Retrospection, Regret, and Contingency in Dickens's Late Midlives

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This essay explores Dickens's representations of male anxieties over aging and argues both that contingency—a character's dawning recognition that their life might have been otherwise—haunts Dickens's midlife narratives and that a developing cultural awareness of midlife as a life-stage is central to the Victorian fascination with unlived lives. It traces developments in Dickens's own sense of midlife's particularity to two sources: a recognition of the bodily changes that accompany the process of aging (such as his own graying hair, which he sought to disguise cosmetically through hair and moustache dyes) and his membership of a generation whose life chances were determined by a demographic bulge caused by a rapid expansion of Britain's middle-aged and elderly population. Both of these circumstances engender an overwhelming sense of regret in the aging protagonists of novels such as *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865), whose midlives are spent thinking, and sometimes writing, about the youthful choices that shaped their later lives. It is only with the publication of the late portmanteau tale "Mugby Junction" that Dickens finds himself able to imagine a midlife in which the aging individuals possess agency and are empowered to cast off the determining and contingent events of their Bildungsroman narratives and engage in the processes of unbecoming and self-renewal.

Dickens's late fiction repeatedly associates midlife masculinity with a cluster of linked anxieties: concerns over bodily decline, domestic and professional disappointment, the contingency made evident by modern life, and what scope (if any) was left for an aging man to retain the bodily vigor and agency he had enjoyed in youth. Dickens's recurring focus on these topics is the subject of this

essay, which identifies a persistent narrative trajectory in his depiction of middle-aged manhood in the 1860s; his midlife men typically note signs of their own physical decline, assess the gap between the optimistic plots of their youth and their disappointment at how life has transpired, and (with one late but significant exception) regret the diminished scope to effect change in middle age. In establishing this narrative archetype Dickens anticipates the trope of the midlife crisis and contributes to the cultural reconstruction of midlife in the mid-Victorian era. These late works first tentatively, and then more explicitly, ask us to extend our focus beyond the traditional endpoints of *Bildungsroman* trajectories by depicting aging protagonists who wish to unbecome, negating or rejecting the determining influence of their own younger selves and the trammels of the contingent life events that have shaped middle age. This late-life attentiveness to both aging subjects and the subject of aging are central to Dickens's fascination with contingency, unled lives, and counterfactual speculation.

DICKENS'S MIDLIFE BODIES

Midlife and middle age have come into focus as sites of interest in aging studies in general, and Victorian studies of aging more particularly, since the publication of Kay Heath's *Aging by the Book* (2009). These life stages are not Victorian inventions—the recognition of a middle period in life predates the nineteenth century (Looser, "Age and Aging Studies" 175)—but Heath argues convincingly that midlife took on distinctive new cultural meanings in the Victorian age, often associated with decline, thereby emerging as terrain in which venerable but simplistic binaries of youth and old age became more troubled and uncertain (11). As with so much else in the period, midlife was constructed unevenly across the sexes, affecting men and women in different ways, with women having by far the worst outcomes; marginalized by entering midlife earlier than their male counterparts, and in more sustained, consistent, and damaging ways (Grisham 1).

Nevertheless, midlife's reconstruction did undermine the advantages of men in a culture where aging had previously been understood as a gradual ascent

towards wisdom and influence (Pickard 69-70). European representations of the life course, often depicted in "Ages and Stages" images, had long posited that the prime of a man's life was in his fifth and sixth decades, and that aging (for men) should be understood as the attainment of wisdom and eminence (Looser, "Age and Aging" 170-71). Industrial capitalism's valorization of youthful male bodies as symbols of economic productivity troubled this narrative, eventually transforming midlife's culturally constructed meanings. By the end of the Victorian period, midlife masculinity was understood less as the culmination of triumphant manhood and more as a period of incipient decline, the first signs of which (graying hair, a lined face) were to be warded-off, disguised, or flat-out denied if men were to avoid feeling haunted by anxieties of economic unproductivity, sexual marginalization, and cultural redundancy.

This anxiety is often written on the bodies of Dickens's middle-aged male characters, whose graying hair and careworn faces reflect a deeper sense of disappointment at how their lives have turned out and register a growing awareness of the insecurity into which the cultural reconstruction of midlife has thrust them. Rumty Wilfer, the put-upon middle-aged clerk in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865), typifies the physical, economic, and existential indeterminacy of these characters. He is "chubby, smooth, and innocent," "boyish" enough "that his old schoolmaster meeting him in Cheapside, might have been unable to withstand the temptation of caning him on the spot." Yet, despite this boyishness, he is also growing "rather grey" and has "signs of care on his expression" (32); he is seemingly both young and old at the same time, belonging properly to neither one conventional life-stage nor another. These visible markers of physical decline are linked to Wilfer's domestic and professional troubles, which manifest themselves in a disparity between the size of his large family and the meagre amount that he earns as a clerk. His failure to attain any position of eminence that would grant him authority over younger colleagues exposes him to their teasing, because they are "'more or less younger than I am, and they're playful'" (605). Wilfer's ambiguous appearance, and his evident separation from (and rejection by) his younger colleagues, mark him as belonging to a category outside of any binary division of life into youth and old

age, signaling Dickens's participation in the wider reconstruction of midlife as a distinctive, and often anxious, life stage.

