

“The prismatic hues of memory” (DC 769): Visual Story-Telling and Chromatic Showmanship in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*

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This article is the first entry in a debate on “Dickens and Colour.” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/dickens-and-colour>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract

What if the memory of colour was an integral part of the act of story-telling? *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens’s “favourite child,” illustrates the author’s will to hold his control over profuse, errant memories, in order to fashion his semi-fictitious autobiography. Yet what has not been analysed so far is the part played by colours in this mnemonic enterprise carried out through fiction. Indeed, chromatic dynamics partakes of memory work. David Copperfield can become the hero of his own life if, and only if, he succeeds in turning “the ghost of half-formed hopes, the broken shadows of disappointments dimly seen” (734) into a succession of bright, vivid memories, paving the way of his *Künstlerroman* towards both artistic success and domestic bliss. Even if direct references to colours may be few and far between, they nevertheless feature at crucial moments and are put to many different uses. They are of course given pride of place in David’s phenomenological recreation of his childhood. They are like beacons in his amorous journey, from Dora Spenlow, the “child wife,” with her invariable rose bud of a mouth and blue eyes, to Agnes, the “sister wife,” with her colour-shifting face. Red is polysemic, pointing in turn to Steerforth’s last feat of heroism when, aboard his sinking ship, he sports a singular red cap, to Uriah Heep’s ubiquitous red eyes. Colours accordingly would seem to both serve a contrapuntal function, bringing out the more dramatic episodes, and to propound a graphic analogue to what can hardly find any fitting verbal transcription, such as Heep’s egregious deviousness. In his retrospective novel Dickens uses colours sparingly to catalyse the act of remembering and detach his autodiegetic narrator’s consciousness from the blank

of an indistinct past so as to attain the vivid colourfulness of fleeting epiphanic episodes illustrative of the temporary presentness of the past.

In his study of *David Copperfield* titled *Das Leben als Geschichte: Poetische Reflexion in Dickens David Copperfield*, Matthias Bauer speaks of “immanent poetics” (Bauer 358) to analyse the dialectical link between, on the one hand, life as existence or destiny and, on the other, life as story, which underpins the *Künstlerroman*, as well as the act of memory which constantly mediates between the two. Joseph Hillis Miller, for his part, fleshes out this somewhat abstract notion of remembering by evoking “the pictorial vividness of memory” (Hillis Miller 812). The quotation is interesting for two reasons: firstly, “vividness” points to the efficacy of the visual to abolish the distance of time, and, secondly, it emphasises the term “pictorial.” Pictures are made up of lines, shapes and contours—which in the case of *David Copperfield* were rendered tangible by Hablot Knight Browne’s, aka Phiz’s, illustrations—and of colours. Colours in a novel are signifiers which can only be actualised through the readers’ mental prism. To quote Paul Cézanne: “Colour is where our brain and the universe meet.” (Cézanne 112; my translation).¹

As a memory novel, *David Copperfield* multiplies levels of subjectivity: there is obviously the real author’s and his fictional persona’s, through the presence of the first-person narrator. But, since Dickens’s fiction is a *Künstlerroman*, the narrator is alternatively the young man in the process of becoming an authorial figure *and* the writer who, having completed his artistic training, casts a retrospective look on his life. Not only is the narrator split between his adult and his younger selves but the interdependency between living and reading is sealed by the activity of “reading as if for life” (DC 106). To focus on the use of colours in the novel entails constantly bearing in mind these different real and fictional levels, and also allowing for constant shifts of perspectives.² Moreover, a tension is constantly maintained between, on the one hand, “well-remembered facts” (DC 225), through the proxy of fiction, testifying to a form of eidetic memory, vivid and precise, right down to colour details, and, on the other, visions, projections, fantasmagoria affording at times “a surrealist view of persons and things” (Hillis Miller 812). It may be hypothesised that colours contribute

to the memory work constitutive of the novel's dynamics; they crystallise, dramatise, enhance, galvanise, and of course aestheticise a text which may be read as an artistic anamnesis. In other words, colours cannot be confined to a mere descriptive, ornamental or even symbolical function. The different functions of colours, stated above, come under scrutiny in what follows. The affects and agency of colours in the process of remembering will first be considered, then the various functions of chromatism will be analysed through the example of red, before attempting to read colours as "chromatope,"³ in contradistinction with Mikhaïl Bakhtin's chronotope, in a third part. Finally, blue will be assessed under the heading "coming out in [one's] true colour[s]" (DC 738).

Colours and Affects, and the Agency of Colours

Scientific literature establishes that not only is colour a determining factor in visual memory (Gegenfurtner and Rieger; Suzuki and Takahashi; Wichmann et al.) but that it also enhances memory performance (Adawia Dzulkifli and Faiz Mustafar). Dickens in his own time was already conversant with the incipient literature on colours, through the nascent discipline of anthropology, for example, and its emphasis on skin colour, as suggested by Tara MacDonald in an article on Uriah Heep's redness. Moreover, as editor of *Household Words* (March 1850-May 1859), Dickens may have perused and even perhaps appraised three scientific contributions on colours: one on colouring, two on colour and the eyes, especially colour blindness. This point will be tackled further down.

