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Jeremy Tambling

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On Innocence: Dickens, Blake, and Wordsworth



JEREMY TAMBLING
SWPS University, Warsaw

Abstract: Considering Dickens's relationship to the English Romantics, and to their poetry, this paper speculates on any possible relationship Dickens might have had with the work of William Blake, and tries to make the question more approachable by pondering Blake's relationship to Wordsworth, and Wordsworth's to Dickens. Triangulating the question thus, I think about Dickens and innocence, and about innocence in Blake and Wordsworth, and take my primary examples from Wordsworth's "We are Seven," and from Dickens and Nell, and eighteenth-century graveyard poetry, and the manifestation of these things in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. No positive account of influence can of course be given, but the paper hopes to make further inquiries about Dickens and (Romantic) innocence possible through its readings of texts.



Introduction

Throughout my engagement with Dickens, I have been pondering over possible relationships between him and William Blake (1757–1827), and actively working on these in a current project, part of which involves trying to assemble evidence for what awareness Dickens might have had of Blake. Dickens's relationship with Shakespeare and with eighteenth-century writers is obvious, and, amongst the Romantics, his acquaintance with Byron's work stands out—for example in *Steerforth*; but there is obviously more to be explored. Subtler sources and intuitions were to be gained from Romantic poetry in the 1830s and 1840s. Dickens's possible relation to Blake in this regard has always been a teasing issue for me. In what follows, the evidences of influence are by no means exhaustive, and invite further research; but after I have offered what evidences I can, the rest of the material of this essay remains speculative only as I discuss *The*

Old Curiosity Shop.

Beyond the uncertainty as to whether Dickens knew anything of Blake,¹ the relationship between Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Dickens is very interesting, and definite, albeit still more nebulous than we would wish it to be. And Wordsworth, although he never met Blake, unlike Coleridge or Southey—Stephen Gill’s biography of Wordsworth does not even have an index reference to Blake—acts as an intermediary between Blake and Dickens, as well as a way of diffusing Blake’s influence. Thus, we know from Henry Crabb Robinson (1775–1867) that Charles Lamb called Blake a “mad Wordsworth,” and that Wordsworth himself “consid^d B[lake] as hav^g the elements of poetry—a thousand times more than either Byron or Scott” (qtd. in Bentley, *Stranger* 133). Admittedly much later, Samuel Palmer, who illustrated Dickens’s *Pictures from Italy*, passed on an anecdote in which Wordsworth told a friend (perhaps Robinson), “I called the other day while you were out, and stole a book out of your library—Blake’s songs of Innocence’. He read and read and took it home, and read and read again” (qtd. in Bentley, *Records* 312). I hope that this paper will demonstrate why it was significant that it was the *Songs of Innocence* that Wordsworth read.

Blake and Wordsworth

This incident of purloining the *Songs of Innocence* must have succeeded the publication by Benjamin Heath Malkin (1769–1842) of *A Father’s Memoirs of his Child* (1806), which included a life of Blake. Malkin printed “How Sweet I roamed” and “I love the jocund dance” from Blake’s *Poetical Sketches*; “Laughing Song,” “Holy Thursday,” and “The Divine Image” from *Songs of Innocence*; and “The Tyger” from *Songs of Experience*. William and Dorothy Wordsworth copied out poems from this volume in a notebook of 1800–08, while Coleridge also knew Blake’s work (Bentley, *Stranger* 133). Robinson seems to have been aware of Blake from reading Malkin, and he solidified this knowledge in 1810, saying in his diary that he gave Lamb a copy of the catalogue of the paintings which Blake was then exhibiting in Golden Square in London. Lamb liked Blake’s rendering of Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims, according to Robinson, “and declared that Blakes description was the finest criticism that he had ever read of Chaucer’s poem” (qtd. in Bentley, *Stranger* 486n151). On 24 July 1811, Robinson wrote in his diary how he

Returned late to C. Lamb’s[.] Found a very large party there—Southey had been with Blake & admired both his designs & his poetic talents. At the same time that he held him for a decided

1 See Tambling, *Blake’s Night Thoughts*.

madman. Blake, he says, spoke of his visions with the diffidence that is usual with such people And did not seem to expect that he sho.^d be believed. he showed S. a perfectly mad poem called Jerusalem—Oxford Street is in Jerusalem. (qtd. in. Bentley, *Stranger* 341).

