IV

A Struggle in Time

With the river and marsh world in the background with all its intimations of human mortality, the remaining chapters of this study contemplate the world of life, which was Dickens's real concern. It will be recalled that the death-related features of the marsh share three basic qualities: monotony, coldness, and rigidity. Life, conversely, is characterized by diversity, warmth, and flexibility. Its values are positive rather than negative. Unlike the timeless, featureless, unchanging marsh world, perpetually in gray darkness, this world of life is diversified with natural sunshine and shadow, a riot of colors, an abundance of things, a constantly changing order of events, complex people with passions and dreams—and the ticking of a clock.

Moving into the image patterns that assert the positive values making life-in-time meaningful, one turns away from the death configurations but can never leave them behind, for full attachment to life requires continual awareness of human mortality. No one can permanently ignore that life is a private, individual affair rushing through time to its dissolution. How, then, is it possible to avoid the pessimism that would seem the only intelligent response to this fate?

The egocentric view of life need not in itself be pessimistic, of course, if one is prepared to reach out boldly beyond death to assert some kind of afterlife, or if one can rest comfortably in an established faith. The journey of Everyman, for instance, never questions whether anything could be more absorbingly meaningful than the private search for salvation. Nor is it pessimistic if one is
capable of achieving some kind of tragic stance. Oedipus rises to lonely greatness through his private voyage of discovery. Dickens, however, gives no evidence of being prepared for either a religious or a tragic escape from pessimism; his characters must look elsewhere for meaning.

It is notable, however, that in Dickens's creation of river and marsh, the egocentric view of life is presented as in itself defective. Lower river and marsh are always threatening and life-destroying. Their denizens are not just alone, a condition of all people at times: rather, they are all terribly isolated and alienated. Their journey of life is a journey of death, sterile and joyless, through a wasteland world. Guilt and corruption rise like the fog from both river and marsh. In addition to underscoring the inescapable fact of personal death, Dickens insistently warns his readers that they risk losing their one chance at life if they cannot or will not escape bondage to the egocentric view.

To perceive Dickens's total mode of experience, then, we must postulate, in addition to the linear private view of life, a circular public one visible from the perspective of society rather than of the individual. Whereas the linear view inevitably leads one to the terminal fact of personal death, the public and social view has no terminus but keeps leading past death back into life again. The individual may die, but human life itself goes on undiminished. The escape from pessimism according to Dickens, then, will be seen to be a social escape relating the individual to the remainder of humanity. Though every person lives but once briefly, individual life takes on extended meaning to the degree that each person can identify with the ongoing life of society.

Some sensitive Dickens characters, like Lizzie Hexam, seem always to have understood this secret. But more representative human beings, like Pip, must struggle painfully to outgrow the destructive demands of the ego. Not even Meredith had a more lively perception than Dickens that the most life-destroying force of all is the monster Ego. In the ensuing chapters, the antagonist will always be incarnated in one of the Protean shapes assumed by egotism.

The world of life is before all else a world where time matters, where people with a strong attachment to life also possess a strong sense of the meaning of time. One of their dependable characteristics is their recognition and continued awareness of their own mortality, which leads them not only to wish to "make much of time" in
the small period allotted them out of eternity, but also to view time warmly as a friend. Sometimes people previously detached or withdrawn from life, such as Scrooge or the Haunted Man, can be brought to this realization by being shown a vision of themselves dead, whereupon time takes on urgent meaning for them and they are drawn back into the stream of life with a feeling of rebirth. A proper sensitivity to time, then, helps define the person who will struggle to find a meaning in life that will prevent it from falling into the vast wasteland of Lady Dedlock and John Jasper.

One of the Christmas stories, an allegory clearly setting forth how meaning is given to life through a right relationship to time, illustrates explicitly the difference between the "one-way" and the "round-trip" ticket. The central character in "Mugby Junction" (Christmas story for 1866) is an anonymous man known first only as Barbox Brothers—"so to call the traveller on the warranty of his luggage." Landing at Mugby Junction "at past three o'clock of a tempestuous morning," he pulls up "the woollen muffler round his throat with both hands" and looks about him.

