Enumeration and Exhaustion: Taking Inventory in "The Old Curiosity Shop"

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Enumeration and Exhaustion:
Taking Inventory in *The Old Curiosity Shop*

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Abstract: *The Old Curiosity Shop* marks a crisis in Dickens’s early career. Overcommitted to projects, a victim of his own success, Dickens soon found his episodic model of fiction, first practiced in *Pickwick* and devoted to furnishing “a constant succession of characters and incidents,” pushed to its limit. Of his new periodical *Master Humphrey’s Clock* he complained, “wind, wind, wind, always winding I am.” His fourth novel became a metafictional reflection on the conditions of his own creativity, a work seemingly intent on thwarting the very delineating power—the power of invention, and of inventory—that multiplies fresh characters and incidents in the Dickensian episodic narrative.

He excels in inventories of poor furniture, and is learned in pawnbrokers’ tickets.

--Walter Bagehot

Mr. Shandy’s clock was nothing to mine [i.e., *Master Humphrey’s Clock*], wind, wind, wind, always winding I am; and day and night the alarum is ringing in my ears, warning me that it must not run down.

--Charles Dickens

Of the making of many books there is no end.

--Ecclesiastes

*Inventory*—traceable to Late Latin *inventarium*, “a finding out,” or “enumeration,” from the Latin *invenire*, “to come upon, find, invent.” The word preserves the archaic meaning of *invention*, whose modern sense (to quote the *OED*) of “devising, contriving, or making up” rests upon this buried, contrary idea of “coming
upon or finding … of finding out; discovery (whether accidental, or the result of search and effort).”

**Item.**

Coming upon, or making up?

Charles Dickens’s novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*, serialized between April 1840 and February 1841, begins with Master Humphrey’s account of meeting by chance a lost little girl in the London street, of escorting her back to her grandfather’s shop, of conversing with the grandfather and mingling with the dissolute Fred Trent and Dick Swiveller, the loyal Kit, the fiendish Quilp. Yet if we are to believe what he says upon concluding his narration, none of that ever happened. I refer here to Master Humphrey’s notorious announcement (in the remarks following *The Old Curiosity Shop* in Dickens’s periodical *Master Humphrey’s Clock*) that his “share … in the pages we have read” was not, after all, that of the chance discoverer of Nell and her old grandparent, that his initial appearance was “fictitious,” and that he is in fact the “single gentleman” who entered the narrative in its thirty-fourth chapter, that old grandparent’s long-expatriated younger brother who searches England – too late – in hopes of being reunited with his kin (680).

It has been easy for critics and editors to discount this “confession” as an afterthought irreconcilable with the tale it follows, but then, a standard of narrative consistency would seem ludicrously misapplied to such a wayward and improvised text as *The Old Curiosity Shop*. And to engage in the thought-experiment of taking the confession seriously for even one minute is to realize that its being “true” would mean that the narrator of this work never saw Nell Trent alive – for the “single gentleman”
arrives with his search party at Nell’s final resting-place (in chapter 71) two days after her death, to find her lying in state and his brother insensible to anything but Nell. Between his entrance into the story and this tardy arrival, he personally interacts with most of the other characters, but a living Nell has no place on any inventory of those he has dealt with. He made her up. And knowing her only as a corpse, he has retrospectively invented an illusion of a walking and talking and weeping and laughing Nell that seems permanently out of place in the world of the living. Inventing her, he has made a “oner,” something wonderful and one-of-a-kind. Nell is a “wax-work child” of “classical” repose, placed in the domain of mutability and history, “surrounded and beset by everything that was foreign to its nature” and endowed with a spiritual prestige befitting her incipient angelhood, an allure by contrast with which all the contents of that historical domain fade into undifferentiated “heaps of fantastic things,” all its actors into “a crowd of wild grotesque companions,” all its events into so much “useless strife” (308, 271, 56, 187). “It would be a curious speculation,” Master Humphrey says to himself at the end of the opening chapter, “to imagine her in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions; the only pure, fresh youthful object in the throng. It would be curious to find” (56) – but he interrupts himself there. If Master Humphrey is the single gentleman, then the speculation is a sham: he already knows that Nell has no future life, no way to make. However many pages are heaped up, however much narrative invention is expended to distract us from the fact, there is nothing to find: Dickens seems to have abidingly felt as much in the writing of this most curious of books, a tale that makes a mockery of the curiosity on which narrative feeds. Or rather, there’s only one thing: but whether that one thing is the black hole of Nell’s always
inevitable absence or the surviving “single gentleman” who creates and destroys her – who else but Dickens, terribly alone at his desk? – neither of these “oners” can make up a narrative, or an inventory, all by itself.