Southey is not entirely right in his account, of course, but he does point to something which Dickens and Blake had in common: that both make London streets central to their work (Blake in *Jerusalem*, especially). And to revert to Lamb: he was intensely interested in Blake, without knowing his work sufficiently (Lamb 188–89).

Robinson was to meet Blake in 1825, and recorded his conversations with him, including Blake's criticisms of Wordsworth, that he was not a Christian but a Platonist (Bentley, *Stranger* 412–13). Blake's annotations to some of Wordsworth's poetry, made in 1826, are extant, and it is evident what he disapproved of: "the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man," Blake being hostile to "Natural Piety," "Because The Natural Man is at Enmity with God," and because "Natural Objects always did & now do weaken, deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me. Wordsworth must know that what he Writes Valuable is Not to be found in Nature" (Blake 782–83). Wordsworth, Blake believed, had mistaken the sources of his inspiration: they were not to be found in what he called "Nature"; they were beyond that, and were divine. Further, he accused Wordsworth of complacency when, in the Preface to *The Excursion* (1814), he spoke of passing "Jehovah ... unalarmed" (Wordsworth 590; ll. 33–35). Blake asked, wittily, "Does Mr Wordsw: think his mind can surpass Jehovah?" (qtd. in Bentley, *Stranger* 414). In citing Wordsworth on how "the individual Mind | ... to the external World | Is fitted" (Wordsworth 590, ll. 63–67), Blake retorted: "You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted. I know better & please your lordship" (Blake 784). G. E. Bentley aptly notes Blake's comparable criticisms of Dante—who "was, like Wordsworth, a great though misguided poet" (qtd. in Bentley, *Stranger* 423). It is worth reflecting, however, that Blake could never have read *The Prelude*, which appeared immediately after Wordsworth's death, but which would surely had significantly modified his judgment of Wordsworth upwards, and that his admiration for the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" was huge (Bentley, *Stranger* 417).

We may summarize, or perhaps translate, Blake's critique of Wordsworth by saying that he finds in him a passivity whereas Blake always speaks for energy, and for the spirit; that he finds that Wordsworth has too much dependence, therefore, on nature; and further that he opposes Wordsworth's reliance on memory and recollection (both as serving passivity) as contrasted to the imagination, and vision, and that the "natural piety" that Wordsworth

believes in, however much it is in the right as speaking for continuity between generations, is also limiting in that it sanctions too much dependency on nature, and on others, so that it lacks the intensity which Blake always represents. In all these matters, I would argue that Dickens stands closer to Blake than to Wordsworth, but the differences are a matter of degree: they are not absolute.

And the differences between Blake and Wordsworth in their lyric poetry are considerable, but they are also matters of degree; and several similarities show themselves. The first is the fascination with childhood, a category of humanity they may almost be said to have invented for English literature, in writing so fully about children; the vulnerability of innocence, which they secularize, and in which they are followed by Dickens; another is their common reaction against slavery; a third, their interest in education, and its perils; and an aptitude for the ballad-form, which is one of the most interesting forms of poetry for Dickens, apart from Shakespeare's verse. The sheer number of citations from Thomas Moore in *The Old Curiosity Shop* illustrates this point (see O'Sullivan); so, for another example, do the effusions of Silas Wegg in *Our Mutual Friend*, in his "dropping into poetry." The ballad-form returns to a simplicity which stands outside the formal artificiality of eighteenth-century poetic diction, and it links with Shakespeare; further it implies a non-self-conscious innocence in the diction. And innocence is an essential for all three writers: we may consider Dickens's phrase for David Copperfield, who calls himself, in the equivalent of the blacking-factory, "an innocent romantic boy," who, unlike Wordsworth's child, makes "his imaginative world out of such strange experiences and sordid things" (*Copperfield* 180; ch. 11).