A place replete with shadowy shapes, this Mugby Junction in the black hours of the four-and-twenty. Mysterious goods trains, covered with pall and gliding on like vast weird funerals, conveying themselves guiltily away from the presence of the few lighted lamps, as if their freight had come to a secret and unlawful end. Half-miles of coal pursuing in a Detective manner, following when they lead, stopping when they stop, backing when they back. Red-hot embers showering out upon the ground, down this dark avenue, and down the other, as if torturing fires were being raked clear; concurrently, shrieks and groans and grinds invading the ear, as if the tortured were at the height of their suffering... An earthquake, accompanied with thunder and lightning, going up express to London. Now, all quiet, all rusty, wind and rain, in possession, lamps extinguished, Mugby Junction dead and indistinct, with its robe drawn over its head, like Caesar. (MJ, ch. 1)

Surrounded by ominous images of the marsh and of violent death calling for a pursuing detective, this traveller seems himself marked for death. Mugby Junction, like Lizzie Hexam in a similarly apprehensive situation (see ch. II), draws its robe over its head.

The journey of this traveller, like that of Lady Dedlock, is an analogy for his futile attempts to fly from his own meaningless life. The mysterious goods train rushes through the night to London, but the traveller has stopped off at this obscure station because, as
the natives shrewdly detect, he is really “the gentleman for Nowhere,” flying from something but towards nothing. Now,
as the belated traveller plodded up and down, a shadowy train went
by him in the gloom which was no other than the train of a life. From
whatever intangible deep cutting or dark tunnel it emerged, here it
came, unsummoned and unannounced, stealing upon him, and pass-
ing away into obscurity. . . . Attendant, with many a clank and
wrench, were lumbering cares, dark meditations, huge dim disap-
pointments, monotonous years, a long jarring line of the discords of a
solitary and unhappy existence. (ch. 1)

The reader soon learns that the gentleman for Nowhere is flying
from that “penitential anniversary . . . called a birthday.” At Mugby
Junction, however, he falls into the hands of Phoebe, a young in-
valid whose happy view of life begins to infect his thinking as he
realizes that she apparently has even less cause for personal hap-
piness than he does.

One day he once more boards the train, for “the great inge-
nious city,” but for the first time he has purchased a round-trip
ticket. He returns with a miniature piano for the little invalid to
whom, as her father says, “everything is music.” Now the traveller
decides to try each of the seven roads leading out of Mugby Jun-
c tion, each time coming back to report to Phoebe what he has found.
This occupation is time-consuming. What with loitering so long
about the Junction, it is suddenly two days before his birthday. It is
more than time for him to set out—not, however, for the vague
wild country of “misty mountains, swollen streams, rain, cold, a
wild seashore, and rugged roads,” which had previously been his
intention; instead, “at last the gentleman for Nowhere took a ticket
for Somewhere, and his destination was the great ingenious town.”

Here he begins to suspect that:

Mugby Junction was a Junction of many branches, invisible as well
as visible, and had joined him to an endless number of byeways.
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. . . . “I too am but a little part of a great whole,” he
began to think; “and to be serviceable to myself and others, or to be
happy, I must cast my interest into, and draw it out of, the common
stock.” (ch. 2)

In the city, he does indeed cast his interest into the common stock
of people, so much so that his birthday hits him as a shocking sur-
prise "when he heard the town clocks striking, and, referring to his watch, found the evening to have so slipped away, that they were striking twelve." He regards himself in the chimney-glass.

"Why, it's your birthday already," he said smiling. "You are looking very well. I wish you many happy returns of the day."

He had never before bestowed that wish upon himself. "By Jupiter!" he discovered, "it alters the whole case of running away from one's birthday! It's a thing to explain to Phoebe. Besides, here is quite a long story to tell her, that has sprung out of the road with no story. I'll go back, instead of going on." (ch. 2)

And so he does go back, to stay permanently in Mugby Junction, "a convenient place to live in, for being joined at will to all sorts of agreeable places and persons"—a place of "many happy returns."

