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DICKENS, “FIRST THINGS” AND THE RITES OF GROWING UP

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We think of “Births, Marriages and Deaths” as marking the most crucial threshold events of a Victorian life. After all, the newspaper announcements listing them began appearing in the nineteenth century, and in many cases were the first items to meet the Victorian reader’s eye. The public importance of the birth notice is comically rendered in an 1851 essay for *Household Words* that takes its title from one such: “Births. Mrs Meek, of a Son.” Overpowered by the “nobility” of the notice of his son’s birth in the *Times*, its narrator, Mr Meek, admits that “We read the review of our child, several times, with feelings of the strongest emotion; and I sent the boy who cleans the boots and shoes, to the office for fifteen copies” (505). Although such events are thus acknowledged by newspaper announcement as the most important moments marking the ages of man in Victorian culture, however, and while Dickens undoubtedly depicts some very memorable birth, marriage and death scenes, his writing provides a wider range of transitional moments for us to consider in thinking about Victorian life cycles and the particular rites of passage that distinguish them. In a collaborative essay written with George Augustus Sala for *Household Words* and published as the leader on 15 May 1852, Dickens identifies a more varied and idiosyncratic set of landmarks in life. Entitled “First Fruits,” this sketch addresses a range of milestones—both whimsical and serious—and forms the framework for my focus upon Dickens’s engagement with *other* significant moments in a Victorian lifecycle, beyond those announced in the columns of the *Times*. How do these “first things” expand our sense of the variety of ritual passages that marked out the stages of a Victorian life? What do they tell us about the formation of identities and the understanding of relationships between past and present selves? In particular, how do they materialize or give shape to that ambiguous stage of development that we have come to call “adolescence”?

Discussing “adolescence” as a key passage of life for the Victorians, Chris R. Vanden Bossche notes that “the question [of] when one stopped

being a child and became an adult” was an abiding preoccupation: indeed, “it was during the Victorian era that the years from age 13 to 24 came to be regarded as a distinct epoch in individual development” identified by the term “adolescence” (82). The term itself only became current in the late nineteenth century and was first theorised by G. Stanley Hall in his pioneering study of that title, published in 1904. Hall argued for the importance of adolescence as a necessary period of transition if youth was to complete its apprenticeship to life successfully. But its boundaries were not clearly defined. As John Springhall notes, “‘Youth’ was, in effect, the word usually employed before 1900 to denote how the years between childhood and adulthood were different from the years around them”; but “our criteria for measuring [just when the stage of adulthood is reached] do not appear to be very constant over time” (7). Leaving school, choosing a vocation, moving out of the parental home, marriage or setting up one’s own household - all have variously been regarded as milestones marking the beginning of adulthood, making adolescence something of what Victor Turner has called a “liminal” condition. For Turner, liminality refers to any “betwixt and between” situation or object (Turner 93). As Thomasson explains, it can be related to single individuals, social groups or whole societies, and applied to both space and time (Thomassen 16). Distinguished by a lack of fixed points, liminality is a kind of formless state and societies use ritual to demarcate or attempt to give form to these unstructured experiences and spaces. As Mary Douglas explains, “ritual focuses attention by framing” and modifies experience by giving form to it (65). The Victorians were hardly unusual then in their employment of a variety of transition rites to establish boundaries that were otherwise unclear.

Dickens’s interest in those rites designed to mark the passage of an individual from childhood to adulthood is characteristically expressed through reference to objects and things. In *Hard Times*, for example, as “Time” passes on in Coketown, “like its own machinery,” so it turns out young Thomas Gradgrind, “a foot taller than when his father had last taken particular notice of him”: “there he stood in a long-tailed coat and a stiff shirt-collar” and ready for “the purchase of his first razor” (120). To be sure, many of Dickens’s children do not grow up, and a number of those who do are catapulted straight into adulthood, without the benefit of an intervening developmental phase. Witness the telescoped autobiographical account in which Esther Summerson describes her transitional years at Greenleaf before she moves to Bleak House (Dickens, *Bleak House* 33-34); or the way in which Amy Dorrit passes from the ages of 13 to 22 in the space of five pages in the chapter that gives us the biography of “The