Yet two points of difference between the two poets should be noted: Blake's work is more sexually aware and sexually charged than Wordsworth's shows itself to be, and this particularly shows, as far as Blake's lyric poetry is concerned, in his treatment of love. The other is, that with the exception of book 7 of *The Prelude*—which, as stated, Blake never saw, and Dickens only in 1850—Wordsworth is not a poet of the city. Book 7 is different in its confrontation with crowds, and London's visual culture, and unreadability, and with the account of Bartholomew Fair, where Wordsworth was taken by Lamb; and though Dickens needed no instruction in how to evoke London and what to make of it, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend* are equally challenged about how to consider what the diverse forces within the city amount to.

Dickens and Blake

Dickens could not have met Blake, being only fifteen when Blake died, but the opportunities for him to know Blake's work were not remote. An edition of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* appeared in 1839, the work of James Wilkinson (1812–99). Further, the omnipresent Crabb Robinson may serve as a bridge between the two, for he knew Dickens well, responding both to the man and his writings, being an early admirer of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. And—another link—Dickens knew Walter Savage Landor (1775–1864), meeting him formally in February 1840 (Dickens, *Letters* 2: 23n1), and staying with him in Bath. John Forster, biographer of Landor as well as Dickens, tells how in 1836 this original of Mr. Boythorn

picked up some of the writings of Blake, and was strangely fascinated by them. He was anxious to have collected as many more as he could, and enlisted me in the service, but he as much wanted patience for it as I wanted time, and between us it came to nothing. He protested that Blake had been Wordsworth's prototype, and wished they could have divided his madness between them, for that some accession of it in the one case and something of a diminishing of it in the other would very greatly have improved both. (*Landor* 2: 322–23)

Clearly, Forster could have passed on something of Blake to Dickens, and though the biography of Landor appeared too late in Dickens's life, yet he might have known Blake either from Forster, or from Landor himself, whose energy had much in common with what Blake praises.

Robinson goes on to supply more details, dating from May 1838:

I had with me Landor, [Richard Monkton] Milnes [(1809–1885), editor of Keats, friend of Dickens from 1840 onwards, and collector of Blake materials], [Samuel] Rogers [(1763–1855), the dedicatee of *The Old Curiosity Shop*], & Serj^t Talfourd [(1795–1854), dedicatee of *Pickwick Papers*, Traddles in *David Copperfield*, and biographer of Lamb]. A great deal of rattling on the part of W.S.L. He maint^d Blake to be the greatest of poets ... Blake furnished chief matter for talk. ... (qtd. in Bentley, *Records* 310n)

Two days later, Robinson records “A delightful breakfast with Milnes, Rogers, Carlyle, who made himself very pleasant indeed, Moore, Landor ... Talleyrand's recent death and the poet Blake were the subjects. Tom Moore [1779–1852] had never heard of Blake—at least, not of his poems. Even he acknowledged their beauty” (Robinson, *Books and Their Writers* 2: 549–50).

If we need a sense of Dickens's acquaintance with these names mentioned above, a letter of 31 July 1843 will do that (*Letters* 3: 296–300). Mention of Carlyle serves as a reminder of how much Alexander Gilchrist, Blake's first substantial biographer, with his *The Life of William Blake* (1863), was a follower of Carlyle.

