TORSTEN PETTERSSON

"That Never-Ending Restlessness": The Revulsion from Life in *The Old Curiosity Shop*

The Old Curiosity Shop, as an anonymous Victorian critic pointed out, is perhaps "more completely *sui generis*" than any other novel by Dickens (Walder 67). It explores the metaphysical questions of death and immortality with an insistence that makes the death of Paul Dombey and the suggestions of a happier prenatal existence in *Oliver Twist* seem like mere allusions. And it couches its explorations in an unusual narrative mode which bears some resemblance to allegories like *Pilgrim's Progress.* These aspects of the narrative have been attended to (especially by Kucich, Engel, and Bennett). I here propose to examine a further feature peculiar to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which is a concomitant of the novel's preoccupation with death: a remarkable revulsion from life as such, and not merely as manifested by the depravities of contemporary society.

To be sure, Nell and and her grandfather's peregrinations originate as a reaction against the atmosphere of early Victorian London, rife with inhumanity and avarice. Nell implores the old man: "oh hear me pray that we may beg, or work in open roads or fields, to earn a scanty living, rather than live as we do now [...] let us leave this sad place to-morrow" (ch. 9; p. 71). And a little later he is disenchanted enough to acquiesce: "we'll turn our faces from this scene of sorrow" (12;94). But after this Nell's motive power gradually changes: what had been a withdrawal from the cruelty of a particular social scene turns into a recoil from life in general, which is equated with strife and agonizing turmoil.

Dickens accomplishes this change by shifting the terms of the opposition between Nell and society in two stages, and by anticipating these shifts very early on in the novel. The view that life is a painful turmoil is suggested on the very first page, where Humphrey, reflecting on people's movements in the street, "[t]hat constant pacing to and fro, that never-ending restlessness", imagines the agony of a sick man who has to lie and listen to it all:

> [...]think of the hum and noise being always present to his senses, and of the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie, dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come!
>
> (1;1)

This powerful vision of a longing for peace is provided with a counterpart in the following paragraph, where Humphrey pictures to himself a man who stops in the midst of the commotion on a bridge and contemplates drowning himself. These suggestions about the nature of life return in passing when Nell visits a churchyard in the country and the narrator remarks that the noise and movements of the birds "satirised the old restlessness of those who lay so still beneath the moss and turf below, and the strife in which they had worn away their lives" (17;128). The comment is particularly revealing because those who are buried here have, as country-dwellers, led the kind of honest life which at this stage in Nell's development is generally represented as the ideal to which she wishes to withdraw. This prepares us for the completion of the first shift of terms. It is achieved when Nell and her grandfather find themselves surrounded by the noise and tumult of a crowded street, alone and unheeded, wondering why they had "ever come to this noisy town, when there were peaceful country places, in which, at least, they might have hungered and thirsted, with less suffering than in its squalid strife" (44;327). Here one of the opposing elements, Nell's longing for a quiet place of refuge, is preserved, but the other one has been transformed: it is no longer constituted by the cruelty of a particular social arrangement, but by strife and restlessness as such, regardless of their moral complexion.

The second shift consists in retaining this newly-formed element of restlessness but contrasting it, not with a peaceful place in the country, but with the peace offered by death. This has been prepared for more extensively than the first shift. The bliss of ultimate tranquillity is implicit in the above quotations from chapters 1 and 17, and in various guises mostly connected with Nell death is a powerful presence in the novel. In chapter 9 the girl sees a funeral procession and pictures to herself her grandfather's gory suicide; and during her visit to the churchyard in chapter 17 she meets an old woman whose husband died at the age of twenty-three. Other premature deaths are also related to Nell: she witnesses that of the little scholar in chapter 25, and we are told that both her mother and her grandmother had died shortly after childbirth. The shift of terms is then suggested soon after the first shift when Nell feels "a dull conviction that she was very ill, perhaps dying; but no fear or anxiety" (45;337), and it is brought out explicitly in her response to the schoolmaster's praise of the village as "a peaceful place to live in": "Oh yes, [...] A quiet, happy place—a place to live and learn to die in!" (52;386). Thus by subtle and long-anticipated shifts it gradually becomes clear that Nell's withdrawal cannot be halted by the village, no matter how unpolluted it may be: what began as an escape from the depravity of a particular society has turned into a retreat from life itself.

