Crocodile tears and beaver-hat hearts:
Weeping, Authenticity, and Emotional Edification in Dickens's Early Fiction

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Charles Dickens's fiction suggests that tears need not be hidden and can even be therapeutic. In *Great Expectations* (1860-1), published at the height of the author's fame, Pip whistles nonchalantly as he leaves Joe and Biddy to travel to London, only to weep as soon as he is out of sight of his home. He reflects, "we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before – more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle" (160). Dickens's earlier fiction prepares extensive foundations for this assertion of the didactic value of bodily fluids, moving far beyond the standard dichotomy of taboo tears and shows of sentiment to portray tears and their release in surprisingly sophisticated and scientific ways. Anthony Trollope, Dickens's rival, famously derided him as "Mr Popular Sentiment" (200), mocking the "make 'em laugh, make 'em cry" manipulation he perceived at work in Dickens's early novels.[1] The most extensive accounts of crying in and about Dickens's early fiction relate to the 1840s Christmas Books and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41). Little Nell comforts her grandfather when he cries (see fig. 1) and in the 1840s grown men reported weeping copiously over her early death.[2] Later, her death was met with laughter or revulsion. Algernon Charles Swinburne found the character of Nell wholly unnatural – not angelic, but "a monster as inhuman as a baby with two heads" (183).[3] Recent readings of these texts have formed part of a broader re-assessment of a particularly intricate area of the history of emotion: Victorian sentimentality.[4] This forum essay focuses on two other novels, *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) and *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), which have yet to receive such extensive treatment in reassessments of sentiment and emotion. Their publication dates, at the beginning and end of Dickens's early novel-writing period respectively, allow us to place

these new readings of weeping scenes in the context of the author's evolving negotiation of complex theories about the emotional body, some of which did not emerge in physiological and psychological writings until several decades later.

Dickens's early fiction writings, from *Sketches* to *Dombey*, periodically present "fly on the wall" views of domestic scenes in which alleged masculine virtues, such as pride, stoicism, and resilience, are re-presented as cold, inhumane, and even inhuman. Mr Bumble, the parish beadle in *Oliver Twist*, evidently considers himself a manly stoic and is proud of his immunity to his wife's "paroxysm of tears":

> tears were not the things to find their way to Mr Bumble's soul; his heart was waterproof. Like washable beaver hats that improve with rain, his nerves were rendered stouter and more vigorous, by showers of tears, which, being tokens of weakness, and so as tacit admissions of his own power, pleased and exalted him. (296)

This beaver-hat heart not only blocks appeals to sympathy but actively *repels* them. When his wife attempts to soften him with a counterfeit display of emotion, crying "crocodile tears" (51),[5] she only strengthens his resolve. She had "tried the tears, because they were less troublesome than a manual assault; but she was quite prepared to make a trial of the latter mode," finding that her initial strategy is ridiculed (297).

By the time Dickens began *Dombey and* Son, he had six children under the age of nine, and weeping had become a feature of his family life. Mr Dombey runs his business on logic and efficiency, applying the same principals to his family life. In the opening pages of the novel, his wife dies after giving birth to a son. Anticipating her death, Dombey sensed that "he would be very sorry, and that he would find something gone from among his plate

and furniture, and other household possessions, which… could not be lost without sincere regret. Though it would be a cool, business-like, gentlemanly, self-possessed regret, no doubt" (5). After all, "Dombey and Son had often dealt in hides, but never in hearts" (2). This seems an inauspicious beginning, but Dickens describes Dombey's heart as "frozen" (51), not "waterproof", like Bumble's (296). Dombey's heart may be hard, but this is not necessarily permanent: in the right conditions, it may defrost.

Three years after the publication of *Dombey and Son*, the American physician William Sweetser considered "the secretion of tears" caused by "loss of kindred" (34), observing that "when the tears run copiously", the sufferer is brought to a "paroxysm of grief, just as sweating does to a paroxysm of fever", leading to relief. Authentic tears, then, were part of a restorative process.[6] In the 1880s, William James and the Danish physician Carl Lange both theorised that in the bereaved, "the vascular muscles are more strongly contracted than usual, so that the tissues and organs of the body become anaemic, [causing] the pale colour and collapsed features… cold, and shivering" (James, *Principles*, II, 444). Reading Dombey's cold body and pale complexion as signs of an absence of emotion would be erroneous, according to this theory. Instead, these features can be understood as results of involuntary physiological markers of grief.

Authentic weeping is not necessarily an immediate response to distressing stimuli. "Bottled up" emotion, to borrow a phrase from the American psychologist William James (*What is an Emotion?* 198), can produce more sustained tears, and Dickens uses this to considerable dramatic effect when young Paul Dombey passes away. Nonetheless, Henry Hallam was "so hardened as to be unable to look on it in any light but pure business" (Churchill 183-4). Fred Kaplan interprets this as a response to Dickens's manipulation, "eliciting from his readers feelings that he himself did not have in order to appeal to a debased popular taste for the purpose of selling more books," and thus rendering the narrative

"consciously insincere" (47-48). However, I contend that delayed emotional outpourings were not merely a dramatic device for Dickens.[7] Rather, Dickens demonstrates a fascination with the potentially volatile dynamic between visible equilibrium and intense feelings of guilt, anger, and grief beneath the surface.