The traveller, who has been running away from time itself in trying to escape his birthday, now can wave it a friendly greeting as it flies past him each year as the anniversary of his rebirth into life. What was previously for him a linear flight through time to death has now become a circular journey where other lives pull him back into the stream of human life.

Two basic ideas keep recurring in the image clusters of time perception: first, living in time subjects human beings to a relentless process of progressive change (the mutability theme); and second, living in time requires continual effort and painful struggle. Though the ticking of a clock may be monotonously regulated, the time it ticks off is fraught with changing meaning for every person from the moment of birth to the moment of death. In the individual life, time will always have the last word. This is what Pip realizes on the day he becomes simultaneously aware of his birth and death—when he finds out "for sure" what the graveyard means; thus this day of his spiritual birth marks the onset of his spiritual struggles.

A natural tension relates these two ideas of human subjection to time and struggle for existence; for the line of least resistance, the path of comfort, is not to struggle, but to relax in actual death or into the death-in-life possible through withdrawal into a remote state of mind, making one day very like another—or through concealing the truth from oneself with the delusion that one is really the master of time and can make it do one's bidding. The marshy borderland between life and death is inhabited by many people who manage in one of these fashions to rub up against most of life without being painfully affected by it.
Sir Leicester Dedlock, for instance, has little sympathy with the limiting concept of time, which leads only to foolish practices of hurrying and to dangerous “leveling” ideas of change and progress. At the “dreary place” in Lincolnshire, Sir Leicester, in contrast to Lady Dedlock, is unaffected by the marshy conditions. In fact, he seems placidly at home there.

He is at his place in Lincolnshire; but the waters are out again on the low-lying grounds, and the cold and damp steal into Chesney Wold, though well-defended, and eke into Sir Leicester’s bones. The blazing fires of faggot and coal—Dedlock timber and antediluvian forest—that blaze upon the broad wide hearths, and wink in the twilight on the frowning woods, sullen to see how trees are sacrificed, do not exclude the enemy. (*BH*, ch. 28)

This is not the first, nor will it be the last time trees and human beings imaginatively fuse together in the Dickens imagery. The reader may recall, for instance, that Lizzie Hexam, viewing a red sunrise and filled with thoughts of death, was reminded at once of a forest fire and a pool of blood. Here the frowning woods react quite humanly to the “sacrifice” of their fellows on the altar of Sir Leicester’s comfort. He, of course, is oblivious to the wisp of warning, for Sir Leicester considers himself to be in complete command of time and resents any challenge to his position. His visitor, the busy and prosperous ironmaster Rouncewell, represents an intrusion by time and is therefore a personal affront to Sir Leicester: living proof that the Lincolnshire flood waters have their analogues in human affairs: “The floodgates of society are burst open, and the waters have—a—obliterated the landmarks of the framework of cohesion by which things are held together” (ch. 40).

Although the upstart Rouncewell seems insensitive to the Dedlock position, Sir Leicester asserts his continued repose:

Sir Leicester is content enough that the ironmaster should feel that there is no hurry there; there, in that ancient house, rooted in that quiet park, where the ivy and the moss have had time to mature, and the gnarled and warded elms, and the umbrageous oaks, stand deep in the fern and leaves of a hundred years; and where the sun-dial on the terrace has dumbly recorded for centuries that Time, which was as much the property of every Dedlock—while he lasted—as the house and lands. Sir Leicester sits down in an easy-chair, opposing his repose and that of Chesney Wold to the restless flights of ironmasters. (ch. 28)
As Sir Leicester sits impervious and immovable he looks like a ponderous anachronism from a primitive world patiently enduring such ephemeral encroachments on his domain in the complacent expectation that these too will pass. He merges into the protective coloration of the middle and ancient past before his fire of “faggot and coal—Dedlock timber and antediluvian forest” in the ancient house standing “deep in the fern and leaves of a hundred years.” It is thus made clear that Sir Leicester inhabits the borderland to the marsh and shares its characteristics.