Item.

“The author’s object in this work, was to place before the reader a constant succession of characters and incidents; to paint them in as vivid colours as he could command; and to render them, at the same time, life-like and amusing” (PP 41). So wrote Dickens in the preface to the 1837 volume edition of *Pickwick Papers*, a work of episodic serial fiction whose miraculous comic inventiveness may be described by the trope of the inventory – a list of separate items (“characters and incidents”) placed one after another, preserved in their plurality. All the items in an inventory contribute to a total value, but, arrayed in succession, they are amenable to line-item evaluation, and the value of the whole is nothing more than the sum of their separate worths. “The publication of this book in monthly numbers,” Dickens noted, “rendered it an object of paramount importance that, while the different incidents were linked together by a chain of interest strong enough to prevent their appearing unconnected … the general design should be so simple as to sustain no injury from this detached and desultory form of publication …” (41). A collection of installments essentially “complete in [themselves]” might strive for only the modest aim of a “tolerably harmonious whole” (41); literary creativity simply meant, in this instance, the capacity for continual production of new material, the capacity to keep extending a list by adding to it fresh items not identical with or subsumable under what has come before. “And if it be objected to the Pickwick Papers, that they are merely a
series of adventures, in which the scenes are ever changing, and the characters come and
go like the men and women we encounter in the real world,” Dickens added, “they claim
to be nothing else” (41).

Inventory proliferates: it implies a point of view alert to differences, interested
and indeed invested in the difference it makes to move from one item to another and to
tally each judiciously. If one pays close enough attention and is sufficiently
discriminating, missing no chance to exploit a distinction and so add a new line, there is
no intrinsic reason why an inventory, like a picaresque novel, cannot be prolonged almost
indefinitely. This was a consideration that arose during the serial run of Pickwick, once
the work’s phenomenal success was assured – for, surely, there was no internal logic in
the text, no constraining plot, requiring the rounding off and closure of its narrative at any
particular point: why should it not be extended as long as the market would bear?
(“Which nothing but death will terminate” are in fact the last words of Pickwick Papers.)
Certainly the book’s self-appointed continuators, in such works as Pickwick Abroad and
others, recognized the open-endedness of the tale Dickens had commenced. Yet in an
announcement accompanying the tenth installment (in December 1836), the author made
clear “his intention to adhere to his original pledge of confining his work to twenty
numbers,” in spite of his having received, as he no doubt took pleasure in recounting,
“every temptation to exceed the limits he first assigned to himself, that brilliant success,
an enormous and increasing sale, the kindest notice, and the most extensive popularity,
can hold out” (902). (We might say that Dickens here indulges in a little inventory of
“reasons for self-satisfaction.”) Having to make this decision probably heightened
Dickens’s awareness that, short of death, and as long as the work enjoyed its success,
nothing but his authorial fiat would put a stop to the story and bring its wayfaring characters to rest. His situation was like that of Mr. Codlin in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the Punch-and-Judy patterer on whom alone rests “the responsibility of deciding on [the puppet show’s] length and of protracting or expediting the time for the hero’s final triumph over the enemy of mankind, according as he judged that the after-crop of halfpence would be plentiful or scant” (191). In the event, a death did halt the forward progress of the *Pickwick* juggernaut for awhile – Dickens’s sister-in-law Mary Hogarth’s death, in the spring of 1837, which caused Dickens to miss his deadline for the only time in his career, and, of course, supplied the germ of Nell, the always-already-an-angel heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop* – a lavishly idealizing piece of work that is also prone to Codlin-esque cynicism about its creator’s inventive genius.

**Item.**

“He was for some days restrained by business from performing any particular pranks, as his time was pretty well occupied [in] taking … a minute inventory of all the goods in the place …” (141). This is the villain Quilp, in chapter 11 of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, newly in possession of Nell’s grandfather’s property and for once, it seems, doing something rational: for even he, with his demonic energies and abiding “taste for [always] doing something fantastic and monkey-like” (124), appears to defer, at least for a time, to another exigency, subordinating his usual malign acrobatics to the business of sorting and counting and record-keeping. Still at this point believing the old man he has ousted to be a miser with a cache of treasure hidden amongst the miscellaneous oddities of the shop, Quilp settles down to determine, item by item, exactly what it is he now owns.
So what is there in the old curiosity shop – or in *The Old Curiosity Shop*?