Dickens pays particular attention to the most visible signs of bodily decline associated with the onset of midlife, focusing in particular on signs of gray and graying hair as a means of signaling a character's transition to midlife. Gray hair offers an easy visual coding for aging in characters such as Wilfer and Barbox Brothers, the central figure in Dickens's 1866 Christmas story "Mugby Junction." Barbox, Dickens's narrator notes, is "within five years of fifty either way" but has also "turned grey too soon, like a neglected fire" (1), an image that links aging to entropy. Heath reminds us that the significance of such visible signs of aging is inherently unstable: aging "occurs in the interplay between physical facts and socially constructed meanings, [and] any experience of its biological aspects is always filtered through how we have learned to perceive them" (5). Comparing discussions of graying hair in Dickens's early and later fiction indicates some of the changes that took place in its cultural construction across his career. Two decades before the appearance of Wilfer and Barbox, the visible signs of old Martin Chuzzlewit's aging had been read as venerability by Pecksniff as he attempted to talk his way into the older man's will: "'And *you* regret the having harboured unjust thoughts of me! *you* with those gray hairs!'". Chuzzlewit replies modestly that "'Regrets … are the natural property of gray hairs'" (158), but he does so from a position of power and condescension: a wealthy older man patronizing and manipulating a younger and less successful flatterer. Even his apparent disavowal of Pecksniff's assumption that aging brings wisdom is understood as a sign of his canniness, and neither interlocutor hints that the elder man's hair denotes a diminishment of his authority or is something to be ashamed of, far less disguised. Chuzzlewit's gray hair (or, rather, the old age for which it stands metonymically) both generates respect and confers authority upon his words and actions, operating hand in glove with his wealth and position in the world. By the mid-1860s, however, the gray hair of characters such as Wilfer metonymizes decline and reduced physical vitality.

Given the socially constructed nature of the meanings attached to visible marks of midlife's emergence, this development might plausibly reflect either a shift in how society perceived visible signs of aging in men, or how Dickens himself perceived it, or both. It may also have had its roots in Dickens's own troubled experience of aging, and his participation as a consumer in the new market for cosmetics to disguise its signs, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century (Shannon 181-82). Long before Dickens reached the conventional entry-point to midlife he was anxious about the visible marks of age on his own body and took steps to disguise them. In a letter of 24 March 1844, he told Angus Fletcher of his desire to shut himself away in the Royal Observatory at Greenwich for three months, "that I may grow a reasonable moustache" (London Society not being "favorable to the cultivation of that Vegetable") (*Letters* 80-82).Dickens clearly wanted to emerge with his "Vegetable" fully formed, bypassing the stages of stubble and wisp altogether. Three months later, on 28 June, he sent his brother Fred an urgent note instructing him to buy "a bottle of dye for my unprecedented Moustache at the Baron's in Regent Street, or some such good place" (152). His "Vegetable" was now fully formed but it seems to have been deficient in color: salted with gray perhaps but, in any case, so insufficiently dark that he felt the need to disguise its failings cosmetically. Even as he wrote the final instalments of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in the spring of 1844, a novel which associates gray hair with wisdom, Dickens was privately figuring his 32-year old body as an unacceptably aging vessel and disguising the signs of his own transition into midlife.

Little is known about purveyors of men's cosmetics; Kathleen Tillotson's editorial note to this letter in *The Pilgrim Edition* advises readers that "None of the several hairdressers in Regent St called himself a Baron; perhaps Antoine Ferrier, *artiste en cheveaux*" or "Louis Rossi" (152), but recent periodical digitizations allow us to fill in some of the missing information. Among many advertisements for hair dye and baldness cures, digital searches throw up an advertisement in *The Athenaeum* published on 15 June 1844, less than two weeks before Dickens sent Fred on his mission of mercy, announcing that Baron Dupuytren, purveyor of "medicated pomatum for the growth and preservation

of the hair," wishes to inform "the Nobility and Gentry that he has removed his Laboratory" from Regent Street to Great Russell Street. The original Baron Guillaume Dupuytren (1777-1835), after whom the business was named, had been a well-respected French surgeon and anatomist who had also concocted a popular tincture for baldness. His recipe ("purified beef marrow … acetate of lead … tincture of cloves … mix") (Dinnefore 123) was widely circulated in domestic management and medical books throughout the 1830s and beyond, making Dupuytren a name to conjure with, among the gray and balding, long after his death in 1835.[1]