The same insularity of mind that incapsulates an individual against time also seems to instill a provincial idea of space. The monotonous world of Mr. Podsnap, for example, is “not a very large world, morally; no, nor even geographically; seeing that although his business was sustained upon commerce with other countries, he considered other countries, with that important reservation, a mistake, and of their manners and customs would conclusively observe, ‘Not English!’ when PRESTO! with a flourish of the arm, and a flush of the face, they were swept away” (OMF, bk. I, ch. 11). Podsnap remains comfortable in his position as a result of his happy faculty of settling “that whatever he put behind him he put out of existence.” The small world of Sir Leicester likewise dominates the universe: “The fashionable world—tremendous orb, nearly five miles round—is in full swing, and the solar system works respectfully at its appointed distances” (BH, ch. 48). Thus do the monuments of egocentricity put both time and space into their respectful places.

Elsewhere in Bleak House, Harold Skimpole, the parasite, carelessly parades his indifference to time. John Jarndyce has asked him to pause a moment, as he wishes to say a word to him. “‘My dear Jarndyce,’ he cheerfully replied, going back to his sofa, ‘as many moments as you please. Time is no object here. We never know what o’clock it is, and we never care. Not the way to get on in life, you’ll tell me? Certainly. But we don’t get on in life. We don’t pretend to do it’” (ch. 43). When, a short time after this declaration, Sir Leicester is announced in the Jarndyce town-house drawing room where Skimpole is a guest, it is hardly surprising to learn that Sir Leicester is highly impressed by that gentleman and hopes “he might have the good fortune to be at Chesney Wold when Mr. Skimpole next came into Lincolnshire.” He recognizes a kindred spirit in a world oblivious to time.

Lesser people than the Sir Leicester Dedlocks and the Harold Skimpoles also have opinions on the subject of time. For example,
Mr. Snagsby, the law-stationer of Cook’s Court, somewhat restively awaits the arrival of guests. Mrs. Snagsby, a follower of the uncouth minister, Chadband, has invited the Chadbands to tea. The table is spread with mouthwatering delicacies assembled in recognition of Chadband’s being “rather a consuming vessel . . . [who] can wield such weapons of the flesh as a knife and fork remarkably well” (ch. 19). Despite his appreciation of this world’s infinite variety of good things, Chadband seems to be somewhat loosely attached to life, for the Chadbands, as Snagsby remarks “in a mild and casual way,” are late. Mrs. Snagsby retorts reproachfully that perhaps he wishes to begin without them.

Mr. Snagsby does look as if he would like it very much, but he says, with his cough of mildness, “No, my dear, no. I merely named the time.”

“What’s time,” says Mrs. Snagsby, “to eternity?”

“Very true, my dear,” says Mr. Snagsby. “Only when a person lays in victuals for tea, a person does it with a view—perhaps—more to time. And when a time is named for having tea, it’s better to come up to it.” (ch. 19)

Common sense, of course, is the great leveler of pretension and delusion. Quite true: Time is nothing to eternity. But Snagsby might well have added that time is the individual’s stake in eternity—the only part of it one has. Although indifference to time permits one to relax, life demands a more precise view that enables one, when a time is named for having tea, to “come up to it.”

This cold eye of common sense always quickly reduces to figures of ridicule those who act as if all eternity is theirs. The narrator of the first chapter of Dombey and Son views his subject through such an eye. The result is a masterpiece of irony as Dombey’s whole relationship to time is explored, while his name tolls its way through the whole book like an old church-bell—or like the gong on some old clock: Dombey, Dombey, Dombey.