In David's "narrative of [his] written memory" (DC 889), the activity of picturing is key, as claimed by anaphoras in the penultimate paragraph of chapter 5: "*I picture my small self* in the dimly-lighted rooms [...] *I picture myself* with my books shut up [...] *I picture myself* going up to bed [...] *I picture myself* coming downstairs in the morning" (DC 132; emphases mine). Picturing is polysemic; in this quotation it refers to the act of reminiscing which is given a graphic analogue, but in the wider context of this Victorian novel, it can also consist in the material activity of sketching and drawing, in the here and now of the diegesis, an activity illustrated by the

skeletons Traddles repeatedly chalks over his slate (DC 143), or in colouring, a practice Dora Spenlow constantly indulges in with her “flower-painting” (DC 667). Significantly, the narrator’s visual memory may be characterised by this tension between drawing and colouring. This is suggested by the introduction of the character of Miss Mowcher in chapter 22; her physicality is expressed by botched, blurred contours, as if she were a hasty sketch: “a double chin, [...] so fat that it entirely swallowed up the strings of her bonnet, bow and all. Throat she had none; waist she had none, legs she had none, worth mentioning” (DC 386). The narrator renders the distorted silhouette of the dwarfish woman through the hypertrophy of her double chin eclipsing the rest of her body. She appears as an unfinished drawing, characterised by absence and negativity, with “none” repeated three times. Yet this paucity of neatly drawn lines and contours is somehow offset by the midget’s histrionic chatter on red, as if she compensated with colour for what she lacked in shape, as it were: “Red by nature, black by art” (DC 389), “it’s not—not—not ROUGE, is it? [...] What the unmentionable to ears polite, do you think I want with rouge?” (DC 391). Through her polyglossic number, Miss Mowcher, the grotesque beautician, colours her prose through this repeated reference to red and, tellingly, rouge, the cosmetic powder indispensable to produce the particular shade of red which defines her. Thus red, the all-encompassing generic notion, and rouge, the chemical preparation, become the cornerstone of the passage, independently of what is actually being discussed. To all intents and purposes, this chromatic verbal display sticks in the narrator’s mind thereafter and affords an opportunity for literary showmanship.

Despite Miss Mowcher’s monomaniacal concern with red, colours in *David Copperfield* are rarely limited to fixed, essentialist monochromes. They are in a state of flux in the narrator’s consciousness: “New thoughts and hopes were whirling through my mind, and all the colours of my life were changing.” (DC 935). If anything, colours are transient since they are briefly summoned up from the colourless “mists and shadows of the past” (DC 711) or from the blank of infancy. Unlike what happens in *Bleak House*’s opening scene where the tangible materiality of both smoke and fog is perceptible through blackness for the former or physical intrusion for the latter (BH 49), mists and shadows in *David Copperfield* are invested with a certain

level of metaphorical abstraction. They stand for the chromatic vacuum out of which colours surge as David's memory gives a new lease on life to scenes that had fallen into oblivion. During their ephemeral return thanks to the act of narration, these colours find themselves exposed to the "ruined blank and waste [...], to the dark horizon" (DC 886) which metaphorically represent the threat of forgetfulness. In his reluctance to adopt a positivist stance, David proves especially sensitive to colours as effects and to their ever-shifting hues, and thus never perceives them as fixed, absolute givens. In this respect, David illustrates what a contemporary American writer calls the "certain ontological indeterminacy" (Nelson 15) of colour.

The first obstacle he has to face stems from the impossibility of naming colours. In the emotionally-charged scene in which Clara Copperfield first returns with Murdstone in chapter 2, David remarks: "I never saw such a beautiful colour on my mother's face before" (DC 67). Refraining from being more specific about this "beautiful colour" may evidence the narrator's embarrassment at identifying his mother's bliss, in which he has no part at this stage. Later, on the day his mother is buried, "the light [is] not of the same colour [as the other days]—of a sadder colour" (DC 184). Again such reluctance to be more specific on the matter of colour could be construed as a sign of the narrator's distraught condition, and colour indefiniteness is associated with affects at this critical moment. Similarly, the absence of clearly defined colours bespeaks despondency on several other instances. The pannelled rooms at Murdstone and Grinby's are "discoloured with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years" (DC 209), so that David is easily inclined to find the dismal place in perfect correspondence with his dark sense of despair. In a slightly different perspective, when Agnes Wickfield realises that her father has fallen into Uriah Heep's clutches, she "glide[s] in, without a vestige of colour in her face" (DC 643). Therefore it could be maintained that resorting to the linguistic signifier "colour," in other words choosing to stick noncommittally to the hyperonym, i.e. "colour" instead of red, pink etc., and thereby pointing to loss of colour, or achromaticity, results in jeopardising the narrative's continuation, premised on the use of colours as triggers to revive scenes from the mists and shadows of the past. This idea is metafictionally acknowledged by the narrator when he claims that "conventional phrases are a sort of fireworks [...] liable to take a great

variety of shapes and colours" (*DC* 655). Through this remark, David momentarily suspends the thread of his story to comment on the graphic colourfulness of his flamboyant prose. Not only may colours be inscribed in the text but they may also take a life of their own, and lend story-telling its impetus, through intratextual resonances or textual reception. Nowhere is this more perceptible than in chapter 2 when the adult narrator phenomenologically evokes David's nascent sense of self in a passage that could be described as a form of chromatic genesis.