There is no need to regard the following point as anything else but something *ben trovato*, but it is at least interesting, and the point could be developed, that when Skimpole (based upon James Henry Leigh Hunt [1784–1859]) and Boythorn argue, Dickens's sympathies are with Boythorn (*Bleak House* 294; ch. 18). Leigh Hunt knew Blake, both in his own right (Bentley, *Records* xxvi, 263), and through his brother James, who wrote viciously about Blake's exhibition in 1810, and about Blake's work on Robert Blair's *The Grave* (see below). Landor, in marked contrast, championed Blake. A Skimpole would be antithetical to Blake. The song about the "Peasant Boy" which he sings is the antithesis of any Blakean "little boy lost" in its sentimentality (*Bleak House* 497; ch. 31).

Dickens and Wordsworth

If Dickens could, at the very least, have known of Blake, what of his knowledge of Wordsworth? As with Blake, I am interested in an influence and an awareness which was formed in the late 1830s and 1840s: with Dickens in the 1850s, there is an assured knowledge of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, and Dickens was by then, though still consistently innovative, assured in his position and of what he wanted from literature. The latter parts of *David Copperfield* have been interestingly compared to *The Prelude*, which we can assume he was using: it was published after Wordsworth's death in April 1850 (Dawson 123–52). But before that, as Dickens develops, he refers to Wordsworth approvingly in a speech of December 1840 (*Speeches* 5). The first five volumes of the Dickens *Letters*, which take us up to the end of 1849, and to the end of what I will perhaps too arbitrarily call Dickens's formative period, and when his reading interests were being laid down, give a first indication of his awareness, though they do not give the sense that Dickens met Wordsworth. The editors of these *Letters* speculate on a reference to "Hart-Leap Well" in a letter of 3 December 1839 (1: 610n1). They note Dickens thinking that "We are Seven," from the *Lyrical Ballads*, is "one of the most striking examples of his genius" (3: 57n7), and quoting the "Intimations" ode (3: 211n8). (The title of Wordsworth's ode persists to "Some Recollections of Mortality" [1863], in *The Uncommercial Traveller*.) The editors show his knowledge of "Lines Suggested by a Portrait from the Pencil of F. Stone" (5: 13n7, and see Dickens, "Amusements of the People" 103–04). A general awareness of the "Intimations" ode is implied in *Oliver*

Twist (1837–39) when, at the Maylie house,

The boy stirred and smiled in his sleep, as though these marks of pity and compassion had awakened some pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known; as a strain of gentle music, or the rippling of water in a silent place, or the odour of a flower, or even the mention of a familiar word, will sometimes call up sudden dim remembrances of scenes that never were, in this life, which vanish like a breath, and which some brief memory of a happier existence long gone by, would seem to have awakened, for no power of the human heart can ever recall them. (238–39; bk. 2, ch. 7)

That same non-specific memory operates before the boy sees Fagin and Monks (assuming it is them, and not a vision) at the window, when “reality and imagination” are “blended,” and when “visionary scenes . . . pass before” the person who is half-asleep (281; bk. 2, ch. 11).

Further, Dickens’s debt to “The Idiot Boy” in the title-character of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) has been well noted (Crawford), and a debt to Wordsworth in Dickens’s interest in idiocy as a form of innocence could be easily developed from there (see McKnight). *A Christmas Carol* (1843) alludes to “the celebrated herd in the poem” (67 and 278n36)—meaning Wordsworth’s “Lines Written in March”—and *Dombey and Son* (1846–48) cites the line, “not a rood of English ground,” from the sonnet “On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway,” in a quotation which has been “crossed,” as Dennis Walder says in his note, with a line from Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (*Dombey* 234; ch. 15, and 954n). Though the quotation from Wordsworth does recall the railway, yet, as always with what Dickens quotes, there is the sense of surprise, because what is cited is not inevitable, or expected; it is idiosyncratic, and, as always, it makes it hard to feel that questions of influence are predictable. The citation’s lack of obviousness suggests, too, that this was not writing for the market-place; the allusions are too subtle for that, too unlikely to be caught. It is a reminder of the need to hang on to Forster’s comment about Dickens’s reading, that though it was “considerable,” “there was never much notice of his reading in his letters” (*Life of Dickens* 2: 57), so that working out what texts were familiar to Dickens often remains problematic, uncertain, and a matter of speculation, and a reminder that perhaps the most significant sources, gaining their force from Dickens’s autobiography, go undeclared. As with, perhaps, a knowledge of Blake.