The moment at which the reader meets Dombey is one of triumph, for his wife has just presented him with his first child (the earlier girl being not worth mentioning). Dombey and Son present interesting points of comparison and contrast:

Dombey was about eight-and-forty years of age. Son about eight-and-forty minutes. Dombey was rather bald, rather red, and though a handsome well-made man, too stern and pompous in appearance to be prepossessing. Son was very bald, and very red, and though (of course) an undeniably fine infant, somewhat crushed and spotty in
his general effect, as yet. On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, as on a tree that was to come down in good time—remorseless twins they are for striking through their human forests, notching as they go—while the countenance of Son was crossed and recrossed with a thousand little creases, which the same deceitful Time would take delight in smoothing out and wearing away with the flat part of his scythe, as a preparation of the surface for his deeper operation. (DS, ch. 1)

Imagining this scene, one might easily fall into the illusion that the same person is being viewed at different times on the same continuum. Inherent in every birth there is a funeral. The infant delicately foreshadows the condition to which life will bring the adult; Dombey is further along on that common road to eternity than Son, but each is already marked to “come down in good time.” Time is a “wearing” operation, first wearing away the infantile baldness, redness, and wrinkles later to wear away the man.

For Sir Leicester Dedlock is in one respect right. Inherent in the idea of time is that of change—the decay and death of all created things as well as their growth and progress are the advancing products of time. Dickens reminds the reader that an individual’s stake in eternity is precisely measured out with the analogy of the forest and the woodman: “On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, as on a tree that was to come down in good time—remorseless twins they are for striding through their human forests, notching as they go.” Once again the fates of tree and human being merge sympathetically together.

This analogy takes on an additional convergence-of-the-twain meaning in the beginning of A Tale of Two Cities as Dickens reviews some of the cruelties that over many years would lead to the French Revolution:

It is likely enough that, rooted in the woods of France and Norway, there were growing trees when that sufferer [a youth tortured to death because “he had not kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks”] was put to death, already marked by the Woodman, Fate, to come down and be sawn into boards, to make a certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in it, terrible in history. It is likely enough that in the rough outhouses of some tillers of the heavy lands adjacent to Paris, there were sheltered from the weather that very day, rude carts, bespattered with rustic mire, snuffed about by pigs, and roosted in by poultry, which the Farmer, Death, had already set apart to be his tumbrils of the Revolution. But
that Woodman and that Farmer, though they work unceasingly, work silently, and no one heard them as they went about with muffled tread: the rather, forasmuch as to entertain any suspicion that they were awake, was to be atheistical and traitorous. (T2C, ch. 1)

Jostling together here elbow to elbow in ironic relationship are four different woodmen: The Woodman Fate who marks the fatal tree(s), the human woodman who cuts down the literal tree, the Woodman Time who brings together in fearful convergence the felled tree and the about-to-be-felled man, and finally the hooded woodman (the Farmer, Death) who wields the axe of the guillotine. All four of these merge in some sense with the transcendent "woodman," Time itself, which moves both people and trees along the life/death continuum.

Here the woodman's axe foretells actual death, but Dickens also finds the analogy useful for other purposes. In Our Mutual Friend, for example, following the night John Harmon is almost murdered, he confusedly remembers his experience:

I saw a figure like myself lying dressed in my clothes on a bed. What might have been, for anything I know, a silence of days, weeks, months, years, was broken by a violent wrestling of men all over the room. The figure like myself was assailed and my valise was in its hand. I was trodden upon and fallen over. I heard a noise of blows and thought it was a wood-cutter cutting down a tree. I could not have said that my name was John Harmon—I could not have thought it—I didn't know it—but when I heard the blows, I thought of the woodcutter and his axe, and had some dead idea that I was lying in a forest. (OMF, bk. II, ch. 13)

The reader's inclination in making sense out of this blurred yet vivid recollection is to attach the adjective to the more sensible substantive: I had "some idea that I was lying dead." Thus with the summoning of the associational image, Dickens manages not only to suggest the imminence of death, but also to recreate the hazy, apparently irrational vagaries of semiconsciousness with all the subjective logic such wanderings usually possess. Although the woodcutter who seems to be chopping down John Harmon turns out on this occasion to be after someone else, our mutual friend, like Dombey, is already marked "to come down in good time."