Departing from the logic of chapter 1, relating David's physiological birth from a range of testimonies of the characters then present, the second chapter records the successive steps of the child's coming to consciousness a few years after. Everything originates in the blank—i.e. white, colourless, achromatic nothingness—of infancy (etymologically inarticulacy). In this context, when the narrator calls up his earliest memories, a form of artistic competition is somehow played out between lines and colours, with on the one hand Clara Copperfield's youthful shape and, on the other, Peggotty's unshapely silhouette but prevalent redness. And in this story of origins, colour, i.e. red, wins the day. It becomes a leitmotif recalled years later as the story winds up: "The cheeks and arms of Peggotty, so hard and red in my childish days" (*DC* 947). As a matter of fact, Peggotty's redness cannot be contained within fixed contours, it contaminates the domestic interior of David's childhood house just as it permeates the whole novel, for example "the red velvet footstool" (*DC* 66) which in the child's hypnagogic perception, recreated years later, is indistinguishable from ruby complexion. Besides, redness is also generative since Peggotty's cheeks and arms could be mistaken for apples, untainted by Original Sin, since only birds are presumed to be attracted to them. Thus bright, vivid colours call the shots, as it were, in this brief evocation of what could be termed David's green paradise of blissful childhood⁴ before Murdstone's "shallow black eyes" (*DC* 73) harden into "blacker and thicker" (*DC* 73) hair and whiskers. The initial polychrome of the half-orphan's warm nest, with its green, red and pink is soon overrun by the "rich white, and black, and brown of [Murdstone's] complexion" (*DC* 71) and the shadow it casts over the future. In retrospect, what should have been a colourful period of insouciance turns out to be what could be called, through a pun with psychomachia, i.e. a battle of

spirits, a *chromamachia* between green and red, on the one hand, and black, on the other. Whereas green heralds the endearing eccentricity of Betsey Trotwood whimsically forbidding donkeys to trespass on her turf, black metonymically refers to the Murdstones' asinine subjection to misguided puritanism: "The gloomy taint that was in the Murdstone blood, darkened the Murdstone religion, which was austere and wrathful" (DC 101). "Taint" is of course etymologically equivocal, conflating the Old French *ataint* or *ateint*, i.e. convicted, and the Latin *tinctus* or the French *teint*, giving the English word *tint*. In short, taint conveys the idea of both tint or hue and stain or blemish, i.e. the very Original Sin which the Murdstones pride themselves on extirpating from David's corrupt nature.

Polysemic Chromatism: Red in All Its Guises

It is perhaps Wilkins Micawber who articulates most vividly the bond between colours and memory when he speaks of "the scenes and events of the past, tinged by the prismatic hues of memory" (DC 769)⁵ in a letter addressed to David. Prismatic colours are the colours that can be seen when light goes through a prism—to wit, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. There is admittedly a lot of red, blue and some green in *David Copperfield* and a few rare instances of yellow, such as when the Scotch Croesus Julia Mills marries is depicted as a "yellow bear with a tanned hide" (DC 948). Significantly, Micawber chooses to speak of "hues" rather than colours where memory is involved, to signal a continuing process of mental filtering, and probably altering in the process, instead of referring to the plain act of perception of one definite colour. Besides, "tinged" confirms the idea of colour interpenetration, as opposed to neat chromatic discrimination. The paradigmatic opposition between, on the one hand, Newton's *Opticks* which postulated that colours result from the interaction of light with objects, and on the other, Goethe, who in his *Theory of Colour* prioritised the decisive function of the eye in colour perception, helps to understand better what is at stake through the antagonism between an objective and a subjective approach to colour.⁶

Strangely enough, the phrase “prismatic hues” also anticipates a debate which arose in the 1860s, following the production of chemical colours from aniline dyes, between industrialists and scientists, who advocated a material approach predicated upon fixed chromatic discrimination, and artists such as “Ruskin, Morris and Pater who craved for ancient Greek colour-weaving or *poikilia*—a Hellenic term encoding dappledness as well as versatility” (Ribeyrol 2). Even if Dickens’s use of colour in the activity of remembering is probably more empirical than derived from any scientific research extant at the time, it is interesting to note his commitment to a subjective, romantic approach to colour. Indeed, the writer’s use of shifting colours retrospectively conjures up a mindset. To give but one example, on first seeing his bedroom at the Micawbers’ David notices an ornament which his “young imagination *represented* as a blue muffin” (DC 212; emphasis mine). The remark does not refer so much to the decoration as to the narrator’s mental disposition at the time; namely his constant worry about not eating his fill and a liking for the colour blue, which will be addressed in more detail in a following section. In the same way as David coins the phrase “comical affection” (DC 111) to account for his attachment to Peggotty, it could be argued that the “prismatic hues of memory” are inflected by what amounts to “*chromatic* affection,” in other words the meaning of one same colour may vary notably according to context and circumstances as much as the character’s affects at one particular moment. Put differently, the signifier colour may call up an array of ever-shifting, diverse signifieds. This is particularly noticeable with red. Red is positively connoted with Peggotty, as seen above, and with Emily’s “cherry lips” (DC 194), as well as the Kentish “orchards [...] ruddy with ripe apples” (DC 242), but, conversely, it becomes paradigmatic of evil with Uriah Heep’s “unsheltered and unshaded” (DC 275), “shadowless red eyes” (DC 437), like “two red suns” (DC 278), or worse the ominous singular of his “cunning red eye” (DC 814) in chapter 52, titled “I assist at an Explosion” (DC 809). From Georges Bataille (1928) and Roland Barthes (1964) to Jacques Lacan (1973), the obsession with the eye or gaze as a node of taboos and transgressions has been repeatedly addressed. Red is indeed the fulcrum of primary impulses when David, fixed by Heep’s glowing red eyes, cannot dismiss the vision of a murderous attack: “I believe I had a delirious idea of seizing the

