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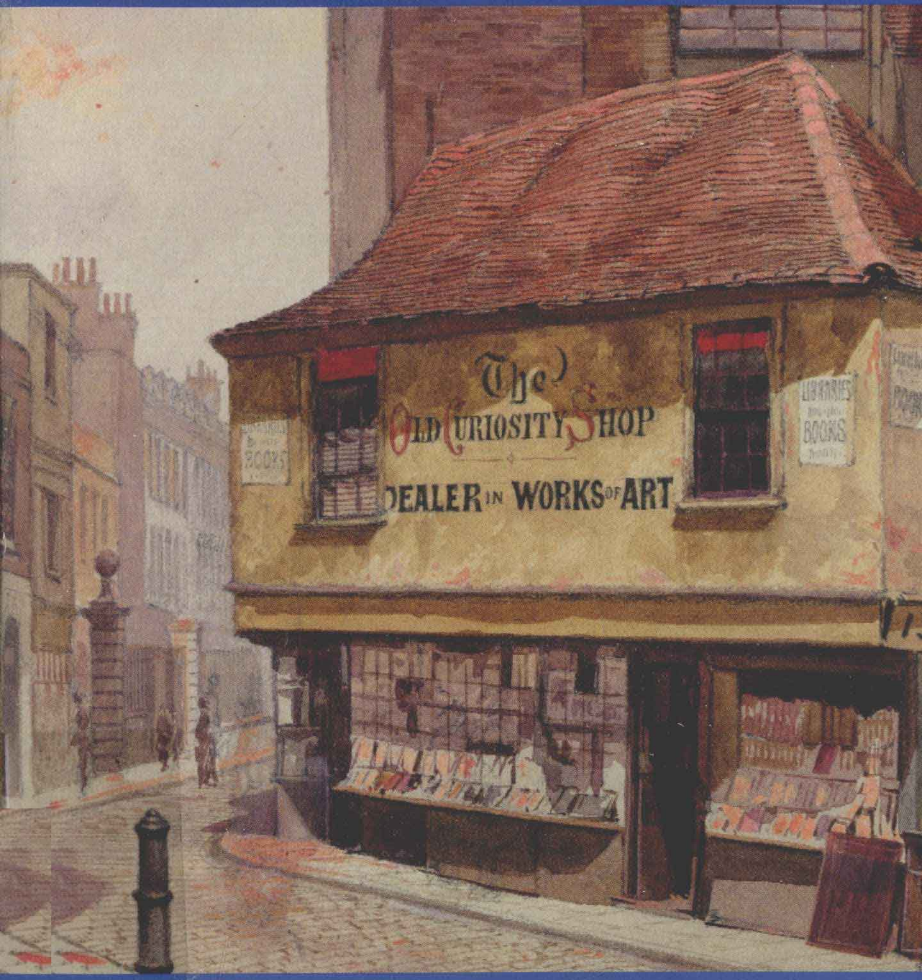
The Old Curiosity Shop

CHARLES DICKENS



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP

Charles Dickens

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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This edition published 1995 by Wordsworth Editions Limited
8B East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ
Introduction, illustrations and notes added 2001

ISBN 978-1-85326-244-9

Typeset in Great Britain by Antony Gray
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

By the summer of 1839 Dickens could look back on three busy and remarkable years. *Pickwick Papers*, published monthly between April 1836 and November 1837, was an unprecedented success, both for its author, still in his mid-twenties, and as an innovative means of publication. The second volume of the collected *Sketches by Boz*, which had first brought Dickens to public attention, appeared in December 1836; *Oliver Twist* (February 1837–April 1839) overlapped with the later numbers of *Pickwick*, and was itself overlapped by *Nicholas Nickleby* (April 1838–October 1839). For much of this time Dickens was also occupied with journalism: he continued as an occasional reporter on the *Morning Chronicle* until 1836, and edited the monthly *Bentley's Miscellany* (in which *Oliver Twist* appeared) from January 1837 until January 1839. There had been major changes in his personal life: he married Catherine Hogarth in April 1836, and by October 1839 was the father of three young children; and in May 1837, Mary Hogarth, his young sister-in-law, died suddenly – an event that was to leave its mark on his next book, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Dickens's fourth full-length novel was developed from material originally intended as a short tale narrated by an eccentric elderly man to a group of friends with a taste for the old and curious, and since the circumstances in which Dickens began the novel are unique in his career and because the process of the book's making had a profound effect on both its form and its content, it is important to begin by briefly tracing its progress from conception to publication.

