

**Dickens and Childhood:
A More Positive View**

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要 約

Dickens と子供：より積極的な見方

1. 初期小説

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Dickens はロマン主義的な子供のイメージに支配されていたというのは広く受け入れられている見方（最初 Peter Coveney によって示された）であるが、この論文はそうした見解に疑問を呈し、さらにそれを弱めようとする議論の第一部をなすものである。そうした見方は、第一に、Dickens の初期の作品にざっと目を通してただけでわかることだが、単純なものであり、第二にロマン主義的な子供のイメージ自体の持つ複雑性を、あるいは Dickens を不当に扱っている。実際、彼の子供達の描き方のどこか Wordsworth を思わせるような面を強調するのは、我々が彼の作品を正しく理解するのをひどく妨げている。そうした見方は彼の描く子供達の多様性、より複雑でしたたかな子供像への発展、そしてそうした子供達の彼の小説に果たす極めて重要な役割から我々の目をそらしてしまうだけである。

今回は *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* を分析する。もちろん Dickens には、これらの作品の核心の部分において、若い登場人物たちについて感傷的に書きたいという誘惑が存在し、彼はそうした誘惑に捉えられなかったわけではない。精神的な強さはしばしば肉体的弱さを伴っている。しかしながら、Oliver や Little Nell でさえ死よりは生に向かって進んでいるのである——もっとも、Dickens は説得されて後者について考えを改めたのであったが。さらに、Nicholas Nickleby 自身や Kit Nubbles のような、より大胆に一人立ちしていく若者達は David Copperfield や Pip Gargery といった後期に描かれた子供達のおおいに積極的な達成の前ぶれとなっているのである。

1. The Early Novels

Charles Dickens, haunted by the traumas of his own early years, and an indignant witness of the sufferings of later generations of children in the Victorian age, is unquestionably the great novelist of childhood. How much that distinction contributes to (or detracts from) his literary stature is more debatable; a fair assessment depends, as it usually does, on maintaining a critical perspective—and not just in dealing with the notorious child death-bed scenes. It is the child characters who live who demand our attention.

There were signs of Dickens's interest in childhood from the very first. It was never simply sentimental. "Boz," his early pen-name for the *Morning Chronicle* pieces, was "the nickname of a pet child, a younger brother"¹; but one of the better-known of these journalistic sketches, "A Visit to Newgate," contains a quite hard-headed account of hopeless young delinquents: "every boy as he 'fell in' to the line, actually seemed as pleased and important as if he had done something excessively meritorious in getting there at all."² Pickwick himself is the first of Dickens's young-at-heart innocents; and the face of youthful suffering peers out at us from the interpolated "The Old Man's Tale About the Queer Client," in Chapter 21 of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37); but the childhood of John Edmunds in Chapter 6 of the same work provides an example of shocking filial ingratitude, and "the fat boy," Mr Wardle's greedy, lazy, tell-tale servant, is a constant butt of ridicule. When he came to choose his own subject for a novel, Dickens chose childhood, not in a glow of tender feelings, but in order to show the social injustice perpetrated on it.

Oliver Twist (1838) shows his interest in the Poor Laws as they affect children, his concern at the ease with which the young can be drawn into the criminal world, and (by default) the responsibilities of the state to the child; it examines the child's options, too, and his capacity to defend or regain his innocence, to claim his birthright. The child will continue to be at the very centre of Dickens's world.

But Dickens is the great novelist of childhood, not just because of his choice of material, but first and foremost—and in more senses than one—because of the very cast of his mind.

Dickens himself said that the "utterly impossible... but none the less alarmingly real" characters of his nursery stories never lost their hold over him: in his late forties, he still vividly remembered his nurse's tale about Captain Murderer, the "first diabolical character who intruded himself on my peaceful youth,"³ and described him in all the savage glory of his cannibalistic pursuits, recording his extraordinary retribution with relish. As soon as Dickens was old enough to read for himself, his imagination was peopled not only by characters from his beloved *Arabian Nights*, but also by the more realistic heroes of eighteenth-century novels, who acted out their escapades there: "I have been Tom Jones... for a week together,"⁴ recalls David Copperfield, in a passage which Dickens's friend and biographer, John Forster, tells us is "literally true"⁵ of the novelist's own

childhood. These colourful figures, and their co-actors, also affected his whole outlook on life. For instance, behind his long line of cruel, wrong-headed and self-righteous schoolmasters, representing the soul-destroying system which the Victorians imposed on their children, can be glimpsed Fielding's Thwackum, and Smollett's Syntax and Keystick.

What interested Dickens himself, on looking back at his early encounters with fiction, was his peculiar receptiveness to it. He recalled the shudder of fear, the cold sweat, the nightmares which Captain Murderer induced; the avidity with which he read and immersed himself in his father's books, and the way in which the characters leapt out of their pages and took up their stations in his own surroundings. Was his fancy wakened by these experiences, as Forster suggests (1:11), or was it the quality of his young mind which guaranteed their impact on him? At any rate, this receptiveness was to be central to Dickens's genius, more vital and enduring than the influence on him of the individual fictional personalities. It was a receptiveness not just to fiction, but to life itself.

The self-conscious Wordsworthian effort to keep hold of or recultivate or simply recall the child's immediacy of response was not necessary for this writer. At the age of fifty-four, he could write a story from the point of view of a seven-year-old, with all the apparent inconsequentiality of a child of that age: "One day the king was going to the office, when he stopped at the fishmonger's to buy a pound and a half of salmon not too near the tail."⁶ Angus Wilson finds this sort of thing "rather strained"⁷; but it runs rings around Wordsworth's ballad "We Are Seven," and has the authentic note of childhood which we find, for instance, in the Brontë children's earliest stories. The tale of the magic fishbone, as it turns out to be, is diverting—but not a mere diversion. With a shock, we recognize in it some of Dickens's most abiding preoccupations and patterns of thought. The wise Princess Alicia, who knows exactly when to make her one wish on the polished bone, and uses it to save her father from poverty, poignantly recalls the twelve-year-old Dickens, who would have given anything to rescue his father from the indignity and shame of his three months in the debtors' prison; her extraordinary skills as a housekeeper, and her transformation into a magnificent bride at the end, can be read as an unintentional parody of all that the critics damn in Dickens's sentimental ideas of domestic bliss, and his contrived happy endings.