red-hot poker out of the fire, and running him through with it [...] the image of Agnes, outraged by so much as a thought of this red-headed animal's, remained in my mind" (DC 441; ch. 25 "Good and Bad Angels"). In this passage, the tropism of redness instigates what amounts to a phantasy script. It is triggered by the metonymic chain between the fire in the hearth, the metaphoric sparks of ambition which Uriah snidely thanks David for having kindled in him, and Uriah's omnipresent, searing red eyes: "his shadowless red eyes, which looked as if they had scorched their lashes off" (DC 437). The account of a fleeting, hallucinatory moment is superimposed on the memory narrative, linking the incandescent redness of fire literally and metaphorically with the ubiquitous glowing gaze. Precisely, it is the eyes which crystallise this phantasmagorical and infernal chain of associations: "each of its terms is always the significant of another term (no term being a simple thing signified) without it being possible ever to break the chain" (Barthes 122). The logic is further complicated if Uriah Heep is perceived as "one of David's alter egos [...] that what he hates and fears in Uriah, he hates and fears in himself" (Stone 121; cf. Bauer 71,73). What is at stake here is chiefly a consuming ambition and the urge to devour the loved one, first Dora and then Agnes. In this perspective, the red eye becomes the nexus of both sadistic and masochistic drives that leave neither of the main protagonists, Uriah and David, unscathed. Thus, David's narrative blends well-remembered facts, in the present case Uriah Heep's successful efforts to enter into partnership with Agnes's father and to win over Agnes herself by the same token, and the delusions of the young man's delirious mind. From the distance of time, the all too present red-hot poker still catalyses an infernal love triangle that persists as an obsession. In this respect, memory does not necessarily appertain to the past as it is indistinguishable from the realm of phantasy, recreated through literary imagination.

It could be hypothesised that the attention to colours allows the reader to revisit the novel by plotting chromatic itineraries. Carrying on with red, it may be said that a series of hyponyms not only enrich the hues, tints, tones, and shades of this primary colour (ruby, ruddy, sanguine etc.), but also that through their semantic inflections they cover the whole spectrum of Dickens's process of storytelling, allegorised through the famous red and white

side of streaky bacon (*Oliver Twist* 134, and *DC* 125). Seen in this perspective, redness applies indiscriminately to the comic and tragic, innocence and corruption, and elicits both attraction and repulsion, in “regular alternation” (*OT* 134). To take up “ruddy” for example, it qualifies both James Steerforth’s handsome head (*DC* 488) and Heep’s ugly one, stained by “unwholesome ruddiness” (*DC* 578). Therefore redness is undoubtedly polysemic, even to the point of dissolving into chromatic chaos when “[Heep’s] eyes seemed to take every shade of colour that could make eyes ugly” (*DC* 686). Yet it could also be argued that red is incremental and shifts from one pole, the horrendous, to the opposite one, the beautiful, through degrees or stages, rather than through abrupt juxtaposition. Comedy affords such an intermediary stage, which is best illustrated by the adjective “sanguine” that aptly defines Micawber’s temper (*DC* 227).

In the tradition of eighteenth-century lampooning, some passages of *David Copperfield* satirise high society, and red is used for comedic purposes. When David, Traddles and Heep are invited to dine at the Waterbrooks’, a family of solicitors (ch. 25), the conversation soon turns to aristocracy and blood, and progressively becomes gory and ghoulish: “We might have been a party of Ogres, the conversation assumed such a sanguine complexion” (*DC* 434). Poor Traddles finds himself ensconced “in the glare of a red velvet lady” (*DC* 433) and David in the gloom of a lady described as Hamlet’s aunt, which is both an intertextual acknowledgment of the thespian quality of the text and a parodic hint at said lady’s complicity in performing bloody deeds. Moreover, comedic redness operates fully with the pantomimic figure of Red Whisker, a young man with red whiskers whom David imagines in the role of his egregious rival in his passion for Dora Spenlow (*DC* 545). Red Whisker makes a show of his redness down to his culinary preferences: “By and by, I saw him, with the majority of a lobster on his plate, eating his dinner at the feet of Dora!” (*DC* 545). In his flustered condition, besotted as he is with Dora, David sees Red Whisker everywhere, and when he forms a passing attachment to “a young creature in pink” (*DC* 545), he suspects Red Whisker may be a more advantageous party for her, and is hardly reassured on realising that “[t]he young creature in pink had

a mother in green" (DC 545). What started off as a fixation with red unleashes a surreal colour vertigo with the omnipresent Red Whisker returning at regular intervals like a chromatic *idée fixe*.