Dickens's agreement with the publisher Richard Bentley in August 1836 committed him to delivering the completed manuscript of *Barnaby Rudge* by January 1840, and during the autumn of 1839, as the serialisation of *Nickleby* neared completion, he was at work on this novel. In his biography of Dickens, however, John Forster records that the writer was anxious about embarking on a new serialised novel so soon after its predecessors, believing that the public was 'likely to tire of the same twenty numbers over again', and wished to 'discontinue the writing of a long story with all its strain on his fancy' (Forster, *Life*, p. 117).[1] Furthermore, since July 1839 he had been in negotiation with his publishers Chapman and Hall about a project which was proudly announced in number 17 of *Nicholas Nickleby* (August 1839) as 'A NEW WORK, ON AN ENTIRELY NEW PLAN'.

This new work – the initiative for which came from Dickens – was to be a weekly periodical whose contents would be framed in the setting of a fictional club. Dickens's models were the eighteenth-century periodical *The Spectator* (1711–12) and his own Pickwick Club: indeed, he planned to reintroduce both Pickwick and Sam Weller. The contents would include essays, comments on current events and sketches, some of them as themes or regular features; there would also be stories narrated by members of the club. Illustrations, in the form of woodcuts, would be dropped into the text at appropriate places, as opposed to the separate engravings which had illustrated his earlier works.[2] Dickens would be editor and, initially, sole author. He would also be part proprietor of the publication, receiving £50 for each issue (out of which he would pay contributors, when necessary) plus a half share of the profits. The periodical would cost 3*d.* a week, with collected monthly parts at 1s, and Dickens worked out that a two-year run with sales of 50,000 per week would bring Chapman and Hall a total profit of £5000, while he would

1 Full details of all works quoted in this Introduction may be found in the Bibliography.

2 See Stevens, '"Woodcuts dropped into the Text"', and Harvey, *Victorian Novelists and Their Illustrators*, for discussion of the illustrations.

receive £11000.[3] Dickens considered several titles, but eventually settled for *Master Humphrey's Clock*. 'I have a notion of this old file in the queer house,' he told Forster in January 1840, 'opening the book by an account of himself, and, among other peculiarities, of his affection for an old quaint queer-cased clock' (*Letters*, II, p. 4).

The first number of *Master Humphrey's Clock* appeared in April 1840, and its sales exceeded even Dickens's optimistic calculations: 60,000 copies were printed and sold and a further 10,000 ordered. '*The Clock* goes gloriously indeed,' Dickens wrote to William Hall; '... Thank God for this great hit. I always had a quiet confidence in it, but I never expected *this*, at first' (*Letters*, II, p. 50). The euphoria was short-lived, however, for sales dropped sharply for the second number and even further for the third. Furthermore, the preparation of the woodcuts, for which Dickens insisted on the best craftsmen, and the difficulties of placing them at the appropriate point in the text, made the illustrations very expensive. Chapman and Hall were losing money, while Dickens was making less than he had hoped and facing the first real setback of his hitherto brilliant career.

The principal reason for the declining sales is easy to identify: in spite of Dickens's doubts, his readers *did* want 'the same twenty numbers over again', and as Dickens acknowledged in his Preface to the 1848 cheap edition of the novel, were disappointed by 'the desultory character' of the new miscellany. Clearly something must be done to stem the loss of readers. During a visit to Bath in March 1840 Dickens had conceived a 'little child-story' (*Letters*, II, p. 41), which he planned to use as the first of the short tales to be recounted by Master Humphrey himself. The first episode appeared in Number 4 (25 April 1840), and although at this stage Dickens, in spite of being anxious about falling sales, was refusing to be panicked into hasty action, he made changes in the proofs which prepared the ground for lengthening the story if necessary. None the less, the second episode of *The Old Curiosity Shop* did not appear until Number 7 (16 May), and although Numbers 8 and 10 were wholly given over to the story, the original miscellany format reappeared for Numbers 9 and 11. But the convention of Master Humphrey as narrator of the tale had already been abandoned at the end of Chapter 3 (Number 8) so that

