woman who needed a place in the world - and not condemned them). In the face of Dickens's wild strayings, at the time, which made the house hell as his daughter Katie said, this was a sober calculation.¹³ It is clear that Catherine did not see herself as capable of offering the children a home to which they could be transplanted without harm to them. In this she was probably right for material and psychological reasons. Social considerations, their father's prestige and the idea that his name was all that

stood between them and the world, must have been internalised by them all except the youngest by that time.¹⁴ Her first care was therefore to keep the home that they had from disruption, and for this Georgy's presence was necessary. In any case Catherine trusted her sister at bottom, especially where the children were concerned. Georgy's real disloyalty to her, which in the end harmed the children as well as herself, must have been inconceivable to her at the time when she made her decision, and so I believe must be the extent of Dickens's vindictiveness.

Catherine's second strong motive, her need for justice, must be considered in the context of the separation as a whole, as part of a continuing story. The actions she took to satisfy the need (they can hardly be called strategies except in the most technical sense) influenced the course of events in a decisive way. At the same time her wish for justice was hedged in and modified by a host of other considerations, one of them care for her children, another, the main one, a lifetime's habit of love and respect for Dickens.

Let us recapitulate a few of the events that led to the separation. In August 1857 Dickens puts on The Frozen Deep in Manchester with professional actresses and rehearses the actresses in Tavistock House. He falls in love with the eighteen year old Ellen Ternan. He gives Ellen a bracelet, engraved with his name, which is sent by mistake to Catherine. To forestall any slur on his

or Ellen's reputation, he forces Catherine to take the bracelet to Ellen herself. After the theatricals are over, he goes on a 'lazy tour' with Wilkie Collins. He pointedly does not write to Catherine. All his letters are addressed to Georgy, without greetings for Catherine. In the Autumn, while Catherine is away from home, he sends the key to their room to a former servant and asks her to have the connecting door between the bedroom and dressing room blocked up. The dressing room is to be furnished as bedroom for himself. All is to be done as secretly and expeditiously as possible. Throughout the Winter of 1857 and Spring of 1858 he makes plans for Catherine's removal without publicity, which Forster is delegated to put to Catherine. Forster tries to persuade Catherine in turn: to move into a segregated suite in the house but play hostess for Dickens; to live abroad; to play Box and Cox between Tavistock House and Gad's Hill. Catherine turns the proposals down because of the pretence and dishonesty they would involve her in. In all these discussions, Ellen Ternan is not mentioned. She does not exist for Forster and therefore cannot have any influence on what is going on.

At one point Catherine had enough. She had enough of the insults, the comedy, and the injustice of such treatment. She decided to talk to her family. This was her first bid for justice. It was very modest. She had to defend herself and she needed help, but she saw it as a family affair.

If Dickens had been honest with Catherine in 1857 the separation would have taken a different course. Catherine would have understood him, however much she lacked in understanding of him as he often complained. Communication would have made a bond between them and called on her generosity and love for him, both of which are amply attested. There is a story that Catherine and Dickens made a pact when they were young that if one of them should fall in love with someone else he or she would tell the other. If Dickens could have honoured this pact, Catherine would have responded with readiness to help. Dickens however couldn't honour it; he was so enmeshed in his contradictory desires that it was impossible for him to be honest about his feelings.¹⁵⁶ He could not admit his love for Ellen, because that would have distorted his fiercely felt need for innocence in the affair. He could not speak to Catherine, because she was not a real person to him any more, but embodied lack of innocence, the hated sensuality.

That Catherine's help would have taken the form of giving him freedom is almost certain, though we cannot be sure what practical arrangements they would have made. Catherine knew from Dickens's behaviour that a separation was coming long before Ellen Ternan crossed his path. She had no wish to live with a man who did not love her and made life intolerable for her, as she had indeed said many times. If Dickens had confided in her, she could have identified with the separation and they could have

made it into a juster, more equitable thing.

Withholding communication with someone close tends to breed sadism. Dickens, torn by conflicting desires, tortured by the impossibility of fulfilling them, made the house hell. Catherine had to turn against him or against herself. She took the healthy course and turned against him.

Catherine's family, especially her mother, rallied to her defense. (When W. H. Bowen comments sorrowfully that Catherine must have been advised badly, he means by Mrs Hogarth).¹⁶ Mrs Hogarth probably counselled legal redress, even use of the new divorce laws. This would not have been such bad advice if Catherine had had powerful friends and a skilful lawyer. It would have at least frightened Dickens. But the family was poor, and all Mrs Hogarth succeeded in doing was spreading rumours of Dickens's adultery. These rumours were complicated by the family's baffled indignation at the way Georgy was behaving. They wanted both sisters to leave. The possibility that Georgy could desert her sister had not occurred to them. When Georgy refused to leave they could only explain it by a guilty attachment. Their outraged sense of the injury to Catherine seems to have made them implicate Georgy. We must also remember that a woman could not claim divorce for adultery; it had to be adultery with an aggravating addition, such as incest. By the laws of the time a relationship with a sister-in-law was incestuous. While this possibility would not

have been seriously contemplated by Mrs Hogarth, she might well have talked about it.

For Dickens the separation was proceeding satisfactorily by May 1858. Forster and Mark Lemon had hammered out a settlement which Catherine accepted. There is a letter extant from Lemon of 14 May in which he says 'Mrs Dickens thankfully accepts the proposal - as made by you on May 7th' (Dexter 1935, appendix, p.277). Mrs Hogarth took Catherine away on a 'holiday' to Brighton and she never entered her house again. Where she was between this and the move to the little house in Camden Town we don't know. Miss Coutts offered her a home for the transition period, but Catherine declined. The period must have been the nadir of her life; her misery and humiliation would have been so great that all she wanted was a quiet hiding hole. Dickens was probably congratulating himself on the quiet when he heard of the rumours circulated by Mrs Hogarth and her daughter Helen. He struck back at once. He revoked the settlement and said he would cut Catherine off without a penny unless he got a legal, written retraction at once.