The woodman's axe may also sound in the background when other than physical kinds of death threaten. Muffled by the wet weather at Sir Leicester Dedlock's Lincolnshire place, "the soft lop-
pings and prunings of the woodman’s axe can make no crash or crackle as they fall” (BH, ch. 2)—the sound certainly can’t reach the ears of Sir Leicester any more than he observes “the frowning woods, sullen to see how trees are sacrificed” as he interviews the ironmaster Rouncewell before his blazing fire of “Dedlock timber and antediluvian forest.” The felling of these ancient giants has no meaning except comfort for the unperturbed Sir Leicester, though he himself may be the next to go.

People with a capacity for life, on the other hand, are quick to detect that trees and human beings share an identical relationship to time. In Hard Times young Louisa Gradgrind, engaged in her favorite occupation of looking to the fire and watching “the red sparks dropping out of the fire, and whitening and dying,” is made to think “‘after all, how short my life would be . . .’” (HT, bk. I, ch. 8). Aware of her own mortality, Louisa is likewise acutely conscious of the inexorable working of “The Great Manufacturer”: “Time,” who “with his innumerable horse-power, worked away, not minding what anybody said” (bk. I, ch. 14) on all the people in their various stages of being woven into the human fabric.

In this inexorable process, Louisa passes from a blighted childhood to womanhood, to marriage with Mr. Bounderby, to the frozen state of indifference (a monotonous existence) that seems to make her vulnerable to the machinations of the drifting iceberg, James Harthouse. The time has come for him to attempt the seduction. “It was not by any wonderful accident that he found her, the time of day being that at which she was always alone, and the place being her favourite resort. It was an opening in a dark wood, where some felled trees lay, and where she would sit watching the fallen leaves of last year, as she had watched the falling ashes at home” (bk. II, ch. 7). This grove with its images of felled trees, fallen leaves, and falling ashes is wonderfully adapted to convey the mortal danger confronting Louisa’s blighted soul.

Harthouse has ascertained that the only penetrable spot in Louisa’s defense is her love for her brother Tom. He therefore affects a desire to aid the “Whelp” in overcoming his dissipation, and declares to her his sympathetic awareness of her brother’s ingratitude. As he speaks, the “wood floated before her” through the unaccustomed tears rising “from a deep well, long concealed.” Now appears that brother, “yonder among the trees,” and the signal appropriateness of his coming “idly beating the branches as he lounged along, or . . . stoop[ing] viciously to rip the moss from the
trees with his stick,” betrays his violent indifference to garden life and foreshadows his implication in the action threatening the tree. Later, as Harthouse talks to the young man, Tom sits “plucking buds and picking them to pieces” or “biting the rosebuds now, and tearing them away from his teeth with a hand that trembled like an infirm old man’s,” a destructive monster of fearful threat to tender growth.3

Even though in these later passages from *Hard Times* Dickens picks up and extends the analogy in scenes viewed from the distant perspective of the narrator, Louisa herself first clearly perceives the similarity between her own mortality and that of trees.

Dombey, however, on the occasion of the birth of his son, is ironically oblivious to the wearing operations of the woodman Time as he sits complacently “wearing” time in the shape of a loudly ticking watch: “Dombey, exulting in the long-looked-for event, jingled and jingled the heavy gold watch-chain that depended from below his trim blue coat, whereof the buttons sparkled phosphorescently in the feeble rays of the distant fire” (*DS*, ch. 1).3 Dombey, like Sir Leicester, clearly considers himself in command here in this darkened room: he is master of the ship, a sea captain with his “trim blue coat” and his buttons sparkling “phosphorescently.” For Dombey also has his related illusions about space: for him, where he happens to be is the center of the universe, just as time exists for his well-being:

The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre. Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes, and had sole reference to them. A. D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei—and Son. (ch. 1)

Thus Dickens ironically establishes Dombey’s absurd blindness to his sublunary condition at a time that brings his son to birth and takes away his wife. The chapter moves faster and faster to the accompaniment of Dombey’s watch, ostensibly engaged in a race with Dr. Parker Peps’s watch, but actually reminding us that Time itself is racing all the figures already on the human continuum inexorably toward death. “Mr. Dombey sat jingling and jingling his heavy gold watch-chain in the great arm-chair by the side of the bed. . . .
The child glanced keenly at the blue coat and stiff white cravat, which, with a pair of creaking boots and a very loud ticking watch, embodied her idea of a father. . . . There was no sound in answer but the loud ticking of Mr. Dombey's watch and Dr. Parker Pep's watch, which seemed in the silence to be running a race. . . . No word or sound in answer. Mr. Dombey's watch and Dr. Parker Pep's watch seemed to be racing faster. . . . The race in the ensuing pause was fierce and furious. The watches seemed to jostle, and to trip each other up" (ch. 1).