3 Estimates vary as to the value of these sums in today's terms, but they probably need to be multiplied by a factor of between fifty and one hundred to produce some kind of comparison. Kit's quarterly wage of £6 and Dick's annuity of £150 also help to put the figures in perspective. See Smith, *Charles Dickens: A Literary Life*, and Patten, *Charles Dickens and his Publishers*, for details of Dickens's dealings with Bentley and Chapman and Hall.

the way was now clear for the next thirty-four numbers (12–45) to be devoted to *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Nothing was said about the discontinuation of the miscellany, but the rise in sales, which at one point reached 100,000 per week, suggests that readers were happy with the change.

The circumstances in which Dickens developed the novel inevitably raise questions about its planning and coherence. The story begins in London, among a group of characters linked with Nell and the old curiosity shop. After Chapter 12, however, the narrative divides into two main strands. The first follows Nell and old Trent as they leave London and make their way across England; the second stays in London, among the group of characters known to or interested in Nell. Efforts are made by an ever-expanding group of people to discover Nell's whereabouts, but it is not until the very last chapters that the single gentleman and his party catch up with Nell and her grandfather. Thus different kinds of narratives exist side by side in the novel: the pilgrimage, the picaresque story of events on the road, the intrigues of marriage and money, the 'conversions' of certain characters from comic accessories to key moral agents. All these narratives are participated in and sometimes controlled by the manically active Quilp, who functions as an important link between the various elements of the plot.

None the less a certain degree of awkwardness remains in the novel's structure. Frederick Trent, who promises to be a wicked brother on the model of Monks in *Oliver Twist* (and could then have contributed to a pattern of brotherhood in the novel, joining old Trent and the single gentleman and Mr Garland and the Bachelor) is dropped from the narrative and disposed of very perfunctorily at the end. Kit, loving and steadfast, but slightly dim-witted, and Dick, amiable but pliant, are both tested by adversity (Kit's imprisonment and Dick's near-fatal illness) and become major characters and positive forces for good. Indeed, in a kind of shadowing of the main plot, Dick rescues the Marchioness, another 'lost' child. At times Dickens appears to be uneasy about the transition from one plot to another, and his attempts to smooth the shift between the narrative strands often have the effect of drawing attention to the change rather than making it easier. At the beginning of Chapter 33, for instance, Dickens employs quite an elaborate metaphor, involving a reference to a slightly obscure French story, simply to get the reader to the Brasses' office (p. 239). In Chapter 42, the reader is told: 'It behoves us to leave Kit for a while, thoughtful and expectant, and to follow the fortunes of little Nell; resuming the thread of the narrative at the point where it was left, some chapters back' (p. 305); while in Chapter 47, the narrative reverts to Kit's mother and the single gentleman, 'upon whose track it is expedient to follow with hurried steps, lest this history should be chargeable with inconstancy, and the offence of leaving its characters in situations of uncertainty and doubt' (p. 343). It is clear that Dickens felt cramped by the restrictions of writing quite short (two chapters) weekly parts, so that compared with his earlier novels the business of moving between plot strands had to be carefully handled. And although the opening of Chapter 47 feels a little easier, as if Dickens was growing more accustomed to the weekly format and could afford to be jokey and self-referential – he presumably retained readers *because* he left characters 'in situations of uncertainty and doubt' – this is the kind of thing that he handled with more aplomb in his later, even more densely plotted novels.

There is contradictory evidence about Dickens's forward planning in the novel. Forster, for instance, said that the novel took 'gradual form, with less direct consciousness of design on his own part than I can remember in any other instance throughout his career' (Forster, *Life*, p. 123). Yet in the Preface to the 1848 cheap edition, Dickens asserted that 'in writing the book, I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed'. This retrospective statement of intent is supported by the novel itself, which is at every level built on contrasts. 'Everything in our lives,' the narrative voice remarks, 'whether of good or evil, affects us most by contrast' (p. 390). In tone, the novel veers between pathos and the grotesque, comedy and tragedy; its settings move between town and country, agriculture and mechanised industry, old and new; thematically, it is concerned with fidelity and treachery, selflessness and rapacity, youth and age, good and evil, life and death. There are unlikely yet arresting juxtapositions – Quilp's appearance at Little Bethel chapel, Nell singing songs on the canal barge, Nell and her grandfather sleeping by the furnace. Nell is frequently one term in these juxtapositions, and this is hardly surprising since she bears the novel's principal thematic and moral burden, which concerns the death of the young and innocent, and the need to accept change and mortality as an inevitable component of human experience. It is no surprise, therefore, that Nell haunts graveyards, encounters several instances of premature death and spends a lot of time in the company of old men. Indeed, Dickens's decision – acting on a suggestion made by Forster in August 1840 – that Nell should die, strengthens the book's aesthetic balance. At the beginning of the novel the child sleeps among ancient curiosities; at the end she lies dead in an equally ancient and grotesque setting. The ways in which the narrative moves between the innocence and purity represented by Nell, and the grotesque, wild, strange and uncongenial, represented by Quilp, and how Dick Swiveller negotiates between these two extremes, are central to the novel's design and meaning.