Despite this pseudo-Baron's flit from Regent Street to Bloomsbury, Fred's trip to the West End may not have been in vain; his brother's reference to "some such good place" indicates that there was both a thriving market for dyes in central London and a hierarchy of vendors; good alternatives must have been easy to come by. Dickens's need for dye was acutely felt because he was scheduled to leave London for Italy four days later, on 2 July 1844. His association of dark moustaches with normative masculinity would become more apparent on this near year-long trip. While in Genoa, he found himself confused by the "preposterous custom the gentry have of addressing each other—men, observe!—as *she*, and in the first person. So that instead of saying 'how are you?' to a great fellow with a black moustache; you say 'Is she quite well?"' (*Letters* 176). Perhaps the troubling combination of feminine pronouns with the manly signifiers of those "black" moustaches was heightened, for Dickens, by the imperfect blackness of his own facial hair? It was certainly a recurring theme in his fiction. A few years later he would brilliantly describe the horseback ride in which the young David Copperfield is compelled to stare closely at the face of the interloping Murdstone—the first adult male that he has ever really encountered in a childhood spent surrounded by young women:

> His hair and whiskers were blacker and thicker, looked at so near, than even I had given them credit for being. A squareness about the

[1] Dickens's faith that the Baron ran a "good place" appears to have been misplaced: his most celebrated and heavily advertised product—a homeopathic cocoa—was found, in an 1855 exposé of sharp practice by the *Lancet*, "to be made mostly of potato flour" and "largely adulterated with red earthy matter" (Hassall 222, 264).

> lower part of his face, and the dotted indication of the strong black beard he shaved close every day, reminded me of the wax-work that had travelled into our neighbourhood some half-a-year before. This, his regular eyebrows, and the rich white, and black, and brown, of his complexion—confound his complexion, and his memory!—made me think him, in spite of my misgivings, a very handsome man. (21)

Clearly none of the Baron's unguents or pomatums are required *chez* Murdstone: the masculine vigor of the man seducing Copperfield's mother can be read in follicular detail and is made manifest in the blackness and thickness of that "strong" facial hair.

Given the strength of Dickens's association between masculinity and dark hair it is no surprise that he felt compelled to participate in the rapidly developing market for cosmetics designed to disguise the onset of middle age. Barbox and Wilfer might thus be read as Dickens's graying doppelgängers, each more willing than he had been to allow these visible markers of midlife to remain legible to observers who might share Dickens's belief that each rogue gray hair was an index to its possessor's declining potency.

The Demographics of the Mid-Victorian Midlife

Merely noting midlife's onset by acknowledging its effects on the body does little to further its reconstruction as a distinctive life-stage, with its own rhetoric of tropes and shared cultural expectations. If gray hairs and lined faces are signifiers for Dickens, then what, for him, are their signifieds? In the rest of this essay, I want to suggest that in Dickens's late midlives these visible marks of bodily decline are accompanied by, and to some extent vouch for, psychological anxieties that seem to characterize midlife masculinity.

Perhaps the most significant of these is an anxiety that springs from a recognition of modern life's contingency. According to David Wellbery's influential definition, "The contingent is … that which is possible otherwise, the contradictory of necessity":

> I am certain my reader knows roughly what I am talking about; you have experienced the embarrassment that ensues when you are

> asked: how did you get to be, for example, a student of literature, or the spouse or partner of that particular person? You can offer no answer to these questions that would derive from a law or necessity, from a plan or project. No, it was a matter of happenstance, of a lucky or not-so-lucky *encounter* at a unique place and time. (237-38)

In Wellbery's account a recognition of these multiple alternate possibilities emerges with decisive clarity in the 1870s, most notably in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, and the contingent is thus both "the space of our modernity" (255) and a function of an increasingly data-saturated episteme. Christina Lupton similarly associates it with the onset of modernity, arguing that contingency is "the price we pay for a society too complex to be understood as a whole. It is the symptom of our occupying it one vantage point at a time, knowing that there are others out there that must be obscured from view if we are to operate at all" (376).

If Dickens is rarely discussed as a writer fascinated with the contingent it is because critical discussion of his reckoning with contingency has been conducted using different terms. His fascination with choices not taken, paths not followed, and decisions that might have been made in a contrary or alternate manner has coalesced under two headings: the counterfactual and the optative. Robyn Warhol has used the notion of counterfactual (or "counterfictional," as she has it) to explore alterity's narratological implications in Dickens's fiction, identifying in his narrative refusals traces of a "counterfictional storyworld," which characterizes his late style (Warhol 235). Discussions of the optative draw on Andrew H. Miller's influential consideration of the moral and generic implications of the presence of unlived alternate lives in his narratives; a shadow-presence in Dickens's fiction that Miller claims is "an intrinsic feature of realistic representation" (782). Readers recognize, and respond to, characters who harbor fantasies that life might just as easily have turned out otherwise, in Dickens and elsewhere. Attentiveness to the representation of aging in Dickens suggests a complementary way of understanding these themes, as both the recognition of contingency and the subsequent optative desire for an alternative narrative trajectory are revealed to be functions of aging, unattainable before the onset of midlife. It is only once the *Bildungsroman* narrative trajectory has

been completed that Dickens's characters can obtain what he calls, in *Our Mutual Friend*, a "vantage ground of inspection" (373) from which to take stock of life. And because contingency is generated by the disappointments involved in obtaining this perspective, midlife is reconstructed as the space from which a view of life's multiple alternate unlived possibilities can first, and most poignantly, be taken. Dickens's young men may think, like Herbert Pocket in *Great Expectations*, that the "grand thing" is "to look about you" (184). His middle-aged men look backwards, in disappointment and regret.