This sounds like bluffing; Dickens did not have a legal leg to stand on. There was no way in 1858 in which a man could have driven a wife from her home and left her penniless. After all Dickens wanted the separation; it couldn't go forward without Catherine's consent, as there was nothing he could legally accuse her

of; yet he was adamant. His sense of injury and the fire of righteous indignation were such that he convinced himself that he could do what he threatened. The interesting thing is that his contemporaries and his biographers down to our own time believed it too and did (or do) not find anything strange in his behaviour. The friends whom he consulted and his lawyer did not deter him. Modern biographers report his response still with a certain approval as appropriate to the provocation. Not one has, as far as I know, gone into the question whether Dickens would have had a legal right to do such a thing in 1858. The answer of course is that he had no legal right and knew it, but was determined to do it because he had learnt in other situations that if he used all his will power he would get what he wanted whether legal or not. It had been so in his quarrels with his publishers. Johnson rather admires him for his stance: 'As in the old days of his struggle with Bentley, he was determined that no court in Christendom should make him yield' (1953: 921).

The two Hogarth women were equally adamant; they refused to put their name to the declaration he demanded. They did not believe that he wasn't having a liaison, or liaisons, with other women, and they continued to say so. The next two weeks were dramatic. On 26 May Dickens speaks in a letter to his lawyer of 'the stern necessity of being relentless with her' (i.e. Mrs Hogarth). The day before he had written the 'Violated Letter' refuting

'two wicked persons who should have spoken very differently of me, in consideration of earned respect and gratitude'. Catherine was in a curious situation during this turmoil. She must have been perfectly aware of the extent of Dickens's love for Ellen Ternan and his wish to live with her. No one who knew him as she did and loved him could have mistaken the signs. But her very knowledge of him must have made her believe him when he asserted that he was innocent, that the relation was pure. She must have known something of his tortured conflict, and known that the 'purity' was technical. But her sense of justice made her side with him now in this quarrel with her family. She tried to use Miss Coutts as an intermediary, but Dickens rebuffed her efforts: '... nothing on earth - no, not even you - no consideration, human or Divine, can move me from the resolution I have taken' and 'if you have seen Mrs Dickens in company with her wicked mother, I can not enter - no, not even with you - upon any question that was discussed in that woman's presence' (Johnson ed. 1952: 357).

He must have well understood, however, that Catherine was on his side, because his tone about her at that time is fatherly and forgiving. In the letter to his lawyer that speaks of the stern necessity to be relentless with her mother he says:

Pray do me the kindness to detach Mrs Dickens from these wrongdoings, now. I do not in the least suspect her of them, and I should wish

her to know it. She has a great tenderness for me, and I sincerely believe would be glad to show it. I would not therefore add to her pain by a hair's breadth. It would be a pleasure to her (I think) to know that I had begun to trust her so far; and I believe that it would do her lasting good if you could convey that assurance to her.'⁷

Catherine did indeed prove her tenderness for him. It may have been her peace loving efforts that persuaded Mrs Hogarth and Helen on 29 May 1858 to sign the document Dickens had prepared for them. In it they 'solemnly declare' that they disbelieve any of the rumours about a scandalous cause for the separation, and that they know Catherine disbelieves them too. Dickens was very pleased with Catherine. He wrote on the same day to his friend Mary Boyle.

Mrs Dickens (really, and generously indignant at the baseless scandals she hears, whatever her weakness may have done once circuitously, towards originating them) has hastened to declare in writing that there is no other cause for our separation than our having lived unhappily together for some time.'⁸

Catherine did not know anything about the 'Violated Letter' then which, though already written, was only published on June 12. But because her sense of justice had made her side with Dickens, he could now assert in public that she knew him to be innocent and agreed to the separation. Dickens's first public announcement of the separation appeared on 7 June in The Times and other papers and on 12 June in Household Words. This statement, which is mainly concerned with scotching the

rumours about Ellen and Georgy, as we have seen, begins with the following words

Some domestic trouble of mine, of long standing, of which I will make no further remark than that it claims to be respected as being of a sacredly private nature, has lately been brought to an arrangement, which involves no anger or ill will of any kind, and the whole origin, progress and surrounding circumstances of which have been throughout, within the knowledge of my children. It is amicably composed, and its details have now but to be forgotten by those concerned in it.

and ends with the words

I most solemnly declare, then - and this I do, both in my own name and in my wife's name - that all the lately whispered rumours touching the trouble at which I have glanced, are abominably false. And that whosoever repeats one of them after this denial, will lie as wilfully and as foully as it is possible for any false witness to lie, before Heaven and earth. (Dexter 1935, 271-72)

Was this threat meant for Catherine? Was his declared 'perfect confidence' in her a public relations stunt, a stunt that would tie her up doubly and make sure that she not only knew what to think but also knew what not to do? We know from a note that he sent a copy of the statement to her before publication

I will not write a word as to any causes that have made it necessary to me to publish the enclosed in Household Words. ... But as you are referred to in the article, I think you ought to see it. You have only to say ... that you do not object to the allusion (Dexter 1935: 257-58).

Dickens had said that he sincerely believed Catherine would be glad to show her great tenderness for him. This was her chance: she did not object to the allusion. Immediately afterwards the 'Violated Letter' was published which stated that she was mad, had in the 'peculiarity of her character' thrown the children on someone else, so that these children would have perished but for their Aunt Georgy who sacrificed her life to them, and that Georgy had higher claims on his (Dickens's) affection, respect and gratitude than anyone in the world. It also says that Catherine reposes 'perfect confidence' in Dickens's truthfulness 'in her better moments'. It is true that Dickens did not publish this letter himself and did not know it would be published at that precise moment. But he had written it on 25 May a day before he assured Catherine through his lawyer that he knew of her 'great tenderness' for him and that he did not want to 'add to her pain by a hair's breadth'. And he sent it to his manager, with instructions to show it 'to anyone who wishes to do me right, or to anyone who may have been misled into doing me wrong' (Dexter 1935: 276). As a journalist, he must have known that the press would be eager to take up the challenge.