In 1872, Charles Darwin observed that "when tears are restrained with difficulty, as in reading a pathetic story, it is almost impossible to prevent the various muscles… from slightly twitching or trembling" (152). The German anatomist Theodor Piderit observed the contraction of the *levator labii* nasal muscles (marked E on fig. 2) to lower and lengthen the nose. Discussing this diagram, Darwin noted that a "pinched look of the nose"[8] in crying served to slow the "downward flow of mucus and tears, and to prevent these fluids from spreading over the upper lip" (151), which consequently stretched out or stiffened. Habitual self-restraint, like Mr Dombey's, is invisible to all but the closest observers, who may trace a strained expression on the face, indicative of concentrated muscular and psychological effort.

The complex physiological, psychological, familial, and social networks of nerves and emotions that Dickens constructs around Mr Dombey cause a gradual, though unsteady, thawing process. The "fly on the wall" in Mr Dombey's study sets this thawing process in motion in the first monthly instalment. As "the last straw breaks the laden camel's back," Dombey "paced up and down the room in solitary wretchedness. For all his starched impenetrable dignity and composure, he wiped blinding tears from his eyes as he did so; and often said, with an emotion of which he would not, for the world, have had a witness, 'Poor little fellow!'" (20). Those last three words offer a vital glimpse of Dombey's potential capacity for sympathy, were he to acknowledge his tears and learn from them. Following the emotional cataclysm of his six-year-old son's death, he eventually notices that his remaining child, Florence, weeps, and he begins to recognise that he does not have a monopoly on authentic grief. Maia McAleavey suggests that John Forster's weeping over little Nell

"connects him with a social network of transferred love", so that "Rather than disciplining his tears, his tears discipline him" (138). A similar argument may be made for Dombey's emotional education, as he weeps over little Paul. His implied awareness that his paternal impulse is but a poor substitute for a mother's affection may be mapped onto Alexander Bain's theory of what occurs "when tender feeling mixes with sympathy" – "the gushing mood, with its pains and its pleasures." According to Bain, this phenomenon is "manifested primarily and markedly in the case of the helpless infancy deprived of protection and of all its needful supports; as when a new-born babe is left to perish" (143). Though Dombey's thawing emotions may dribble rather than gush, this narrative of conversion is a significant building block in Dickens's evolving doctrine, articulated by Pip over a decade later: that "we never need be ashamed of our tears."

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Notes

[1] The advice for aspiring novelists to 'make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait' has been attributed to both Wilkie Collins (see Winifred Hughes, quoted in Tondre, p. 585) and Charles Reade (Bloom p. 206).
[2] See the actor William Macready's letter to Dickens, 25 Jan. 1841, *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 193. Dickens also saw Macready "undisguisedly sobbing, and crying on the sofa" during his reading from *The Chimes* in December 1844. Letter to Mrs Dickens, 2 Dec. 1844, *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 234. In 1855 Margaret Oliphant exclaimed, "Poor little Nell! Who has ever been able to read the last chapter of her history with an even voice or a clear eye?" and embraced the "manifold fascinations of Dick Swiveller", whom "the hardest heart in the world… could not resist" (458).
[3] For a discussion of the curiously vehement, even angry, barrage of criticism of Dickens's sentimentality from the 1850s onwards, see Bethan Carney.
[4] See, for example, the 2007 issue of *19*, 'Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality', guest edited by *Nicola* Bown (including articles on Dickens by Sally Ledger, Emma Mason, and Heather Tilley), Carolyn Burdett, Bethan Carney, Maia McAleavey, and Catherine Waters. On child death also see Pat Jalland (24-38), Julie-Marie Strange, and Claire Wood (79-82).
[5] Tom Lutz notes the source of this metaphor: "When crocodiles fully extend their jaws to swallow a victim, the crocodile's lacrimal ducts are squeezed, and excess lubricating tears are produced. Real crocodiles' tears are in fact meaningless in emotional terms" (57). Dickens returned to false emotional displays of "crocodile tears" some years later in "Mrs Lirriper's Lodgings" (1863-4).
[6] Sweetser warns that those who are unable to weep "generally experience much sharper sufferings," darkly assuring healthy weepers that "it is seldom… if ever, that an individual dies in a fit of grief when weeping takes place freely" (36).
[7] If this were the case, surely his language would be more sensational, and perhaps Mr Dombey's eventual breakdown would take place in front of a larger audience instead of only Mr Toodles, the husband of his son's wet nurse.
[8] A phrase used by the surgeon Charles Langstaff in his letter to Darwin on these muscular movements (letter no. 7143).