Child of the Marshalsea” (Dickens, *Little Dorrit* 60-64). Other protagonists, subjects of Dickens’s coming-of-age novels, like David and Pip, are afforded the kind of buffer zone between childhood and adulthood that adolescence provides. However, Dickens’s representation of growing up remains ambiguous, not only because the boundaries of adolescence lack clear definition, but because of his countervailing desire to preserve some of the elements of childhood (a desire that Malcolm Andrews has so compellingly demonstrated in his landmark study, *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child*) and because the “things” used to define the transition are themselves ambiguous signifiers or unstable markers of selfhood. In this essay, I consider childhood, adolescence and New Year’s Day as three key periods of transition discussed in Dickens’s fiction and journalism and the “first things” that distinguish them.

“First Fruits” is the only collaboration between Dickens and Sala recorded in the *Household Words* Office Book, although as Anne Lohrli notes, Dickens exercised his editorial hand freely in making changes to many of Sala’s solo contributions (422). According to the OED, “first fruits” are the ritual offerings made to mark the moment of harvest, although the expression has also been employed in a transferred sense as referring to “the earliest products, results or issues of anything; the first products of a man’s work or endeavour.” However, the focus of the essay by Sala and Dickens is not upon outcomes, but those “first things” from which, we infer, something else is derived: such as the nature of the adult self identified by the editorial “we” of the narrative, the identity that is the “fruit” of the events and experiences recalled. The essay is premised upon Enlightenment associationist psychology, with its view that the mind’s ideas originate in the “first things” of our experience and that memory of them works serially through the activation of connections. The “first things” described by Sala and Dickens are tacitly understood to have a symbolic value as part of the rituals associated with growing up. Some of them mark the passage of an individual life and include such commonly recognised landmarks as the first love-letter, the first baby or the first death. Other “first things,” however, are less conventionally regarded—like the first oyster, or the first visit to “My Uncle,” the pawnbroker; and still others, like the first picture book or the first play, represent rites of passage of a qualitatively different sort—crucial access points through which the child first enters upon a world of fancy and imagination. Such

“first things” bespeak a more singular, Dickensian perspective upon formative moments in the Victorian life cycle.

Sala and Dickens begin with an appeal to the common reader:

Of primary causes or primary colours, we are neither philosophers nor opticians enough to be enabled profitably to discourse. Yet there are primaries—first things—in all our lives very curious and wonderful, replete with matter for speculation, interesting because they come home to and can be understood by us all (189).

Eschewing the technical or specialist primaries in order to discourse instead upon the “first things” familiar to us all, Sala and Dickens here abide by the journal’s remit to help engender “a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding” amongst the community of readers brought together by its “Household Words” ([Dickens], “A Preliminary Word” 1). The editorial “we” here seeks to establish a democratic inclusiveness. “We are all alike in this respect,” write Sala and Dickens, that although the “camera may be of costly rosewood or plain deal, the lens of rare pebble or simple bottle-glass; but the first impressions come equally through the focus, and are daguerretyped with equal force on the silver tablet of memory” (189). Even when remembrance appears to fail, they argue, our recollection of first things can be revived by their material traces, regardless of any intervening transformations in our social station:

for all that we may be riding in gold coaches, and denying that we ever trotted in the mud; for all that we may have changed our names, or tacked titles onto them, or given the hand that was once horny and labour-stained, a neat coat of blood-red crimson ...; for all that we eat turtle instead of tripe and drink Moselle in lieu of “max”;—the primaries shall never be forgotten—the moment when our foot pressed the first step shall never vanish (189).