At around the same time, on 31 May, Georgy wrote the letter to her 'dearest Maria' from which I have already quoted. The letter gives an unpleasant impression of being written according to instructions carefully

followed point by point. The separation is 'for the happiness of all'. Catherine 'by some constitutional misfortune or incapacity' has thrown her children upon other people from their infancy, so that 'there was not the usual strong tie between them.' Her eldest son is to live with her 'at his father's request and not taking any part or showing any preference in doing so' (Dexter 1935: 290-91). One gets the impression that Georgy wrote many such letters at the time, letters that all make the same points, points that exonerate Dickens. The letter is also unpleasant for its intimate woman-to-woman tone when one remembers that shortly before Georgy laughed about Maria Winter with Dickens and called her 'a kind of good natured woman, but fearfully silly', and shortly afterwards dropped her from her correspondence. Here she writes: 'To a few of our real friends Charles wishes the truth to be stated, and they cannot show their friendship better than by quietly silencing with the real solemn truth any ... lies and slanders' (p.291).

These volleys of slander and deception with their calling upon the truth were too much for Catherine. She must also have felt gulled, after Dickens's friendly letters, and her giving him permission to quote her as believing in his innocence and as agreeing to the separation. Her sense of justice was outraged, and she decided that now she would tell the truth. This was Catherine's second bid for justice, and this time it was directed not to her family but to the world. It was not

a matter of needing help now but of having to redress the public balance, of putting on public record what had really happened. After all she was still Mrs Charles Dickens, the wife of a very famous man, and the record mattered.

We know that Catherine talked, but we do not know what she said or to whom she talked. All traces of what she put in writing about it have been obliterated. We know that it happened solely from Dickens's response, which is well documented. Slater thinks she may have dined out on stories of Dickens's behaviour over Ellen Ternan, but the only example he quotes - a piece of secondhand gossip - is too much out of character to be useable evidence.¹⁸ I think that she may have talked to Miss Coutts. She had written to her on 19 May 1858 (that is five days after she had accepted Dickens's proposal for a settlement, at that time of transition at which Miss Coutts had suggested that she take refuge with her): 'One day though not now I may tell you how hardly I have been beset'.²⁰ Catherine may have felt now that the day had come. From the point of view of making a public, not simply private, revelation Miss Coutts would be a good choice, since she was not only a kind friend but was a wealthy and independent woman of proven uprightness who had the ear of society. Miss Coutts may have remonstrated with Dickens for distorting the facts, or simply said that from Catherine's point of view the marriage looked different - not all the fault was on her

side. At any rate, Dickens's response was directed to her.

On hearing that Catherine had dared to talk about him, Dickens was beside himself. He writes on 23 August 1858:

As to Mrs Dickens's simplicity in speaking of me and my doings, O my dear Miss Coutts do I not know that the weak hand that could never help or serve my name in the least, has struck at it - in conjunction with the wickedest people whom I loaded with benefits. I want to communicate with her no more. (Johnson, ed. 1952: 360-61)

He did indeed never communicate with her again. From this time on he treated her as if she were a detected criminal and he her innocent victim. A few business notes were unavoidable in the twelve years they still lived in the same town, but Dickens keeps their tone as cold and insulting as he can. He writes to her as if she had never shared his life. When her mother died he wrote to her on a business question concerning the grave: 'When I went to America (or to Italy: I cannot positively say which, but I think on the former occasion) I gave your mother the paper which established the right in perpetuity to the grave in Kensal Green' (Dexter 1935: 264). When their son Walter died in 1864 Dickens made no sign to Catherine, a fact that apparently greatly added to her grief.²¹ Miss Coutts tried twice to soften his attitude. When Katie got married in 1860, she suggested Catherine should be invited to the wedding.

Dickens replied,

In the last two years I have been stabbed too often and too deep not to have a settled knowledge of the wounded place. - It is simply impossible that such a thing can be. That figure is out of my life for evermore (except to darken it) and my desire is Never to see it again. (Johnson ed. 1952: 369)

On the occasion of Walter's death in 1864 she must have urged a reconciliation, since Dickens writes,

Do not think me unimpressed by certain words in your letter concerning forgiveness and tenderness when I say I do not claim to have anything to forgive - that if I had, I hope I would forgive freely - but that a page in my life which once had writing on it, has become absolutely blank, and that it is not in my power to pretend that it has a solitary word upon it. (Johnson ed., 1951: 376)

When Catherine needed him for something and wrote with a request, he turned her letter over to Georgina to turn it down. He seems not to have felt a moment's compunction over his behaviour and kept it up for the rest of his life. His last public mention of Catherine is in his will, where one expects her name to appear among the legacies. Dickens has taken the opportunity to make clear once more what he thinks of their respective places in the family.

AND I DESIRE here simply to record the fact that my wife, since our separation by consent, has been in the receipt from me of an annual income of £600, while all the great charges of a numerous and expensive family have devolved wholly upon myself. ²²

All this was in reaction to Catherine's bid for

justice. To him it meant only one thing: the weak hand that could never serve his name had struck at it. These words show more clearly than anything else Dickens wrote or did his attitude to women. They are perhaps also the answer to the question what the Victorians expected from a woman: the sinking of her interest in her husband's. Truth is not an issue: a wife must not speak on her own behalf. She has to support her husband, she is a helpmeet, and even a weak one like Catherine will be tolerated as long as she doesn't stand up for herself, or point out any injustices she suffers in the association. Any speaking out for herself is a striking at his name. Women have internalised this rule and find it still today almost impossible to speak for themselves. Catherine should be one of our heroines because she had the courage to try. The changes in the divorce laws have given women a voice of course, but it is a formalised voice. One reason why they find it hard to speak in their own voice is because they know they will not be believed. Their bitterest experience is when their own children do not believe them (though they have seen their plight with their own eyes and often shared in it) because they are anxious not to offend against what is socially accepted. This was Catherine's experience.