* * *

The topography of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is rendered with a striking combination of precision about its London locations and an apparently deliberate and tantalising vagueness about the route taken by Nell and her grandfather. Even a modern map of London will help the reader to understand that, given the number of routes between Drury Lane and the Strand, Dick Swiveller must have a great many debts if only one of them is left open to him (p. 59). Quilp's residence on Tower Hill is handy both for the City and Bevis Marks (where Brass has his office), and for the area between the Tower and the docks, where Quilp owns property and carries on his ship-breaking business. When Brass tells Dick to ' "step over to Peckham Rye" ' (p. 414), he is actually sending him some distance and thus ensuring that he is out of the way while Sampson puts in motion the plot to incriminate Kit. Peckham is quite a distant London location for this novel, in which the metropolitan scenes mostly take place in a smallish area from the City to Aldgate and Whitechapel. Nobody lives or ventures into the fashionable western end of London, and only the Garlands, in the then northern village of Finchley, and eventually Dick and the Marchioness in Hampstead, live outside the central area. This highlights the fact that this is a novel full of characters who work or have worked for their living; apart from Dick's small annuity no one has an inherited income.

By the last page of the novel Kit Nubbles has become uncertain of the exact location of the now demolished curiosity shop. Dickens is no more helpful in locating it for the reader and the same uncertainty attaches to the journeying of Nell and old Trent. When Nell and her grandfather decide to flee the shop, old Trent looks 'irresolutely and helplessly, first at her, then to the right and left, then at her again' (p. 96), but the narrative does not even tell us whether they turn left or right, let alone in which compass direction that might be. The descriptions of the parts of London through which they pass are very unparticularised, and the only hint of their route comes when they pass through 'the haunts of commerce and great traffic', presumably the City of London, before coming to 'a straggling neighbourhood' (p. 113) via which they reach a hill, perhaps to the north-west of the city, on which they can feel they are 'at last . . . clear of London' (p. 114). As their journey continues they pass through villages and towns, some of them quite large, none of them named. Their characteristics and layout are often described in some detail, as in the town (possibly Warwick) where Mrs Jarley sets up her exhibition, or the industrial centre (presumably Birmingham) which they reach by canal. At the beginning of Chapter 45 they leave this town, longing 'for the freedom of pure air and open country', but must first endure a passage through a wasted industrial landscape in which chimneys present 'that endless repetition of the same dull, ugly form, which is the horror of oppressive dreams' (p. 330). 'You will recognise,' Dickens told Forster in his letter of 4 October 1840, 'a description of the road we travelled between Birmingham and Wolverhampton' (*Letters*, II, pp. 131–2). Again, however, no such positive identification is offered in the novel.

Speculation about the 'real' originals of these places, however, is false to the shape and spirit of this part of Dickens's narrative. In spite of the contemporary feel of the England through which they travel – especially the industrial areas – Dickens is not writing a novel of urgent social concern, and the time at which it is set is no more specific than some of its locations. Brass is described as one of 'her Majesty's attornies' (p. 96), but Kit is accused of an offence 'against the peace of our Sovereign Lord the King' (p. 458): Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837 and was preceded by George IV (1820–30) and William IV (1830–7), so this alone offers a possible twenty-year timespan for the action of the novel. Quilp's burial at a crossroads suggests a practice discontinued for suicides in 1823 (p. 539), while old Trent's fear of the madhouse evokes an earlier regime (p. 148). Again, exactitude is not offered and need not be sought, since place and date are most significant in that they represent stages on a symbolic journey whose model is less a factory inspector's report than John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678).[4]