After such emphatic insistence upon the universality of “first things” in all our lives, however, the landmarks recalled in the descriptions that follow focus almost exclusively upon the experience of masculine, middle-class, social formation.¹ To begin with, “first things” are differentiated by gender. “Male primaries and female primaries there be,” they declare, “and we are of the ruder sex...”; hence they commence their account, with comical mock modesty, by describing “the first—well, there is no harm in it!—the first pair of trousers.” The ceremony of breeching of the early modern period was an important rite of passage in the life of a boy and while it may have declined in prominence by the nineteenth century, it clearly remains a milestone for Sala and Dickens:

Who does not remember, who can ever forget, those much-desiderated, much-prized, much-feared, much-admired articles of dress? How stiff, angular, hard, wooden, they seemed to our youthful limbs! How readily, but for the proper pride and manliness we felt in them—the utter majority and independence of seven years of age—we would have cast them off fifty times, the very first day we wore them, and, resuming our kilt, have once more roamed our little world, a young Highlander. How (all is vanity!) we mounted on surreptitious chairs, viewed ourselves in mirrors, and were discovered in the act by cousins, and blushed dreadfully, and were brought thereby to great shame and grief. What inexpressible delight in that first plunge of the hand (and half the arm) into the trouser-pocket,—in the first fingering of the silver sixpence deposited five fathom deep, for luck! What bitter pain and humiliation we felt, when first strutting forth abroad in them, rude, contumelious boys mocked us, likened us to a pair of tongs, aimed at our legs with peg-tops. ... Those premier pantaloons were snuff-coloured, buttoning over the jacket, and forming, with an extensive shirt-frill, what was then called a “skeleton suit”. They shone very much, and had a queer smell of the snuff-coloured dye. They gave the wearer something of a trussed appearance, like a young fowl ready for the spit. It was a dreadful fashion, as offering irresistible temptations to the schoolmaster to use his cane. You were got up ready for him, and abstinence was more than he could bear (189-90).

The description here manifests that peculiar imaginative treatment of things that is characteristic of *Household Words*'s non-fictional prose. As the stiffness of the fabric and angularity of its shaping are registered by the “youthful limbs” of the wearer, the trope expresses a bodily discomfort that renders both the clothes and their wearers thing-like. The comic effect is compounded by the use of the editorial plural, which, in describing multiple boys “mounting on surreptitious chairs” and “viewing [them]selves in mirrors,” suggests a bizarre proliferation of blushing youth all admiring their legs at once. These “premier pantaloons” are recalled with a vivid particularity as to their colour, texture and smell that conveys the intense self-consciousness of the young boy beset by mixed emotions of pride, vanity and embarrassment as he wears them. The image of the cockerel that underlies the description of his “strutting forth” is made ironically explicit in his likening to a “young fowl ready for the spit,” whose “trussed appearance” also invites flagellation by anyone who shares Mr Creakle’s sadistic predilections. But these trousers are only one among a number of memorable first outfits marking transitional moments in Dickens’s journalism and fiction.² The “fashionable suit of clothes”

(Dickens, *Great Expectations* 148) ordered by Pip from Mr Trabb in which to travel to London is of course another notable example.

While changes in clothing may be important in marking key stages in the passage of a life, for Sala and Dickens, other “first things” are equally resonant. As if inspired by recollection of the vanities associated with wearing the “premier pantaloons,” Sala and Dickens go on in their essay for *Household Words* to remember their next primary, the “first picture-book.” This is a work devoted to dandies and is remembered not for marking a period of development in the life of the young reader, but as one of those points (as Dickens puts it in another essay for *Household Words*) “where we stopped growing” and managed to retain certain childlike faculties:

We date from the time of the Prince Regent, and remember picture-books about dandies—satires upon that eminent personage himself, possibly—but we never knew it.... The picture-book that seems to have been our first, was about one Mr Pillblister (in the medical profession, we presume, from his name), who gave a party (190).

Harry Stone has identified the book as *The Dandies' Ball; or, High Life in the City*, a popular children’s work illustrated by Robert Cruikshank that was first published in 1819 when Dickens was seven, and attributes this section of the essay to him on this basis (2: 413). “As the legend is impressed upon our remembrance,” writes Dickens, the book opened with the verse:

Mr Pillblister and Betsy his sister,
Determined on giving a treat;
Gay dandies they call
To a supper and ball
At their house in Great Camomile Street (190).