Dickens had an obsessive urge to believe that his children didn't love their mother. He wrote to Miss Coutts in May 1858 already - about a month before he went into print about Catherine's unnaturalness as a mother

She has never attached one of them to herself, never played with them in their infancy, never attracted their confidence as they have grown older, never presented herself before them in the aspect of a mother.... Mary and Katey (whose dispositions are of the gentlest and most affectionate) harden into stone figures of girls when they can be got to go near her, and have their hearts shut up in her presence as if they were closed by some horrid spring. (Johnson ed., 1952: 354-5)

This is terrible enough, especially as the vivid image of the stone girls makes one suspect that there is some truth in it, that the girls really did behave in some such way, at least in their father's presence. In August, after Catherine has committed her unthinkable crime Dickens sums it all up for Miss Coutts in a final sentence: 'She does not - and never did - care for the children; and the children do not - and never did - care for her' (Johnson ed., 1952: 361).

This is of course a fantasy, but it was a fantasy that affected the children deeply. The boys were less affected than the two girls, because they were out of the house (Katie tells us in her book on her mother that by 1859 all the boys had left home: Walter was already in India, Frank in Hamburg, Alfred, Sidney and Harry were at school in Boulogne and Plorn, the baby, had been sent to a school in Southend. Charlie, who had moved with Catherine, went to Hong Kong the following year.²⁴) Catherine's three smallest sons, Sidney aged eleven, Harry aged nine, and Plorn aged six at the separation were too young and puzzled to take up any attitude.²⁵

They just longed to be with their mother, and there is a touching letter from Catherine to her aunt about how happy she was with them when they were allowed to spend a few days of their school holidays with her, and how they showed they cared:

I cannot tell you how good and affectionate they were to me. One of them, little Sidney, was full of solicitude and anxiety about me, always asking what I should do when they were gone, and if I would not be very dull and lonely without them; he should so like to stay. Upon the whole their visit has done me much good, and dear Charlie is so kind and gentle, and tried to cheer me. I trust by God's assistance to resign myself to his will, and to lead a contented if not happy life. but my position is a sad one.²⁶

But Catherine's daughters, Mamie and Katie were young ladies of twenty and nineteen when Catherine left and there is no doubt that they were influenced by the social situation. They did not want to associate themselves with a mother who lived in disgrace - since, to have been forced to leave your house, give up your children and have your own sister side with the husband who had dismissed you were all clear signs of social disgrace, however innocent you might be in private. Their dazzling, successful father loomed very large in their lives. Katie, who had always sided with her mother in her heart, if not in action, reproached herself bitterly at the end of her life for not having gone to see her more often. She recalls that both she and Mamie had opportunities they did not take because of their

father's attitude. Dickens did not forbid them to go, but they were left in no doubt by his manner that he saw it as a disloyalty which deeply hurt him. Georgy and Catherine had broken off all contact since the separation, so that Georgy's influence, no doubt also silent, would be added to the others for the girls. In this way it came to the situation of the music lessons, one of the most terrible and painful situations ever described in mother-daughter relations. Storey tells Katie's tale:

Both she and Mamie used to take music lessons from a master who lived in the house opposite to Mrs Dickens's in Gloucester Crescent. They would drive up and drive away, but never call to see their mother, who had either seen them arrive or depart or had been told that they had done so ... Often she had waited in expectation of them coming - who would condemn the tears she shed in the desolation of her home - when time after time they did not cross the road to ring her doorbell.²⁷

Catherine never made a bid for public justice again. She knew that the forces arrayed against her were too great. She had wanted an open hearing, such as Dickens got for himself, in which she could have witnessed to the truth and straightened out what was distorted. She was not vindictive and had not planned it as a revenge on Dickens. If such a hearing was denied to her, she would not lower her pride to fill the air with scandal and rumour, the only other way of justifying herself open to her. She showed a proper regard for herself and bore the separation with dignity and courage. She never

mentioned her marriage again. When she mentioned Dickens (which she did rarely) she spoke of him as kindly and with as much respect as he spoke of her unkindly and slightingly. If he treated her as if she were dead or had never existed, she ignored his slight and simply regarded herself as a widow who had to live her widowed existence with as much calm as she could muster. Only on her deathbed did her anger against Dickens break out, as we have seen.

Should Catherine have given expression to her anger instead of suppressing it and choosing a dignified silence? The answer is surely yes, ideally she should. In expressing it she would have done something for herself, for her children, for Dickens and the history of letters, for posterity and in particular for women. But conditions were not ideal. Catherine was always a realist and she must have come to the conclusion that there was no way for her to do it constructively. Her bid to do it through Miss Coutts had been the best use she could make of her opportunities, and it had failed. She knew Caroline Norton, and she knew she did not have the temperament or brains or social position of a Caroline Norton. She was not a writer. Though from her few surviving letters it seems to us that she could convey spirit and feeling beautifully, she always felt she couldn't write. 'I won't attempt to describe the scene, as Charles can do it so much better' had been her attitude as a young woman. With this assessment of the

situation, the course she chose was surely the right one. The fact that she expressed her anger to her most talented child, her daughter Katie and gave her Dickens's letters to be published shows that the wish for justice remained alive in her, and that she concerned herself with ways for the truth to become known to the end. She could do no more. But she should be remembered for what she did.

If we turn once more to the triangle Dickens, Georgina and Catherine, and ask the question Hardwick asked about Rosmersholm, 'How is life served here - and whose life?', what is the answer? At first blush it seems that it was Dickens's and Georgina's lives which were served here. Dickens could fulfil his wish to live with Ellen Ternan (His daughter Katie notes perceptively that this depended on Catherine's going: 'he could not bring his conscience eye to eye with the thought of his association with another woman while his wife occupied the house' [Storey 1939: 95]). With the help of Georgy he could at the same time fulfil his wish to remain 'morally pure' in the eyes of his audience and of posterity. If his life with Ellen was not happy, it was more satisfying than his life with Catherine had been. He wrote another four great novels in which the heroines show an advance in complexity and independence of spirit compared to his earlier ones. This was one of the good effects his decision to live with Ellen Ternan had.

His portraits of older women continue to show the

same prejudices, so that in this sense Dickens learnt nothing from the separation. On the contrary, his obsession with his mother's betrayal was confirmed by Catherine's treachery as he saw it, and the reinforced trauma made a rut in his subconscious mind which he could not get out of.