The butcher boy is another of David's bugbears, standing halfway between the comedic Red Whisker and the satanic Uriah Heep, and invariably sporting his "mulberry-coloured great coat" (DC 444, 445, 638). The coarse butcher with his "rough, red cheeks" (DC 324) is the nemesis of the young gentlemen of Dr Strong's school, chief of whom, David, who takes it upon himself to beat him in single combat to vindicate his and his peers' honour. There is of course an element of classism when the labouring menial, "bloody but confident" (DC 325), quickly gains ascendancy on the young scholar. However, whereas with Uriah Heep class difference entails life-long enmity, the difference between David and the butcher is short-lived. Indeed, soon after David gets his own back on the butcher, known for anointing his hair with beef suet, the latter mellows into the respectable figure of family man and constable. As for Uriah Heep, he remains the "detestable *Rufus*" (DC 445; italics mine)—Latin for red-haired—which, according to Michel Pastoureau, was a common word of abuse among the monks in the middle ages alongside with "subrufus" (Pastoureau, *Rouge* 113). Interestingly, once Heep has been sent to jail where he acquires all the qualities of a model prisoner, no mention is made of red any more in relation to his character. It should also be noted that Pastoureau remarks how only the Biblical David is spared from the cultural and anthropological bias stigmatising redness. In Samuel 1.12, David is described as "ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to." Could David *Copperfield* have a ruddy complexion? After all, copper is used as colour to describe Julia Mills's Indian servant in the last chapter (DC 948), and copper is also the skin colour of Dev Patel, the actor who plays the part of David in Armando Iannucci's 2019 adaptation of Dickens's novel. Therefore, ultimately, colours can raise ethical questions pertaining to inclusive casting in theatrical and cinematic adaptations. In any case, red in all its guises is fundamentally plural and multivalent and is even invested with solemnity when Steerforth is seen for the last time. A valedictory note is struck with the red cap Steerforth is sporting just as his boat is about to be swallowed by a high, green wave. At this crucial juncture, the narrator seems

to freeze the fateful vision as if to bid farewell: "He had a singular red cap on,—not like a sailor's cap, but of a finer colour" (DC 865). The emphasis laid on colour, in what is manifestly a momentous event, gestures towards an indefinable red, perhaps a sublime red. And red and green (a mix of yellow and blue) are complementary colours on the colour wheel so that green, associated with rebirth in the seasonal cycle, sublimes, in the chemical sense of rendering gaseous and impalpable, this ever receding and indefinable red, within the novel's chromatic crucible.

Chronotope and "Chromatope"

Bakhtin "give[s] the name *chronotope* (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 84). The assumption in this subsection is that in chapter 3, "I Have a Change," Bakhtin's dialectic intersection between time and space could be more productively replaced by a confrontation between space and colours, hence the neologism *chromatope* propounded for what follows. Chapter 3 marks a departure from the narrative's chronology characterised at this point by the mounting pressure entailed by the arrival of the Murdstones at Blunderstone, and affords a momentary escape out of temporal bounds and chronological ordering—a parenthesis as it were. Space is at first striking on account of its oddity. Indeed, to young David, Norfolk's flatness defies the very roundness of the earth, a singularity which he can only put down to the fact that Yarmouth is probably "situated at one of the poles" (DC 77). In this absence of temporal encroachment, space is complemented by colours to call up the sensation of universe, hence the choice to coin the concept of "chromatope." Put differently, colours somehow come to stand in lieu of time. At any rate, they certainly bestow a narrative dynamics of their own upon the chapter as a whole.

Firstly, the tang of the fishing village is metonymically expressed by "pitch, and oakum, and tar" (DC 78) which call up dull colours such as black and brown. But this lacklustre environment recedes in the background as soon as David steps into Daniel Peggotty's boathouse, which is compared to Aladdin's palace and turns out to be the open sesame for a