In Dickens’s journalism, Michael Slater notes a quotation from Wordsworth’s “The world is too much with us” in 1844 (*Dickens, “Amusements”* 64), a sonnet heard again in a public speech of 1857 which

asks for schools that feed the imagination (a thoroughly Wordsworthian ideal), rather than discouraging “those bright childish faces, which it is so very good for the wisest among us to remember in after life, when the world is too much with us early and late” (*Speeches* 241); and another, from “My heart leaps up” in 1850 (“*Amusements*” 266). Indeed, there was an interest in state education which Dickens shared with Wordsworth, even if he disliked Wordsworth’s conservatism (Dickens, *Letters* 6: 111 and 142). This was a part of Dickens’s concern with social issues that can be identified with Wordsworth’s interests in the poor, and with outcasts (Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* 114–15). Here, comparisons with Blake are apt: with his chimney-sweepers (and *Oliver Twist* is nearly made a sweep); with his figures of “infant sorrow”; with his image of the “little boy lost,” and with his probably ironic treatment of beadles and parish officers looking after charity-children in “Holy Thursday,” in *Songs of Innocence*.

Beyond the material that we have seen that Dawson discusses, and which is concentrated on Copperfield’s journeys in the Alps after the deaths of Dora and of Steerforth (*David Copperfield*, ch. 58), there are further evidences of Dickens’s use of *The Prelude*. Some are given by U. C. Knoepfelmacher (51–54), starting with Esther Summerson’s moment in *Bleak House*, when, at the garden gate, she feels herself “as being something different from what I then was. I know it was then, and there, that I had it. I have ever since connected the feeling with that spot and time, and with everything associated with that spot and time, to the distant voices in the town, the barking of a dog, and the sound of wheels coming down the miry hill” (489; ch. 31). This autobiographical moment seems to remember Wordsworth’s “there are in our existence spots of time” in *The Prelude* (Wordsworth 577; 12.208), and, of course, everything in the quotation may echo the memory of the boy which the poet has in writing his “autobiography,” as the word emerged in the first five years of the decade, to describe what it was he was writing in working on *The Prelude*:

A tranquillising spirit presses now
 On my corporeal frame, so wide appears
 The vacancy between me and those days
 Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
 That, musing on them, often do I seem
 Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
 And of some other being. (Wordsworth 503; 2.27–33)

No such interest in formally exploring “the growth of a poet’s mind,” of course, is to be found in Blake, though “the two contrary states of the human soul” are central to him (210). But Dickens needed no encouragement from

Wordsworth to think autobiographically: it had been an interest patent in the 1840s, for example in the Christmas books and *David Copperfield*, and confirmed by Forster (*Life of Dickens* 1: 2), and it probably began much earlier. The Alpine scenes in *David Copperfield*, which recall book 6 of *The Prelude* are interesting, but I do not find them to be at the heart of the novel, and certainly not as essential to it as the Alps are in *Little Dorrit*; and they are bound too closely to the love-interest with Agnes Wickfield, which again is less integral to the more intense heterogeneous drives within the novel (820–21; ch. 58), perhaps in being so normalizing, so bound up with a wished-for bourgeois happy ending. It is not there that I would look for an interesting response to Wordsworth, one which would go outside the conventional; indeed at such moments the feeling might be that if Dickens had read Blake, that would be a more decisive and a more interesting influence.