In life the association with Ellen Ternan seems to have involved painful readjustments, but these he also turned successfully into art. There is a general agreement among his biographers and critics that Dickens's was disappointed with Ellen because she was a gold digger. The source for this is his art. Edmund Wilson notes that the 'episode of Ellen Ternan has been hushed up so systematically ... that it is difficult to get an impression of her' but adds, 'We do, however, know something about what Dickens thought of her from the heroines of his last books which are derived from her. Estella is frigid and indifferent: ... she marries a man she does not love for his money. Bella Wilfer up to her conversion by Mr Boffin is equally intent upon money - which was certainly one of the things Ellen got out of her liaison with Dickens' (1961: 64). There seems to be also a general agreement that Ellen did not love him. Adrian thinks that Georgina suspected that 'in the Ellen Ternan affair Dickens had only exchanged one heartache for another. Nelly, though dazzled by the older man's fame ... mindful of the luxury of his attentions, apparently did not respond with the whole-souled devotion

he craved' (1957: 80). I find the androcentric attitude displayed here astonishing. Dickens was almost thirty years older than Ellen Ternan. She was a professional actress who had been on the stage from infancy and had always had to think of herself as having to make her way. What did Dickens expect, what do his critics expect? Of course she took him as a sugar daddy. How could she be expected to offer him the same love and devotion which Catherine had given him as a young man? Not only Dickens but also his modern critics seem incapable of understanding a woman whose first consideration is not how to please a man but how to stand on her own feet. Ellen gave up her acting career a year after their association. Having done this, her first care was obviously how to be financially independent.

Dickens seems in the end to have understood something of this. It seems to have dawned on him that female independence is not incompatible with female goodness. Though he never gave up his belief that a woman is only lovable in so far as she sacrifices her self to some man - husband or brother - the character of Helena Landless shows that fierceness and determination did not any longer stamp a woman automatically as a villain for him. If Edwin Drood had been finished, Helena would probably have been shown to be capable of planning, acting and using her will power like a man, without losing her goodness.

These were hardwon advances, cut short by Dickens's death. They allow us to imagine that Dickens was a better mate to Ellen Ternan than he had been to Catherine.

But Dickens's life was not served by the separation. An erosion set in at the core, the point where the psyche is balanced within itself and with those that surround it. We have seen that even before the separation he excused his domestic tyranny, but also his inability to live with Catherine with his genius, the terms on which he held his imaginative life. This is where the erosion began. The process bears looking at closely, since it not only has psychological aspects important for Dickens's life and the life of those close to him but also sociological ones that are important for our general theme.

I have talked of Dickens as a divided man. This is evident when one looks at his life and writing after the separation: there is the division between his respectable family life with Georgina and his secret life with Ellen Ternan, and there is the division between the radical Dickens of the novels and the growing conservatism of his public convictions. But Edmund Wilson in The Two Scrooges shows something more extraordinary. He shows how by the end of his life Dickens internalised and dramatized his division. He is no longer the man torn apart by conflicting desires. He unifies and transcends in himself the division between

virtue and criminality, love and murder. It is on this psychological point that The Mystery of Edwin Drood hangs, and the type figure for it is the Thug. (The Thug appears only to the bourgeois eye to be leading a double life, on the one hand a loving family man and respected citizen, and on the other a killer. In his own eyes he is virtuous all through. He knows in his heart that the service of the goddess is praiseworthy, though it demands the strangling of innocent victims).

In other words when Dickens obsessionally acted the murder of Nancy, and became violent if anyone tried to restrain him, he was not on the brink of confessing ('I am a criminal'), but on the brink of exhibiting himself as innocent though guilty ('I am a superman who transcends such paltry divisions'). This state of mind was generated by the excitement of being so close to his public and by the extraordinary power his readings gave him over his public (He writes in a curious exhilaration about twenty or so ladies who, having fainted, are carried out 'stiff as corpses'). To the ordinary unprejudiced person this state of mind is madness.

Wilson suggests in explanation that the process began when the aging Dickens was not any longer truculent enough to defy Victorian values and be damned to them. The values invaded him, though he knew them to be wrong and himself to be the right. He therefore makes Jasper, with whom he identifies, end in a condemned cell. I think almost the opposite process took place, and by

Wilson's own showing.

Wilson writes compellingly about the identification:

Mr Jasper is, like Dickens, an artist: he is a musician, he has a beautiful voice. He smokes opium, and so, like Dickens, leads a life of the imagination apart from the life of man. Like Dickens he is a skilful magician, whose power over his fellows may be dangerous. Like Dickens, he is an alien from another world; yet, like Dickens, he has made himself respected in the conventional English community. Is he a villain? From the point of view of the cathedral congregation of Cloisterham ... he will be playing a diabolical role.... And yet in another land there is another point of view from which Jasper is a good and faithful servant. It is at the command of his imaginative alter ego and acting in the name of his goddess that Jasper has committed his crime. (1961: 91-2)

He then goes on to show that Jasper is not any longer the innocent whom we meet in jail, nor a wicked man, but a man both innocent and wicked. The protest against the age has turned into a protest against self. 'In this last moment, the old hierarchy of England does enjoy a sort of triumph over the weary and debilitated Dickens, because it has made him accept its ruling that he is a creature irretrievably tainted ...' (1961: 92). But what he has just shown and what the evidence of Dickens's life from the separation on bears out is that Dickens saw himself as inhabiting another land, where there is another point of view; saw himself as acting at the command of an alter ego (which we call genius) and was confident, or almost confident, that he could make this point of view prevail with his audience in the

ordinary world if he tried.

In talking about Dickens's compulsion to recreate the murder scene between Sikes and Nancy, Wilson has suggested in an aside that it might be 'a symbolical representation of his behaviour in banishing his wife'. By implication, this too would be a sign that the old hierarchy of England enjoyed a triumph, since marriage is one of the sacrosanct values of the establishment. But the great discovery Wilson made does not lie in his explanation, which is a rationalization and a muddled one at that, it lies in his having seen that Dickens, like Jasper, felt he had an excuse for doing anything because he lived the life of the imagination, was an artist. If Edwin Drood has any value it lies in Dickens's being self critical about this stance by thinking up a character like Jasper. Wilson's explanation postulates a 'real Dickens', who is purely radical, and has acted nobly if unconventionally, and a weakened Dickens, who feels tainted because he cannot hold out against the false accusations of convention.