Master Humphrey says – and remember, he may be making this up, since he may never have been there – that “There were suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china and wood and iron and ivory: tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams” (47). But this is *inefficient* inventory, exhibiting only the most minimal discriminating energy: a half-hearted gesture at enumeration employing a few rough-and-ready distinctions to form fuzzy, unhelpful classes (such as “tapestry and strange furniture”). The point of view expressed here is one almost entirely lacking in the commitment, the *curiosity*, to delineate more and yet more items, to extend the catalogue and avoid lumping possibly distinguishable items together, so as to miss no opportunity of extracting value. As Henry James would say, we have been given “the circumstances of the interest,” “but where is the interest itself?” (James 319). Indeed, one gets the feeling that, even if Master Humphrey were to tell us in greater detail what the shop contained, the effect of his doing so would be comparable to the one that arises from John Bunyan’s description, in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, of the Vanity Fair of this fallen world, where (says Bunyan) “all such merchandise [is] sold, as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not” (125). To the Nell-fixated gaze – and how many of this novel’s *characters* have it, as well as readers? – spin the list out as one may, it all reduces in the end, and even before that, to a mass of “what not,” or to what the single gentleman sums up as “the wreck of
life,” the assorted, heaped-together, unworthy-to-be-delineated contents of history’s old
curiosity shop (652). Bunyan says that one might see in Vanity Fair “jugglings, cheats,
games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues, and that of all sorts” (125): a pretty fair
description, one might be disposed to think, of the narrative business, the narrative busyness,
set serially before us between our first view of Nell, as she lies sleeping in the shop,
and our last, as she lies dead upon her bier (figs. 1 and 2). The uncanny sameness-and-
difference of these two well-known illustrations, the seemingly typological relationship
in which the former appears inevitably to forecast the latter, threatens to reduce “reading”
this novel to the act of flipping back and forth between the two framing, static images,
and to evacuate all significance from the in-between.

In The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens hurls against his own narrative-propagating
powers, so gloriously deployed in The Pickwick Papers, the story-negating inertia of
Nell. With our eyes fixed on her in her passage from one picture to another, we will be
inclined to regard all the energetic comings and goings of The Old Curiosity Shop and,
for that matter, of mortal existence as such, in the manner Master Humphrey attributes to
a bedridden man listening to the foot-traffic outside his window: as just so much
maddeningly pointless “pacing to and fro,” as an “incessant tread of feet,” a “stream of
life that will not stop [but] pour[s] [senselessly] on, on, on” (43) in the delusion that there
is anywhere to get to in life other than where we always knew we were always headed.

Tennyson, in the fifty-sixth section of In Memoriam, fills out an inventory that is
just as pointlessly, tragically prolonged as the narrative of The Old Curiosity Shop might
seem to us, when he responds to the evidence of a suspectedly indifferent Nature by
asking:
And he, shall he,
Man, Her [Nature’s] last work, who seem’d so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll’d the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,
Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation’s final law -
Tho’ Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek’d against his creed -
Who loved, who suffer’d countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal’d within the iron hills? (399)

As this single sentence grows and grows, the poet unwinds and unwinds the whole long scroll of human history, its prayers, loves, sufferings, battles, ideals, theories, purposes – what not – as if to defer his arrival at the terminus he has seen lying before him all along.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, if we are really to pay attention to what fills up the middle, to *inventorize*, delineating and involving ourselves in the affairs of Quilp and Dick Swiveller and the Punch performers and Mrs. Jarley’s waxworks and the factory fire-watcher and the impoverished unemployed and the bereft old schoolmaster – and what not – we must distract ourselves from the static spectacle of Nell, must practice what James Kincaid calls “the massive … evasion” of the dying or already dead child: our challenge as readers of this unreadable novel, Kincaid says, is to “show Nell and her
corpse that they can’t claim all the attention” (36,37). Because to look at Nell is to miss everything else. Witness Nell’s grandfather, a man blasted loose from all attachment to the world by the experience of living with an angel. By the end of the book, he has come to inhabit a condition in which “[w]hatever power of thought or memory he retained, was all bound up in her,” such that he can feel “no love or care for anything in life” (660, 661). His plight may remind us of the opening lines of Rilke’s Duino Elegies, where the poet writes,

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence. For Beauty’s nothing but the beginning of a Terror we’re still just able to bear, and why we adore it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us. Each single angel is terrible. (21)

Nell’s is the image, as her grandfather puts it, that “sanctifies the game” (306), but to look upon that image is to forget the point of playing. By the end, this curiosity shop keeper has been rendered “quite incapable of interest or curiosity” (649).