The first identification of their journey with Bunyan's book is made by Nell herself as she and her grandfather leave London:

> There had been an old copy of the Pilgrim's Progress, with strange plates, upon a shelf at home, over which she often pored whole evenings, wondering whether it was true in every word, and where those distant countries with the curious names might be. As she looked back upon the place they had left, one part of it came strongly on her mind.
>
> 'Dear grandfather,' she said, 'only that this place is prettier and a great deal better than the real one, if that in the book is like it, I feel

4 See Wheeler, *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction*, for a discussion of the influence of *The Pilgrim's Progress* on many nineteenth-century narratives.

> as if we were both Christian, and laid down on this grass all the cares and troubles we brought with us; never to take them up again.'
>
> [pp. 114–16]

This is the only explicit reference to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but other allusions follow. Given their subsequent misfortunes, Nell's words are unwittingly ironic, and there are a number of references to the burden of cares borne by Christian, as well as to the wicket-gate through which he must pass to reach the Celestial City and to the various swamps, thorny places and other hazards through which he must make his way. Temptations are offered to old Trent in the form of gambling and the urge to steal to feed his habit; Vanity Fair appears in the guise of the races, the Slough of Despond as the industrial city. Some of the people they meet on the road offer good advice, true succour and a genuine refuge, but they must also avoid the false lure of gambling and evade the relentless pursuit of the demonic Quilp; these threats force them to resume their journey even when they seem to have found a safe haven. Only when they re-encounter the schoolmaster do they meet the true guide and fellow-pilgrim who will lead them to their final resting place.

Perhaps the most significant similarity between *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* lies in the number of emblematic scenes and incidents in each narrative. Christian's burden only falls from him when he has witnessed and correctly understood what is presented to him in the Interpreter's House, and Nell is required to undertake similar interpretative and exemplary tasks throughout the novel. In the graveyard where she meets Codlin and Short she also meets the widow of a man who died over fifty years ago and who 'although she continued to be sad when she came there, still she could bear to come, and so went on until it was pain no longer, but a solemn pleasure' (p. 127); an encounter which leaves Nell thoughtful. The schoolmaster's absorption with his dying pupil (p. 182), Nell's observation of the two sisters (pp. 236–7) and her encounter with a little boy near his brother's grave, reminiscent of Wordsworth's poem 'We Are Seven' (pp. 387–8), provide similar emblematic lessons. But the most telling incidents of this nature, bearing the most striking resemblance to those in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, occur at the nadir of the pilgrimage, just before she re-encounters the schoolmaster, when Nell, desperate for food, begs at one of the 'wretched hovels' by the road, only to be met by a man in similar straits:

> 'Do you see that?' returned the man hoarsely, pointing to a kind of bundle on the ground. 'That's a dead child. I and five hundred other men were thrown out of work three months ago. That is my third

> dead child, and last. Do you think I have charity to bestow, or a morsel of bread to spare?' [p. 332]

At the next house she witnesses a scene between a magistrate and two mothers, one of whose sons has been restored to her while the other's has been transported, never having had the opportunity to learn right from wrong. Both incidents are illustrative of economic conditions in the 1830s and 1840s, and although Dickens does not place them in any larger socio-political drama, as Benjamin Disraeli or Elizabeth Gaskell were soon to do, he certainly intends to arouse pity and anger in his readers.[5] At the same time, viewed through the framing doorways of the houses, each becomes an ahistorical moral drama, with a lesson for Nell about the universality of suffering and the need for compassion.

