

## The Voice of Objects in *The Old Curiosity Shop*

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Curiosities are objects on sale in an antique dealer's - bric à brac, knick-knacks, souvenirs, mementos. So *The Old Curiosity Shop* is about what we can think of as commodities, objects on display and for sale. A fine new book by Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Household Words*, offers plenty of material for a new focus on objects in Dickens which reinvigorates past, and some of it rather crude, Marxist criticism of Dickens's works. Its focus is Dickens's journalism, and that of the staff of the magazine he edited between 1850 and 1859, but its arguments can be used, as I do here, to provide an insight into the fiction. Even if the discussion of Dickens's novel takes precedence here, and the consideration of its possible critical and theoretical underpinning is brief and largely confined to the end of the essay, my approach here is in fact an attempt to combine Waters's work, both with an important but still little known essay on *The Old Curiosity* by the significant German philosopher and critic Theodor Adorno, and with some aspects of recent work by Bill Brown about what he calls 'thing theory'.

The essential thing I have to emphasise is how thoroughly and pervasively Dickens confuses the categories of persons and things. It is a kind of trademark of his imagination. Just as an initial example, the vicious lawyer Sampson Brass is described in chapter xii (100) as "the ugliest piece of goods in all the stock" at the Old Curiosity Shop, making him an item on sale like any other. His very name Brass, a capital example of Dickens's onomastic habit in naming his characters, indicates that he can be seen as the sort of item that might be on sale in a curiosity shop. And of course we can argue that this is a fundamental feature of the novel in its analysis of nineteenth-century capitalism - it depicts a society where people treat other people and even themselves as things to be bought and sold.

To get at this level of Dickens, one doesn't have to neglect his status as a great comic writer - quite the contrary, for much of his humour is generated by this wholesale confusion, and serves the purpose of illuminating what has happened to human relationships in modern society. It is a surprisingly modernist, even surreal humour. We might take as an initial example the marvellous comic character Dick Swiveller. The sister of Sampson, the equally vicious Sally Brass, lays traps for Dick, in order first to insinuate and later supposedly prove that he is a thief who has stolen property from his employers. "I say... you haven't seen a silver pencil-case this morning, have you?" she asks, and the reply is a splendid piece of crazy mocking tomfoolery that registers Dick's healthy critical grasp of how this society reifies people in general and the Brasses in particular. "I didn't meet many in the street," he replies. "I saw one - a stout pencil-case of respectable appearance - but as he was in company with an elderly penknife, and a young toothpick with whom he was in earnest conversation, I felt a delicacy in speaking to him" (lviii 445). Apart from the work of Gogol, where a character loses his nose at the barber's shop and wanders about the city looking for it, eventually seeing a giant nose dressed up in an overcoat, we don't perhaps get very much of this kind of absurdist joking in nineteenth-century fiction.

Another excellent example of this kind of surreal humour occurs when Mrs Jarley decides to take Nell and her grandfather along in her caravan, but needs to ask her driver

George what effect this will have on the overall weight of the vehicle. This is his highly puzzling reply: "The weight o' the pair, mum... would be a trifle under that of Oliver Cromwell." The reader is thoroughly bemused: how on earth can George know the weight of a historic personage who died nearly two centuries previously, and why on earth would he compare the weight of the people in front of him with that of a dead man? The joke can only be understood in retrospect, for at this stage the reader doesn't know that Mrs Jarley's living is gained through exhibiting waxworks, and that the "Oliver Cromwell" he is referring to is not a person but a thing - that is to say, the waxwork 'curiosity' she puts on display (xxvi 206)!

This confusion between people and things becomes wholesale when Mrs Jarley starts to employ Nell to introduce the waxwork figures to the paying audience. Nell is placed next to a waxwork representation of an Italian bandit and paraded through the streets to advertise the spectacle. Punning gives the waxwork figure illusory movement as the "light cart in which the Brigand usually made his perambulations" is described, "contemplating the miniature of his beloved as usual," whilst similar verbal tricks turn Nell first into a waxwork like any other, the Brigand for a while "important only as a part of the show of which she was the chief attraction," and later into a commodity to market like any other by creating artificial shortages to increase its value: "Mrs Jarley ... lest Nell should become too cheap, soon sent the Brigand out alone again, and kept her in the exhibition room" (xxix 223). Packaged thus by Mrs Jarley, the consumers of the product 'Nell' naturally enough proceed to reify her as an object. "You're the wax-work child, are you not?" (xxxii 242), asks Miss Monflathers in disdainful and dismissive tones, keeping up the confusion of person and thing generated in these scenes where Nell interacts with the Brigand and other wax-works as an apparently interchangeable element of the spectacle.