The striking thing about this view is that Dickens is made out to have offended against convention. He had; but he had behaved badly by any standard. He had been cruel and deceitful and slanderous. By ignoring this Wilson virtually joins Dickens in believing that he is an alien, inhabiting another land where there is another point of view. What I have called madness becomes here an ordinary attitude toward behaviour.

The explanation for this is that the behaviour at stake is behaviour to women. It can simply not be seen; it is as if it didn't exist.

The fantasy element or madness, that is, the internalizing and dramatizing of the division, which made Dickens the man who unifies and transcends good and evil, is first apparent in the 'Violated Letter'. His daughter Kate was the first to draw attention to it.

So far as the statements in this letter are concerned, the truth appears a quality as unreal as the phantom which haunted the lady at Genoa. In this mood Dickens perpetrated the truth about the unreal as sincerely as she had done. Since the letter (copies of which he sent to several friends) was dated nearly a month before the Personal statement appeared in Household Words, it is likely that it was originally intended to be published therein, but recognising in calmer moments the enormity, indeed the absurdity, of some of the statements, he wrote in its place the one which appeared in Household Words. In this light it may be affirmed with Dickens that he was 'no party to the publication'. (Storey 1939: 100)

Not all later commentators believe that Dickens was quite sincere when he 'Perpetrated the truth about the unreal'. Bowen (1956) concludes from a comparison of Dickens's letters with his public statements that he must have known he was lying but was so deranged (he implies he was temporarily out of his mind) that it seemed justified to him. Phyllis Rose points to Dickens's habit of self dramatizing:

Trapped by the melodramatic patterns in his mind Dickens projected all his difficulties onto outward circumstance, of which the grossest embodiment was Catherine, and he cast

himself, improbably, in the role of victim. Perhaps because of his childhood trauma of abandonment, for which he blamed his mother, Dickens continued to identify with the unprotected fragile child and based some of his greatest work on the identification. But in his marriage, this fruitful fantasy made him fail to perceive his own power. He was male, with all the privileges of his sex; he was successful; he was rich at any rate compared to his wife. Yet in his mind she appeared as the wounding and derelict parent.**

Rose more than any other commentator also notices the superman quality of the public statements. She calls them 'an absolute assertion of the uniqueness of his life and of the primacy of his imagination over all fact' (1984: 183).

I have only one disagreement with these commentators: I don't think it was a passing madness generated by the excitement of the separation and subsiding with it. I think it became a permanent state, though it went underground. It does not show in Dickens's life or his art. But it does show in his readings, to which I come below; and the vindictiveness and hate with which he pursued Catherine long after the separation is an expression of it. The reason for his vindictiveness was not any longer the old self-dramatization, with himself as the unprotected fragile child and Catherine cast as the wounding, derelict parent. This drama was obsolete - he had overcome her. It was because Catherine 'in her simplicity' as he wrote to Miss Coutts, had punctured the fantasy of his omnipotence, had made holes in the edifice of truth

about the unreal he had taken such pains to build up. In doing this she had positively slain one of his children. It excused all his earlier cruelty and later slander, it made it necessary to go on punishing her.

The type of erosion Dickens suffered is not peculiar to him, though he is an unusually clear example because of his unselfconscious self-exposure. It happens when 'the imaginative life' becomes an occasion for towering conceit. It then makes itself independent; it is no longer a means of hiding from oneself what one has really done but becomes a condition of doing reprehensible things (such things as are ordinarily called cruel, brutal, deceptive, slanderous). This can be confused with social rebellion, with one in the eye for bourgeois values. As I said, however, it is in fact a form of madness.

Dickens was not alone responsible for this process of erosion. It started when the public accepted from him what it should have rejected in the name of the best he had written. When Dickens published his statements about his marriage, he was acutely aware that they might not be accepted. He was trying it on; he therefore started with his claim on his readership: 'Three-and-twenty years have passed since I entered on my present relations with the Public ... through all this time I have tried to be as faithful to the Public, as they have been to me. It was my duty never to trifle with them, or deceive them or presume upon their favour, or do

anything with it but work hard to justify it. I have always endeavoured to discharge that duty'.²⁰ There is no doubt that the other side of his megalomania was fear and that at the time of the separation fear dominated. The passion with which Dickens works on self-justification and on convincing the public is more than half a passion of fear. He passionately wanted Ellen Ternan and was passionately afraid that this wish would be detected and smear her (and his) reputation. He was passionately afraid that his wish to break out and possess her would ruin him, draw him down again to that pit from which he had risen (the place where his mother had wanted to keep him): poverty and servitude. He must be free of Catherine, he must have Ellen - but he must above all keep his place in the world.

He therefore wooed the public shamelessly. He also defamed Catherine ruthlessly. He realised that he could not succeed in any of the things he wanted without doing her down. He was probably astonished at how well he succeeded. As he did not know his power in marriage and saw himself as the fragile child, so he did not quite know his power with the public and saw himself as exposed and on the defensive. But a man has the power of the word generally. In a male oriented society laws and customs are set up to favour a man's chance of making his case over a woman's. He can use channels of communication not easily accessible to a woman, he has greater confidence in speaking and is more readily

listened to and given credence. And when the man is known to be a genius, this power is increased a thousandfold. The cult of genius is here again an extension of what is granted an ordinary man in our culture. If the genius is a writer, his very art serves his purpose; he can use the (justified) confidence in the quality of his work.

When Dickens started his career as a public reader of his works immediately after the statements about his marriage had appeared in Household Words and in the newspapers in the form of the 'Violated Letter', he was extremely nervous. The public greeted him with ovations in which he saw (rightly or wrongly) with relief an 'affectionate recognition of my late trouble'. He learnt that there was a parallel between the power he had had over Catherine's reputation and the power he had over his audience. He could slay with his word. In one case it was character assassination, in the other an emotional effect so intense ladies were carried out stiff as corpses. He must have finally felt he had turned into the magician he had so often impersonated. His word could accomplish anything. When he gave up his readings, the distance from the public had a sobering effect. He began to write Edwin Drood in an effort to analyse the dream of absolute power through the imagination. But he died before he could draw his insights together to a conclusion. As many people have pointed out, it seems almost as if he could not face

having Jasper publicly exposed.