Dickens celebrates the pictorial detail of the illustrations, which “represented male dandies in every stage of preparation for this festival: holding on to bed-posts to have their stays laced; embellishing themselves with artificial personal graces of many kinds; and enduring various humiliations in remote garrets” (190). As the brightly-coloured engravings and verses from the book attest [Plates 1 and 2], the essay’s account of this first picture book is testimony to Dickens’s extraordinary visual and verbal memory. But it also demonstrates his belief in the vital importance of retaining the fancies of childhood and in the value of immaturity, celebrated so memorably in other *Household Words* essays like “Where We Stopped Growing” or “A Christmas Tree.” The working out of this

belief takes many forms, and here we see it in the peculiar “grafting”³ of the imaginary world onto the real that features in the conclusion to his account of reading about the dandies ball: “When we first came to London (not the least of our primaries) [he writes], we rejected the Tower, Westminster Abbey, Saint Paul’s, and the Monument, and entreated to be immediately taken to Great Camomile Street” (190) instead. For the child, the imaginary and the real are one. Unlike the first suit, this primary represents not a milestone passed upon the road to adulthood, but a kind of portal onto a world of romance that remains vividly alive in the memory of the older narrator.

Akin to the first picture book in its association with the fancies of childhood is memory of the first play. Dickens’s indebtedness to the essays of Elia is evident here; for Charles Lamb had already visited the topic in “My First Play,” and a comparison of the two essays is instructive. Elia tells of being transported back to his childhood by passing the doorway at the north end of Cross Court that used to be the pit entrance to the Old Drury theatre. He recurs to that first evening when, in an ecstasy of anticipation, “the curtain drew up—I was not past six years old—and the play was Artaxerxes!”:

All feeling was absorbed in vision. Gorgeous vests, gardens, palaces, princesses, passed before me. I knew not players. I was in Persepolis for the time; and the burning idol of their devotion almost converted me into a worshipper. I was awe-struck, and believed those significations to be something more than elemental fires. It was all enchantment and a dream (“My First Play” 115-16).

Elia contrasts his memory of this first play, recollected at a distance of forty years, with an interim visit to the theatre made as an adolescent when, he says, he “expected the same feelings to come again with the same occasion” but was disappointed. For “we differ from ourselves less at sixty and sixteen, than the latter does from six” (116-17), he writes.

In that interval what had I not lost! ... I had left the temple a devotee, and was returned a rationalist.... The green curtain was no longer a veil, drawn between two worlds, the unfolding of which was to bring back past ages, to present “a royal ghost”—but a certain quantity of green baize, which was to separate the audience for a given time from certain of their fellow-men who were to come forward and pretend those parts. The lights—the orchestra lights—came up a clumsy machinery.... The actors were men and women painted (117).

Such disillusionment and alienation from his childhood self do not befall the narrator in Sala and Dickens's essay, where recollection of the first play remains vividly immediate, and adult and child selves happily coexist. Echoing the earlier childhood memory in Elia's essay rather than his adolescent disappointment, their recollection of the first play captures all the excitement of the child's anticipation, willingly submitting, "at five-o'clock that evening, to the otherwise, and at any other time, detestable ordeal of washing, and combing, and being made straight" and "sitting with petful impatience in the parlour, trying on the first pair of white kid gloves" and fearful that the "theatre would be burnt down" or that "(to a positive certainty) a tremendous storm of hail, rain, sleet and thunder would burst out as we stepped into the cab, and send us, theatreless, to bed" (190). The "sweet, dingy, shabby little country theatre, we declared, and believed, to be much larger than either Drury Lane or Covent Garden." With so few people in the audience, they recall "the lady, who sold apples and oranges, sitting in a remote corner, like Pomona in the sulks. And the play when it did begin—stupid, badly acted, badly got up as it very likely was." But the child is oblivious to these shortcomings:

Our intense, fear-stricken admiration of the heroine, when she let he back hair down, and went mad, in blue. The buff-boots of Digby the manager.... The refreshment, administered to us by kind hands, during the intervals of performance, never to be forgotten—oranges, immemorial sponge-cakes.... The final fall of the green curtain, followed by an aromatic perfume of orange-peel and lamp-oil, and the mysterious appearance of ghostly brown Holland draperies from the private boxes. Shawling, cloaking, home, and more primaries—for then it was when we for the first time "sat up late," and for the first time ever tasted sandwiches after midnight, or imbibed a sip, a very small sip, of hot something and water (190-91).