**Item.**

“Inventory,” Roland Barthes once wrote, “is never a neutral idea; to catalogue is not merely to ascertain, … but also to appropriate” (222). Quilp’s attention to the business of reckoning the value of his new property restrains him from fully indulging in his usual menacing monkey-business. To be sure, even while conducting his inventory Quilp
manages to make a thorough nuisance of himself to both Nell (whose bed he commandeers with salacious glee) and his own lawyer, Mr. Brass (whom he compels to smoke as incessantly as himself). But, whereas most of the time he functions in this novel as a superlatively busy and finally self-defeating devil incarnate who merely moonlights as a businessman, here the calculative protocols of the latter assume temporary priority, making this maliciously mobile enemy of peace and rest accept temporary confinement in the shop, for as long as the process of counting and assessing lasts. And confinement is something “foreign to [his] nature.” Like the book in which he appears, and like all the other houses and buildings in that book, and indeed like Quilp’s small body itself, the shop and its rooms and furniture seem scarcely able to hold his errant energy. When he goes to sleep in the very coziest of the book’s enclosures, Nell’s little bed, Quilp “hang[s] so far out of [it] that he almost seem[s] to be standing on his head” (150).

A parodic reflection of Quilp’s inventory-taking can be found a few chapters earlier, when a character who is destined to counterbalance Quilp in the novel – Dick Swiveller – takes “a greasy memorandum-book from his pocket and [makes] an entry therein” (109). Having just consumed another delivered dinner and incurred another debt he cannot defray, Dick explains,

I enter in this little book the names of the streets I can’t go down while the shops are open. This dinner to-day closes Long Acre. I bought a pair of boots in Great Queen Street last week, and made that no thoroughfare too. There’s only one avenue to the Strand left open now, and I shall have to stop up that to-night with a pair of
gloves. The roads are closing so fast in every direction, that in about
a month’s time, unless my aunt sends me a remittance, I shall have
to go three or four miles out of town to get over the way. (109)

Where Quilp finds it necessary to take stock of what he owns, his comic counterpart
defers to calculative rationality so far as to keep careful track of what, and where, he
owes. In both cases, on the credit side of the ledger and on the debit, concession to the
necessity of accounting requires that a character defined by his capacity for movement –
the restless troublemaker and the constantly “swiveling” evader of debt – accept or
acknowledge a measure of limitation, checking or at least redirecting his steps.

Like other villains in early Dickens, Quilp achieves his primary effect through his
apparently incessant and unpredictable motion: not only does his body jerk and caper its
way through every scene, as if unable to control the force it harbors; more than this,
whenever Quilp is compelled to remain indoors, he tends to smoke so volcanically as to
suggest he is liable to erupt. He also exhibits the alarming tendency (visible as well in
the behavior of Oliver Twist’s Monks and Fagin) suddenly to materialize from out of
nowhere. When Kit is arrested on the trumped-up charge of stealing from the lawyer
Brass, the innocent dupe looks out of the window of the carriage bearing him away and
sees, “all at once, as though it had been conjured up by magic, … the face of Quilp”
(548). Here again – and strikingly captured in the accompanying illustration (fig. 3) – the
baleful power in Quilp shows itself straining against enclosure: “It was from the open
window of a tavern that [Quilp] looked out,” we read; “and the dwarf had so spread
himself over it, with his elbows on the window-sill and his head resting on both his
hands, that what between this attitude and his being swoln with suppressed laughter, he
looked puffed and bloated into twice his usual breadth” (548). In another passage, Nell has a close call when Quilp turns up unexpectedly, seeming “to have risen out of the earth,” in the town she has just arrived in with Mrs. Jarley’s traveling waxworks show, and the fright makes her feel “as if she were hemmed in by a legion of Quilps, and the very air were filled with them” (276, 278). It appears as if the driving force in Quilp is something, to borrow language Dickens will later apply to the Inspector Bucket of Bleak House, that “[t]ime and space cannot not bind” (769).