But to return to the power of the word as a general point. A writer, especially when he has moved people with what he has written about women, love and marriage will be believed, and more, will be pitied when he paints the miseries of his own bondage in marriage.²¹ Our writers have used this privilege of genius freely. A generation before Dickens Coleridge used it to denigrate his wife, who is consequently known to us as a little milliner, brainless and commonplace.²² His own behaviour to her remains in the shadow, though it is well documented. Norman Fruman writes in a review of Lefebure's Life of Sara Coleridge:

Coleridge's attitude on his wife's character, personality, and emotional range reveal the immense power a great writer has over almost everyone around him in the documents that come down to posterity. To read selectively in his letters and notebooks is to feel that he married an appallingly shallow and emotionally crippled woman. 'Permit me, my dear Sara,' he wrote in 1802, 'without offence to you, as Heaven knows! it is without any feeling of pride in my self, to say - that in sex, aquirements and in the quantity and quality of natural endowments whether of Feeling, or of Intellect, you are the Inferior.' Since this was presumably projected in tranquility, we can imagine the spontaneous overflows during a quarrel.²³

The preface of Lefebure's Life begins,

Mrs Samuel Taylor Coleridge must surely rank among the most maligned of great men's wives. Three great writers have given us a combined surviving portrait of her which far exceeds prejudice; it is a positive arraignment, pronounced in the first instance by Coleridge, taken up by Dorothy Wordsworth and subsequently

by De Quincey - an outstanding case of what
Hartley Coleridge would have called
'Destruction by Pen and Ink'. (1986: 15)

Coleridge had the excuse of an opium addiction which, according to Lefebure, distorts one's view of others, especially those close to one, to the extent of turning it upside down. When we look at Dickens, however, it seems opium isn't necessary: a psychological disturbance, aided by existing prejudice is enough. And besides, Dickens was as intoxicated by success, by his power over his audience as poor Coleridge was by laudanum. Both had an inflated view of the privileges conferred by genius or what was called in romantic parlance 'the Imagination' (or 'organic sensibility'), as contrasted to 'the understanding'. Behind the shifting view of what constitutes genius stands the simple prejudice against women. It is a conviction of male superiority ('in sex ... you are the Inferior') that basically distorts these men's relations to their wives. Returning to Hardwick's question which we applied to the separation, the answer is surely that when prejudices like this become active, life simply cannot be served - neither in a general sense of the life of our social community nor in the sense of one participant's personal life.

But I am simplifying in making the answer depend on a distinction between men and women when in reality the problem is much more complicated. In the case of our

drama, as in the case of Rosmersholm, there are three protagonists and two of them are women. It is true, we are focusing on the marriage and are mainly interested in what happened to Catherine in her relation to Dickens. Surely the first thing to stress then is that Catherine was the most maligned of great men's wives. And that it was done so skilfully that we ask ourselves still today whether the attack on her wasn't justified. Hardly a scrap of evidence which could speak to us of her directly survives.³⁴ She was destroyed by pen and ink not privately but in full view of the public. But the next and important thing to note is that Dickens used the underswell of prejudice against women by saying comparatively little about her but contrasting her with 'a really good woman', her sister. The glowing picture he gives of Georgina on all public occasions, whether in his printed statements about the separation or in letters he knew would be published or in his will damn Catherine more certainly than anything he said about her. It was Georgina Hogarth, to whom we turn now, who was, willingly or unwillingly, instrumental in the destruction of Catherine Dickens by pen and ink. What sort of woman was she? How was her life served by the role she played in the drama of the separation? How was 'life' served here, in the general sense of Hardwick's question?

Conclusion: Georgina Hogarth

Georgina Hogarth's life after the separation adds up to one of the most interesting women's careers of the 19th Century. The sociological questions it raises are particularly interesting. In fact I am astonished that no feminist has attempted a critical Life of her. Unmarried, without much money, without education or intellectual gifts, without even particular energy, ambition or industry, she rose to become one of the most powerful figures of the nation's literary establishment. She survived Dickens by more than forty years and in those years she was the acknowledged authority on him. She controlled what was said, and what was thought about Dickens till her death and beyond it, and as a result she controlled what has come down to us about Catherine. Anyone writing on Dickens consulted her, or at least sought her approval before publishing (No one dreamt of consulting Catherine, though she outlived Dickens by twelve years). Very little of what she had not supervised escaped her, and she always protested vigorously at unauthorised versions. She 'authored' our life of Dickens. Because of her influence, the discovery of Dickens's double life was not published until 1934 (Dickens's daughter's book, vindicating her mother and telling the same story of Dickens's double life did not come out till 1939). She published Dickens's letters, and it is remarkable how many of the letters, which still turned up in great quantities at the

time, she destroyed. Her rule was 'private material written in confidence ... must not be published' (see Adrian 1957: 193). In preparing the letters for publication she deleted what did not suit her. I shall cite a small example: Dickens wrote to her from his reading tour in the States: 'I do not forget that this is Forster's birthday or that it is another anniversary' and Adrian, who quotes it notes in brackets: 'It was the thirty second anniversary of his marriage. Secure in not suspecting the future marvels of infrared photography Georgina was later to ink out the second clause of this sentence (1957: 113). It did not suit her that Dickens should be seen to remember his marriage so many years after the separation. What sort of woman would act like this? What were the sources of her power? What were the springs of her actions?