To say that Dickens is a great novelist because he never quite outgrew the child in him is a critical truism. It has long been felt that it is exactly this quality which gives his work its tremendous panache, its hold on our imaginations and its passport to our hearts. Yet it is this too which has tended to obscure his greatness. The first instalment of Forster's biography provoked a powerful adverse reaction:

The tree which bore fruit as golden as that of the Hesperides was rooted in a wretched soil, and watered with the bitterest possible tears of self-compassion. . . . Child-like he commiserated himself, with sharp, agonising introspection. Child-like he rushed out into the world with his griefs and grievances, concealing nothing, wildly

craving for sympathy. . . . And just as much as little Paul Dombey was out of place at Dr. Blimber's where they tried to cram him with knowledge, and ever pronounced him old-fashioned, was Charles Dickens out of place in the cold, worldly circle of literature, in the bald bare academy of English culture. . . .⁸

Of course, what Edmund Wilson could say in 1929—"the literary men. . . have rather snubbingly let him alone"⁹—could hardly be said now. On the contrary, the body of Dickens criticism has grown at such a pace that at least one eminent Dickens scholar, Philip Collins, has confessed to finding it humanly impossible to keep up with. Still, many remain puzzled by and critical of the marks of immaturity and even regression in Dickens's work, and would question the connection between what is childlike in him, and his *greatness* as an artist. It is not just a matter of his portrayal of children. But when Peter Coveney suggests that the writer's vision blurs mistily, again and again, as the child in him comes to the surface in these characters, he is making a severe criticism of a major and inextricable part of his work.¹⁰

The view that Dickens was dominated by the Romantic image of the child is simplistic, as even our cursory glance at his earliest writings indicates. To say that the general effect of his work is to weaken it does no justice either to the complexity of that image, or to Dickens himself. In fact, to dwell on his more palely Wordsworthian figures seriously impedes our appreciation of his oeuvre, preventing us from seeing the variety of his child characters, the development of more complicated and resilient ones, and their vital contribution to his novels.

The discussion which follows aims to bridge the gap in Dickens criticism between studies of childhood in the novels, which all too often sound negative notes, and the more positive appraisals of later novels which are still deeply concerned with the development of the young.

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Oliver Twist is the first of his novels to demonstrate that "Dickens's childish sufferings, and the sense they burnt into him of the misery of loneliness and a craving for the joys of home, though they led to what was weakest in him, led also to what was greatest" (Forster 2: 395).

The book has always been as much criticized as it is loved. On the one hand, the original monthly instalments were a great success, and huge profits accrued from it—to the publisher, if not to Dickens himself (see Forster 1: 93). It was also the source of the most sensational of Dickens's last public readings, causing numbers of women in the audience to faint. On the other hand, Dickens felt compelled to defend it, in a Preface to a later edition, against some of the early attacks on it—that it glamourized the criminal classes, for instance. Forster, on the other hand, admitted that "the people meant to be entirely virtuous show poorly" beside "wretched Nancy" (1:91) and Bill Sikes, and his judgement has been echoed and expanded down the years. Even Hillis Miller, having deftly revealed significant patterns of imagery in the novel, finds it ultimately unsatisfactory: Dickens's Oliver "lives happily ever after, but only by living in a perpetual child-

hood of submission to protection and direction from without,"¹¹ he writes. Why is *Oliver Twist* so attractive, then? And is the ending really duplicitous?

What draws us to the novel is, of course, the pathos of the central character's situation—not so much "the plight of the poor,"¹² as Arnold Kettle suggests, as that of the poor *child*. Here we have the prototype of what Karl Miller has called the "white face at the window,"¹³ the child whose very pallor represents at once his outcast condition and his purity. Both the pallor and the darkness which surrounds it are continually emphasized, creating a dichotomy which has been variously interpreted, but whose main function, we need to remind ourselves, is "to show, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance."¹⁴ The propensity of Dickens and his contemporaries to see the world in black and white, finds its literal expression in Oliver's experiences.

Oliver is an orphan (the first of many in the novels), born in a workhouse which is later described as "the dreary prison of his youthful days, with its dismal windows frowning on the street" (455). However, having been farmed out, he spends his first nine years in a branch-workhouse. From the coal-cellar here he is brought up, on his ninth birthday, in Chapter 2. A "pale thin child," he has been punished, in the manner of his time, for "presuming to be hungry" (49). The Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) recommended a meagre diet; but this constant hunger seems to be more than an indictment of specific legislation. It shows society's failure to nurture the child in every way.

The "gloom of his infant years" (53) is recalled as Oliver leaves this branch-workhouse to return to the main one, where he commits the famous crime of asking for more. More gruel, on the surface; more, we are again made to feel, of all that a child needs to grow up into a strong and well-rounded adult. Mr. Limbkins, Chairman of the Workhouse Board, responds on behalf of Victorian society: this time the punishment is a week's imprisonment in a "dark and solitary room" (59), from which "bondage"(63) he is only released, with a "pale and terrified face" (65), in the expectation of further bondage—pauper apprenticeship to Mr. Gamfield, the cruel chimney-sweep. Although Oliver narrowly escapes this doom, with its risk of being smothered to death by soot, there are plenty of other unpleasant experiences in store for him.

Once established, the transparent tint of the child's mingled purity and suffering is continually juxtaposed with the bleakness of the world around him. Absconding from Mr. Sowerberry's after having been used to add pathos to the undertaker's processions to the churchyard—wearing black funeral regalia, of course—Oliver endures another incarceration in Fagin's hideout, and yet another in jail. Then, "deadly pale" (122), he stands dizzily in the dock accused of a theft he was only a helpless witness of. Receiving no answer to his enquiry about his name, the interrogating officer hazards the appropriate guess, Tom *White* (122).

This is the child who, on his forced return from Mr. Brownlow's into the custody of Fagin, peers disconsolately out of a dingy, barred "back-garret window. . . with a melancholy face for hours together" (179). By "solitude and gloom" Fagin hopes to

prepare the boy to accept any kind of company in preference to his own: "he [Fagin] was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue forever" (185). However, Oliver cannot be corrupted. Dickens is no believer in original sin. The child remains "innocence" (209) itself, and it is only as an unwilling accomplice that he accompanies Sikes and Toby Crackit on their house-breaking expedition. Here the window motif appears again; it is assuming more and more significance. Made to climb through a tiny lattice at the back of Mrs. Maylie's house, Oliver is unwittingly set back on the path to recovering his identity.

Later, he is inside this house, looking out of another lattice surrounded by climbing flowers, when his wicked half-brother, ironically named Monks, and Fagin come to seek him there. Terrified, he leaps out of the window into the garden, and is again in danger of being sucked back into the dark world from which he has now been rescued twice.

Oliver's is not the only white face in this novel. Others, such as Sikes and Crackit, become blanched with fear; Fagin is ashy, beneath his red eyebrows (134), presumably as a result of his unhealthy way of life. But two young characters are marked out by the same kind of pallor as Oliver. These too are orphans. Dick, his little friend from the branch-workhouse, is so pale that when Oliver passes by his old home at the start of his trek to London, and finds him weeding in the garden, he himself exclaims, "How pale you are!" (96). Dick is destined for the early death which Oliver just escapes. Rose, the seventeen-year-old girl whom Mrs. Maylie treats as her niece, and who (by one of the novel's hard-to-swallow coincidences) turns out to be none other than Oliver's aunt, also has her periods of pallor—and, like Oliver, of pensive gazing out of the window. As "a friendless, portionless girl with a blight upon [her] name" (316), she had once suffered as the miserable ward of some cottagers; now, while Oliver is staying at Mrs. Maylie's house, her life is threatened with a mysterious illness. Soon after this, she turns "very pale" (314) at the entrance of Mrs. Maylie's son, whom she has grown to love, and watches him depart from "behind the white curtain which . . . shrouded her from view" (321), shedding tears of grief.