For Nell, many of these incidents are not simply educative, they are also preparative, for the narrative is relentlessly bringing Nell towards her death; and it is around the death of Little Nell that much critical discussion of *The Old Curiosity Shop* has revolved. Oscar Wilde famously remarked that a man would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing, and the typically Wildean subversion of the expected reaction indicates how widespread was its opposite, as does G. K. Chesterton's dismissive 'it is not the death of Little Nell but the life of Little Nell that I object to' (Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms*, p. 54). Bernard Shaw, also writing at a time when opinion was turning against Victorian emotional excess, remarked that Nell was 'nothing but a sort of literary onion, to make you cry' (*Shaw on Dickens*, p. 100). At the time of its publication, however, many readers claimed to have wept over the novel. Francis Jeffrey, one of the most intellectual and hard-headed critics of the time, was so stricken by grief when ~~he read of Nell's death th~~at a visitor, finding him sobbing bitterly with his head on his desk, assumed that a close relative had died (*Letters*, II, p. 238n). Other notable men of letters – Thomas Hood, Walter Savage Landor and even the stern Thomas Carlyle – were overcome. Nor was the reaction confined to Britain. It was reported that impatient readers gathered on the docks at New York to call out to passengers from England, 'Is Nell dead?' The American poet Bret Harte wrote a poem called 'Dickens in Camp', which tells of a group of hardened trail riders gathered round a fire in the 'dim Sierras' and being

5 See Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) and especially Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), which make direct contrasts between the vulnerability of the poor in periods of economic depression and the more secure lives enjoyed by the middle classes.

read *The Old Curiosity Shop* by the youngest among them until 'Their cares dropped from them like the needles shaken/From out the gusty pines' (Forster, *Life*, pp. 132–3).

Praise for Nell and grief at her death was not, however, universal, even in Dickens's own more sentimental age. Fitzjames Stephen, writing in the 1850s, strikes a modern and pathologising note when he observes that Dickens 'gloats over the girl's death as if it delighted him; he looks at it . . . touches, tastes, smells and handles it as if was some savoury dainty which could not be too fully appreciated' (quoted in Ford, p. 61). The highly rhetorical passage describing the dead Nell (pp. 527–9), with its thrice-repeated 'She was dead', certainly lingers over her body and emphasises both the release brought by death and the continuity of what was best and holiest in Nell:

> Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose.
>
> And still her former self lay there, unaltered in this change. Yes. The old fireside had smiled upon that same sweet face; it had passed like a dream through haunts of misery and care; at the door of the poor schoolmaster on the summer evening, before the furnace fire upon the cold wet night, at the still bedside of the dying boy, there had been the same mild lovely look. So shall we know the angels in their majesty, after death. [p. 529]

Fitzjames Stephen's suggestion that Dickens somehow wishes to *consume* Little Nell, brings the author's contemplation of her dead body uncomfortably close to the lip-smacking relish with which Quilp talks about the living Nell: ' "Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud . . . such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell . . . so small, so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and such a transparent skin, and such little feet, and such winning ways' (p. 73). Even Dickens's own account of his feelings when composing the death of Nell tells a complex story, compounded of reluctance, inevitability, grief, guilt and excitement. In January 1841, he described his work on the final chapters as 'a painful task', and a few days later he told William Macready, 'I am slowly murdering that poor child, and grow wretched over it. It wrings my heart. Yet it must be' (*Letters*, II, pp. 178 and 180). Forster says that he never knew his old friend 'wind up any tale with such a sorrowful reluctance as this' (Forster, p. 128), and Dickens's letter to Forster, probably written on 8 January 1841, confirms this observation: 'I am the wretchedest of the wretched. It casts the most horrible shadow upon me, and it is as much as I can do to keep moving at all . . . Nobody will miss her like I shall. It is such a very painful thing to me, that I really cannot express my sorrow' (*Letters*, II, p. 181).