This stock-take of the memories associated with the first play is dominated by the range of sensory impressions that continue to inhabit a kind of timeless present in the essay. It takes recollection of just one element in the chain of images associated with the event to set off the entire serial memory. Despite the older narrator's awareness of the dynamic operating between the artifices of the theatre and its shabby reality—the same dynamic that disillusioned Elia—this adult understanding is not allowed to undermine the recaptured moment of childhood joy in attending the first play, and the concrete memories associated with it.

From these "first things" of childhood, Sala and Dickens move on in their essay to consider the rites of adolescence. They bemoan with comic ruefulness the effects of the first dissipation, evoking the sensation of

getting “elevated,” as they call it, by projecting the effects of inebriation onto the surrounding environment: “The earth seemed to spin round in an inconsistent manner; the pavement was soft—very soft—and felt, you said, as though you were walking on clouds; until suddenly, without the slightest provocation, it came up and smote you on the forehead” (191). This, of course, is another distinctly masculine primary; but it is left behind as Sala and Dickens move finally to their recollection of “the first time we were ever treated as a man!”:

It was after dinner somewhere (we had gone there with our sister; only a year older than ourself, but universally admitted to be a woman, while we unjustly laboured under the tremendous reproach of boyhood) and were left alone, with an aged Being—fifty, perhaps—who was out host, and another patriarch of forty or so. We were simpering behind the decanters, extremely doubtful of our having any business there, when the host uttered these remarkable expressions:

“Mr Bud, will you help yourself, and pass the wine!”

We did it, and felt that we had passed the Rubicon too. We helped ourself feebly, awkwardly, consciously. We felt that they were thinking “Will he take more than is good for him? Will his eyes roll in his head? Will he disappear beneath the table?” But we did it, and bashfully sipped our wine, and even made impotent attempts to close our left eye critically, and look at it against the light. We have been promoted twice or thrice since, and have even sat in high places, and received honour; but our host has never said, with the same deep significance –

“Mr Bud, will you help yourself, and pass the wine?” (192)

The mixed feelings of masculine pride and bashfulness that distinguish this rite of passage in the memory of the narrator also bespeak the ambiguous position of adolescence, of the uncertain situation of the diffident youth poised between boyhood and manhood. His liminal condition is registered in the effeminacy that seems to haunt his performance of manliness here, as he “simplers” behind the decanters and makes “impotent attempts” to scrutinise the quality of the wine. His youthful self-consciousness, comically captured in the surname Bud, is intensified by the anxiety said to be felt beneath the gaze of his elders, and it recalls David Copperfield’s repeated transformation from an adolescent approaching his majority back into “a boy again” (292) whenever he comes into the presence of Steerforth’s valet, Littimer.

Such anxieties about immaturity and adolescent development—seen not only in David, but in his first love, Dora as well—contrast with

Dickens's embrace of arrested growth elsewhere in his writing, and no where more so, perhaps, than in those essays he contributed to *Household Words* marking another "first thing" and key transitional moment: the coming of the new year. For the Victorians, as for us, rites of renewal typically marked the advent of the New Year. New Year's Day is an example of the temporal dimension of liminality, for 1 January, as the name of the month suggests, looks backwards into the old year as well as forwards into the new one, like the two faces of the god Janus from whose name it derives. Dickens used this first day of the year in his journalism as a moment to take stock and reflect upon questions of progress and development.