But, on the basis of these citations and allusions, which are only selective, surely, and are perhaps unsurprising, in that they come from an obviously well-known poet, I would like to return to the comparisons between Blake and Wordsworth, and between them and Dickens. What links them? All three were political radicals, however much Wordsworth reneged on that. All had a continuous interest in experimentation in writing; each had an interest in madness—Wordsworth’s fear of madness is evident, as in “Resolution and Independence”; interest in madness as related to innocence; all three had a fascination with such extreme states of being. Blake and Dickens made strong criticisms of the church, and saw hypocrisy as a leading motif in behavior; both, too, had a rich appreciation of diabolism. Blake’s “mind-forg’d manacles” (“London,” Blake 216) and Wordsworth’s “shades of the prison-house” which “begin to close about the growing boy” (Wordsworth 460) are alike powerful images, both to be interpreted widely (I will give a further reading of the meaning of the “prison-house” below), and they find obvious correspondence in Dickens’s fear of, and awareness of, prisons: the Fleet, Newgate, and the Marshalsea especially. Further, though Dickens is not commonly thought of as a writer of nature, he shares with Wordsworth an ability to write about landscapes,² and with Blake, as in his “Auguries of Innocence,” an interest in natural, animal beings. Above all, he sides with Wordsworth on the power and need for the imagination, and though Blake thought that vision transcended imagination, everything in Blake speaks for the importance of creative power.

2 See Tambling, “Wreckage and Ruin.”

“We are Seven”

However, there is one interest which might be considered, and which goes across all three writers: it relates to “We are Seven” (1798; Wordsworth 66), and here I will become more speculative. Wordsworth’s poem works in several ways. It plays games with counting, in which way it has an awareness of the uncanniness of numbers, and within the difficulties of trying to add up, and the ways that numbers belong to different language-games. Hence the schoolboys in *The Old Curiosity Shop* play at “odd-or-even” (192; ch. 25); and incidentally, they go out from the schoolroom later, in a spirit which the text endorses, to become “The boys at play upon the green” (197: ch. 25), in the spirit of “Nurse’s Song” from *Songs of Innocence* (Blake 121). “We are Seven” accepts the need for plural systems of reckoning which go beyond the binary divide of life and death, and it takes seriously the point that the child cannot be said to have an understanding of death, despite whatever the education given by the adult may say about that. The girl uses the word “died” before the adult does, and she can tell the story of the deaths of her siblings Jane and John, but her world is present-tense, and it contains no ultimate loss. The adult is confronted by innocence, which is here not an ignorance of the world but a different way of reading the world of experience, and the difference makes it baffling to the adult. Whether innocence can exist at all is questionable, as is whether innocence can be a single state, but its possibility and renewal is of the deepest interest to Blake, Wordsworth, and Dickens, for reasons which, in the case of Dickens, are not obvious, and which have hardly been explored, possibly because they would cast Dickens in a more religious light than that in which he is usually considered. Presumably what Dickens admired in “We are Seven” is the attempt in Wordsworth to craft an image of innocence, to make it a concept through the poem, by writing a self-ironizing poem, whose daringness is its willingness to make both the adult self look foolish, and to bring out an ultra-simplicity within the poem, risking parody and the charge of having nothing to do with any form of realism. Indeed, innocence has realism as its opposite, which makes its achievement in the novel form even harder than in the lyric.

The girl lives in “the churchyard cottage,” and this illuminates a point of interest to Blake, and to Wordsworth, and to Dickens, who was aware of Robert Blair’s poem *The Grave*, which Blake famously illustrated in 1808, though the credit for engraving it for book-form was given to Louis Schiavonetti, in a scandalous disregarding of Blake by the publisher, Robert Cromek (Bentley, *Stranger* 276–91; Essick and Paley). I am not arguing that Dickens had knowledge of Blake’s designs, though the edition was reprinted

in 1826, and he could easily have seen that.³ The substantial point is that Blair,—like Gray’s *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, which Mr. Micawber quotes when thinking of his epitaph (Dickens, *Copperfield* 718; ch. 49)—belongs to a tradition of “graveyard poetry,” whose lineage begins with *Hamlet*, and persists with Thomas Parnell, with Young’s *Night Thoughts*, and James Hervey. Dickens supplemented an interest in the graveyard motif with another, earlier than *Hamlet* but implicit in it: in Holbein’s rendering of the dance of death.⁴