As the tempo increases, time runs out for the mother, who holds to her single frail support—the negligible small daughter—until "clinging fast to that slight spar within her arms, the mother drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world." Meanwhile, the captain of the ship stands awkwardly apart in the shadows, looking slightly ridiculous in his commanding costume.

Many Dickens characters with or without an attachment to life are constantly reminding the reader of the passage of time, though they are not always alert to the significance of what they say. In *David Copperfield*, for example, time's inexorable passing is a continual thematic note struck consciously by David, but also echoed by other characters, whether tossed off as a cliché by Mr. Micawber: "But punch, my dear Copperfield, like time and tide, waits for no man" (*DC*, ch. 28); as a flight of suitable rhetoric from the pen of J. M., writing to D. C. regarding his love problems: "Must not D. C. confide himself to the broad pinions of Time?" (ch. 38); or the commonplace observation of Agnes: "How the time goes!" (ch. 35). David himself in his "Retrospect" chapters repeatedly throws his life into the perspective of passing time and plays the *ubi sunt* theme. Chapter 18 looks back across his school-days: "My school-days! the silent gliding on of my existence—the unseen, unfelt progress of my life—from childhood up to youth! Let me think, as I look back upon that flowing water, now a dry channel overgrown with leaves, whether there are any marks along its course, by which I can remember how it ran."

For "time has stolen on unobserved." David has progressed from the lowest boy to the head boy: "That little fellow seems to be no part of me; I remember him as something left behind upon the road of life—as something I have passed, rather than have actually been—and almost think of him as someone else." As in *Dombey and Son*, the basic configuration is a picture showing human figures in various stages of life appearing, progressing along, and vanishing
from the moving road of time. Whereas Dombey and Son imaginatively fuse into one, the single entity David Copperfield proliferates into a series of such shadow figures, all with their own persisting, though transitory, reality.

On the eve of his marriage to Dora at twenty-one, David once more pauses to look back over his life.

Let me stand aside, to see the phantoms of those days go by me, accompanying the shadow of myself, in dim procession.

Weeks, months, seasons, pass along. They seem little more than a summer day and a winter evening. Now, the Common where I walk with Dora is all in bloom, a field of bright gold; and now the unseen heather lies in mounds and bunches underneath a covering of snow. In a breath, the river that flows through our Sunday walks is sparkling in the summer sun, is ruffled by the winter wind, or thickened with drifting heaps of ice. Faster than ever river ran towards the sea, it flashes, darkens, and rolls away. (ch. 43)

David has the ability to back far enough away from his own life to put it into perspective as a progress through time, with a definite beginning and ending marking out his own little stake in eternity. As Pip comes to a simultaneous recognition of birth and death, as the birth of little Dombey both creates his own death and brings the death of his mother, David thinks of the two boundaries of existence together. Looking back on his infancy when “I lay in my basket, and my mother lay in her bed,” he again cannot refrain from a glance in the direction of death as well: “The land of dreams and shadows, the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled; and the light upon the window of our room shone out upon the earthly bourne of all such travellers, and the mound above the ashes and dust that once was he, without whom I had never been” (ch. 1). Once more comes the flash of insight as the child’s creation and his demise merge in the person of his parent.