Even as such, the view that the strife of life is squalid and distressing casts an interesting light on the characters' actions. But what is more, that view is corroborated and amplified by the actions themselves. Human endeavour in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is largely futile and ineffectual. The book is full of plans that misfire, no matter how diligently they are pursued: the grandfather's plan to aquire a fortune and Quilp's to have his share of it; Fred, Swiveller and Quilp's plan for Swiveller to marry Nell; Codlin and Short's scheme to have Nell sent back to London, Isaac List's to make her grandfather steal Mrs. Jarley's money. Most surprising, on reflection, is the fact that the search for Nell, which forms the backbone of the main plot, actually produces nothing at all. The single gentleman scours the countryside, interviews would-be informants, and promises handsome rewards for any clues; Quilp applies his impressive ingenuity, for instance by spying on Mrs. Nubbles and tailing her and the single gentleman. But all to not avail. Dickens does not allow either of them to pick up the trail of the fugitives, but effects the final reunion by the mere chance of Mr. Garland's receiving a letter which reveals their whereabouts. And by then the single gentleman's object of "serving and reclaiming" the fugitives (38; 285) has been defeated: Nell is dead and her grandfather too far gone even to recognize him as his own brother. In fact, the only scheme of some magnitude which meets with even temporary success is the theft-charge which Brass fakes against Kit, but even that comes to naught in the end.

In contrast to the piteous outcome of most activities in the novel, success may occur when a character does not apply himself to achieving it. Nell and her grandfather manage to elude their pursuers and find a place to refuge, not so much by active endeavour as through improvised flight and passive drifting. A similar point is enforced by the resolution of both plots. The letter which finally enables the single gentleman to find Nell and his brother emanates from the old bachelor in the remote village; and what saves Kit is not the energetic efforts of wordly-wise characters like Witherden and the Garlands, but the testimony which Swiveller, exhausted on his sickbed after weeks of raging fever, coaxes out of the Marchioness, an illiterate slavey who has quietly been spying on the Brasses. The novel's revulsion from life conceived as pointless and distressing commotion thus extends deep into the texture of the plots.

As this view of life gradually asserts itself, the alternative to life on earth becomes increasingly important. From the very first paragraph of the novel, it is implicit in the frequent references to the gentle light of Heaven. They culminate in the village when Nell, having climbed the stairs of the church-tower in darkness, experiences "the glory of the sudden burst of light" and admires the landscape below: "all, everything, so beautiful and happy! It was like passing from death to life; it was drawing nearer Heaven" (53; 398).

Such intimations of paradise put a final edge on the novel's bleak view of life; compared to Heaven, life on earth is really more like "death". For the most part this strain is gently elegiac, but towards the end of the novel, when the old people of the village come to pay homage at Nell's grave, it rises to an extraordinary pitch:

> Old men were there, whose eyes were dim and senses failing — grandmothers, who might have died ten years ago, and still been old — the deaf, the blind, the lame, the palsied, the living dead in many shapes and forms, to see the closing of that early grave. What was the death it would shut in, to that which still could crawl and creep above it!
> (72; 542)

A remarkable outburst, this, unDickensian in its harshness towards the old and infirm, and more redolent of the bitter disillusionment of the later novels than of the generous exuberance of the early work. But although the passage is conspicuous by being so explicit, the repugnance against crawling, creeping animalism is no isolated phenomenon. It is akin to the fascinated repulsion with which the novel presents Quilp, the "creature" (3; 25) whose behaviour is often "dog-like" (5; 40) or "monkey-like" (9; 72), and it is related to the portrayal of the Brasses. Sally's appearance is scaly enough for Swiveller to wonder, in chapter 36, if she is a mermaid or a dragon, and after their downfall she and her brother go from bad to worse, becoming reptilian creatures who (which?) "crawl at dusk from the inmost recesses of St. Giles's, [...] cowering shivering forms, looking into the roads and kennels as they went in search of refuse food or disregarded offal" (Chapter the Last; 548-49). Against the backdrop of this disgust at what is nevertheless forms of human life, however grotesque and animalistic, however perversely clinging to their deathlike existence, it is not surprising that the novel idealizes Nell's return to the "beautiful country beyond the sky, where nothing died or ever grew old" (6; 49).