The last window to play an important part in the action is also one with a young person behind it: it is the "small trap" (450) from which Charley Bates, "appalled by Sikes's crime" (477) in battering Nancy to death, shouts out information about Sikes's attempted escape to his pursuers.

At this point, all the windows in the area are wrenched open by the avenging mob: in a violently climactic moment, "sashes were thrown open, or bodily torn out" (450) as the forces of good pour out against the murderer. The "tiers and tiers of faces in every window" (451), witnessing Sikes's ghastly end, are soon to be echoed by the ranks of "people rising above each other" (466) in court to see Fagin's face, and "the windows filled. . . with people" (474) who gather to watch his hanging.

For Charley Bates, the betrayal of Sikes from that small "aperture" (450) points the way to a new life: at the end of the novel we are told that, after struggling gamely with many difficulties, he rises to become "the merriest young grazier in all Northamptonshire" (477). There are options, then, and this child has the sense and courage to choose

(at last) the right one.

Like the inimitable Artful Dodger, Charley Bates goes out in style, defying the odds in his own way. But what about Oliver? It is the Dodger himself who first puts his finger on Oliver's weakness as a character: "Why, where's your spirit?" (182), he says. With very few exceptions, Oliver's response to his own problems is to weep piteously, or collapse. He is a fountain of tears from "three minutes and a quarter" (46) after his birth to the end, when he weeps over Fagin in the condemned cell. As Dickens observes himself, "Oliver cried very naturally indeed" (52). Moreover, he sometimes faints away from physical or emotional distress, as he does after being questioned in court, or when Mr. Brownlow suddenly exclaims on the likeness between the child and the portrait in his bedroom. After visiting Fagin in the condemned cell, Oliver almost swoons, and is unable to walk for an hour or so (474).

In another sense, Oliver has *too much* spirit. Dickens presents his Calvinist contemporaries with a child who passes like an angel through the snake-pits of poverty and crime, and speaks like one, too. Oliver is never less childlike than when he begs the doomed Fagin to say a prayer with him (474).

The last real glimpse we have of him is with Rose, the two of them "passing whole hours together in picturing the friends whom they had so sadly lost" (479)—the very image of a feeble nostalgia which is perfectly in keeping with their characters, but has little to justify it in the plot. (Apart from Oliver's little Dick, who are these lost "friends"? Dickens can only mean Oliver's dead parents, whom he never knew, or could he be referring to Nancy. . . and Fagin. . . ?)

At any rate, it is an unnecessarily soggy note to end on: not to notice this would be a critical evasion. It is almost as if the spunk that Oliver might have inherited from Smollett's outcast boys all went into Fagin's gang, and (except on the occasion when he fights Noah Claypole, and speaks defiantly to Mr. Bumble—actually getting flushed in the process) Oliver was left with nothing but the negative role of a Tristram Shandy. However, there are two compensations for Oliver's limpness. The first is what makes the narrative not only appealing but novel: Dickens's ability to see through his eyes, as we never do through Tristram's. This is to say something more than that the outrageous characters and episodes in the novel are animated by Dickens's characteristic freshness of vision; even when Oliver is not present, Mr. Bumble is still Mr. Bumble. But we do gradually see things more and more as Oliver sees them.

For all its novelty, this development occurs quite naturally, as if by an inevitable process of authorial empathy. "If he [the new-born Oliver] could have known that he was an orphan. . . perhaps he would have cried the louder" (47), says Dickens at the end of the first chapter. When the boy Oliver spends his week in solitary confinement for demanding more gruel, he is shown moving closer to the wall of the workhouse cell "as if" for protection (59). On his first night as Mr. Sowerberry's house-lad, "he wished, as he crept into his narrow bed, that that were his coffin . . ." (75). And when he accompanies the undertaker on his first mission, the scene in the dark room of death is described entirely through Oliver's eyes:

Oliver shuddered as he cast his eyes towards the place [where the corpse was], and crept involuntarily closer to his master; for though it was covered up, the boy felt that it was a corpse.

The man's face was thin and very pale; his hair and beard were grizzly; his eyes were blood-shot. The old woman's face was wrinkled; her two remaining teeth protruded over her underlip; and her eyes were bright and piercing. Oliver was afraid to look at either her or the man. They seemed so like the rats he had seen outside. (82)

Not to the extent of central characters in later novels, but to some extent at least, Oliver provides a consciousness through which parts of the subsequent narrative are filtered. And, since he is so young, this inevitably presents special opportunities for irony and other multiple level readings. A prime example of the former is when he sees Fagin as a "merry old gentleman" (110); of the latter, when he supposes the prostitutes Bet and Nancy to be "very nice girls indeed" (111)—as far as Nancy as is concerned, at least, there is some truth in this apparently comic misunderstanding. She has, we learn later, "better feelings" (198).

In this way, the awareness of Oliver as a distinct presence in the novel is often heightened. Dickens was to improve on the approach, with the adult's memory complementing the child's perceptions, in *David Copperfield* (1849–50). Here one of the effects is again to reveal what the child does not see. In a later and greater novel, *Great Expectations* (1860–61), there is more of a judgemental bias as the boy grows up, and this demonstrates the movement away from sentimentalizing about childhood which marks—as both the Leavises have indirectly noted,¹⁵ but Coveney has not—Dickens's own increasing maturity; it may reflect, too, that gradual social betterment of the child's lot, which Dickens himself helped to bring about.

It is perfectly true that in *Oliver Twist* the young hero is linked with death. The darkness and blackness around him is like that of the coffin, while his pallor can also be seen as death-like. Then, Oliver not only finds himself sleeping among coffins at Mr. Sowerberry's but longing to be in one "in a calm and lasting sleep" (75); later, after his first night at Mr. Brownlow's, it is a struggle for him to wake up from the first "peaceful rest" (127) he has ever known. Nevertheless, *the fact is* that he runs away from the undertaker's, enduring the long, painful journey on foot to the city; and he feels "cheerful and happy" (128) when at length he opens his eyes to the bright sunlight of his benefactor's home. Here, there are signs of something vital in Oliver himself.

Of special interest in this connection is the knowledge that Dickens toned down his first account of Oliver's awakening in Mr. Brownlow's house. Sylvère Monod has drawn attention to a cancelled fragment about a dream from which the child roused himself "with an effort so strong and painful that it seemed as if death would have been easier and sweeter than life."¹⁶ While the fragment itself may well indicate the strength of Dickens's preoccupation with a personal grief, over the recent tragic death of his teenage sister-in-law, Mary, its deletion demonstrates something much more important about his

handling of childhood—and about his art. The movement of the child, in Dickens's work, was to be more towards *life* than death. It was G. K. Chesterton who realized that, for all his physical weakness, "Oliver Twist... is an optimist"¹⁷; what Chesterton failed to see is that this does not simply contribute to the pathos of his situation. For in Dickens's universe, that optimism is finally justified. There is a note of triumph about Oliver's recovery, after his first rescue, that looks forward to the ending, and should not be missed: "He belonged to the world again" (128).

Rescue... recovery... a child's restoration to his birthright. *Oliver Twist* was bound to capture the public imagination. The young Queen Victoria herself was much taken by it: "Talked of *Oliver Twist*, which I must say is excessively interesting,"¹⁸ she wrote in her diary at the end of 1938.