Before considering Dickens's representation of contingency, it would be helpful to describe in greater detail how the early Victorians understood the different stages of the life course and to cast some light on why Dickens's late midlife men are characterized by disappointment and regret. After all, the optative mood in its original grammatical form expresses future-oriented desire rather than retrospective melancholy. Interest in the changes that take place across a life was as widely shared by the mid-Victorians as it had been by previous generations, not least among the demographers and statisticians who compiled and analyzed the vast bureaucratic machinery of census returns, government Blue Books, and other forms of statistical accounting to which the Victorian novel has often been compared. The work of one anonymous demographer, writing in response to the 1851 Census, suggests that the transformation of midlife was underway but incomplete in the 1850s. In an attempt to delineate the characteristics of each stage of life, he divides life into twenty-year *vicenniads*, each of which has its own (highly gendered) characteristics. To read across these summaries is to follow a developmental narrative in which midlife still has an uncertain status. The first *vicenniad*, which lasts from birth to the age of 20, he calls "the age of growth" and "the age of learning," in which "manner, knowledge, language, and skill—the traditional and hereditary acquisitions of mankind—are transmitted to the new generation" (*The Census of Great Britain in 1851* 30). The next (from 20-40) is the "athletic, poetic, inventive, beautiful age,—the prime of life," in which major events take place that determine each individual's future course: "the apprentice becomes the journeyman … Marriage is contracted, and the man hears the

name of father from the lips of his children" (30). Between the ages of 40 and 60, the era of midlife, the fruits of all the good decisions, hard work, and sound investments made in youth will inevitably be reaped:

> [W]e see men in the higher professions first attain eminence; the capital which has been expended in their education returns rapidly; their established character gives them the confidence of their fellow-men; experience and practice enable them to deal as proficients with the great interests and questions of the world. They see their children enter life. The edifices, of which the foundations were laid before, spring up around them. The prudent, tried, skilful, inventive man now often becomes, in England, a master, and controls establishments in which he was once the clerk, the workman, the apprentice boy. It may be justly called the intellectual age—the legislative, the judicial age. The statesman speaks, and his voice reverberates over an attentive nation. (30)

This middle phase of life is characterized, both here and in Heath, by its dependence upon actions and events that have taken place in youth; the attainment of eminence is figured as an inevitable return on educational investments that have been made decades earlier; proficiency results from the experience and practice gained in prior life-stages; new edifices "spring up" (as if by magic) but only on foundations that have been laid "before." There is no evidence here to support the narrative of midlife as decline—this is clearly an age of triumph rather than anxiety—but nor do any of midlife's triumphs have their genesis in midlife itself. Nothing, here, is initiated by the middle-aged subject in middle age. Every good is an outworking of prior decisions. We can see these assumptions written into innumerable Victorian novels, where plot is for the young and the middle-aged need only wait, killing time, until their already-determined narrative spools out to its inevitable end.

Midlife's narrative quietude seems pleasant enough in this telling. Men merely have to wait for life's good things to fall into their laps (an assumption that speaks to the class biases of both the author and his intended readership). Yet, the middle-aged men of Dickens's late fiction are much less certain that their earlier decisions were sound and that they are on course to enjoy the fruits of their earlier labors. Dickens's late midlives are increasingly fraught, regretful,

and disappointed; the bodily decline evident in graying hair and lined faces is typically accompanied by a feeling of deflation as his characters realize that the reality of their midlife fails to match the expectations of domestic bliss and financial security that they formed in their youth.

This sense of disappointment, and the desire to reject it, may now seem to be universal tropes of a certain strain of midlife masculinity, but there are grounds for believing that it may have emerged with particular force and frequency in mid-Victorian Britain as a function of the nation's changing age profile and demographic make-up. By the 1860s, it had become clear that Britain was undergoing a significant demographic transformation that affected the relative proportions of young, old, and middle-aged men (and women) in society. Before this process began in the late eighteenth-century, Britain had been a country of high fertility and high mortality. People typically had large families, but many of them also died young. As a result of this pattern, its population remained largely stable. However, a combination of a sustained increase in the birth rate that began in the late eighteenth century, and a declining adult mortality rate throughout the nineteenth century, saw England's population grow rapidly: doubling (and then some) from 8.3 million in 1801, to 16.7 million in 1851 (Wrigley and Schofield 588).