There was only one main spring to her actions: to do exactly as Dickens wanted her to do. She wanted to keep the image of the great man untarnished. She was the 'guardian of the beloved memory'. We may well ask: what sort of memory did she preserve, what sort of Dickens did her efforts bequeath to history? Surely just the conventional and respectable Dickens. I have found no indication that Georgy, who had heard Dickens read all he wrote to Catherine and to herself all her life, had a glimpse of the rebellious Dickens, the suffering and divided Dickens, of Dickens as an outsider, someone who could jar respectable feeling (She did know

he was a public benefactor, but this she put down to his private heart of gold). Her guardianship of the beloved memory began already as it were at the time of the separation, that is, the point in his life at which Dickens began to worry about his reputation. She assumed her task and in it found her source of power. All her power was rooted in the separation and the decisions she made then. But one can hardly speak of decisions: she could not have acted differently. She was to an extraordinary extent Dickens's creature. Even her well-disposed biographer Adrian remarks on this and on her difference to Catherine in it. He says with reference to Dickens's efforts to educate Catherine out of her slipshod ways: 'But he was dealing with refractory clay and no method, direct or indirect served to remould it nearer to the heart's desire' (1957: 50), and with reference to the difference between the sisters: 'With his wife's mind already formed at the time of their marriage, he had turned, perhaps unconsciously, to the more rewarding prospect of his impressionable sister-in-law' (1957: 26). Georgy has on the whole had an excellent press in the Dickens biographies. There are only two exceptions: Una Pope-Hennessy's Life and most important, W. H. Bowen's hardly known Charles Dickens and his Family: A Sympathetic Study. Bowen discusses at one point the famous drawing, that shows Dickens, Catherine and Georgina in profile in relation to Dickens's claim that Catherine was a bad mother and all

the burden of educating the children fell on Georgy:

A contrast has been drawn between Mrs Dickens and her sister Georgina, in the triple picture which includes Charles. If the faces of the two young women are critically examined, there are but few people who would conscientiously say that, where developing minds were to be treated sympathetically, their preference would be given to Georgina rather than to Mrs Dickens. Georgina looks impersonal, aquiescent, a yes-woman to any form of authority, whereas Mrs Dickens had something sympathetic and thoughtful in her submissiveness, something reflecting beyond the moment with the possibilities of understanding and comfort. (1956: 93, emphasis mine).

He puts his finger exactly on the point, and I believe also on the source of Georgina's fame and power. Aquiescence is extraordinarily prepossessing. Thackeray for instance was sorry for Catherine, but thought Georgina was clearly the more intelligent of the two sisters.

We have almost no letters from Catherine, but a large quantity of Georgina's letters have survived, thanks mainly to Annie Fields, the wife of Dickens's American publisher who befriended her. Adrian in his Georgina Hogarth and the Dickens Circle quotes lavishly from these letters. They reflect the most stuffy views of the time. Georgy disliked women, she preferred boys to girls, she approved of women who were 'good little wives', Queen Victoria was for her 'such a real woman' (1957: 211, 253). She was shocked when a woman wanted 'as much attention as her famous husband' and disapproved when a woman married a man younger than herself (1957:

257, 200-1). The tragedy of her life is that no one really respected her (not even Annie Fields, who was a feminist but not above sympathising with a great man for having had an unsuitable wife). Though Dickens said in his will that she was 'the best and truest friend man ever had' and that she had a higher claim on his affections than anyone else (Adrian 1957: 56), he did not treat her as a friend. His letters to her have a tone that is hard to describe - dismissive, even contemptuous - at any rate quite different from his tone to Catherine. He is peremptory in his demands and treats her as a factotum. She follows his orders like a slave. 'Factotum' is exactly the word Kate Perugini uses for her when she wants to describe her role in the house and distinguish it from the role her mother played. One feels sorry for Georgy. She was exploited, and exploited in more ways than one. Dickens's extravagant praise exploited her in his pursuit of Catherine, as a foil. A factotum is used as a thing: she was 'objectified'. She exemplifies perhaps that worst type of exploitation: the parasite, reduced to manipulating people because she is not respected personally. Her real tragedy is that she did not deserve personal respect.

Georgy's crime is not that she abandoned her sister. Nor is it that she adored Dickens, or obeyed him blindly, or even that she perpetrated the 'Dickens Lie'. Her crime is that she pursued her sister with vicious,

unending hatred and vindictiveness, and that she influenced the children against her. This she did not do blindly. The evidence in Adrian's biography shows that it was a deliberate policy. She is very discreet about it. But the letters in which she mentions Catherine to trusted friends are a terrible testimony of hate. She libels Catherine whenever she can.

The part Georgina played in the separation then did not really serve her life, at least it did not serve 'life' in that general sense in which Hardwick uses the word. And yet the separation was not about 'death' as is Rosmersholm. Nor was it a drama of sexual competition between two women for a man. What we witness is the struggle of two women for 'space', a space for oneself, a space in which one can be oneself. Why was Georgina so successful in this struggle and why did Catherine fail? Before the tribunal of their contemporaries at the time of the separation - before Victorian public opinion - both sisters were accused of crimes. Betraying and abandoning a sister was not less serious a crime than being an unsatisfactory wife and mother. Why was Georgina acquitted while Catherine was condemned? Why did she rise in the eyes of the world from the same low point (her notoriety at the time of the separation was quite as great as Catherine's), while Catherine sank? The verdict surely hinges on the difference between the sisters. Georgy could adapt to public opinion, Catherine had better things to do.

Georgy tailored her account to the prejudices of the audience. She did this unconsciously, because she shared them. One important prejudice was (and still is today) that a woman who is a real woman must be passive. Being passive means following the lead of a man, and Georgy had Dickens to vouch for her that she was passive in the right way. By this criterion then Georgy was a true Victorian woman and could not be a villainess. This in spite of the fact that she did not marry and lacked all the obvious badges of Victorian womanhood. Catherine, who had them, grated by contrast unpleasantly on public taste and public opinion. She resisted Dickens actively. She wanted the truth to be known. In her pursuit of justice she had no time to tailor her account to public prejudice. She was in any case temperamentally unfit for it because she was too sincere, too simple and concerned with real things.

In the end it was Catherine's life that was served. This is surprising and we may well ask why. The answer is, because she served life. She was honest. She was loving and not vindictive. She had enough pride to see Dickens's faults and criticise them. She wanted to serve, but not blindly. She wanted equality as sharing and mutual giving.

When she was cut off from her marriage, her magnanimous assumptions added up to a strength that made her keep her dignity. In her retreat she found a peace

that had been out of her reach before and even a measure of contentment.