Now *Oliver Twist* is Dickens's first—the first—extensive treatment of such a theme in the novel. The novelist rushes in very much in the spirit, to borrow Chesterton's words again, "of a boy in a fairy-tale who had wandered about, sword in hand, looking for ogres and who had found an indisputable ogre."¹⁹ The energetic polishing off of this many-faced ogre, in which Mr. Bumble gets his comeuppance from his new wife, and Sikes and Fagin are reduced to "dangling heaps of clothes" (469) is inevitably more exciting—not to say melodramatic—than the muted happiness achieved at the end. Dickens is always better at climaxes than resolutions: he does not have Jane Austen's peculiarly satisfying gift for these. Here, Oliver is left in such a dependent and sheltered condition that Hillis Miller sees no chance of his growing as an individual. But it is hard to know what other condition a boy of his age should be left in, and Dickens tells us specifically that "his nature *developed itself*" (479—emphasis added). Winding down his story, which focuses on the child's escape from oppression, the author quite understandably feels no call to demonstrate such future progress. To read meanings into his failure to do so seems over-subtle; to accuse him of having run out of creative steam at this stage, because we happen to know that he was working concurrently on *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9), seems unfair.

Graham Greene's well-known criticism of the ending, to which Hillis Miller briefly refers, and by which other critics have also been influenced, is more seductive and more fundamental. Greene suggests that we cannot put any trust in Oliver's escape, for the sense of demons lurking in the darkness outside is never banished:

... is it too fantastic to imagine that in this novel, as in many of his later books, creeps in, unrecognized by the author, the eternal and alluring taint of the Manichee, with its simple and terrible explanation of our plight, how the world was made by Satan and not by God, lulling us with the music of despair?²⁰

This remark cannot be dismissed, for the Manichean black and white of Oliver's universe conveys apprehensions which (while surely "unrecognized" here) do come to the fore later in Dickens's oeuvre. But it is certainly unfair to the vision expressed in the novel by the conscious artist. Not only is there more to Oliver than at first appears, but he is, as we have seen, an extraordinary testimony to the incorruptibility of the pure soul. Also—

and here is the best justification for them—the great coincidences in the novel, in bringing him literally to the feet of Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Maylie, lead directly to the discovery of his identity. On the other hand, the evil characters are set on a course to self-destruction, with the murderer Sikes actually hanging himself in his own noose. Coincidence. . . fate. . . Providence. . . ? In the last chapter, Dickens has Rose and Oliver offer “fervent thanks to Him who had protected and preserved them,” adding that their happiness was founded on this gratitude to a merciful “Being” as well as on their own “affection and humanity” (479).

Oliver Twist has one child who dies (little Dick) and one who struggles on—feebly enough, it is true, but with an innocence which withstands all evil, and an attractive eagerness to prove himself to those who have earned his affection. Perhaps the most natural and appealing picture of Oliver in the whole narrative is that of the boy volunteering to deliver the books, and pay Mr. Brownlow’s debt, to the honest bookseller:

Oliver, delighted to be of use, brought down the books under his arm in a great bustle “I won’t be ten minutes, sir,” replied Oliver eagerly. . . . Oliver looked gaily round, and nodded before he turned the corner. (151)

Of course, this rare glimpse of a boyishly cheerful Oliver turns out to be ironic: he certainly “won’t be ten minutes,” since Nancy will encounter him in a bye-lane, and return him to Fagin. In later novels, more tears are shed over children, but more hope can be placed in them, too.

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The tears seem to have sprung from a variety of sources. That there were some pathetic scenes involving children in debtors’ prisons in *Pickwick* (not only the debtor’s child who dies of a broken heart, but also the little girl who tries to cheer her grandfather in the Fleet [367; 687]) does seem to confirm what so many have taken for granted, from Forster to Edgar Johnson onwards, that Dickens’s own bitter experiences as a child lay at the back of such pity. These were apparently made available for writing about—more directly, that is—after Forster’s questions had elicited from him the autobiographical fragment which was the germ of *David Copperfield* (Forster 1:19ff). What is important in Dickens’s childhood is not simply the fact of his father’s imprisonment for debt, nor even his own miserable months in the blacking warehouse, though these humiliations were never forgotten; but the sense of lost happiness which accompanied them, and the shock of feeling abandoned and left to fend for himself, “of being utterly neglected and hopeless” (Forster 1:22).

Then there was the sudden death of his much-loved sister-in-law, which haunted Dickens all his life, coming to his mind with great vividness when he was writing that most notorious of the death-bed scenes—the death of Little Nell (Forster 1:22); and, later on, the death of his own baby daughter, Dora, which occurred before he wrote, for instance, that gratuitous little episode in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) in which Lucy Darnay’s son dies. Moreover, he took personally to heart the sad cases with which his lifelong preoccupation with social injustice constantly brought him into contact. He

was "ill and sleepless"²¹ after attending an inquest on the death of a single new-born infant in January 1840, and profoundly disturbed by a large-scale disaster at Drouet's baby farm in Tooting in 1849, when 180 pauper children died.

Personal experience was not everything, though. There was also the temptation to move his huge readership with scenes of pathos, of which he had quickly become the acknowledged master, and to which his contemporaries, particularly in the earlier part of his writing career, responded *en masse*. This was the time when the desperate need for reform, as it touched on children, was first sinking in, and when Evangelicalism was at its very height.²² It was a temptation which neither the reformist nor the dramatist in Dickens could resist. The message is often writ large, very large. It was realized from the start that the theatrical side of his talent influenced his writing immeasurably. Perhaps fostered by his early predilection for Fielding and Smollett, as well as by childhood outings to the Theatre Royal, Chatham, it gave him some useful clues to presenting the child's view of life, but it also lured him into a cruder handling of plot machinery, and more tonal flourishes, than our own age can stomach. Though Barbara Hardy has revealed a progressive subtlety in their management, the death-bed scenes of Little Nell and Paul Dombey are still cases in point.²³

Nevertheless, surging on ahead of Dickens's unhappy child characters are others who rejoice in something of his own gusto, who move forward, more boldly than Oliver, out of the shadows and into the daylight.

The difference between the two types becomes clearer. Indeed, it often seems to be deliberately pointed up, in that several pairs of contrasted children appear in his subsequent work. In the novel which Dickens had started eight months before completing *Oliver Twist*, there are two youths in their late teens, the doomed Smike and the "sanguine"²⁴ Nicholas Nickleby. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), Nell is complemented by the buoyant Kit, whose hope does not give out even in prison. For Paul Dombey, there is a sister Florence, who lives to redeem her father and produce another "son." The baby brother who pines away soon after his mother seems to release David Copperfield from the taint of morbidity, and leave him free to prove himself in the world.