Blake writes about the churchyard critically in “The Garden of Love” (*Songs of Experience*), and it is a Wordsworthian subject, for example in “There was a Boy,” one of many of his poems that thematize early death. But what of the churchyard in Dickens? We immediately think of the tombstone for Scrooge, and of Lady Dedlock’s death, and the opening of *Great Expectations*, where it is part of the death intuited in the landscape, but beyond these, and their interest, I would like to return to what seems the most Wordsworthian and Blakean of Dickens’s novels, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In chapter 16, Nell and her grandfather go through the churchyard into the town, and meet Short (Trotters) and Codlin mending the Punch puppets. In chapter 17, the child speaks to an old woman who has come to visit the tomb of her husband, who died fifty-five years ago, aged twenty-three. This episode, with its topsy-turvy chronology, seems derivative from, and to be an inversion of, “We are Seven,” drawing out the poem’s implications about the inadequacy of counting systems when the widow speaks “of the dead man as if he had been her son or grandson, with a kind of pity for his youth, growing out of her own old age ...; and yet she spoke about him as her husband too ...” (135; ch. 17).

The incident, which might also remind us of Hoffmann’s story “The Mines of Falun” (1818), is proleptic for Nell’s death, and Nell walks away thoughtfully; this death impacts on her, making her unlike the child of “We are Seven.” The dialogue anticipates the arrival at the church in chapter 46, and the scenes in chapters 52 onwards, including the children sporting among the tombs, and a grave being declared to be a garden (396; ch. 53). Further, it anticipates the scenes with the sexton, which include Nell tending the graves, and the sexton showing her the well in the crypt, an incident illustrated by Daniel Maclise (415; ch. 55). It anticipates her

3 In the same way, the picture of the *Canterbury Pilgrims* which is seen in the Veneerings’ library (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 27), which may have been engraved by Thomas Stothard, was another, and equivalent, cheating of Blake, who had created his own design (Bentley, *Stranger* 291–324). The picture Veneering possesses *could* have been Blake’s, though remembering Veneering’s superficiality, it is more likely to be Stothard’s.

4 See Tambling, *Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby, and the Dance of Death*.

death and burial (chs. 71 and 72). The shadow of “We are Seven” is on all of these chapters, but the sense of another, carnival life in chapter 16 cannot be forgotten, where Punch has been perched on a tombstone, introducing a comic undoing of the solemnity of death, and where Codlin and Short are entirely materialistically engaged in repairing puppet-lives, and thus calling into question life–death distinctions.

The novel is Dickens’s contribution to the literature of the graveyard, and it puts Dickens at the culmination of such a tradition, with Punch undoing something of its sole concentration on death. Punch, of course, represents a sexual power, which is “imaged also” in Quilp. The graveyard seems to be evoked in the curiosity shop itself, whose “hideous lumber and rottenness” Forster was to dwell on (*Life of Dickens* 1: 124–25). Master Humphrey has a “curious speculation,” imagining Nell “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——” (20; ch. 1). Master Humphrey breaks off there, as if seeing a region on which he was little disposed to enter. The silence may have something to do with the point that at some level of awareness, Nell must be associated with child prostitution, like Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (Wolff), and she certainly suffers from the sexual maneuverings of Quilp, which probably means that her innocence is marked for death in a non-specific way. For innocence—which in Wordsworth is confined to unawareness of death, but which in Blake is more sexual, as when he writes about “the youthful harlot” in his poem “London” (Blake 216)—can have no survival value. And Nell’s sleeping existence “in a kind of allegory” must, though it does not exhaust its significance, have something to do with a future death-in-life, the thought of which is unbearable, and which includes the Blakean “invisible worm” of “The Sick Rose” (Blake 213). Thus Master Humphrey concludes the chapter:

But all that night, waking or in my sleep, ... the same images retained possession of my brain. ... the old dark murky rooms—the gaunt suits of mail with their ghostly silent air—the faces all awry, grinning from wood and stone—the dust and rust, and worm that lives in wood—and alone in the midst of all this lumber and decay, and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumber ... (20; ch. 1)

“Lumber,” and the attendant lifelessness in the room, gives way, assonantly, to “slumber,” but the image, which Samuel Williams illustrated (19; ch. 1), anticipates George Cattermole’s pictures showing Nell in a Romanesque and Gothic church surrounded by armor and tombs of knights (400; ch. 53), and then on her deathbed (538; ch. 71). In the last, she has the allegorical hour-glass next to her, as if she is part of the dance of death (as I think that trope is

alluded to in Master Humphrey's "wild grotesque companions"). It allegorizes the fate of one who must be given a romantic ending to compensate for the unspecified, but guessable, speculations of Master Humphrey (even if Master Humphrey hardly seems a thinker of the sexual).

But it also seems that "the kind of allegory" which Williams illustrated, may comment on "We are Seven," because the child is in the presence of death, and is unaware of it. In which case I will try a last speculation. Blake's poem *The Book of Thel* (1789), an allegory itself, images the yet unborn soul—whom Wordsworth will think of in stanza 5 of the "Intimations Ode"—coming before birth to her own "grave plot." This is, doubly, the body of clay she will be born in, which is of course, sexualized, and the sphere of contrasted and contentious affects, torments of love and jealousy. In Wordsworth's "Ode," that same body is, of course, the "prison-house" into which the unborn soul must be enclosed. Thel's grave plot is also equally the clayey grave she will be laid in, and she retreats from the voice of experience which breathes from it: thus the poem ends with "The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek | Fled back unhinder'd till she came into the vales of Har" (Blake 130), which place Foster Damon describes as meaning "primal innocence," though he also thinks of that as decadence (174)—as it might be, if the attempt to retreat to such primal ground, after perceiving what "experience" entails, may be thought of as decadent.

Wordsworth, whether knowing *The Book of Thel* or not, writes about the reverse in "We are Seven"; now the girl sits next to the grave plot, unaware either of the sexual, or even more, of death, and is restful in that condition; she is unaware of the experience that awaits her, as if she had, so far, escaped the "shades of the prison-house," which have enclosed her in a sensuous and sexual body. Though Nell is older than Wordsworth's child, who is eight (in some counting-systems that could be seven), she is still a child, though Master Humphrey says "her very small and delicate frame imparted a peculiar youthfulness to her appearance" (Dickens, *Old Curiosity Shop* 9). She is not at the stage which Pip arrives at on the first page of *Great Expectations* when he becomes aware of death as real, in the deaths of his parents and siblings; in that sense *Great Expectations* becomes a commentary on "We are Seven" (and, if we are playing with the varieties of possibilities in the counting-game, it is important that Pip, we discover, is seven when the novel opens). The important point for *The Old Curiosity Shop* is that like Thel, the child is sent back by Dickens to what Blake would call the vales of Har: the text, or better, the inhibiting conditions of Victorianism, will not let her survive.

Dickens seems to be part of a culture which has rowed back on the insights of Romanticism, so much so that there needs to be, in the period, a surprised recovery of the Romantic poets, but in an attenuated form as we have seen, which will not allow Nell to go further, but must consciously

work against something in “We are Seven.” Her fate is indeed a disturbing one, where she is enforced back to the allegorical vales of Har, kept at the Wordsworthian age, and stage, of “We are Seven,” and deprived of the vividness of the life which elsewhere runs through *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and which she is allowed to glimpse only in allegory. If Dickens had known Blake, he would have found difficulty, given his culture, in using him in an extended sense; the problem seems to have been bad enough for his use of Wordsworth, though in that case, Dickens’s urban interests were so divergent from much of Wordsworth that the loss is felt less.

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