Birth and death are equally solemn occasions for the thoughtful, for here the struggle is especially crucial: by very definition failure here sends one forever into the “land of dreams and shadows” that David apprehends. When that small “item of mortality” who comes to be known as Oliver Twist is born, “there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration,—a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence: and for some time he lay gasping on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this
world and the next: the balance being decidedly in favour of the latter” (OT, ch. 1). Oliver and nature “fought out the point between them,” and—again—even as the child accepts the challenge of the struggle for existence, his mother gives it up as not worth the effort. Similarly, Dombey, Son, comes into the world “with his little fists curled up and clenched,” seeming, “in his feeble way, to be squaring at existence for having come upon him so unexpectedly” (DS, ch. 1). In another part of the house Mrs. Chick is earnestly remonstrating with her dying sister-in-law. ‘Now, really Fanny my dear,’” she chides: “‘I shall have to be quite cross with you, if you don’t rouse yourself. It’s necessary for you to make an effort, and perhaps a very great and painful effort which you are not disposed to make; but this is a world of effort you know, Fanny, and we must never yield, when so much depends upon us. Come! Try! I must really scold you if you don’t!’” Dickens seems to enjoy making unlikely characters his mouthpieces. Distasteful as Chick may be with her complacent clucking of her little formula for life, what she says is irritatingly true—too true for poor Fanny, who proves unable or unwilling to come up to it.

The power of inertia in these boundary experiences always sends the balance in favor of death; living requires the vigorous assertion of a vital power combining strength and will. John Harmon, confronted with such an extremity in Our Mutual Friend, marshals enough of both to survive. He later recalls his confused impression of hearing a woodman’s axe before being dropped unconscious into the river.

It was only after a downward slide through something like a tube, and then a great noise and a sparkling and a crackling as of fires, that the consciousness came upon me. “This is John Harmon drowning! [not a tree falling!] John Harmon, struggle for your life. John Harmon, call on Heaven and save yourself!” I think I cried it out aloud in a great agony, and then a heavy horrid unintelligible something vanished, and it was I who was struggling there alone in the water. (OMF, bk. II, ch. 13)

The struggle for existence here, seen through the eyes of John Harmon, is experienced as the reader’s own.

Elsewhere in Our Mutual Friend the point of view shifts. Here another river victim hovers between life and death while the reader hovers over him, an absorbed spectator with unsettling questions rising to mind.
If you are not gone for good, Mr. Riderhood, it would be something to know where you are hiding at present. This flabby lump of mortality that we work so hard at with such patient perseverance, yields no sign of you. If you are gone for good, Rogue, it is very solemn, and if you are coming back, it is hardly less so. Nay, in the suspense and mystery of the latter question, involving that of where you may be now, there is a solemnity even added to that of death, making us who are in attendance alike afraid to look on you and to look off you, and making those below start at the least sound of a creaking plank in the floor. (bk. III, ch. 3)

Did an eyelid tremble? A nostril twitch? The chest flutter faintly? “Over and over again No, No. But try over and over again, nevertheless.” Finally comes an unmistakable sign of life, a spark that may “smoulder and go out, or it may glow and expand, but see!” The spectators shed tears: “Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the other, could draw tears from them; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily.” Breathlessly the onlookers follow this fundamental human battle as the man struggles: “Now he is almost here, now he is far away again. Now he is struggling harder to get back. And yet—like us all, when we swoon—like us all, every day of our lives when we wake—he is instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of this existence, and would be left dormant, if he could.”

It is now apparent that Rogue is returning from one of the analogues of death, for unconsciousness is a “little death” that, in sleep, daily reenacts the boundary struggle for existence. Riderhood is “instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of this existence”—“like us all,” says Dickens, interestingly, “every day of our lives.” In a few moments, as the “low, bad, unimpressible face” comes up unmistakably from the depths, the spectators will fall away indifferently. But their rapt attention has demonstrated their awareness that, whatever the character of the individual in the daily business of living, any return from death is a pure triumph of the human body and spirit over their own inertia.

The first such triumph, then, is birth itself. Once safely past that hazardous struggle, the infant has already demonstrated a certain toughness of body and spirit—can now be expected, like baby Dombey, “to accomplish a destiny. A destiny, little fellow!” (DS, ch. 1).