The split between the child who sinks into the darkness and the one who strides forward from it is finally internalized, more profoundly and successfully than in Oliver or even in David, in the character of Pip in *Great Expectations*. The effort which is hinted at in *Oliver*, but which really begins in *David Copperfield*—to confront and overcome childhood weakness, by being true to its fundamentally true and good impulses—is completed here. There are all sorts of child characters in Dickens, comic creations as well as tragic ones, gems of observation, sharply etched caricatures, and mawkishly tripping or drooping little ones. But looking at his main child characters we can say that, through the whole oeuvre, he comes to add his own unique vigour to what was most positive in the Romantic view of childhood. The emergence of Oliver, unscathed, from the gloomy workhouse and the robbers' den, must be put down more to that Providence which guarded his soul and cast him in the way of the very people who had most interest in him, than to his own self-reliance. Providence will always be important, but as for the

child, this is just the beginning of a long process, a process in which the most dramatic episodes concerning childrens' deaths are not, after all, the most significant ones.

* * * * *

Smike, the "poor, unoffending injured lad" (879) who has been stashed away since early childhood at Dotheboys Hall in Yorkshire, is not the hero of *Nicholas Nickleby*. He is in no position to be one, since he possesses not even the promise of a growing child like Oliver. "Nothing to build on here," as Robert Frost says in "Out, Out—." Smike is not unscathed by his childhood deprivations. Far from it. He is still innocent, of course, but what may seem—and in fact often does seem—endearing simplicity, unfits him for taking any active part in life—a terrible cross for this teenager to bear. He is retarded, but not retarded enough to be unaware of the fact.

Dickens introduces the lame, skinny, gangling eighteen-or nineteen-year-old to us in a comically incongruous outfit, indicating at once his ambivalent position, caught between the world of the child and that of the adult: Mrs. Squeers has got him up in a very small boy's suit, which is naturally "absurdly short in the arms and legs," a huge pair of farmer's overboots, and his own superannuated child's neckfrill half covered by a "coarse man's neckerchief" (143). (Smike's predicament is grotesquely parodied later on by the "Infant Phenomenon," dressed by the Crummles as a ten-year-old, with sandals, pink bonnet and so on, but in reality at least fifteen; Ninetta's exploitation does not, however, rouse Dickens's sympathy, no doubt because of his genuine attachment to vivacious theatre folk).

Later, Dickens goes deeper, below Smike's ludicrous appearance, and has a stab at what we would now call psychoanalysing the benighted youth:

To prepare the mind for such a heavy sleep, its growth must be stopped by rigour and cruelty in childhood; there must be years of misery and suffering lightened by no ray of hope; the chords of the heart, which beat a quick response to the voice of gentleness and affection, must have rusted and broken in their secret places, and bear the lingering echo of no old word of love or kindness. (587)

The physical illness (consumption) which carries Smike off is so accurately described by Dickens that his account of it appears in two contemporary medical textbooks (731–2; n. 1, 971). But this explanation of Smike's mental dullness is still more to be commended: it reveals an understanding of the consequences of prolonged emotional neglect which was lacking in *Oliver Twist*, and is well in advance of its time.

Poor Smike becomes doubly conscious of his limitations when he has to learn the Apothecary's seven lines, for the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* with the Crummles' troupe. Dickens's choice of this part for him is no accident, for Romeo's speech in the scene, a comment on the Apothecary's evident poverty, is extremely apt: "The world is not thy friend nor the world's law:/The world affords on law to make thee rich" (V. i. 72–3). Smike is beyond the pale; his chances of improvement are nil. When he conceives his passion for Kate Nickleby, there is so obviously no future in it—to his own extreme dismay—that his languishing and dying with "no rallying, no effort, no struggle for life"

(862), is the only possible conclusion.

Forster does mention that as many people wrote to Dickens begging him not to kill the boy, as women of an earlier generation had written to Richardson, begging him to let Clarissa live (Forster, 1:103); but there seems to have been much less of a furore over Smike's death than there was to be over Little Nell's. Yet Smike is younger in mentality than Nell, not much older in years, and every bit as pure and affectionate as her. The important difference is that Smike has no stuff in him, so to speak, and slowly but surely comes to be of secondary interest to the reader. As the romances of the two Nickleby children blossom, he falls into the background—quite literally, for he retires into his own room when Frank Cheeryble comes to court Kate. His role now is as part of the plot machinery which will bring Ralph Nickleby to book. For his short, unhappy life is finally to be laid at the door, not only of Squeers and the hideously cruel regime of the Yorkshire schools, but also of the father in whom greed for money has vitiated all natural feeling.

Two echoes of Smike's pathetic decline appear in the novel—the story of sixteen-year-old Alice, the youngest and sweetest sister in the interpolated traveller's tale of "The Five Sisters of York" (119ff.), who dies and is commemorated in the cathedral's beautiful stained-glass window; and the "sickly bed-ridden hump-backed boy" (601) described by Tim Linkinwater, who has been growing flowers in blacking bottles outside his back-attic window, and whose death is clearly imminent.

These are two other efflorescences of Dickens's, and the Victorians', tendency to be morbid about children, a tendency which will come to a head in the subsequent and more famous death-bed scenes. Traces of it will always remain in Dickens, for the reasons already discussed: here, for instance, the words used to describe Alice recall words Dickens used of his recently lost sister-in-law (n. 3, 959) while the mention of the hunchback boy's growing his flowers in "old blacking-bottles" (601) specifically links Dickens's sentimentality with self-pity for the boy who once slogged in the blacking warehouse. There is a Wordsworthian element, too, watered down and lacking its original robustness, in both episodes: "the faint image of Eden which is stamped upon them [our hearts] in childhood, chafes and rubs in our rough struggles with the world, and soon wears away" (120), comments Nicholas's fellow-traveller, who retells the York legend; the hump-back boy harks back not to the Immortality Ode, but (like Smike himself, and later, Barnaby Rudge) to "The Idiot Boy," a poem whose central figure loses all his rugged, health-giving properties, keeping only his poignant predicament, when thus transmuted.

Yet Smike, however pathetic, is but the Apothecary to his cousin Nicholas's Romeo, and these other tales are only minor interpolations. Nicholas himself is the hero, very much in the old picaresque tradition, grabbing hold of panicked horses (Tom Jones to a tee), assaulting villains (Peregrine Pickle could not have made a better job of Squeers, or of Sir Mulberry Hawk), protecting frail innocent beauties like his sister and Madeline Bray, and so on. Dickens clearly separates this gallant, "impetuous" (477) and "undaunted" (813) youth from all taint of the grave when he cuts from the very end of Chapter 20

certain lines in which Nicholas had originally comforted Smike by promising to share the same doom:

"I tell you," said Nicholas, "that the same fate shall be ours in life and the same grave shall hold us both in death." (Appendix A, 939)

In the event, Nicholas nurses the dying Smike among the scenes of his own happy youth, to which the whole Nickleby family returns in the end. And, whatever he lacks in individuality, he makes up for in youthful confidence—and hope.

This hope is fundamental to Nicholas's, as to *Oliver Twist's* character. Only once does it momentarily fail him: "There seems no ray of hope" (388), he laments, on learning that Madeline has acceded to her father's wish for her to marry the hideous old Arthur Gride, and that the event will take place within the day. The situation seems desperate indeed, but Newman Noggs quickly restores the young hot-blooded hero to his usual spirits:

"Hope to last," said Newman, clapping him on the back. "Always hope, that's a dear boy. Never leave off hoping, it don't answer. . . . Don't leave a stone unturned. It's always something to know you've done the most you could. But don't leave off hoping, or it's of no use doing anything. Hope, hope, to the last!"

