Heartlessness in *The Old Curiosity Shop*

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It has often been pointed out that *The Old Curiosity Shop* can be seen as a kind of Punch and Judy show, with Quilp starring as Punch and Nell as his ultimate victim.[1] Rachel Bennett saw it as 'a book divided against itself', being in part 'a celebration of life and in part a lament for the inevitability of death',[2] and demonstrated that these respective aspects are delineated through references to Punch and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. According to her,

> Punch [. . .] confers invulnerability, and in *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens's main opposition to the death-directed world of *The Pilgrim's Progress* comes through the immortal Punch.[3]

But presented in this way, we are rather made aware of the indeterminability of the proposed dichotomy. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not so much death-directed as pointing towards eternal life, and what Punch finds himself in as a result of his serial killings is the state 'between two deaths', that is, the state after death in terms of social existence and before biological death.[4] Moreover, the Bunyan references, though present in the novel, are not followed up in a coherent way as Bennett partly admits.[5] Perhaps it is that life and death in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is not so much 'divided' as intertwined in a certain dialectic, which can also be found in Punch's self-destructive life force.

G. K. Chesterton designates just such a dialectic in the figure of Quilp in his famous analysis of the novel, whose conclusion is as follows:

> There is nothing better in the whole brutal exuberance of the character than that gesture with which Quilp punches his own face with his own fist [p. 460[6]]. It is, indeed, a perfect symbol; for Quilp is always fighting himself for want of anybody else. He is energy, and energy by itself is always suicidal; he is that primordial energy which tears and which destroys itself.[7]

There is a certain ambiguity, which it might be said is an idiosyncrasy of Chesterton, in his comments on the 'bad figures'.[8] While Chesterton acknowledges their *diablerie*, he seems to suggest that it is something continuous with the source of Dickens's moral virtues: that is, his state of mind 'torn with a happy hunger'[9] which breeds the 'true romance'[10] between Dick and the Marchioness and gives Chuckster the uncanny insight that Kit is a meek snob. Such is the irresistable attractiveness of those vigorous Dickensian figures, even the more when they are immoral and wicked, since we are watching 'from a secure gallery' (p. 566). This 'happy

hunger', then, can be seen as ultimately pointing toward Punch's happy thirst for bloodbaths, which delights us in a very similar way.

Though the foremost Punch-like figure is certainly Quilp,[11] the same kind of life-force is distributed among several characters, as Bennett and Chesterton both observe. On the other hand, we shall have to note the difference between Quilp and Punch, namely that he is not a serial killer: he may fantasise about killing his wife and Brass in his hermitage, but he is clever enough not to put them into action. Instead he effectively controls and tortures people by constantly showing his violent nature but keeping his aggressions in suspense, trapping people 'in a state of incessant agitation and suspense' (p. 465), or 'in a constant state of restlessness and agitation' (p. 470). This makes Quilp's victims, instead of himself, suffer that state of 'between two deaths', as we see with Nell's long march and Kit's imprisonment. Perhaps we can see this as reflecting the narrator's art of keeping the reader in suspense, as well as leaving the 'characters in situations of uncertainty and doubt' (p. 440), building up the tention towards the final sacrifice: after all, a serial novel must not end in thirty minutes with all the characters battered down with a slapstick.

In fact, Sally Brass is definitely more Punch-like than Quilp in a straightforward way. The following scene of unmitigated domestic violence will be enough to recognise this:

> It was plain that some extraordinary grudge was working in Miss Brass's gentle breast, and that it was this which impelled her, without the smallest present cause, to rap the child with the blade of the knife, now on her hand, now on her head, and now on her back, as if she found it quite impossible to stand so close to her without administering a few slight knocks. But Mr Swiveller was not a little surprised to see his fellow-clerk, after walking slowly backwards towards the door, as is she were trying to withdraw herself from the room but could not accomplish it, dart suddenly forward, and falling on the small servant give her some hard blows with her clenched fist. (p. 353)

It is shocking when we come to think of it, that while the Marchioness must have certainly led a life significantly more miserable than Nell, we are hardly left with a sense of compassion for her. We would even find the above passage comical, while partly appalled by that response. What is at work here is a radical cutback of psychological charge or libido which is the cause of humour according to Freud, and exactly the kind of which prevails in a Punch and Judy show where we never consider the misery of the murdered baby or of Judy.

Dick displays a similar impulse of violence to Sally herself, which is described as follows:

> Mr Swiveller by degrees began to feel strange influences creeping over him – horrible desires to annihilate this Sally Brass – mysterious promptings to knock her head-dress off and try how she looked without it. (p. 328)

This feeling of aggression, oddly enough, seems to be part and parcel of his intimacy with her. Considering his final union with her daughter, we might see here an expression of his idiosyncratic mode of attachment; on the other hand, we cannot be a hundred percent sure whether he did not develop a similar impulse towards the Marchioness in later life, as Punch

swivells from endearment to carefree assaults on his wife.