colourful exploration. The empirical stance adopted in chapter 2, "I observe," is superseded in chapter 3 by a complete reversal of perspectives, because now colours seem to take on a life of their own. They indeed become divorced from their referential function to play their respective parts in a phantasmagoria in motion as David explores the boathouse. The ontological divide between the colours in the story and the colours in the paintings represented in the story is erased. Consequently, David is as much struck by a "blue mug" (DC 80) on a table as he is by pictures representing scripture subjects in improbable colours: "Abraham in red going to sacrifice Isaac in blue, and Daniel in yellow cast into a den of green lions" (DC 79). David's vision, a more accurate term than perception under the circumstances, could perhaps be accounted for as "sleep mentation [...] a dreaming logic characterized by a set of operational structures not typically found in the waking state" (Haskell 345-46). Indeed, dreamwork as per Freud is founded on two main principles, namely condensation and displacement, and often entails the reversal of one thing into its antithesis (Freud 296-321 and 321-26). In the novel, the pictorial form of the oneiric displayed through David's visit of Dan Peggotty's boathouse illustrates the first two principles, and adumbrates the third one. Displacement through reversal first, the boat is a house and, therefore, instead of movement, there is stasis and immobility: "To hear the wind getting up out at sea [...] no house near but this one, and this one a boat" (DC 82). As befits dreamwork, causal links are eclipsed by condensation and repetition, and this is where colours *do* come in. The walls are "whitewashed as white as milk" (DC 80), and Peggotty's white apron is twice mentioned as if to spell out a fantasy of maternal plenitude compensating for Clara Copperfield's growing estrangement at this point in the story. Transmogrification is carried out through red when, after scrubbing himself raw, Dan Peggotty's complexion is indistinguishable from the colour of the "lobster, crabs, and crawfish" (DC 82) he is used to fishing. As seen above with Red Whisker, the crustaceans are destined to develop into a chromatic obsession later in the novel. But dream grammar also postulates abrupt reversals: after appearing like a rubicund freak, Dan Peggotty, through anamorphosis, features like a colourful fairy tale king. The power of the poetic vision is delegated to Emily, and reported by David as narrator, which is in itself proof of the young

man's budding passion: "If I was ever to be a lady, I'd give him a sky-blue coat with diamond buttons, nankeen [yellowish buff] trousers, a red velvet waiscoat, a cocked hat, a large gold watch, a silver pipe, and a box of money'" (DC 85). Emily's short description is a trove of colours, a chromatic matrix for the whole novel. If Dan is evoked in polychrome, Emily, that "blue-eyed mite of a child" (DC 87)—a tell-tale pleonasm clinging to the ideal of unalterable innocence—is for her part monochromatic. She embodies that blue which in *David Copperfield* conveys all the shades and hues of romantic love and the novelist's sincere engagement with the theme of love.

Coming Out in One's True Colour

Blue is allegedly Dickens's favourite colour: "If you ever have occasion to paint the Mediterranean, let it be exactly that colour. It lies before me now, as deeply and intensely blue" (Dickens qtd. in Forster 331). In his scientific article on "Colours and Eyes," which Dickens edited for *Household Words*, Henry Morley observes: "A pure blue, well illuminated, is in the next degree [i.e. after yellow] least likely to pass unperceived; some colour-blind persons pronounce it to be the colour of which they have the most vivid perception" (Morley 522). Blue seems to be granted a special status in *David Copperfield*, both as a natural tinge enhanced by the sunlight and as liable to work what amounts to miracles with visually impaired people. Of course, blue had undergone many transformations by the time Dickens was writing *Copperfield*—ever since the middle of the eighteenth century with the serendipitous discovery of Berlin, later known as Prussian, blue. And blue was also refined thanks to aniline dyes up until the middle of the nineteenth century (Pastoureau, *Bleu* 115-17). One critic, Iain Crawford, speaks of "formulaic color tagging" (45) and notes David's "special partiality for things blue" (45) and, more interestingly, underscores the colour's tight link with desire, and perhaps more covertly, sexuality (46). In *David Copperfield* blue links together Emily, Steerforth, the eldest Miss Larkins, Dora as well as some other lesser characters, such as Mrs Steerforth's little parlour maid, in romantic lanes of memory. The first time David encounters Mrs Steerforth's little servant, his attention is immediately caught by

the “blue ribbons in her cap” (DC 491), a detail which only proves how much he has fallen captive to Dora’s “blue ribbons, and a quantity of curls” (DC 456), met shortly before. Therefore colours, in the present case blue, have no bearing on an actual situation: they are but triggers in the kaleidoscope of David’s memory. And when David meets the little maid for the second time and notes that she has replaced her blue ribbons with “one or two disconsolate bows of sober brown” (DC 734), it is not so much to express his interest in the maid’s sartorial metamorphosis as to reflect on his own sad mood. He has, at that point, fallen into a “brown study” (DC 734), i.e. a melancholy introspection, in which he finds himself haunted by “the ghosts of half-formed hopes, the broken shadows of disappointment” (DC 734). Therefore colours, regardless of the characters or situations they are associated with, should be considered on their own merits, by and for themselves. This argument could be substantiated by the French phenomenologist Claude Romano, when he says that “ontological chromatism [...] is no longer a mere instrument of imitation, or the signature of objects, but a pure dimension of thinking or being” (309; my translation).⁷ And Maurice Merleau-Ponty propounds the phrase: “one sole tone of being” (135) to express the idea that colour draws its irreducible existence from its very essence, irrespectively of what it is used to qualify:

What is indefinable in the *quale* [i.e. a quality or property as perceived or experienced by a person], in the color, is nothing else than a brief, peremptory manner of giving in one sole something, in one sole tone of being, visions past, visions to come, by whole clusters. (Merleau-Ponty 135)

Can a typically Dickensian way of relating to the world be extrapolated from *David Copperfield*, by focusing on blue? The idea of clusters is worth addressing because as Jeremy Tambling aptly argues in his introduction to the 2004 Penguin classics edition:

It is as if the repetition in the book functions to deposit layer after layer of sedimentation into the novel, so that memories and the past can be created through a rich context established through different textual levels, which are reinvoked time and time again, rather than the plot simply moving forward. (Kindle edition 298)

