

## CHAPTER 28

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### ON DICKENS' *THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP*

A Lecture

Today, ladies and gentlemen, I will not introduce you to a new book, nor call your attention to one you have forgotten. Instead, I would like to talk about one whose title is generally familiar, a book that may still be widely read, especially by children. But in the ninety years that have passed since Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* appeared, inserted into another novel, some of the secrets embedded in the work, perhaps without the author knowing clearly that he was doing so, have become discernible. Dickens is currently considered to be one of the founders of the realistic and social novel. Historically, this is correct; but when one examines the form of his work itself, it requires some qualification. For Dickens' fictional work, in which poverty, despair, and death have already been recognized as the fruits of a bourgeois world, a world to which only the traces of human warmth and kindness in individual human relationships can reconcile one—this work also contains the outlines of a completely different sort of view of the world. You may call it prebourgeois; in it the individual has not yet reached full autonomy, nor, therefore, complete isolation, but instead is presented as a bearer of objective factors, of a dark, obscure fate and a starlike consolation that overtake the individual and permeate his life but never follow from the law of the individual, as do, for instance, the fates of the characters in Flaubert's novels. The novels of Dickens contain a fragment of the dispersed baroque that maintains a strange ghostly presence in the nineteenth century. You know it from the plays of Raimund and even Nestroy, but it is also contained, in more hidden form, in the apparently so individualistic philosophy of Kierkegaard. For the novel form

in Dickens that means, more specifically, that there is no psychology in it, or rather, that it absorbs psychological approaches into the objective meanings the novels depict. There are good reasons why these novels were published with illustrations; they are themselves illustrations of objective meanings by means of human figures rather than free representations of human beings. In Dickens' unpsychological and illustrative method, which describes objective factors, you can see, in addition to the prebourgeois element, an intention that goes beyond the bourgeois practice of art: it does so by not taking as its own criterion the highest norm of bourgeois art, the individual and his psychology, thereby helping to reveal the objective structure of a life space which tries of its own accord to dissolve all objectivity in subjectivity. The prebourgeois form of Dickens' novels becomes a means of dissolving the very bourgeois world they depict.

In none of his novels is that clearer than in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Here social criticism converges with the representation of objective factors. That can be seen, in crude form, in the settings. The novel's inventory is baroque and allegorical, an arrangement of figures. The old curiosity shop, Short and Codlin's puppet theater, a waxworks, and a churchyard form the space of the main action; a spirit-space, like that of the theater in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, which intersects bourgeois space even in the prose of Gottfried Keller and Theodor Storm. There can be no doubt about its allegorical character, given a formulation like this one: "Punch, it may be remarked, seemed to be pointing with the tip of his cap to a most flourishing epitaph, and to be chuckling over it with all his heart."<sup>1</sup> Dickens sketches a Yorick scenery. But all these images are arranged, as around their center of gravity, around the depiction of an early industrial city that lies under the space of the allegorical images like a Hell space, where the mute sacrifice of the heroine actually takes place.

The heroine, a child, Little Nell, victim of the mythic powers of bourgeois fate and at the same time the slender ray of light that fleetingly illuminates the bourgeois world, is herself an allegorical figure through and through. "She seemed to exist in a kind of allegory," says the narrator of her (14-15)—like a puppetmaster, he presents the characters in the first chapters and then expressly withdraws, leaving the field to those "who have prominent and necessary parts" (29). The figural character of Little Nell manifests itself above all in the fact that she is introduced as part of a group from which nothing but death removes her. It is the group portrayed in the old woodcut on the title page: Nell and her grandfather. Formed of the same material, the two remain inseparable; neither could exist as an autonomous human being, the child no more than the feeble-minded old man. Once again, one thinks of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, of Mignon and the harpist. Nell and her grandfather are bound to one another by the force of a fate that burdens the granddaughter with the grandfather's guilt, his blind and senseless passion for gambling, in a natural linkage, a fate that leads to the death of Nell, herself innocent, as a propitiatory sacrifice. The