This sort of statistic is a staple of historicist criticism of Victorian novels, often used to explain both the booming literary market which sustained the novel's rise to cultural pre-eminence, and the plenitude of characters that Victorian realist novels typically depict. Yet, recent scholarship by Nicholas Daly (2015) and Emily Steinlight (2018), among others, has begun to consider in greater detail some of the ways in which these demographic changes shaped Victorian fiction, and their work offers new directions for Victorian aging studies. It seems significant, for example, that these symmetrical developments in birth and mortality rates created an imbalance in the demographic mix of mid-nineteenth-century society, which in turn means that midlife's emergence as a newly anxious life-stage coincided with a bulge in the numbers and proportions of the middle-aged in the British population. When the ages of the nation's population were first recorded in the 1821 census, demographic

analysis revealed that the numbers of people under the age of twenty, and those aged twenty and above, were roughly equal. When this balance between youth and adulthood was repeated in 1831, the demographer (and originator of the census) John Rickman identified it as an invariable law of population (*The Census of Great Britain in 1851* 27). Yet data gathered in the next two census exercises proved this to be too hasty a judgment and, by 1851, it was clear that this early-century equilibrium had been caused by a sustained baby boom that was now, in relative terms, tailing off. While those born in this boom aged in an era of increasing longevity, the nation's birth rate began to slow; this combination meant that Britain's population became increasingly top-heavy, with the middle-aged and elderly soon beginning to outnumber the young. Between 1821 and 1851, there was a 37% increase in the number of people aged between 0 and 20; in the same period, however, the numbers of those aged between 20 and 60 increased by almost 60% (*The Census of Great Britain in 1851* 27). Where previously youth and age had been in equilibrium, by 1841 the number of adults exceeded the number of young people by almost 700,000; a significant figure in a population of 15.9 million (27-28).

By the time Dickens entered his own final decade, an unexpected but consequential shift had taken place in the intergenerational balance of British society. Britain's older population had expanded more rapidly than its young, creating a new surplus of middle-aged and older Victorians. Increasing numbers of old and middle-aged men occupied the commanding heights of economic and public life, living and working for longer than their predecessors in earlier generations; this inevitably left more men waiting patiently in junior positions to take their place, regretting their failure to advance in life and wondering where, for them, it had all gone wrong. When seen in this context, the disparity between Dickens's late midlives and those imagined by the anonymous demographer begin to seem like a function of Dickens's literary realism, and his attentiveness to larger demographic movements in the nation's generational constitution. The early decades of Victoria's reign were marked by a growing generational imbalance and Dickens's recurring focus on middle-aged men who have failed to "attain eminence", whose foundations prove to have been

haphazardly laid, and who find the master's role already occupied, reflects an increasingly common experience at a time when opportunities for the middle-aged were more restricted than had previously been the case.

MIDLIFE, YOUTH, AND RETROSPECT IN *DAVID COPPERFIELD* AND *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

As the cultural construction of midlife began to change under the impress of demographic transition and capitalism's valorization of youth, Dickens's middle-aged men become haunted by the unrealized hopes of their younger selves. A sense that things might have turned out better had *something* gone differently in the past, and a desire to identify precisely what that something was by a process of retrospective self-examination, become keynotes of his depiction of midlife masculinity. Theorizations of the life course had always depended on the assertion of fundamental discontinuities between the same selves in youth and old age. "In time," our 1851 demographer notes, "man differs almost as much from himself as he does from the things around him" but also that "the changes which he undergoes are not wrought solely by external circumstances, but arise in the ordinary course of his life. How different is he in infancy, in the prime of manhood, and in decrepit age" (*The Census of Great Britain in 1851* 27).

Yet, representing these different phases of selfhood, and the aging process that connects them, proved difficult for Victorian novelists. The form's development tended towards a lateral expansion rather than an elongation throughout time of the sort that would allow different life stages of the same character to be represented in one work of fiction. The novel's scope may have expanded to create more narrative space, but it was space that was filled by an ever-increasing cast of characters, as fiction-writers responded to urbanization and the development of a mass readership. Recent work by John Plotz and Alex Woloch, along with that of Daly and Steinlight, has helped us to gain a better understanding of the "social density of the century's texts" (Steinlight 19) and the ways in which population growth registered even on novels that seem to focus on an individual's *Bildung*. Expanding on this scholarship, Jacob Jewusiak

identifies what he describes as a "temporal compromise" in Victorian realist fiction: one that allowed novelists to depict a much broader range of Victorian subjects than had previously been thought novelistically possible, yet, which also limited their ability to represent both the aging of an individual character and the sense of duration that characterizes any life. Arguing that a temporally lateral expansion of narrative space in which characters operated allowed authors such as Dickens "to accommodate the swell of urban life," Jewusiak observes that "the time allotted to represent the characters becomes shorter. In other words, because so many characters appear in the Victorian novel there is simply *not enough time* to consistently represent the transformations that age registers" on each of them (49, emphasis in original).

Dickens's use of retrospective narrative in both *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* goes some way towards addressing this gap by allowing middle-aged narrators to demonstrate self-development across two stages of the life course. Their accounts of their early lives are predicated on an awareness that a gap exists between the self in youth and the same self, changed in and by middle age. Each narrator responds differently to this recognition and in ways that correspond broadly with my suggestion that Dickens's understanding of midlife developed in new directions as he approached the final decade of his career. Copperfield repeatedly wonders that such an unpromising childhood could result in his successful midlife, while Pip regrets the shoddy behavior of a young man led astray by the promise of social advancement.