Because of its iterative quality, colour partakes of this sedimentary function at work in the memory process, and its inflections vary according to the

narrative levels considered, for example whether the narrator is metafictionally evoking the workings of his mnemonic activity, or else fully immersed in an episode of the past which he is bringing back into his present act of telling. Although blue is less present quantitatively than black or red, it bears witness to the logic of recollecting most convincingly because it allies cognitive and affective qualities.⁸

Blue first gives itself as a fixed idea when the narrator recalls arriving in London for the first time and attempting to remember the name of the inn he was bound for: "I forget whether it was the Blue Bull, or the Blue Boar; but I know it was the Blue Something" (DC 122). Precisely the "Blue Something" (capitalised in the text) underlines the prevalence of "blue" over whatever it may qualify. This is a case of hypermnesia of the colour blue. And, indeed, perhaps because it originates from David's first encounter with Emily, blue is the starting point of one of the novel's most prevalent memory chains. Blue blends light and darkness and by extension the ephemerality of a recollection in the midst of the obscurity of the forgotten. At Salem House, Steerforth dips a match in a phosphorus box to shine a blue glare for a fleeting moment in the dormitory. Like the magic lantern Marcel Proust was to use years later in *Swann's Way*, a paradigmatic memory novel (Proust 9-10), the match conjures up, in retrospect, years later, a sense of ineffable mystery and lost familiarity, mixing nostalgia and the thrill of transgression: "the secrecy of the revel, and the whisper in which everything was said" (DC 138). Blue probably also draws a veil of modesty on past intimacies. By the same token, blue is also imbued with romanticism and a whiff of eroticism. David linguistically represses the first stirrings of love, potentially as a result of his puritan education. Indeed, at the beginning, with Emily, blue conflates desire and its sublimation: "I am sure my fancy raised up something round that blue-eyed mite of a child, which etherealized, and made a very angel of her" (DC 87). In a Roman Catholic country, this association between blue and angel would call to mind the marial blue in the stained-glass windows of medieval cathedrals. Michel Pastoureau speaks of "bleu de Chartres" and "bleu du Mans" where the holy Virgin Mary is pictured (Pastoureau, *Bleu* 45). However, there comes the moment when in this novel of apprenticeship, which

is also a covert novel of sexual discovery, David hyperbolically and obsessively surrenders to the appeal of blue, initially with the eldest Miss Larkins: "She is dressed in blue, with blue flowers in her hair—forget-me-nots—as if *she* had any need to wear forget-me-nots" (DC 328; original italics). Then the repetition of blue inscribes David's mounting desire and precludes the very possibility that this beauty may ever be forgotten. David subsequently wallows in blue, alternating between "blue angel" (DC 328) and "blue enslaver" (DC 333). And the recollection of Miss Larkins still preys on his mind when he loses himself in the contemplation of "the blue eyes of [his] child wife" (DC 834), onto whose finger he slips a ring of "Forget-me-nots" (DC 550) made of blue stones. Here again the grammar of dream is characterised by repetition together with condensation, and is not ruled by causality or chronology, so that "Little Blossom," or Dora the child wife, becomes one with Emily: "a blue-eyed blossom" (DC 501), according to Mr Omer. This process of memory condensation partakes of the oneiric dimension of the novel. In a sense, blue spins a yarn of its own, which may be occasionally riddling though; for example, what is the reader to make of "Uriah's blue bag lying down and vomiting papers" (DC 313)? This unsavoury blue seems totally uncalled for and deconstructs the thematic and symbolic coherence of the rest of the novel. This may be a warning that colours can remain cryptic as well as invite prudence and are proof that memory works in unpredictable ways. Or this is perhaps yet another example of Dickens's partiality for jarring contrasts, his proclivity for the above-mentioned streaky bacon. Or is it perhaps the fact that Uriah, even at his most despicable is never totally divorced from David, his luminous double? In this instance, as in many others, blue evidences the ambivalences of identity formation, the fact that on his way towards maturity David has to come to terms with the best and the worst in himself.

When, at the end of his amorous journey, David eventually marries Agnes, his sister wife, whom critics almost unanimously deride as "bloodless, legless, passive, impossibly long-suffering and self-denying" (Garnett 226), the question of how she can fare colourwise is legitimate, granted that blueness has already been so insistently and indiscriminately applied to a whole group of young eligible women. In other words, how is David's sec-

ond wife's exceptionality chromatically sealed? Dickens opts for an expedient, between choosing one colour, which would be too assertive, and relinquishing colour altogether, which would not do justice to "the dear presence" who "bears [the narrator] company" (DC 950) at the moment when the anamnesis reaches its completion, opening the way for the beginning of the act of narrating. Henceforth Agnes is to be forever linked to "a stained glass window in a church" (DC 280, 289, 839), which the narrator saw once, without being able to say when or where. Agnes thus transfigures colours by being elevated above the secular and sublunary, and she also exists beyond the span of memory by challenging David's capacity to recollect. If the prismatic hues of memory are instrumental in reviving the scenes and events of the past, the stained glass seems like an absolute, beyond the reach of time; a "tranquil brightness" (DC 280) both above and beyond the whole gamut of variegated emotions:

I love little Em'ly, and I don't love Agnes—no, not at all in that way—but I feel that there are goodness, peace, and truth, wherever Agnes is; and that the soft light of the coloured window in the church, seen long ago, falls on her always, and on me when I am near her, and on everything around. (DC 289)

Conclusion

Colours in *David Copperfield* do not work mimetically as indexes of what the Victorian or pre-Victorian world actually looked like colourwise. In other words, the reader cannot get a clear picture of how red, blue, and green actually appeared at the time, in terms of hue, chroma, and luminance. In the same way as for odours or noises, it may be hypothesised that, as cultural historians claim, sensory experience is inextricably linked with the social imaginaries of both the time of writing and the time of reception.⁹ And the perception of colours is also intersensorial since one sensory perception cannot be considered in isolation. As this study has shown, in *David Copperfield*, colours are woven into the memory work which makes up the novel's substance. In this respect, the use which is made of colours in the novel ties in with the twentieth and twenty-first scientific literature on the

subject. What Dickens mostly intuited in the middle of the nineteenth century; that colours are not fixed signifiers but context-dependent, and that they act as triggers in the process of remembering, is confirmed by recent research on the subject. Sometimes colours are even endowed with a form of agency as they energise the narration through repetition and quasi-surreal visionary digressions. Moreover, colours flag the diversity of Dickens's style, from satire to comedy, and tone, from the romantic to the pathetic. In this regard, they do justice to the novelist's claim to run the whole spectrum of moods in his prose, through the colourful, in more senses than one, image of "streaky bacon." And in a novel underscoring the vulnerability of memories, always on the brink of the infinite indistinctness of oblivion, colours vindicate a form of resilience.

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NOTES

¹The original French text reads: "La couleur est le lieu où notre cerveau et l'univers se rencontrent."

²Mark Spilka categorises *David Copperfield* as a "projective novel, in which surface life reflects the inner self" (Spilka 292).

³The neologism "chromatope" has been chosen even if there is currently a research project on colours in the nineteenth century called "chromotope." The scope of this ERC project goes well beyond the field of literature to cover art, science and technology throughout Europe whereas the purpose of the present analysis is to underline methodological correspondences between the Bakhtinian *chronotope* (time and place) and *chromatope* (colour and place).

⁴The phrase "the green paradise of blissful childhood" is of course a variation on Charles Baudelaire's lines "But the green paradise of childish love [...] Innocent paradise of furtive joys" in his poem "Moesta et errabunda" (Campbell 85). The colour green often connotes nostalgia in *David Copperfield*, such as when David reminisces Blunderstone, Suffolk, the village of his early childhood. Although green is much less present than black, red, white or blue in the novel, it is found more emphatically in relation to Betsey Trotwood's "patch of green" (DC 251), which she ardently defends against the intrusion of "saddle-donkeys, lady-ridden" (DC 250). As a matter of fact, the treatment of green is not devoid of humour in this same chapter 13, when the aunt is reported to be invariably ensconced in a chair behind a "green screen or fan" (DC 246, 248, 250, 252). Indeed, this green theatrical prop partakes of the paraphernalia of the woman's

eccentricity. Sometimes green is alleged to be the colour of memory, a fact that is not attested by the literature on the subject, which tends to link mnemonic attributes with warm colours such as red or orange (see Kuhbandner, Lichtenfeld, Spitzer, and Pekrun). That said, because green is linked to resurgence and vitality through the cycle of vegetation, it connotes the persistence or renewal of past traces. This is the meaning of Claudius's words in *Hamlet* "Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death, / The memory be green" (1.2, 1-2), which Dickens takes up at the end of *The Haunted Man*, the fifth and last of his *Christmas Books*. There, Redlaw, a professor of chemistry, after begging from a ghost the power of forgetting his sorrow and his loss, subsequently realises that this gift of oblivion is actually a curse, as it deprives him of interest, compassion, and sympathy. At the end of the story, the characters are assembled in the College Hall beneath the College founder's portrait and seem to hear the words "Lord, keep my memory green" (HM 408) as if a voice had uttered them. I am most grateful to Professor Michael Hollington for aptly pointing out to me the significance of green in relation to memory.

⁵Jeremy Tambling in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition contemplates the possibility that Micawber "perhaps [...] is [...] the hero of David Copperfield's life" (Kindle 590) because "Micawber's writing is a figure of continuity which surpasses David Copperfield, who seems to show a certain exhaustion in drawing his own writing to an end, and behind Micawber's, there is the text, with the extraordinary and unexhausted depths it comes from" (Kindle 610).

⁶Interestingly, Dickens, through Micawber's inflated lyrical prose blurs the opposition between Newton's scientific, prismatic optics and Goethe's insistence on human perception. Indeed, Micawber uses the image of "prismatic hues" to probe into memory processes in a nearly Proustian way, even if the parallel may seem somewhat anachronistic.

⁷The original French text reads: "un chromatisme ontologique [...] n'est plus simple instrument d'imitation, signature des objets, mais pure dimension de pensée et d'existence."

⁸Research on the Kindle online edition of *David Copperfield* gives the following results: blue (56 occurrences), black (121), and red (91).

⁹See for example Alain Corbin's *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* and his *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*.

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