As for Dick Swiveller, he is reminiscent of figures like Jingle and Bob Sawyer in Pickwick Papers, men of boundless appetite and verbal self-invention who love the wide world for its ample provision of more and more places in which to contract new obligations and escape having to repay them. For such locomotive appetites, as for Tennyson’s Ulysses in the dramatic monologue of that name, “all experience is an arch wherethro’ / Gleams that untravell’d world, whose margin fades / For ever and forever as [they] move” (“Ulysses” 142, lines 19-21). From the mouths of such men comes an outflow of chatter proportionate to the amount of free food and drink that goes in. Other people exist, for such characters, for the almost exclusive purpose of affording them what Swiveller is looking for from Nell’s grandfather when he first appears in the novel: “The watch-word to the old min,” Dick says, “is – fork” (68) – as in fork over, or provide the means of feeding me. Embodied in Swiveller is the comic potential so rapturously exploited in Dickens’s inaugural novel, that of the man self-invented on the move, unfettered by relationships, by institutions, and most of all by the women who control them: the man who makes it up as he goes along, his creative powers seeming equal to the variety of the world. When Jingle, in Pickwick Papers, announces that his place of
residence is “No Hall, Nowhere” (584), he defines himself and his ilk as the instruments of a boundless, unhouse-able desire, the radical extension of that cornerstone of English liberty, the principle of habeus corpus. As Sam Weller memorably puts it, “The have-his-carcase, next to the perpetual motion, is vun of the blessedest things as wos ever made” (701).

Yet in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as Dick perceives, the roads are closing fast in every direction. By the middle of the novel he finds himself installed in a kind of curiosity shop, that lawyer’s trap for ensnaring the innocent, the House of Brass. Here he takes up his station alongside other oddities such as (in a kind of inventory) “She-dragons in the business, conducting themselves like professional gentlemen [Sally Brass]; plain cooks of three feet high appearing mysteriously from under ground [the Marchioness]; strangers walking in and going to bed without leave or license in the middle of the day [the single gentleman]” (334). No better able to bear confinement than Quilp is, Swiveller is liable to burst into “the performance of a maniac hornpipe” (329) when left alone, and to play at attacking his jailer (Sally Brass) when her back is turned. For this comic law-unto-himself, being compelled to serve as clerk to a lawyer is tantamount to being what he imagines his destiny making him next, “a convict … trotting about a dockyard with [his] number neatly embroidered on [his] uniform, and the order of the garter on [his] leg …” (330).

When these restless characters stay inside and pay attention to their lists, they acknowledge the power that places *them* on a list – the power that constructs and manages the *dramatis personae*. They defer, that is, to the narrator, who enumerates, apportions, and delimits the domains of his characters.
“Everything in our lives, whether of good or evil, affects us most by contrast” (OCS 493).

As Audrey Jaffe observes in her excellent study *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience*, the roving Dickensian narrator possesses his authorizing mobility and freedom “in relation to and at the expense of” its characters, producing the effect of omniscience and omnipresence by opposition to characters who are, finally, made to remain in their places, however much they may long to roam free (12).

Narrative omniscience, Jaffe maintains, is not just a phenomenon of Dickens’s fiction but a, or perhaps the, project of that fiction, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* in particular shows us that project in faltering and self-conscious operation, revealing “not the unproblematic achievement of distance and detachment, but rather a blurring of the boundaries that define and separate narrator and narration” (49-50). As readers cannot help noticing, the Master Humphrey who participates in the narrative of the book’s opening chapters removes himself from the story’s action at the end of chapter 3 in what seems the most ham-fisted of manners, announcing his intention of “detach[ing] [him]self from its further course” (72). Subsequently he will make full and ironically knowing use of the omniscient narrator’s unique ability to leap from setting to setting and storyline to storyline, demonstrating and indeed flaunting the narrator’s privilege in such passages as the following:

As the course of this tale requires that we should become acquainted, somewhere hereabouts, with a few particulars connected with the domestic economy of Mr Sampson Brass, and as a more
convenient place than the present is not likely to occur for that purpose, the historian takes the friendly reader by the hand, and springing with him into the air, and cleaving the same at a greater rate than ever Don Cleophas Leandro Perez Zambullo and his familiar travelled through that pleasant region in company [in Le Sage’s romance *The Devil on Two Sticks*], alights with him upon the pavement of Bevis Marks. (319)

And yet, as we have seen, he will make a “return” to the domain of the story’s participants that feels just as clumsy as his exit from it, as if he is unsatisfied with having to choose only one side of the opposition between narrator and narrated. As Jaffe puts it, “the status of the narrator – whether he is ‘in’ or ‘out’ – is not fully settled by his departure” at the end of chapter 3 (49). It remains an open question whether the narrator should be listed on or omitted from an inventory of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, whether he intends to accept the self-erasure that is the price of omniscience or whether he considers that price too high. Not content with being the peripatetic student of human affairs, he ambivalently occupies a position we might label *peripathetic*, at once free to move about the fictional landscape he surveys and affectively involved in it. He can’t *just* stay “out.”