Nicholas is an apt pupil: "You read me a good lesson, Newman" (777), and of course the lecherous plot is overturned. In fact, Nicholas's hope, like Oliver's, always proves justified: "There is some spell about that boy," rages the increasingly impotent wicked uncle, "Circumstances conspire to help him. Talk of fortune's favours!" (658). How ironical it is that Ralph Nickleby, of all people, should put this down to the Devil!

Of course, for all his youthful passion, Nicholas is not half as much of a child as his cousin Smike. It seems right that, in the last words of the novel, Smike should be referred to as the "dead cousin" of the new generation of Nicklebys, rather than his own. And, though we tend to forget it, Smike himself is hardly a child in years.

Nicholas Nickleby is, however, packed with characters who are children both in years and behaviour, and this perhaps contributes to the general impression, given to many critics from Gissing onwards, that it is a novel which shows Dickens in his "boyish mood."²⁵ But there is not much whimsy, even when he is at his least sombre. Most of the minor child characters are described with the keen observation of a young man who was now experiencing fatherhood: little Charles (another 'Boz') was just over a year old when the first number of the novel appeared; Mary, Dickens's second child, was born in the same month as that first number.

First, there are Squeers's three little new boys, who look each other over self-consciously at The Saracen's Head, "writhing their bodies into most remarkable contortions, according to the custom of little boys when they first become acquainted" (98), and are subsequently in danger of falling out of the coach on the way to Yorkshire. Then there are the wretchedly cowed or resentful pupils already in residence at Dotheboys Hall, described in Chapter 8 as constituting an "incipient Hell" (152). The horribly spoilt and greedy Wackford Squeers Junior is a true likeness of his father, but

the Borum children, who prod and pull the Infant Phenomenon around when the Crummles make a canvassing visit to their home, are little better. The Kenwigses' six young "olive branches" (230), four of whom Nicholas is engaged to tutor, are better behaved: the eldest of them, Morleena, can already throw a fainting fit quite as well as her mother. Not much sympathy is expended on her, nor on the Kenwigses's young baby-sitter, who falls asleep and singses her hair instead of earning her ninepence. The lucky, unfettered gipsy children at Hampton race-course in Chapter 50, really "*are* children and lead children's lives" (748—Dickens disliked using italics, so we can understand how keen he was to get this message across). Finally, there are the happy little Nickleby children with which the novel ends, who put fresh flowers on Smike's grave, as if to exorcise the wrong that was done to that boy in his lifetime.

The adult who is a child at heart, after the fashion of a Parson Adams (Fielding) or an Uncle Toby (Sterne), has already made his *début* in Dickens's work, with Pickwick—"Bless your innocence, sir" (291), as Sam Weller says to him. To set against the monstrous Squeers and Ralph Nickleby, and aid Nicholas in overthrowing them, we have here the jolly Cheeryble twins, who greet each other with an affection "which would have been most delightful to behold in infants" (537), and who are, as it happens, as well-endowed materially as they are with sentiment; and their clerk, the kindly Tim Linkinwater, "a mere child—an infant" (650). Newman Noggs, whose very Christian name suggests his innocence, occupies the strategically useful position of clerk to the wicked uncle himself. Having done his not inconsiderable bit to set things right, Noggs, like Pickwick, is idolised by children at the end: "His chief pleasure and delight was in the children, with whom he was a child himself, and master of the revels. The little people could do nothing without dear Newman Noggs" (932).

Critics have, on the whole, little to say about *Nicholas Nickleby*. The plot is rambling, and lacks the kind of thematic images which offset the blatant manipulations of *Oliver Twist*. The bad characters are too monstrous (though it is agreed that hints of a softening towards Kate help to round out her uncle). As far as the good characters go, praise is reserved for the voluble and unintentionally, comically, self-revealing Mrs. Nickleby. Smike is felt to be too odd²⁶; not even Chesterton, who responds to the generally upbeat mood of the book, has time for Nicholas's heroics²⁷; and the Cheerybles, though apparently drawn from real-life philanthropists (just as Mrs. Nickleby was drawn from the author's own mother) are dismissed as fairy godfathers. That their wealth is not accounted for struck even Dickens's contemporaries.²⁸

There is no answer to some of this. But it needs to be remembered that, at the time, Nicholas himself was considered to be sufficiently natural—so much so, that Dickens felt the need to defend him against contemporary reviewers who found him too hot-blooded (Preface to the First Cheap Edition, 52). And he serves his turn well. The author is able to confront Squeers and Ralph Nickley quite credibly through him. His verve, his refusal from the very first to tolerate what should not be tolerated—his uncle's cold-heartedness towards his bereaved mother, the beating of Smike, disrespect to his sister, or the cruel sacrifice of his beloved Madeline—represent very important advances for

Dickens. It is not simply that he is a romantic hero, but that the vigour is no longer all on the side of evil; a character has appeared who, however young, and even *because* he is young and “impetuous” (“young men are rash, very rash” [477], says Mr. Crummles) is willing to take the non-existent or inadequate law into his own hands. If Smike’s passivity is palely Wordsworthian, Nicholas’s spirit is more in tune with Blake’s “Into the dangerous world I leapt,”²⁹ and this is a good indication of future developments.

* * * * *

Until Chapter 42 of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), Little Nell is quite robust—much less wishy-washy than Oliver, and considerably more attractive than Smike. Although the original narrator describes the thirteen-year-old’s “frame” as “very small and delicate”³⁰, we later learn that her cheeks are “rosy.” Quilp’s description of her draws attention to her developing sexual maturity:

“Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud, neighbour,” said Quilp, nursing his short leg, and making his eyes twinkle very much; “such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell!” (125)

She has “hope and confidence” (148), a “hoping and trustful attitude” (186), for over half the book, leading and encouraging her helpless grandfather, answering for him, providing for him, and sharing with him the rigours of a long, weary, uncertain flight from the beastly money-lender and the madhouse. Time and again, she escapes from the shadows that threaten to converge upon them, whether it is Quilp himself, or others who wish to exploit them, or her grandfather’s own weakness, earning the honest schoolmaster’s praise for her heroism (435). And all the while she retains her “beauty,” for “the bright-eyed girl” soon becomes “the chief attraction” (286) of Mrs. Jarley’s wax-works.

Indisputably, the child whose very name has a funereal ring is also associated with death, and this too from the very beginning. In the opening chapter, it is through her grey-haired, “haggard” (47) grandfather and the musty shop with its “old dark murky rooms” (56), so well illustrated by Cattermole. But also, more directly, there is Kit’s comment that he would certainly have been able to find the wandering child, “if she was above ground, I would” (52). Nor is she ever free from this association with death. The novel is as full of graves and grave-like places as *Oliver Twist* is of cells. For instance, the meeting with Codlin and Short just happens to take place in a churchyard, and Nell’s room in the nearby inn, where she and her grandfather stay that night along with their new acquaintances, just happens to give on to it. Next morning, Nell is shown walking among the graves, taking “a curious kind of pleasure in lingering among these houses of the dead” (186–87), and as if that is not enough, she then encounters an old woman visiting the grave of her husband, who had died many years before: the woman no longer laments the death of this youth, so much as that of the “comely girl who seemed to die with him” (189). Even Nell’s employment by Mrs. Jarley, among the waxwork “effigies” (283), seems peculiarly appropriate. Hints of Little Nell’s tragic end are many and big.