As *Bildungsroman* narratives, each novel figures youth as a period of intensely-plotted activity and midlife as a time of static reflection. Middle age is a simple working out, and living through, of plots whose trajectories were determined in youth, echoing (to varying degrees) the logic of the different *vicenniads* outlined above. Copperfield's long and extraordinarily detailed narrative ends with his marriage to Agnes, an event that is followed by just two further chapters in which decades of midlife are compressed into a strikingly rapid sequence. Childhood events receive a disproportionate weight in the novel's narrative economy. David's brief trip on horseback with Murdstone is recounted in 1000 words, while his first decade of married life is compressed into just 19: "I had

advanced in fame and fortune, my domestic joy was perfect, I had been married ten happy years" (844). In the lines that follow, we learn (in remarkably short order) that he and Agnes have children, hear news of old friends, and (in the next few pages) look forward to old age together and eventually death: "O Agnes, O my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed" (855). Comparing the narrative space given over to the events of youth with this whirlwind account of midlife and old age suggests that, to all intents and purposes, the novel's plot stops with the successful formation of a nuclear family, just as Pip's plot stops when he fails to wed either Estella or, as we shall see, Biddy. One makes one's bed in youth, Dickens suggests, and lies in it when middle-aged: thinking, and in some cases writing, about the past.

The nature of these thoughts changes as Dickens himself encounters middle age. Written when Dickens was in his late thirties, David Copperfield's midlife is marked by a smug sense of self-satisfaction; but while Copperfield is clearly satisfied with his lot, the midlives of Dickens's later fiction are marked by a creeping sense of failure and regret. *Great Expectations*, written as he approached the landmark age of fifty, exemplifies both this development and the increasing importance to Dickens of contingency, evidenced in Dickens's desire to establish a distance between the narrating and narrated Pips through a recurring and often implicit critique of the latter by the former. At times, Pip's tendency towards regretful retrospection seems to be an aspect of character that develops in youth, stemming from his recognition of the gap between the prospects he might have had, if rich, and the very different prospects of an apprenticed smith. He recounts sitting on a riverbank with Biddy and speculating—thoughtlessly, and perhaps with a degree of cruelty that he does nothing to disguise—on what his desire "to lead a very different sort of life from the life I lead now," might mean for both of their futures:

> "If I could have settled down," I said to Biddy … "if I could have settled down and been but half as fond of the forge as I was when I was little, I know it would have been much better for me. You and I and Joe would have wanted nothing then, and Joe and I would perhaps have gone partners when I was out of my time, and I might even have grown up to keep company with you, and we might have

> sat on this very bank on a fine Sunday, quite different people. I should have been good enough for *you*; shouldn't I, Biddy?" (128)

This passage doubles and ironizes this sense of contingent regret, as we see teenage Pip looking back the few years to his childhood and regretting what he assumes is a decisive moment in his life. In this reckoning, Pip believes that his humiliation by Estella has turned him into a "quite different" person, one who could no longer grow up to "keep company" with Biddy. At the same time, the middle-aged narrator looks back at his teenaged self, and recognizes that his misinterpretation of the past is causing him to miss an opportunity to court the woman with whom he might have lived a happier life. The teenager's nascent and naïve recognition of contingency is overwhelmed by the middle-aged narrator's sense of its power, depth, and complexity, although recognition of this moment's complexity is delayed until later in the novel, when we see Pip feel genuine remorse for the choice he makes in this scene. After the death of Magwitch and the collapse of his expectations, he returns home full of his plan to remind Biddy "of our old confidences in my first unhappy time" (472) and to ask her to marry him, only to find that she has now married Joe; news that causes him first to faint and then to emigrate.

As in *David Copperfield*, the culmination of the novel's marriage plot largely marks the end of Dickens's narrative interest and Pip's final loss of Biddy stands as the terminal event in the story of his becoming. Henceforth, we assume, the circumstances of the remainder of his life have been determined and are scarcely worth narrating. Pip skips through decades of midlife in the few pages of the novel that remain, giving only brief snippets of information about what follows: his decision to move overseas, to remain a bachelor, and to knuckle down to business as a clerk in Clerriker and Co. Both versions of the novel's ending linger over his final meeting with Estella as a return to the erotic contestations of youth but for Pip, as for his predecessor Copperfield, the narrator-protagonist's plot recedes as midlife approaches and his life assumes what appears to be a settled outline. His disappointment at the shape of this outline exemplifies Dickens's positioning of midlife as a space in which the gap

between past hopes and present realities provokes optative reflection and a sense of life's contingency.

What Might Have Been Vs. What Is: Contingency and Midlife Regret

Dickens's most concise encapsulation of midlife regret comes in Rumty Wilfer's first words in *Our Mutual Friend*: "'Ah me!', said he, 'what might have been is not what is!'" (33). Wilfer utters them as he trudges across an unprepossessing part of north London towards his comically unhappy home that consists of a wife and two daughters (the last of "Many" who have already gone out into the world (34)) who are unhappy with the poor living conditions that they can afford. Wilfer's "limited salary" barely supports his "unlimited family" (32). While we never discover the precise contours of the alternate life he regrets, Dickens implies both that his present circumstances were avoidable and that the opportunity to improve them has gone.