novel is nothing but the story of her sacrifice. The path of her sacrifice is at the same time the path from one allegorical scene to another and the path of a revolt from bourgeois society, which seems everywhere in league with mythical powers here; her path is as deeply ambiguous as that of the post coach that Dickens at one point calls a “highway comet.” Her bourgeois surroundings are just as ambiguous; unmediated social reality, to whose coercion she is subject, and mythical power, visible as dwelling and city and interpreted at the moment of her flight with her grandfather, when Dickens speaks of the “labyrinth of men’s abodes” where “ruin and self-murder were crouching in every street” (119). Nell is subject to that yet at the same time already removed from it; this is clearer in small details than in some of the sentimental phrasings: when Nell’s demonic adversary, the dwarf Quilp, asks her, “Do you wish you may die if you . . . know?” she rejects the oath, as something mythical, by simply saying, “Indeed I don’t know” (46). Nell’s washing in the pond on her flight may be similarly symbolic; Quilp, in contrast, who sleeps in his clothes, never seems to wash—and ultimately dies by water. In fantasy and daydream the figure of Nell appears together with the things that cannot be realized in her own fate; Dickens speaks of her “dreams of rambling through light and sunny places, but with some vague object unattained” (100); this object, which lies outside the novel’s course, is no doubt the mother of the child Kit, who loves Nell. After Nell’s flight she imagines that the girl and her grandfather have emigrated to a foreign country, and with amazingly real words of the kind not spoken thereafter until the figures of Franz Kafka, she reveals what kind of foreign country this is: “It’s the talk of all the neighbors, and there are some even that know of their having been seen on board ship, and can tell you the name of the place they’ve gone to, which is more than I can, dear, for it’s a very hard one’ ” (158).

Quilp, whom Dickens calls a dwarf and who is attached to Nell through a desire whose horror is all the more palpable the more Dickens is concerned to conceal it, is no more human than Nell. But he is not, as the style of the woodcut depicting him might lead one to believe, a devil, but rather a kobold, and as kobold also the figure of the bourgeois greedy for profit. Only Daumier has depicted the bourgeois spirit world as incisively as this, and reference to the “humor” with which such figures are drawn could serve only to rob knowledge of them of its seriousness. The light of humor that seems to illuminate Quilp is the twilight in which a demonic nature bound to fate manifests itself here. What distinguishes Quilp from the satanic is his lack of freedom. He does not have the freedom of a devil; he is bound, both to fate and to individual figures, secretly to Nell and openly to his assistant, a child. Here Dickens says: “And here it may be remarked, that between this boy and the dwarf there existed a strange kind of mutual liking. How born and bred, or how nourished upon blows and threats on one side, and retorts and defiances on the other, is not to the purpose” (44). No analysis could set the content of this figure apart

from any psychology more sharply than Dickens does with these words. Quilp's sadism springs from the same depths of nature as his enthralled affection, an undifferentiated mingling of love and the urge to annihilate; it bursts the structure of bourgeois emotions as much as does the radiance of reconciliation that lies over Nell and is therefore repeatedly hidden by Dickens as unseemly and then inadvertently revealed again, as in the scene in which Quilp eavesdrops on his wife and her friends, who think he is dead, and then suddenly leaps into the middle of the room. The mythic image of sadism that underlies the figure of Quilp is that of the cannibal; Quilp talks about cannibals more than once. The sleeping Quilp is described as a cannibal; on their flight from the house Quilp has taken possession of, Nell and her grandfather arrive at "the passage on the ground floor, where the snoring of Mr. Quilp and his legal friend sounded more terrible in their ears than the roaring of lions" (100).

The flight is a flight from Quilp; from Quilp, who pursues but cannot overtake them, because the course of his demonism is as firmly prescribed as that of Nell's sacrifice. Over and above that, however, the flight contains a deep dialectical ambiguity. First, it is the escape of the group from the bourgeois world that has sworn a demonic opposition to it, an escape that succeeds at the price of death. This motif of escape, which in Dickens is always found in the domain of children because it is closed to adults, both in reality and in literature, was correctly grasped by Stefan Zweig in his essay on Dickens. Dickens announces it: "And then the old man clasped his hands above her head and said, in a few broken words, that from that time forth they would wander up and down together, and never part more until death took one or the other of the twain" (98–99). The escape is given a somewhat romantic lighting in this passage:

We will travel afoot through the fields and woods, and by the side of rivers, and trust ourselves to God in the places where He dwells. It is far better to lie down at night beneath an open sky like that yonder—see how bright it is!—than to rest in close rooms, which are always full of care and weary dreams. Thou and I together, Nell, may be cheerful and happy yet, and learn to forget this time, as if it had never been. (98)

And in a similar vein, polemically: "Thou and I are free of it now, Nell. They shall never lure us back" (122). The escape is incomparably more powerful in its concrete presentation, however, as the group leaves the city, and as in the dawn, the holy dawn of its beginnings, the image of the city is revealed, terrifying:

The two pilgrims, often pressing each other's hands, or exchanging a smile or cheerful look, pursued their way in silence. Bright and happy as it was, there was something solemn in the long, deserted streets, from which, like bodies

without souls, all habitual character and expression had departed, leaving but one dead uniform repose, that made them all alike. All was so still at that early hour, that the few pale people whom they met seemed as much unsuited to the scene as the sickly lamp, which had been here and there left burning, was powerless and faint in the full glory of the sun. (119)

The demonic character of the world they are leaving is seen in its timelessness; just as the lamp burns on into morning, so this space truly knows no history until it is shattered; it exists in a negative eternity. Of the industrial city whose fumes bring Nell her fatal disease, Dickens says, “[They] passed through a dirty lane into a crowded street and stood, amid its din and tumult, and in the pouring rain, as strange, bewildered, and confused as if they had lived a thousand years before, and were raised from the dead and placed there by a miracle” (336). This may prove to be the deepest connection between the world of the marionettes and the bourgeois world whose image it is; of the wax figures, too, Dickens says, “. . . always the same, with a constantly unchanging air of coldness and gentility; and so like life, that if wax-work only spoke and walked about, you’d hardly know the difference” (209). Thus the city dwelling and the waxworks are akin to one another. Hence the path of the child, which runs between them, cannot escape the force of destiny: the escape from the bourgeois environment is the road to death. The marionettes are as much, and better symbols of death, than the cemetery, whose symbolic character seems to have been arbitrarily moved to the surface of the plot. In the image of the industrial city, the novel’s two intentions, the sociohistorical intention and the mythological intention, merge to become an unmediated unity; the mythical death symbolism is fulfilled in Nell’s encounter with the industrial city as the Hell space of the bourgeois world. Dickens describes it:

On every side, and as far as the eye could see into the heavy distance, tall chimneys, crowding on each other, and presenting that endless repetition of the same dull, ugly form which is the horror of oppressive dreams, poured out their plague of smoke, obscured the light, and made foul the melancholy air. On mounds of ashes by the wayside, sheltered only by a few rough boards, or rotten pent-house roofs, strange engines spun and writhed like tortured creatures, clanking their iron chains, shrieking in their rapid whirl from time to time as though in torment unendurable, and making the ground tremble with their agonies. (346–47)

The crisis of this industrial world—identified by Dickens as unemployment—becomes a decision about Nell’s life: she dies as the victim of the mythical

complex in which she stands, and in expiation for an injustice that is taking place there:

Towards the afternoon her grandfather complained bitterly of hunger. She approached one of the wretched hovels by the wayside, and knocked with her hand upon the door.

“What would you have here?” said a gaunt man, opening it.

“Charity. A morsel of bread.”

“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?” (349)

After that Nell loses hope. Collapsing, she is rescued by the schoolmaster and brought to a village that is no longer a real one, a village whose landscape encompasses only death and the reconciliation of those who are dying: “At that silent hour, when her grandfather was sleeping peacefully in his bed, and every sound was hushed, the child lingered before the dying embers, and thought of her past fortunes as if they had been a dream and she only now awoke” (400–1). Hope shines over Nell nevertheless, just as she represents hope:

She raised her eyes to the bright stars, looking down so silkily from the wide worlds of air, and gazing on them, found new stars burst upon her view, and more beyond, and more beyond again, until the whole great expanse sparkled with shining spheres, rising higher and higher in immeasurable space, eternal in their numbers as in their changeless and incorruptible existence. She bent over the calm river, and saw them shining in the same majestic order as when the dove beheld them gleaming through the swollen waters, upon the mountain tops down far below, and dead mankind, a million fathoms deep. (322)

Dickens gives only a fleeting and hidden indication of why Nell has to perish all the same. In her flight, Nell parts from her belongings unreconciled—she is not able to take anything from the bourgeois sphere away with her. To put it in modern terms, she does not succeed in making the dialectical transition; she succeeds only in flight, which has no power over the world from which she flees and which remains in thrall to it. Nell’s death is decided in the sentence that reads: “There were some trifles there—poor useless things—that she would have liked to take away, but that was impossible” (99). Because she is not able to take hold of the object-world of the bourgeois sphere, the object-world seizes hold of her, and she is sacrificed. But Dickens recognized that the possibility of transition and dialectical rescue was inherent in this object-world, this lost,

rejected world, and he expressed it, better than Romantic nature-worship was ever able to do, in the powerful allegory of money with which the depiction of the industrial city ends: “two old, battered, smoke-encrusted penny pieces. Who knows but they shone as brightly in the eyes of angels as golden gifts that have been chronicled on tombs?” (344-45).