At the same time, the characters whose limitation and *inventoriability* defines the narrator’s mobility and invisibility by contrast, can appear to chafe, as we have already begun to see, against the restriction they are obliged to accept under the terms of their fictional contract. When, at the end of chapter 21, Quilp encounters and then taunts to fury a chained dog (*fig. 4*), the interaction travesties the Dickensian differential relationship of narrator and characters: from a position of “perfect safety,” Quilp
“triumph[s] over [the dog] in his inability to advance another inch” (228). “The dog tore and strained at his chain with starting eyes and furious bark,” we read, “but there the dwarf lay, snapping his fingers with gestures of defiance and contempt. When he had sufficiently recovered from his delight, he rose, and with his arms a-kimbo, achieved a kind of demon-dance round the kennel, just without the limits of the chain, driving the dog quite wild” (228). In a later passage (fig. 5), we need hardly ask the true identity of the “figure-head of some old ship,” “much too large for the apartment which it was … employed to decorate,” which is propped in a corner of Quilp’s room “like a goblin or hideous idol whom the dwarf worshipped” (564). Quilp says it looks like Kit, but to say so is to screen himself from what stares him in the face: who else but his creator and confiner could provoke such a torrent of aggression as he rains down upon the colossal effigy? The churl “batter[s] the great image until the perspiration stream[s] down his face with the violence of the exercise”; he boasts of “screwing gimlets into him, and sticking forks in his eyes, and cutting [his] name on him,” intending “to burn him at last” (566).

A comparable effect arises from the fact that our attention is repeatedly directed, both by Dickens’s text and by its accompanying pictures, to the permeability of the spaces characters occupy. If we recall that illustration of Quilp emerging from the tavern window to crow at the captured Kit (fig. 3), we confront just one of this novel’s images of a barely successful restraint or an endangered threshold, with the frame of an insufficiently large window coming to suggest the frame of the illustration itself and the frame of the book that contains it. If you see a window in this book, chances are that Quilp will be thrusting himself through it. Similarly, there appears to be no half-opened doorway in this novel without its eavesdropper or unexpected entrant. And doors that are
closed are often being pounded upon, a situation that more than once stirs up a threshold anxiety about what might happen if they are suddenly opened.

For example, the morning after Nell and her grandfather abscond from the shop they have forfeited to Quilp, the antagonist and the lawyer Brass are awakened by “a knocking at the street-door, often repeated and gradually mounting up from a modest single rap into a perfect battery of knocks, fired in long discharges with a very short interval between” (152). It’s Dick Swiveller, laying siege to the shop – in answer to whom Quilp, “opening the door all at once, pounce[s] out upon the person on the other side” (154), whom he mistakenly believes to be his wife, a sort of substitute Nell he delights in terrorizing (fig. 6). This sequence involves the replacement of Quilp’s opposite and victim (Mrs. Quilp; Nell) by a figure who at this point in the narrative is his rival pursuer of Nell (for Swiveller is acting here on Fred Trent’s plan that he woo Nell to get hold of the grandfather’s supposed fortune). A line of demarcation between opposed characters’ spaces is crossed with an explosive sense of release, and a distinction temporarily collapses, as two men with similar aims engage in the one activity this novel provides in plenty: pointless violence, “useless strife” (187).

Later on, once Swiveller has become something of a victim himself, entrapped in the House of Brass, he hears “a loud double knock” at the street door that is “repeated with increased impatience” up to the point at which “the door [is] opened, and somebody with a very heavy tread [goes] up the stairs and into the room above” (332). This is followed by a further “rapping of knuckles at the office door” (332), which Dick, who ignored the first summons, is compelled to answer. In walks the small servant – her very existence a surprise – whom Dick will eventually rechristen the Marchioness (and later,
Sophronia Sphynx), to announce the arrival of the “single gentleman” who has come to take the room for rent upstairs. A complex transaction is taking place here. Though he does not yet recognize the fact, just as he does not admit the knocker into the house, Dick is himself a “single gentleman” in search of a loved one; and insofar as we are willing to entertain the idea that the brusquely intrusive single gentleman is Master Humphrey, we might also observe that Dick Swiveller is, for his part, the poet, the story-maker, the word-spinner, in this novel. Had he opened the street door, he would have looked into a mirror, he would have been a mirror to the single gentleman who looked at him, and the narrative would have foundered on the spectacle of a Dick(ens) “[a]ll alone,” a “Swiveller solus” (514). But the Marchioness mediates, helping to keep apart the teller and the told, to keep narrative going and to ensure a different, happier destiny for Dick Swiveller than the one that awaits his fellow bachelor.