A strange kind of humour - again thoroughly modernist, in its reminder of writers like Ionesco in his play *Amédée* - seems also to lie at the root of this wholesale confusion of persons and things. At all times in his writing Dickens imagines a kind of *contagion* spreading from things to human beings and vice versa. The onomastic Mr Short, for instance, a Punch and Judy Man, is described as "a little merry faced man with a twinkling eye and a red nose, who seemed to have unconsciously imbibed something of his hero's character" (xvi 128). Thus he and a whole range of characters in Dickens are imagined as having been profoundly influenced in their very being by some object or medium (Shakespeare's phrase about the dyer's hand "subdued to what it works in," hovers in the background here) they come into contact with as part of their work and life.

I want to speculate a little now in a kind of digression on some of the general context for this obsession in Dickens with *contagion*. Following Allan Christensen in his *Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Contagion*, I use this word in a broad, even metaphoric sense to get at some 'deep structures' of Dickens's imagination. It applies in a number of spheres, including that of sound. As John Picker in his recent *Victorian Soundscapes* has established, Dickens was very interested in a rather eccentric theory put forward by the mathematician Charles Babbage, the originator of the modern computer. Babbage held the view that there was in the atmosphere about us a 'library of the air,' containing all the sound emissions and utterances ever made throughout human time. In a speech of 1869 Dickens seems to reveal that he thinks of its formation as a process of limitless spreading - not dissimilar, perhaps, to the idea of contagion: "it was suggested by Mr Babbage in his *Ninth Bridgewater thesis* that a mere spoken word - a mere syllable thrown into the

air - may go on reverberating through illimitable space for ever and for ever, seeing that there is no rim against which it can strike: no boundary at which it can possibly arrive” (Picker 17). I shall suggest here that Dickens applies this principle of contagion to the influence of things as well as the influence of sounds, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and elsewhere.

Consider, for example, Dickens’s fascination with the corpses on display in the Paris Morgue in one of the pieces in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, a wonderful collection of his journalism. What happens when he goes to visit them is that the shock experience of these sights contaminates, not only all other sights in the surrounding streets, but all other forms of sense contact with the city. Thus in the river the nightmare dead body is experienced as a *taste*: “in the shock I had taken some water in my mouth, and it turned me sick, for I fancied that the contamination of the creature was in it” (66). In another similar example in “City of London Churches,” we find a very marked indication of the possible derivation of the conception from Babbage, as the dead souls buried in one of the churches rise into the air and penetrate and contaminate the body: “Not only in the cold damp February day do we cough and sneeze dead citizens, all through the service, but dead citizens have got into the very bellows of the organ, and half choked the same. We stamp our feet to warm them, and dead citizens arise in heavy clouds” (86). In “Arcadian London” a family of grotesques called the Klems and distinguished by a number of repellent irritants to the senses, including a perpetual smell mingled of bed and cheese (one wonders if the joke originates out of punning on the stereotyped phrase ‘bread and cheese’), seem likewise to have the mysterious contaminating power of “converting everything to flue. Such broken victuals as they take by stealth, appear (whatever the nature of the viands) invariably to generate flue; and even the nightly pint of beer, instead of assimilating naturally, strikes me as breaking out in that form, equally on the shabby gown of Mrs. Klem, and the threadbare coat of her husband” (157). And in a final example, “Nurse’s Stories,” about the frightening images Dickens was exposed to by his nurse’s love of gruesome and fantastical stories, there is a certain Captain Murderer swelling and swelling “until he reached from floor to ceiling, and from wall to wall,” as well as the story of Chips, which contains talking rats that multiply endlessly - “they got into his lodging, and into his bed, and into his teapot, and into his boots;” or another story about some unearthly animal “gradually rising on its hind-legs and swelling into the semblance of some quadruped greatly resembling a hippopotamus” (147, 150, 152). It is from such sources, perhaps, that Dickens derived his sense of how in modern capitalist society the contagion of things might spread to the persons associated with them.

But to go back to *The Old Curiosity Shop* and the specific case of the contagion exerted by puppet over puppet master, we may say, first, that thinking of human beings as wooden marionettes is an essential part of Dickens’s vision of people as things, and second, that he frequently imagines the human figure as connected to strings, so that the separate parts of the body may act as if independent of each other. The notion of ownership then enters into this configuration of the body, so that we are frequently presented with the possibility that some organ or member may not belong to the body in question. Thus for example when the sympathetic notary Mr Witherden is presented with a nosegay, it appears to be his nose, as an independent organ, apparently with an independent speaking voice - not the entire person, even when as here that person is warmly sympathetic and alive - that enjoys its fragrance: “a nose, also supposed to be the property of that gentleman, was heard to inhale the scent with a snuffle of exceeding

pleasure” (xiv 114). In logical extension of the same principle, characters who are again presented sympathetically, and who, as performers, avail themselves for display effects of artificial means of locomotion, such as stilts, seem to have possession of two alternative sets of limbs, the narrator being jokingly obliged to specify which of them is being used on any given occasion, as in this description of Jerry Grinder walking without stilts: “[he] used his natural legs for pedestrian purposes and carried at his back a drum” (xvii 139).