My own claim, that Wilfer's utterance exemplifies an epiphanic recognition of life's contingency typical of Dickens's late representations of midlife masculinity, is built partly on other theorizations of this and similar passages by critics who also note the frequency with which Dickens deploys this regretful tone in his late fiction, but without considering how it relates to aging. Miller's influential identification of an "optative mood" in Dickens's writing is drawn not from the optative mood in grammar (where it expresses hope or optimism), but from the work of moral philosopher Stuart Hampshire who recasts it as a mode of self-examination whose reflective nature is perfectly suited to the concerns of poetry and fiction:

> Any person's actual history can be seen in retrospect as a track between two margins. Just over the left margin are all those things that could or might have happened to him, and that nearly happened to him, stretching back along the margin into the past. On the right-hand side of the track are all those things that he might have done, and that he nearly did, and that were real possibilities or options for him, stretching back into the past. He may, looking back, regret what might have been, seeing another possible life for himself, regretting the sudden turns of fortune … at the same time as he regrets the

> choices that he failed to make, the other possible life that he might have made for himself. (101)

Hampshire's brilliant image makes clear the necessarily retrospective nature of moral self-reflection and, as Miller has shown, corresponds perfectly to the way that Dickens uses Pip's retrospective narration in *Great Expectations* as a means of laying bare every bad decision that he makes in the course of his early life (Miller 781). For Miller, the optative's presence serves as a marker of psychological verisimilitude and ought to be understood as "an intrinsic feature" of fictional realism. It characterizes the individual who is aware of his "present desires and feelings, and of his present situation, as indissolubly tied to his past good and bad fortune and to his past good and bad decisions" (782). This, as Hampshire points out, is a common form of "moral reflection" which "everyone to some extent experiences," and our familiarity with its processes means that its representation in fiction helps ground a novel's narrative in the reader's experience. It is also a retrospective mode that is age-dependent: without a gap between past and present selves this self-interrogation will yield few results.

Dickens's late fiction suggests not just that the middle-aged have generated more of these unled lives than the young, internalizing each within the (often disappointing) reality of their situations, but that midlife is characterized by a recognition of this contingency. For Lupton, one "defining feature" of contingency is precisely this realization "that things that have already happened might have been otherwise" (375). Her formulation chimes with Wilfer's acknowledgement that although things are ineluctably (and perhaps regrettably), they need not have been; that neither his habitation of this part of London nor his straitened circumstances, his unhappy marriage or stale office routine have been in any way necessary or determined. Although he understands that, at some point in the past, the endless possibilities of his life have been whittled down to just one, he nevertheless sees his present circumstances within (to use Niklas Luhmann's influential definition of contingency) "the horizon of possible variations" (106), perceiving other scenarios—indeed, entirely different lives—that also have been possible. What

might have been is not what is but, just as pertinently, what is might not have been.

Pip, too, recognizes contingency in *Great Expectations*, writing a narrative which mercilessly sets out every missed opportunity and wrong choice that he took on his way to a comfortable, but still disappointing, midlife. Yet, by omitting or truncating the details of his protagonists' later lives, Dickens reinforces the construction of middle age as a period marked by reflection and retrospection rather than action and anticipation, an era of decline and marginalization rather than continued significance and agency. In which case, we might be tempted to ask what use is this recognition of life's potential alterity to Pip? Or to Rumty Wilfer? By the time each earns this knowledge of what they might have done in youth to improve their lives in middle age, it is too late for either man to make other, better choices. The middle-aged are deprived of agency when midlife is constructed as a stage in which plot can only ever be the working-out of *Bildung* narrative trajectories. It is this sense of futility and missed opportunity that makes the recognition of contingency in Dickens's late fiction such a melancholy affair, couched in Miller's optative mood. Circumstanced as they are, his characters' only possible course of action is to try and figure out where it all went wrong.

"Where Shall I Go Next?": Dickens's Late Embrace of Midlife Refashioning

I want to conclude this essay by discussing one of Dickens's final representations of midlife, which rejects the archetypal belatedness of midlife desires for alterity and reimagines middle age as a potentially liberatory period of renewal and plural narrative possibility: a space of refashioning and plotting different from, yet comparable in intensity to, youth. "Mugby Junction" contains all the elements of Dickens's reconstruction of midlife that I have set out in this essay: a recognition of the onset of physical decline, a retrospective self-audit, and a regretfully belated identification of life's contingency that is triggered by the character's recognition of his passage into middle-aged quietude. In its opening pages, a traveller alights at a railway junction in the

middle of the night with no clear onward destination in mind. He is, we discover during a rapid expositional retrospect of his youth, a middle-aged man—"within five years of fifty either way" (1)—born illegitimately and raised as the "unacknowledged son" (3) of a cruel father under a series of false names: first Young Jackson, then Old Jackson, and now Barbox Brothers, the name of his former employer which he has adopted simply because it is stencilled on his luggage. In this rapid account of Barbox's early life Dickens reverses the *Bildungsroman* assumption that youth is the proper object of narrative interest and midlife its culmination; this, it seems, will not be a narrative in which a middle-aged man looks backwards but one in which he considers both his present and future course.