Nor is this the last of the door-business. A few pages later, the new lodger’s preternatural powers of sleeping have so disturbed the other inhabitants of the house that they gather outside his chamber determined to roust him out, even though they fear “[i]t would be an extremely unpleasant circumstance if he was to bounce out suddenly” (341). “Hallo there! Hallo, hallo!” shouts Mr. Brass (fig. 7), as a means of attracting the lodger’s attention, and while Miss Brass plied the hand-bell, Mr Swiveller put his stool close against the wall by the side of the door, and mounting on the top and standing bolt upright, so that if the lodger did make a rush, he would most probably pass him in its onward fury, began a violent battery with the ruler upon the upper panels of the door. … [He] rained down
such a shower of blows that the noise of the bell was drowned …

Suddenly the door was unlocked on the inside and flung violently open. (341)

One can imagine a passage like this in an acutely self-reflexive modern text such as Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*, in which we would not be surprised to find a group of characters laboring to awaken their slumbering storyteller so that he might invent something for them severally to *do*, might divide and distribute and mobilize them by means of an efficacious fictional plot. Perhaps they just want him to tell them whether he intends to stay in or go out.

But perhaps the uncanniest instance of this threshold anxiety in *The Old Curiosity Shop* occurs when Mrs. Jarley’s carriage is put in motion at the end of chapter 26. Nell is on board, the recipient of the waxwork proprietress’s hospitality, and as the vehicle takes to the road we read that “away they went, with a great noise of flapping and creaking and straining, and the bright brass knocker, which nobody ever knocked at, knocking one perpetual double-knock of its own accord as they jolted heavily along” (269). Ask not for whom the invisible knocker knocks. The north-by-northwest journey Nell is on makes a gloomy rejoinder to the sunny picaresque of *Pickwick*, in which the road and the book always promise something new, something more around the next bend. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as Hilary Schor has put it, “the central activity of any reader … is watching Little Nell walk herself to death” (32). Even when she gets to ride for a time, her foreordained fate is out there, importunately knocking.

The *inventoriable* world of Dickens’s early fiction, like the whole universe as John Milton imagined it in his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, requires what Milton
called the “divorcing command” of its creator if it is to rise, and remain, “out of Chaos”: it requires the exertions of a power capable of drawing a line between and “separating … unmeet consorts” like Light and Dark, dry land and water, Nell and Quilp (Milton 420). But in The Old Curiosity Shop, as Robert Frost put it, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall” (33). And so we face a catalogue of items exhibiting what seems a compulsive failure to stay distinct from one another. There’s Abel Garland – Abel without a Cain, a clone of his father, down to the club-foot. There are the brother and sister Brass, of whom it is said that “so exact … was the likeness between them, that had it consorted with Miss Brass’s maiden modesty and gentle womanhood to have assumed her brother’s clothes in a frolic and sat down beside him, it would have been difficult for the oldest friend of the family to determine which was Sampson and which Sally …” (320). There are Mrs. Jarley’s waxwork figures, so malleable to their mistress’s hand that “Mr Grimaldi as clown” can be transformed into “Mr Lindley Murray as he appeared when engaged in the composition of his English Grammar,” that “a murderess of great renown” can undergo wholesale moral revision and turn into “Mrs Hannah More,” that “Mr Pitt in nightcap and bedgown, and without his boots” can represent “the poet Cowper with perfect exactness,” and “Mary Queen of Scots in a dark wig, white shirt-collar, and male attire” can become “a complete image of Lord Byron” (288). There is the “I and five hundred other men” of the desperate unemployed, the pitiful aggregate never permitted to diversify into individuals (427). There is Nell, and Mrs. Quilp, and Miss Edwards, and her sister, and perhaps the Marchioness, all versions of each other. There are Quilp and Swiveller, two masks for “the uncontainable.” There is Kit, who surrenders his separate consciousness entirely to his image of Nell, determining his
conduct by the principle of “always try[ing] to please her,” of “always be[ing],” as he puts it, “what I should like to seem to her if I was still her servant” (632). There is Nell’s grandfather, who convinced himself that his gambling addiction was a selfless service to Nell, and who winds up so thoroughly lost to himself that, as we have seen, “whatever power of thought or memory he retained, was all bound up in her” (660). There are Nell and Quilp – but then, as Steven Marcus noted, the one exists not just as the antithesis but as the other half of the other (151). The exaggerated carnality that must shadow Nell’s exaggerated purity, Quilp without Nell is a rebel without a cause. There is Nell’s family tree, which generates generations without differences, and which features “the same sweet girl through a long line of portraits – never growing old or changing – the Good Angel of the race” (OCS 637). And then, of course, there are the bachelors.