Nevertheless, there is this ambivalence. Perhaps it is best seen at the time of the little scholar’s death, when in fact Dickens admitted to hardly knowing “what to do”³¹ with Nell. The girl is greatly saddened by this child’s fate, yet, we are told, she takes a

"lesson of content and gratitude" from it:

of content with the lot which left her health and freedom; and gratitude that she was spared to the one relative and friend she loved, and to live and move in a beautiful world, when so many young creatures—as young and full of hope as she—were stricken down and gathered to their graves. (261)

Dickens goes on to say that Nell should perhaps have considered the heaven that awaited these children; but he finally approves of the simple message she took from the little boy's death: "still she thought wisely enough" (262). It is no surprise, then, to learn from Forster that Dickens had *not* originally intended her to die:

He had not thought of killing her, when, about half-way through, I asked him to consider whether it did not necessarily belong even to his own conception, after taking so mere a child through such a tragedy of sorrow, to lift her also out of the commonplace of ordinary happy endings, so that the gentle pure little figure and form should never change to the fancy. (1:123)

Chapter 42 seems to be the very stage at which Dickens took up Forster's idea.³² Here, even before she sees her grandfather as an easy tool of the card-sharpers, Nell lingers "in the gloom" (396), and hope begins to give way to a new "resignation" (397). After her discovery, she begins to look "spectral" (404). No longer able to push the shadows back, she now seems to welcome them. In the next chapter she has acquired a more ethereal beauty, is suddenly "very weak" (406) and is clearly destined for "the sleep that knows no waking" (407). As Forster goes on to say, from this point, Dickens never looks back. She is soon trudging "a dismal, blighted way" (421) past miserable "windowless" (424) houses, and her grandfather, coming at last to notice her wretched condition, cries, "too pale—too pale. She is not like what she was" (504). Now, in her own mind as well as in the schoolmaster's, she is completely identified with the little scholar whose death once made her glad to be alive.

The weepy postmortem scene of her own death-bed may escape some censure when we remember how often children did die in Dickens's time, or (thinking of it in artistic terms) when we appreciate, as Chesterton does,³³ the irony of her dying just then, when help is so close at hand. Seeing it as part of an "allegory" (56) helps too—Nell is the spiritual guide to the unregenerate old man,³⁴ who will die soon after her. But for most of us, this part of the novel simply symbolizes the enormous divergence between Victorian taste and our own.

The antidote to all that is pathetic in Nell and her situation is provided by Kit. Christopher Nubbles bubbles with gaiety from the moment we meet him in the opening chapter, where he has the power to make even Nell laugh heartily with "childlike. . . . hilarity" (49), to the end, when he makes his own children "quite merry" (671) again after talking to them about Nell. As Monod³⁵ has pointed out, this boy is the link between the two groups of characters in the narrative, so he is conspicuous enough to provide an alternative to Nell.

Kit's heart, like Nell's, is "true and honest" (142); his spirit, like hers, is "kind and generous" (144). As she cares for her grandfather, so he does for his widowed mother and two little brothers. He too becomes the victim of Quilp's machinations, and though he never suffers as Nell does, what he does suffer he endures stoutly. On the other hand, whereas she flees evil, he stays to confront it, battling with Quilp's boy to save her linnet, and bearing it off in triumph. Whereas she is increasingly given to meditation and piety, he is active, and boldly answers back the Little Bethel parson who resents his taking his mother out of the sleepy congregation: "I don't believe, mother," he says to her outside,

that harmless cheerfulness and good humour are greater sins in Heaven than shirt-collars are, and that those chaps are just about as right and sensible in putting down the one as in leaving off the other—that's my belief. (393)

Kit is thoroughly and heartily pro-life; as the narrator realizes in Chapter 1, he is "the comedy of the child's [Nell's] life" (49), while Nell herself plays out a tragic role. The contrast between the child character who lives and the one who dies is, as elsewhere, essentially a dramatic one.

Two things militate against our giving Kit his due. One is his clownish, even doltish first appearance, and the other is the label attached to him later—"young Snobby" (516), which has somehow (but largely thanks to Chesterton's endorsement of it) stuck. The former aspect of Kit seems to be part and parcel of Dickens's avowed intention "to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions" (Preface to the First Cheap Edition, 42). This is gradually played down in the novel, though Kit never has anything of the refinement which elevates Nell, and continues to look absurd enough in the illustrations. The idea that he is snobbish is much more damaging, because it goes deeper. Chuckster's irritation at the boy's voluble virtuousness hits the nail right on the head, maybe betraying Dickens's own intuition about him. The fact is, all the good young characters he has created up to now strike us to some extent as prigs—an adult's idea of what youth *ought* to be like, or, as John Carey puts it in his witty and scathing attack on them, "plastic children" akin to dwarfs (in the sense of miniature adults) or decorative garden gnomes.³⁶ Unfortunately, Kit, with his high colour and turned up nose, fits the bourgeois gnome idea particularly well—especially when snugly placed at the middle-class Garlands' cosy house—though he is not included in Carey's discussion.

Dickens might have begun to realize this himself as the character of Sally Brass's poor little servant, of no known name or age, developed in this novel. Here, for the first time, is a fully rounded, truly life-like child figure: "With the exception of David Copperfield and Pip, she is the only natural child in Dickens's works," claims K. J. Fielding,³⁷ exaggerating only slightly. She may be stunted in appearance (hints of a plan to reveal her as Sally and Quilp's love-child can still be found in the plot), but she is credible and touching in a way that no garden gnome could ever be: ignorant yet slyly knowing, and sharp as a blade; fearful yet resolutely daring when it comes to the crunch;

subject to that commonest of all childhood complaints—boredom—yet keenly alert to what goes on around her, even to the point of applying her eye to keyholes—this lowly servant girl is indeed, as Dick Swiveller dubs her, a Marchioness among her pallid and/or goody-goody peers.

Dickens surely does not, as Carey assumes, forget what it is to be ‘under age.’ All the evidence points to the fact that the terrible, terrifying predicament of the helpless young was burnt into his brain for a lifetime. Nor has he ever forgotten, for it pops up now and then in the early novels—in Oliver’s momentary dullness when first being parcelled off to the undertaker’s; in Noah’s revenge on Oliver for his own humiliations; in the vicious, sullen faces of some of Squeers’s boys; in Nicholas’s moments of bitter, unbearably agitated frustration—all examples of the normal young person’s understandable but quite unappealing responses to their predicament. But the mix of good and bad in the smaller child, particularly, is in the first few novels an almost unapproachable truth, to be backed away from if not actually repressed. This was partly perhaps the better to promote the children’s cause to the Victorian public, but mainly, no doubt, to spare himself the agony of examining his own early responses to life too closely.