Two of Dickens's most memorable New Year contributions, "Where We Stopped Growing" (1 January 1853) and "New Year's Day" (1 January 1859), use the transitional moment to reflect upon the relationship between his past and present selves. Once again, as with the memory of his "first play," Dickens is following here in the wake of Charles Lamb (Andrews 69). "No one ever regarded the First of January with indifference," writes Elia. "It is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left. It is the nativity of our common Adam" ("New Year's Eve" 32). But rather than welcoming in the birth of the coming year, Elia is beset by "tender regrets for the decease of its predecessor" (32) and made conscious of the gap between his past and present selves:

But for the child Elia—that "other me," there, in the background—
—I must take leave to cherish the remembrance of that young
master—with as little reference, I protest, to this stupid changeling
of five-and-forty, as if it had been a child of some other house, and
not of my parents (33).

The detachment felt by Elia from his former self is not shared by Dickens, however. In "Where We Stopped Growing," Dickens celebrates the preservation of a childlike capacity for wonder that coexists with his adult self. The essay describes a series of examples of arrested growth—his memory of the tales of Robinson Crusoe and the Arabian Nights, eccentric figures like the White Woman, or places like the outside of Newgate prison. But the most resonant and "enigmatic" image, as Malcolm Andrews remarks (66), is a thing: a tea-tray seen in a Covent Garden window,

representing, with an exquisite Art that we have not outgrown
either, the departure from home for school, at breakfast time, of
two boys—one boy used to it; the other, not. There was a
charming mother in a bygone fashion, evidently much affected
though trying to hide it; and a little sister, bearing, as we

remember, a basket of fruit for the consolation of the unused brother; what time the used one, receiving advice we opine from his grandmother, drew on his glove in a manner we once considered unfeeling, but which we were afterwards inclined to hope might be only his brag. There were some corded boxes, and faithful servants; and there was a breakfast-table, with accessories (an urn and plate of toast particularly), our admiration of which, as perfect illusions, we never have outgrown and never shall outgrow (“Where We Stopped Growing” 362).

The intensity of this memory, registered in the small details so distinctly recalled, the affective power of the family scene described and the interpretative impulse that arises from it, all bespeak the importance of retaining the childhood capacity for wonder and imagination as the essay marks our passage from the old to the New Year. As Andrews observes, depicting “an emotional family leave-taking” (64) and exhibited in the window of a shop near to the Chandos Street premises of Warren’s Blacking Warehouse, the tea-tray no doubt had a peculiar resonance for Dickens stemming from its association with that crucially formative experience of his youth: “It is akin to what in Freudian terms would be known as a ‘screen memory’—a vivid but intrinsically trivial image acting as host to a displaced cluster of memories of a traumatic experience” (66). But the material significance of the tea-tray is also worth noting. For it unites the familial breakfast-table depicted upon it with the functional utility of the object itself, suggesting the associations of homeliness and comfort to be found in the domesticated ritual of the English tea-table by mid-century. In the context of an essay that celebrates being “in childish company” at this particular season, “with the Old Year going out and the New Year coming in,” the symbolic work of the tea-tray might be said to include the creation of a shared community through the solacing, quotidian associations of a cup of tea, in a journal that seeks to be “as familiar in their mouths as Household Words.”

When Dickens returns to the topic of “New Year’s Day” in 1859, his essay once again focuses upon rites of renewal in the blending of memory and imagination, fact and fiction. He recalls, as a child, having been taken upon a New Year’s Day by “a grim and unsympathetic old personage of the female gender, flavoured with musty dry lavender, dressed in black crape, and wearing a pocket in which something clinked at my ear as we went along” (97)—to the Bazaar in Soho Square to have a present bought for him. The chosen gift was a Harlequin’s Wand, which, despite the promise of its pantomimic associations, proves to be wholly without magic. “Other wands [too]”, writes Dickens, “have failed me since, but the Day itself has become their substitute.... I throw up and catch my wand of

New Year's Day, beat the dust of years from the ground at my feet with it, twinkle it a little, and Time reverses his hour-glass, and flies back, much faster than he ever flew forward" (97-8).