In many ways, Barbox stands as a culmination of Dickens's late representation of midlife masculinity. He is both visibly declining (gray hair, lined face) and dissatisfied with the midlife determined by the unhappy circumstances of his life thus far. His miserable childhood was succeeded by an equally unhappy career in a business he found both "distasteful and oppressive" (2). "I have been what I don't like all my life" (3), he observes, half-echoing both the dissatisfaction of Wilfer and the regretful retrospection of Pip. Yet, Barbox struggles to regain agency in his life in what might be read either as a rejection of the emergence of midlife as a period of decline or as a midlife crisis *avant la lettre*. Boarding the train and then alighting at Mugby are attempts to sever himself from the determining plotlines of his past and begin life anew. He has wound up the firm, abandoned both his home and his name, and in midlife has struck out, literally and metaphorically, in a new direction.

Barbox originally had no intention of alighting at Mugby Junction—a windy, "comfortless" (1) place—but with its seven different branch lines, each leading towards different destinations and yet more intersecting lines, the junction neatly illustrates both the possibilities of his new condition of economic freedom and his novel sense of having escaped from the expected *telos* of a midlife, determined by the contingent events that have shaped his life. "'Where shall I go next?'" the newly liberated traveller asks himself, "'I can go anywhere from here'" (4). In midlife, he has attained the freedom of a *Bildungsroman* hero.

Yet, choosing a new destination proves more difficult than he had imagined as we see when he climbs a bridge to observe the tangle of tracks, down each of which lies an alternate possible future:

> But there were so many lines. Gazing down upon them from a bridge at the Junction, it was as if the concentrating companies formed a great industrial exhibition of the works of extraordinary ground spiders that spun iron. And then so many of the lines went such wonderful ways, so crossing and curving among one another, that the eye lost them. And then some of them appeared to start with the fixed intention of going five hundred miles, and all of a sudden gave it up at an insignificant barrier, or turned off into a workshop. And then others, like intoxicated men, went a little way very straight, and surprisingly slued round and came back again. And then others were so chock-full of trucks of coal, others were so blocked with trucks of casks, others were so gorged with trucks of ballast, others were so set apart for wheeled objects like immense iron cotton-reels: while others were so bright and clear, and others were so delivered over to rust and ashes and idle wheelbarrows out of work, with their legs in the air (looking much like their masters on strike), [and] there was no beginning, middle or end to the bewilderment. (4)

It is a perfect image of contingency and there is evidently more at stake here than a simple question of which train the story's central character should catch. Perhaps one clue to the significance he attaches to this decision can be found in his claim of perplexity, a word whose root *plectere* means to plait or interweave. Barbox's perplexity mimics the tangled scene that confronts him, but it is not just the lines that are entangled one with the other. Barbox's identity at midlife is involved in the confusion as well. Dickens links this paralyzing sense of confusion to the visible signs of age and anxiety that mark Barbox's life stage, as "the lines on his forehead … multiplied while he looked down, as if the railway Lines were getting themselves photographed on that sensitive plate" (4).

In one telling image, Barbox imagines the "train of [his] life," in which the different stages of his self over the life course are coupled together:

> Here, mournfully went by, a child who had never had a childhood or known a parent, inseparable from a youth with a bitter sense of his

> namelessness, coupled to a man the enforced business of whose best years had been distasteful and oppressive, linked to an ungrateful friend, dragging after him a woman once beloved. Attendant, with many a clank and wrench, were lumbering cares, dark meditations, huge dim disappointments, monotonous years. (2)

This pessimistic view of the relationship between past and present, youth and middle age, typifies Dickens's late construction of midlife as a period in which his characters seek to diagnose life's disappointments and indulge themselves in optative considerations of contingent past events. And yet, Barbox, unlike his predecessors in Dickens's final decade, rejects this restrictive understanding of midlife, even though it is partly one of Dickens's own construction, and resolves his dilemma by accepting uncertainty and embracing the contingent. He refuses to allow the past to define him and seizes control of determining his own future. After exploring the seven different lines, each of which generates one of the stories in this portmanteau tale, he chooses to remain in Mugby, recognizing "that Mugby Junction was a Junction of many branches, invisible as well as visible, and had joined him to an endless number of byways" (11). This recognition seems to have resolved his midlife despondency: "For, whereas he would, but a little while ago, have walked these streets blindly brooding, he now had eyes and thoughts for a new external world" (11). By choosing to remain at the junction, Barbox acknowledges and makes peace with a midlife free from determinisms incurred in youth; as Ruth Livesey suggests, his redemption "lies not in finding a dwelling place in modernity, but in the active embrace of the very idea of existence as network and junction" (218). Rather than brooding over the mistakes and injustices of the past, Barbox acts to reshape his own (mid)life in the present in collaboration with the community he finds at Mugby—a collaborative impetus that is formally emphasized in the portmanteau story itself. By allowing Barbox to uncouple himself from his past and, thereby, to shape his own uncertain present, Dickens finally reimagines and re-presents midlife as a life stage. The middle-aged can, in this instance, both sustain narrative interest and exercise agency, shaping plots, and their futures, through the formation of new social bonds, free from the determining and contingent circumstances of youth.

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