Only when David Copperfield bites Mr. Murdstone’s hand, or feels self-consciously proud of his bereavement, does Dickens really begin to face up to the complications in the human child. The Marchioness is a minor character but a major pointer to that development, and meanwhile she shows up Kit and the rest for what they are—or rather, for what they are *not*. Whether created to live or die, they are ideal, and ideally unnatural children. They lack what David Masson called, as early as 1851, “that great and noble element in all that is human—the element of *difficulty*,”³⁸ and are indeed not so much decorative as poetic conceptions, filled with the gentle feelings which Smollett and Sterne both denied their boys. Yet, just as Dickens shows the pull of the active, the affirmative, so he also moves now towards a more honest probing of the early years, an acceptance of what childhood actually entails.

Another indication of this is his endowing a *bad* character—indeed, *the* bad character or “evil genius” (619) of this novel—with childlike qualities. If Pickwick and other kindly souls preserve the kindly side of childhood, Quilp embodies its unmanageable perversity. The horrible dwarf is more than a figure in Little Nell’s nightmares; sleeping in her very bed, because it just fits him and because it gives him a certain salacious pleasure to do so, he is her obverse, the sadistic, vulgar, potentially sexual reality which is the other side of the coin to the tender and innocent ideal. Writing in 1841, Basil Hall, surely one of the very first to complain about the sharp division between Dickens’s “expressly good” characters and his “rogues,” particularly took to the little servant, and noticed that Quilp’s “excessive delight at a joke” offset “the jet black of his character.”³⁹

Unlikely as it may seem, then, these two characters are symptomatic of a process which leads to a more vital conception of childhood in Dickens’s work, one in which a tougher, more forward-looking recognition of the child’s nature gives backbone to the feebler Romantic tendencies of a child like Oliver Twist.

NOTES

- 1 Charles Dickens, Preface to the Cheap Edition, 1847, *The Posthumous Papers of The Pickwick Club*, ed. Robert L. Patten, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 45. Subsequent references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 2 *Charles Dickens: Selected Short Fiction*, ed. Deborah A. Thomas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 119. For a fine analysis of Dickens's ambivalence about childhood in *Sketches by Boz*, see Sylvère Mond's "Revisiting *Sketches by Boz*" in *Dickens and Other Victorians*, ed. Joanne Shattock (London: Macmillan, 1988), 25ff.
- 3 "Nurse's Stories," *Selected Short Fiction*, 220, 221.
- 4 *David Copperfield*, ed. Trevor Blount (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 106.
- 5 *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols (Lodon: Dent, 1927), 1:7. Subsequent references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 6 "Holiday Romance," Part2, "Romance. From the Pen of Miss Alice Rainbird," *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces etc.* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), 699. We are informed in a footnote of Miss Alice's age.
- 7 "Dickens on Children and Childhood," *Dickens 1970: Centenary Essays* by Walter Allen et al, ed. Michael Slater (London: Chapman & Hall, 1970), 227.
- 8 Robert Buchanan, "The 'Good Genie' of Fiction: Thoughts while reading Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*," reprinted in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 578-9.
- 9 *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, corrected ed. 1947), 3.
- 10 Peter Coveney, in his often-cited *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature* offers a generally balanced appraisal of Dickens's child characters, but finally (despite his own best intentions, it seems) stresses their morbidity ([Harmondsworth: Penguin, rev. ed. 1967] , 158ff.).
- 11 *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), 83.
- 12 *An Introduction to the English Novel: Vol. 1, Defoe to Fielding* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 130.
- 13 *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, paperback ed. 1987), 40.
- 14 Dickens's own words. See *Oliver Twist*, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 33. Subsequent references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 15 e.g., see F. R. Leavis's contrast of Little Dorrit with Little Nell, and Q. D. Leavis's comment that Dickens moves towards the portrayal of "socially realistic children," *Dickens the Novelist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 298, 422. (However, Q. D. Leavis's conclusion, that Dicken tires of the romantic view of childhood, depends on too simplistic an interpretation of what that view entails.)
- 16 See his *Dickens the Novelist* (Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 135.
- 17 *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (New York: Haskell House, 1970), 48.
- 18 Quoted in *Dickens: the Critical Heritage*, 44.
- 19 Chesterton, 47.
- 20 *The Lost Childhood and Other Essays* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951), 57.
- 21 Norman Page, *A Dickens Chronology* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 20. A fuller account of this incident can be found in Vol. 2 of the Pilgrim edition of his letters, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 9-10.
- 22 See Philip Collins's pamphlet, "From Manly Tear to Stiff Upper Lip" (Wellington, New

- Zealand: Univ. of Victoria Press, 1974).
- 23 See "A Question of Sentimentality" in her *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London: Peter Owen, 1985), 63ff. See also George H. Ford on changes of taste in this context, in *Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel Criticism Since 1836* (New York: Gordian, 1974), 63ff. Ford specifically links Victorian sentimentality with that of the late eighteenth century, but also discusses the possibility that it was rooted in the guilty awareness of the current prevalence of child abuse. N. B., Coveney and Kathleen Tillotson are others who feel that Paul's death is handled skilfully (Coveney, 160; Tillotson, *Novels of the 1840s* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961], 51).
 - 24 *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 147. Subsequent references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.
 - 25 George Gissing, "Humour and Pathos," reprinted in *Discussions of Charles Dickens*, ed. William Ross Clark (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1961), 9.
 - 26 e. g., Slater considers him "peculiar," Introduction to the Penguin ed., 24.
 - 27 Chesterton calls him "a somewhat chivalrous young donkey," 32.
 - 28 For example, see the unsigned review (1844) of R. H. Horne's *A New Spirit of the Age*, reprinted in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*: "we cannot help reflecting on the position of the mass of workmen whose labours have accumulated their capital," 152.
 - 29 See also Dirk Den Hartog's specialized discussion, *Dickens and Romantic Psychology: The Self in Time in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1984), where Smike (with Oliver and Little Nell) is placed in the Wordsworthian tradition, 25ff.
 - 30 ed. Angus Easson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 45. Subsequent references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.
 - 31 See the Pilgrim ed. of the letters, Vol. 2 (see n. 21 above), 125, n. 3.
 - 32 The Pilgrim editors feel differently; but Forster's mention of Dickens's being "half way through" the book when he decided to follow this advice seems to be borne out by the text itself. See also Forster 1:123.
 - 33 Chesterton, 54.
 - 34 See Robert Pattison, *The Child Figure in English Literature* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1978), 78ff.
 - 35 Monod, *Dickens the Novelist*, 181.
 - 36 *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber, 1979), 136.
 - 37 *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1958), 55.
 - 38 "*Pendennis and Copperfield*: Thackeray and Dickens," reprinted in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, 259. N. B., we can easily believe that the same actress (*actress*, mind you) played the parts of Oliver, Smike and Little Nell in stage adaptations of the novels (see the Pilgrim ed. of the letters, Vol 1, 459); the part of Jo in an adaptation of *Bleak House* was also taken by an actress.
 - 39 Quoted in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 2 (see n. 21 above), 185, n.

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