Some of the former New Year's Days recalled here are clearly autobiographical: such as the Italian New Year's Day based upon his residence in Genoa in 1844-45. The family moved from the unsuitable Villa Bagnerello to the Villa Pallavicino della Peschiere on 23 September 1844, and Dickens evokes the splendours of this Renaissance Palazzo here: "I tread the tessellated pavement of the garden-terrace, watch the gold-fish in the marble fountains, loiter in the pleasant grove of orange-trees, and become a moving pillar of fragrance by unromantically pocketing a green lemon, now and then, with an eye to Punch tonight in the English manner" (100). He recalls the great Twelfth-cake "which has come as a present all the way from Signor Gunter's della Plaza Berkeley, Londra, Inghilterra, and which got cracked in coming, and is in the street of Happy Charles to be mended, and the like of which has never been seen" (100). Angela Burdett Coutts had sent it in honour of Charley's birthday. "It is not the New Year's Day of a dream" he writes, "but of broad awake fact, that finds me housed in a palace, with a highly popular ghost and twenty-five spare bedrooms" (100). Whether some of the *other* New Year's Days recalled in the essay have their basis in fact or fancy is less clear. "On what other early New Year's Day can I possibly have been an innocent accomplice in the secreting—in a coal cellar too—of a man with a wooden leg!" (98), exclaims Dickens. Is this an invented memory? Or does it have a basis in fact and explain where all those bizarrely recurring wooden legs in his fiction come from? The episode seems preposterous enough to imply its invention, but the circumstantial detail with which it is recalled in the essay gives it an effect of authenticity that suggests a recovered memory. Either way, the uncertain origin of this recollection is in keeping with the nature of New Year's Day as an "in between" moment, prompting reflection upon the blending of reality and imagination in the transformations associated with growing up.

In conclusion then, what are we to make of the range of milestones and rites of passage that Dickens depicts in his writing, and how does this relate to his interest in that ambiguous stage of development that comes in between childhood and adulthood? Dickens's deep fascination with liminal states and spaces—between internal and external imaginings, the animate and the inanimate, people and things—may help to explain his interest in the ambiguities of adolescence. Having felt that he missed out on an interim stage between childhood and adulthood himself, he was acutely aware of the way in which the experience of adolescence was

bound up with socio-economic circumstance: an awareness most powerfully dramatized perhaps in the portrait of Pip. Not surprisingly, the “first things” recalled by Dickens offer further evidence of his continuing fascination with subject-object relationships. In exploring a more varied and sometimes idiosyncratic set of landmarks in life made memorable by virtue of their first occurrence, we see how particular objects are endowed with symbolic value and may serve as repositories for selfhood or vehicles for its renewal. Things like clothes or picture-books, and experiences like parties or theatrical performances, convey the importance of material culture in Victorian rites of growing up and in the practice of memory-writing. They also generate some of the tension to be found in Dickens’s accounts of maturation and development. On the one hand, he recalls those “first things” marking the transition towards adulthood in order to convey the excitement felt at the growing powers that accompany maturity. On the other hand, the very processes of recollection, with their reliance upon the vivid materialization of memory, frequently advocate a stoppage of growth that calls the transition itself into question. Ever seeking to dwell upon “the romantic side of familiar things,” Dickens’s engagement with “first things” in his fiction and journalism shows something of the variety of ways in which Victorian middle-class subjects identify with and through the objects they possess and which, in some cases, might be said to possess them.⁴

Notes

¹ There is of course an autobiographical basis to the essay that Harry Stone uses to identify the attributions of each co-author.

² Harry Stone attributes this section of the essay to Sala, who later wrote a chapter on the “Costumes of my Infancy” in his memoir, *Things I Have Seen and People I Have Known*, in which he recalls being “brought triumphantly down to breakfast by my nurse, and exhibited to the family circle in all the pride of what was known as a ‘skeleton suit’” (2: 254) and bewails his former self as one of “the wretched little slaves of a preposterous fashion” (2: 255).

³ The metaphor is Malcolm Andrews’s: “In time the marks of the grafting operation are erased and the relation between romance and reality becomes hard to determine” (50).

⁴ I borrow Jennifer Sattaur’s phrase here (353). As Walter Benjamin observes of the collector, “ownership is the most intimate relationship that

one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them”(67).