By various means and with considerable power *The Old Curiosity Shop*, then, presents life on earth as a painful turmoil pervaded by animalism and the taint of death and, concomitantly, celebrates the peace and celestial serenity of the afterlife. This stance may, however, seem to be contravened by the bemoaning of Nell's death. But in fact it is not, for the emotional intensity of the two chapters in question springs from the feelings of the mourners rather than from the girl's death as such. Scrutinizing the text one finds, surprisingly, that the notorious "death of Little Nell" is actually never presented as happening in the present moment of the narrative. The last time we see Nell in the present is at the end of chapter 55, where she leans at her casement window, symbolically gazing at the declining sun and thinking of

spring. We then follow the London characters, who on their arrival at the village enter the house in chapter 71, finding her grandfather and finally, in the inner chamber, her dead body. The death itself is only described retrospectively by the villagers on the following morning:

> Waking, she never wandered in her mind but once, and that was of beautiful music which she said was in the air. God knows. It may have been.
> Opening her eyes at last, from a very quiet sleep, she begged that they [the villagers] would kiss her once again. That done, she turned to the old man with a lovely smile upon her face — such, they said, as they had never seen, and never could forget — and clung with both her arms about his neck. They did not know that she was dead, at first. (72; 540)

This quiet bliss of passing into another sphere is in perfect harmony with the novel's devaluation of life on earth. As is also indicated by his studious avoidance of Nell's death as an event in the present, the narrator is not inviting us to luxuriate in tragic lachrymosity, which would jar with the fact that the girl has now finally reached the beautiful country beyond the sky where the burden of life is lifted. The narrator does, however, detail manifestations of the characters' grief which may strike us as extravagant: The schoolmaster gives "his tears free vent" (71; 539), the little boy cannot bear the thought of Nell's body being left alone, and her grandfather, distracted by his emotions, spends his remaining days by her grave, waiting for her to return. But even this is motivated by a moral ideal related to the contrast between Heaven and life on earth. Having described the universal mourning at Nell's funeral, the narrator draws the following conclusion:

> When Death strikes down the innocent and young, for every fragile form from which he lets the panting spirit free, a hundred virtues rise, in shapes of mercy, charity and love, to walk the world, and bless it. Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes. In the Destroyer's steps there spring up bright creations that defy his power, and his dark path becomes a way of light to Heaven. (72; 544)

In addition to appropriately describing death as a liberation ("lets the panting spirit free"), this passage echoes the consolation which the schoolmaster has offered Nell for the absence of external signs of the mourning of the dead (54; 406). The idea is that by allowing their deepest feelings to be touched, the characters develop in such a way as to be able to show "mercy, charity, and love" — in contrast to the hardheartedness prevailing in society. As in the similar case of Nell's empathic response to the Edwards sisters — the "pure emotion which must be prized in Heaven" (32; 241) — this ability to show sympathy is presented as a quality that prepares, or even qualifies, man for Heaven.

Since the girl's death as such is not sentimentalized, and since there

is a reason for dwelling on the emotions of the mourners, I feel that the "sentimentality" of Nell's death has been much exaggerated by Huxley and others (such as Pearson 79 and Hobsbaum 57). More incongruous, to my mind, is the fact that rather than allowing the novel to end here where it has logically come to an end, Dickens bows to the Victorian convention of rounding off the work by summing up the fortunes of the characters. As the narrator says, displaying perhaps some annoyance at the shackling mechanics of the convention, in the final chapter it "remains but to *dismiss* the leaders of the little crowd who have borne us company" (Chapter the Last; 547, my emphasis). This is a blemish because, for one thing, the bustling "life-goes-on" atmosphere of the catalogue that follows jars against the muted key of the two preceding chapters set in the village. And for another, it smacks of a last-minute retreat from the conclusion towards which the novel has been tending: that the peace of death is preferable to the distasteful turmoil of life.

Dickens has come a long way in less than three and a half years, from the completion of the exuberant *Pickwick Papers* in the early autumn of 1837 to that of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in January 1841. To be sure, the dark strain was there even in *Pickwick*, in the Fleet scenes and in the lugubrious interpolated tales, but it never seriously challenged that novel's generous acceptance of life in all its amusing manifestations. In *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* the exposure of Victorian malpractises was actually an assertion of the value and dignity of life: some things just should not be tolerated. And the ultimate success of Oliver and Nicholas showed us that once such contaminations as Fagin, Squeers, and Ralph Nickleby have been removed by death or transportation, ours is a world in which the good can thrive. But in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where life is seen to be unsatisfactory as such, it cannot, by the similar removal of Quilp and Samson Brass, be purged sufficiently for Nell to continue her earthly existence. Because of this fundamental disenchantment the novel, properly considered, has a special significance: it is the first major prefiguration of the bleak vision which Dickens was to deploy to the full from the early fifties onwards.