Yet it must be, Dickens had told Macready, and his excitement in creating Nell's necessary death also emerges from his letters to Forster. As early as November 1840, after telling Forster, 'All night I have been pursued by the child; and this morning I am unrefreshed and miserable,' he goes on to say, 'I think the end of the story will be great' (*Letters*, II, p. 144). In the 8 January letter, immediately before informing Forster of his wretchedness, he writes that he believes that the death of Nell 'will come famously' (*Letters*, II, p. 181). And painful though it may be, Dickens did not shirk the task, for completing it offered the satisfactions of power, over his material and of course over his readers. For both Dickens and his sympathetic (largely male) readers, writing and reading about the death of Nell represented a kind of consolatory catharsis. Yet in some respects the death of Nell is very willed, and Dickens had to work hard to attain the appropriate emotional and imaginative state in which to write it. This is in marked contrast to the astonishing freedom and expansiveness with which he creates the Brasses, Dick or Quilp. During those last hard days of writing, the habitually convivial Dickens refused several invitations because he was 'afraid of disturbing the state I have been trying to get into, and having to fetch it all back again' (*Letters*, II, p. 182). This self-induced state, necessary for the act of creation, suggests the degree of pain and imaginative excitement involved in 'murdering' Nell, and was perhaps brought about, as the editors of Dickens's letters suggest, by deliberately bringing to the forefront of his mind the circumstances of Mary Hogarth's death (*Letters*, II, p. 182n). 'So young, so beautiful, so good' (p. 532) Dickens says of Nell, echoing the words he had had placed on the gravestone of his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, who died in his arms at the age of seventeen in May 1837. 'Old wounds bleed afresh when I only think of the way of doing it,' he told Forster in the 8 January letter, 'Dear Mary died yesterday, when I think of this sad story' (*Letters*, II, pp. 181–2). In grieving for Nell (and her successors in his work) he grieved for Mary, just as in sobbing over Nell, Francis Jeffrey wept again for his infant son, who died in 1832 (*Letters*, II, p. 238n). Offering such consolation and the release of feeling seems to have been part of Dickens's conscious intention, as he told Forster in a letter of about 17 January 1841: 'When I first began . . . to keep my thoughts upon this ending of the tale, I resolved to try and do something which might be read by people about whom Death had been, – with a softened feeling, and with consolation' (*Letters*, II, p. 188). In a letter of 15–16 January, Forster had written that he 'felt this death of dear little Nell as a kind of discipline of feeling and emotion which would do me lasting good' (*Letters*, II, p. 187n); Dickens, however, found it difficult to benefit by the 'discipline of feeling'. Chapter 71, in which Nell's death is revealed, ends with the schoolmaster's words: ' "It is not . . . on earth that Heaven's justice ends. Think what it is, compared with the World to which her young spirit has winged its early flight, and say, if one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it!" ' (p. 529). 'I can't,' Dickens told Forster, 'preach to myself the schoolmaster's consolation' (*Letters*, II, p. 181).

All these reactions need to be placed in their historical context. As Peter Ackroyd points out, in 1839 almost half the funerals in London were those of children under ten; and for those who did survive, particularly young girls, the streets of London could be very dangerous (Ackroyd, *Charles Dickens*, p. 320). Dickens ensures, however, that Nell, does not encounter thieves, pimps or procuresses. Nell's mourners would have been consoled by the novel's implicit assurances of the protection of innocence and its return unspoiled to its maker. All the mourners quoted here were men, and it is striking that in the various accounts of the reception of *The Old Curiosity Shop* not one reaction recorded is from a woman.[6] There was undoubtedly a sentimental cult of young girls in the nineteenth century and its manifestations ranged from the idealistic to the sexually predatory, with many devotees simultaneously occupying a number of points on this spectrum. Examples would include John Ruskin's idealisation of Rose la Touche, Lewis Carroll's obsession with Alice Liddell and Francis Kilvert's omnivorous interest in the girls of his parish. A ready translation of such creatures from the earthbound to the angelic, often achieved with little pain or suffering, and usually before they have reached sexual maturity, could offer a catharsis and a sublimation through art that was eagerly seized upon in an age of waning religious faith and deep sexual anxiety.

* * *

In contrast to the story of Nell, with its pull towards enervation and death, *The Old Curiosity Shop* also creates an atmosphere of strangeness, eccentricity and manic energy. Characters like the Brasses, Quilp and Dick Swiveller appear to inhabit an entirely different imaginative universe from Nell and her grandfather. Dickens relished the odd and grotesque spectacle offered by much popular entertainment: the

6 The absence of female reactions to the novel is notable in the accounts of its reception by Philip Collins, Amy Cruse and George H. Ford.