**Item.**

“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. … 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” (659). The narrator of *The Old Curiosity Shop* here imagines a vibrant growth economy of goodness rooted in the fertile soil of buried Nell. Yet by the end of this novel, Dickens’s own capacity for bringing hundreds of new shapes and bright creations into the world is straining to its utmost. In the last scene in which we see Nell alive, the old sexton tells her that the deep, dry well into which he compels her to gaze is “to be closed up, and built over” (511). In a later work, such as *Bleak House*, what is meant to get constructed
over the gaping hole left by a child’s passing is a revitalized national culture determined to prevent the neglect that condemned the child to penury, ignorance, and disease. In dying, Jo the street-sweeper assumes a nation-energizing power comparable to that of the “Unknown Soldier”: he becomes a site of commemoration and rededication for an entire people, belonging to all of them equally, since he is both theirs and none of theirs in particular.

One can discern a tentative gesture in this direction in The Old Curiosity Shop, in the nation-implying center-to-periphery radius Nell’s itinerary draws from London to a Shropshire hamlet “within sight of the primeval heart of Britain, ‘the blue Welch mountains far away’” (Marcus 141). Bleak House describes a similar circuit in reckoning the Chancery Court’s baleful effect upon Mr. Gridley, “the man from Shropshire,” and so suggesting that the evil it concerns itself with is fully national, infecting not just the metropolis but “every shire” (Bleak House 54, 51). But in the earlier novel, any progress we might want to make toward this expansive vision is checked by the vision of the little community, if we can call it that, constituted around Nell’s grave. In seeming mockery of his celebrated fecundity and variety as a storyteller, Dickens turns and turns his crank and gives us a series of insufficiently distinguishable deformed or wounded aged bachelors: Master Humphrey, the single gentleman, the old schoolmaster, the “little old gentleman” called “the bachelor,” the old sexton, another old man who talks with him, and while we are at it why not include Nell’s grandfather (so long ago married it hardly counts), and the village clergyman (ditto), and Mr. Garland (surely a bachelor, even though married), and Quilp (who in the course of the story leaves his wife and declares himself a bachelor), and, of course, the other members of Master Humphrey’s club, that
“bizarre distortion of the Pickwickians” (Marcus 131). Thinking about this self-negating inventory of spent men gathered around the figure of Nell can call to mind the obscure mechanical and fruitless ritual taking place in Marcel Duchamp’s so-called *Large Glass* (fig. 8), that masterpiece of twentieth-century conceptual art whose full title, in English, is *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*.

**Bottom Line.**

What saves us, and Kit, and Dick Swiveller – insofar as Dickens considers any of us worthy of salvation – is the little servant Dick names, the woman for whom he harrows the hell of Brass’s kitchen-dungeon. Without her, his only possible future is that of the single gentleman, condemned to join the queue. As Dick learns through his near-fatal illness and recuperation under her care, he must have someone else to play off, and play *with*. Until he has the Marchioness, all he can do is give a self-pleasing solo performance, like his performance of the tune “Away with Melancholy,” which he plays – one blushes to recall – “very slowly on [a] flute in bed” for “half the night, or more” (535). Whatever gratification he gets from this, his neighbors may prefer not to know about it. G. K. Chesterton called the union of Swiveller and Sophronia Sphynx “the one true romance in the whole of Dickens” (156), and John Bowen has more recently contended that in this couple the cold “spiritual heaven” of Nell “is answered and outplayed” by the more mundane, material satisfactions, such as they are, “of having enough to eat and drink, and some fun” (156). Both of these critics take a more sanguine view of the matter than I am able to adopt. For me, the fascination of this breathtaking Dickensian anti-novel, or anti-Dickensian Dickens novel, can be summed up by saying
that the whole gaudy apparatus it parades before us can be, exactly, summed up – in a slogan. Innumerable writers undergo crises of creativity; Dickens turned his into a substantial work of fictional narrative that questions in the most radical and remorseless fashion the very principles he understood his art of fictional narrative to follow. It is a work that, by repeatedly threatening to negate that divorcing power with which Dickens’s imagination multiplied characters and incidents, brought the novelist again and again to the brink of his terrible singleness. The slogan? I imagine Dickens muttering it to himself as he wound and wound and wound his Clock and churned out page after page: 

*stop sniveling; keep swiveling.*
Works Cited


Captions for illustrations accompanying “Enumeration and Exhaustion: Taking Inventory in *The Old Curiosity Shop*”

1. Nell asleep in the Curiosity Shop
2. Nell on her death-bed
3. Quilp in the window
4. Quilp and the dog
5. Quilp and the effigy
6. Quilp and Swiveller at the door
7. Knocking at the single gentleman’s door