This punch-drunk 'romance' between Dick and the Marchioness prepares us to be unmoved by, instead of providing redemption for, the sacrifice of Nell. Let us consider how they stand in relation to her. Nell's predicament is essentially that she lacks responsible guardianship which should be provided by Mr Trent. Quilp, with his invitation to be his 'number two' (p. 93), comes to embody the dangers that ensue from this vulnerable state: hence when Mr Trent is caught in a gambling fever, his figure robbing her money (p. 301) comes as an answer to her fears of finding Quip among the waxworks (p. 289). Early in the novel, we are presented with two possibile alternatives for her: Kit, who proposes Nell and Mr Trent to come and live in his house when the shop is about to be sold (p. 143), and Dick, who considers marrying Nell for money through Fred's instigation (Chapter the Seventh). In terms of the balance within the structure of the novel, it is as if Nell is made redundant as a result of the two finding her substitutes in the forms of Barbara and the Marchioness. Barbara and her mother do not hide their antipathy towards Nell; that the Marchioness is Nell's counterpart[12] is made clear by Dick himself, who comments 'that there had been a young lady saving up for him after all' (p. 668). Thus Dick's alliance with the Marchioness, who has all the Punch-like resilience condensed in her, being the child of the two Punches, Quilp and Sally, completes the triumph of the Punch principle that persecutes Nell, by pushing her over.

Whatever the changes in historical conditions are that dispersed the magic which made Victorian readers weep over Nell's deathbed, that we today cannot share the sorrow they felt testifies to the fact that the artistic value which endures in this novel lies elsewhere. Aldous Huxley criticised the arrest of artistic judgment in Dickens's 'overflowing of his heart' (quoted in the Introduction, p. 27), but to my mind Franz Kafka's remark on his 'Heartlessness behind the style that makes emotion overflow'[13] is decidedly more to the point. Indeed, even the sentimentalism and moral reflections seem to be fuelled by the same vigour that elsewhere defies sentimentality and morality in this novel. While Nell suffers from a lack of responsible guardianship, the defiant celebrations of orphanship that the other characters display make us almost irritated by her incapability to be energetic and resilient like the other children, who are in many ways far worse off than her: Kit, Tom, and as we have seen, the Marchioness.

While Nell had said, 'I *do* rather grieve to think [. . .] that those who die about us, are soon forgotten' (p. 503), and Dickens himself told Forster, 'I feel as if I never could become attached to any new set of characters',[14] the tale ends with even Kit not being able to spot exactly where the shop was, and a gesture of farewell from the narrator that can be heard as sounding almost cheerful in its tone (pp. 671-2). This reminds me of Freud's refutation of his poet friend, who found the beauty of nature ultimately worthless because of its transience.

> I believe that those who think thus, and seem ready to make a permanent renunciation because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost. Mourning, as we know, however painful it may be, comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free (in so far as we are still young and active) to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious.[15]

We find how far the lament for Nell is from this kind of 'mourning': the 'happy hunger' of early Dickens is free from morbid 'renunciations' and seems always ready with a stock of freewheeling 'libido', or a hearty appetite to consume. Nell is, as it were, always and already 'consumed', surrounded by a heartless world where her vulnerable self has no place to hold (cf. the 'allegory' Master Humphrey sees in p. 56), which accounts for her 'colorlessness'.[16] The novel seems to thrive with 'fresh', resilient characters in her absence, and in her place after her death, and furthermore, ready for another fresh start in its conclusion.

Notes

[1] Would it be too much to suggest that the name Nell, apart from its association with death knell, could be linked with Punchi'nell'o?

[2] Rachel Bennett, 'Punch Versus Christian in *The Old Curiosity Shop*', *Review of English Studies* 22, p. 423.

[3] *Ibid*, p. 427.

[4] See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), Chap. XXI ('Antigone between two deaths').

[5] *Ibid*, p. 434.

[6] Quotations from *The Old Curiosity Shop* are from Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Penguin Classics, 1985).

[7] G. K. Chesterton, Introduction to Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Dent, 1907), pp. xiii-vi.

[8] *Ibid*, p. xv.

[9] *Ibid*, p. vii.

[10] *Ibid*, p. xi.

[11] Rachel Bennett, 'Punch Versus Christian in *The Old Curiosity Shop*', pp. 429-30. The parallels given here are of: dog-teasing, use of weaponry, violent language and taking people by surprise.

[12] Their ages are close, Nell being 'nearly fourteen' (p. 103) at the outset and the Marchioness about 'nineteen' minus 'half-a-dozen' at the end (pp. 667-8). Apparently in a certain stage production in the nineteenth century the two roles were played by the same actress.

[13] 'Herzlosigkeit hinter der Gefühl überströmenden Manier.' (quoted from Kafka's fragment in Bert Nagel, *Kafka und die Weltliteratur* (Winkler Verlag, 1983), p. 30)

[14] Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *Dickens: a life* (Oxford UP, 1979), p. 98.

[15] Sigmund Freud, 'On Transience' in *The Standard Edition Vol. XIV* (The Hogarth Press,), p. 307.

[16] Freud wrote in one of his correspondences, 'You must have noticed that all our writers and artists have a "mannerism", a stereotyped series of motives and arrangements which indicates the limits of their art [. . .] To these mannerisms belong, in the case of Dickens, *those flawless girls, selfless and good, so good they are quite colorless*' [my italics] (Earnest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud Vol. I* (Basic Books, 1953), p. 174).