anarchic violence of Punch, dogs walking on their hind legs, people walking on stilts, giants and dwarves, limbless young women. These diversions, in Dickens's hands, retain their ability to amuse, but at the same time become strange and unsettling, sources of fear and black humour. In these areas, where Dickens is often at his strongest, issues of political correctness concerning deformity, disability, cruelty to animals, wife-beating or murder become quite irrelevant. Here, where observation and imagination have free play, Dickens readily exploits humanity's fascination with deviations from its own illusory norms. This he accomplishes in a number of ways. There is, for instance, the breathtakingly businesslike conversation between Vuffin and Short about what to do with superannuated giants. In his professional capacity, Vuffin fully understands the value of rarity – ' "Once make a giant common and giants will never draw again " ' – and of protecting and nurturing his property – ' "The older a dwarf is, the better worth he is . . . a grey-headed dwarf, well-wrinkled, is beyond all suspicion" ' (pp. 140–2). It is the deadpan quality of this conversation, the manner in which the participants accede to ordinary considerations regarding an extraordinary premise, and Dickens's ability to carry the reader along with him, that makes the scene at once hilarious and outrageous. Kafka, in the opening pages of *Metamorphosis* (1916), a more transparently fantastic story, achieves a similar readerly collusion in the bizarre as his protagonist struggles with the physical difficulties arising from being transformed into a giant insect.

Even more unsettling, however, and more Kafkaesque, is the way in which Dickens blurs the boundaries between oddity as spectacle and its presence in everyday life. When Kit and his party visit Astley's, the performance is safely distanced from the spectators, within the ring or on the stage. It is witnessed and enjoyed as spectacle and offers no backstage access. The action of the Punch and Judy show also takes place within a frame, the conventionalised stage opening at the top of the booth – but Punch himself usually spends most of the performance sitting on the edge of the 'stage', with his legs *outside* the booth, and is often as threatening to his audience as to his victims within the play. Dickens's readers, like Nell and her grandfather, are also allowed a view behind the scenes, and old Trent is both fascinated and frightened by the inert puppets: he looks at them 'with extreme delight', yet pulls away his hand 'with a shrill laugh' when he touches one, and finally accompanies them out of the graveyard 'keeping close to the box of puppets in which he was quite absorbed' (pp. 122–3). When he and Nell meet Codlin and Short the puppets are deprived of their energy, scattered, some in pieces, in boxes and on the ground. Yet Punch himself, seated on a tombstone, retains his 'usual equable smile notwithstanding that his body was dangling in a most uncomfortable position, all loose and limp and shapeless' (p. 120). Both the smile and the ungainly position are reminiscent of Quilp, whom Nell finds 'hanging so far out of bed that he almost seemed to be standing on his head, and who, either from the uneasiness of this posture or in one of his agreeable habits, was gasping and growling with his mouth wide open, and the whites (or rather the dirty yellows) of his eyes distinctly visible' (pp. 94–6). In repose, neither Punch nor Quilp loses his capacity for mischief or terror. Even the more benign Mrs Jarley, who 'by some process of self-abridgment known only to herself, got into her travelling-bed' (p. 203), is potentially akin to Punch in his box, 'utterly devoid of spine, all slack and drooping . . . with his legs doubled up round his neck' (p. 129). For Mrs Jarley, the attraction of her waxworks, by contrast with the active and vulgar Punch show, lies in their stillness: they are ' "calm and classical . . . with a *constantly unchanging air of coldness and gentility, and so like life, that* if waxworks only spoke and walked about, you'd hardly know the difference" ' (pp. 198–9). Yet her figures, with their characterless and readily interchangeable nature and 'with their eyes very wide open . . . looking intensely nowhere, and staring with extraordinary earnestness at nothing' (p. 208), challenge the viewer by claiming lifelikeness while being so evidently dead. In this respect, they may bear out Mrs Jarley's belief that although she may not have seen ' "waxwork quite like life" ' she has ' "certainly seen some life that was exactly like waxwork" ' (p. 199). Or some death, one might add, for in commenting on a sentence in Chapter 42 about 'dead mankind, a million fathoms deep' (p. 307), Dickens told Forster in October 1840, 'I have a notion of the dreadful silence down there, and of the stars shining down upon their drowned eyes' (*Letters*, II, p. 131). As John Carey has pointed out, waxworks' and other eyes that cannot meet and return the living human gaze always held a fearful fascination for the supremely energetic Dickens.[7]

Sally Brass challenges the boundaries of the human, and boundaries within the human, in a different way. At her first appearance in the story Dickens deliberately blurs the gender distinction between Sally and her brother. Sally's masculine qualities of body and mind are insisted on whenever she appears, and the narrative suggests that if she were to assume Sampson's clothes it would be hard to tell them apart, especially as she has 'upon her upper lip certain reddish demonstrations, which, if the imagination had been assisted by her attire, might have been taken

7 John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, pp. 84 and 103