Works Cited

Bennett, Rachel. "Punch versus Christian in *The Old Curiosity Shop*". *The Review of English Studies* 22 (1971), 423-34.

Dickens, Charles. *The Old Curiosity Shop.* London: Oxford University Press, 1951 (1841).

Engel, Monroe. "'A Kind of Allegory': *The Old Curiosity Shop*". In *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice* (=Harvard English Studies, 1), ed. Morton W. Bloomfield, 135-47. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970.

Hobsbaum, Philip. *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1972.

Huxley, Aldous. "From *Vulgarity in Literature*". In *Charles Dickens: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Stephen Wall, 280-83. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970 (1930).
Kucich, John. "Death Worship among the Victorians: *The Old Curiosity Shop*". *PMLA* 95 (1980), 58-72.
Pearson, Gabriel. "*The Old Curiosity Shop*". In *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson, 77-90. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.
Walder, Dennis. *Dickens and Religion*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

CAMBRIDGE **ELT: the professional choice**

The New CAMBRIDGE *English Course*

MICHAEL SWAN
CATHERINE WALTER

Level 3 available now

What the profession says:

- general approach – 'balance of structure and function, detailed work on pronunciation, imaginative skills exercises and a rich variety of consolidation exercises'
- grammar summaries on the page – 'a great aid to clarity'
- Practice Books – 'thorough and very clear'

Practical English Teaching

New Cambridge English Course 1 Video

Desmond Thomas with Catherine Walter and Michael Swan

The Video combines documentary and dramatised sequences, which review the language syllabus of the course and also expand on its themes.

The individual video sequences can easily be slotted into any teaching programme.

An accompanying *Teacher's Guide* gives:

- advice on how to use the Video in class
- tapescripts
- photocopiable pre-and post-viewing tasks.

For further information, please contact:
ELT Marketing, Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK.
TELEPHONE: (0223) 325846/7

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

JENNIFER L. EBERHARDT

Perceptions of Black English Vernacular: An Investigation of the Linguistic Ramifications of Race, Gender, and Class

Jennifer Lynn Eberhardt är doktorand i socialpsykologi vid Harvarduniversitetet, där hon under handledning av Roger Brown är i färd med att slutföra en avhandling om rasbaserade stereotyper och attributionsteori (den teori som behandlar hur individer och grupper tillskrivs vissa egenskaper). Hon har också intresserat sig för relationer mellan etniska grupper. I den här artikeln diskuterar hon variablerna ras, kön och samhällsklass med avseende på Black English, den typ av engelska som talas av en stor andel av USAs svarta befolkning.

It was once believed that Black English lacked several requirements for logical thought, and thus limited the intellectual processes of its speakers. It was not until the mid-1960s that linguists and other researchers/scientists began to recognize Black English as a legitimate language rather than as an inferior, illogical, and deficient form of American Standard English (Labov, 1969). The origin and development of Black English can be traced from West African tribal languages, to Caribbean Creoles, to the language spoken on Southern American plantations, and, finally, to the black migration north. Although this is true, it was not until recently that descriptive linguists have attempted to analyze in detail the distinct phonological, syntactical, prosodic, narrative, and rhetorical features of Black English.

Reactions to spoken language that is characteristic of a group often reflect the perceiver's stereotypes about the group in question (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner & Fillenbaum, 1960). In this sense, the longstanding denial of the legitimacy of Black English in the past appears to reflect the personality characteristics that white Americans attribute to Black English speakers. Although Black English has been recognized as a distinct language by linguists and among the academic community generally, many white Americans continue to perceive Black English speakers as exemplifications of negative stereotypes (e.g. unintelligent, uneducated, incompetent, hostile).

Less clear, and probably more consequential, is understanding how black people themselves perceive Black English speakers. Although 80 percent of African-Americans speak the language at some time, the social perceptions of blacks by blacks has been minimally researched. It is not at all clear whether African-Americans attribute positive characteristics to Black English speakers or whether they share the same beliefs about the language as white Americans.