I turn now to the way in which objects are seen as animate. The contagion principle can be seen here to be as fundamental to the relation between humans and things: just as things infect humans, humans infect things. Thus Mrs Jarley’s fondness for a wee dram or several is transferred to her caravan and its mode of perambulation when she has been drinking: “the caravan blundered on as if it too had been drinking strong spirits and was drowsy” (xxvii 212). The caravan is an example of an object viewed in the light of Ruskin’s ‘pathetic fallacy’ as in some kind of harmony with the human, animate world. In Dickens’s world, these can be benignly or malignantly disposed towards humans according to a variety of factors. One of these is the mood and spirit of the general space they inhabit, a building for instance - in other words, its general ‘atmosphere’ as in Gothic fiction, magisterially analysed by Leo Spitzer in his essay on Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* - which as a whole may have contagious power over each separate item it may contain. Again restricting myself momentarily to benign examples, there is for instance at the Jolly Sandboys, an inn whose name onomastically proclaims the prevailing mood of hospitable warmth, a clock which the landlord consults in order to answer a question about when dinner will be ready. It very much partakes of the spirit of the place: “the very clock had a colour in its fat white face, and looked a clock for Jolly Sandboys to consult” (xviii 142). Elsewhere, as in Puccini’s *La Bohème*, where in one aria Colline the philosopher bids farewell to the coat that he is about to pawn to provide money for medicine for Mimi, objects are represented as faithful companions who share and sympathise with the lives of their owners, as the sexton in the country graveyard explains to Nell: “If it could speak now, that spade, it would tell you of many an unexpected job that it and I have done together” (liii 408). With an extra degree or two of ambiguity, since they are obviously associated with death, the mutilated sculptures on the fireplace in the house where Nell and her grandfather find refuge also seem to sympathise with the new inmates, and chime in with the mood of inexorable decline, “like creatures who had outlived their kind, and mourned their own too slow decay” (lii 397).

But the German phrase “die Tücke des Objektes” - the cussedness of the object - is also of relevance to Dickens’s fiction, and introduces a darker, more dissonant relationship between persons and things. It was invented by Friedrich Theodor Vischer, a German writer and philosopher who lived from 1807 to 1887 and was thus a contemporary of Dickens. Vischer’s novel *Auch einer*, which might be colloquially translated *Not another one!*, is where he explores the cussedness of objects most thoroughly and extensively. Its tragicomic hero is engaged in a losing battle against objects that will not obey his command or comply with his wishes. It culminates in a scene where he starts to flog a carter who is maltreating his horse and is fatally but accidentally wounded by a knife the carter is wielding. The scene would have subsequent meaning for a number of writers and thinkers in the German tradition - Nietzsche’s similar collapse in Turin whilst embracing a horse was linked with Vischer by Carl Gustav Jung and by Gottfried Benn in his poem “Turin,” thus helping to spread the institutionalisation of the phrase in German culture (see Bishop 56n). It may well have been somewhere in the background of Adorno’s

thinking when he, as we shall see, wrote on the meaning of things in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

This incident of course marks a darker and heavier degree of object malice than we customarily find in Dickens, who, like Vischer, is working within a playful and fanciful tradition that sees objects as having a mind and will of their own that goes back to the late seventeenth century, and that includes such agreeable trifles as Beethoven's popular 1790s "Rondo alla ungharese quasi un capriccio," op. 129, which his secretary and biographer Anton Schindler later turned into a marketable commodity by renaming it "Wut über den verlorenen Groschen" ("Rage over the Lost Penny"), and spreading the view that it provided a musical representation of a mischievous coin swirling and jumping away from its enraged owner. Dickens plugs himself in to that tradition early in his first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, when Pickwick's hat is blown off his head by the wind, and, "gamboling playfully away in perspective," leads its owner a merry dance:

There are very few moments in a man's existence when he experiences so much ludicrous distress, or meets with so little charitable commiseration, as when he is in pursuit of his own hat. A vast deal of coolness, and a peculiar degree of judgment, are requisite in catching a hat. A man must not be precipitate, or he runs over it; he must not rush into the opposite extreme, or he loses it altogether. The best way is, to keep up gently with the object of pursuit, to be wary and cautious, to watch your opportunity well, get gradually before it, then make a rapid dive, seize it by the crown, and stick it firmly on your head: smiling pleasantly all the time, as if you thought it as good a joke as anybody else.

There was a fine gentle wind, and Mr Pickwick's hat rolled sportively before it. The wind puffed, and Mr. Pickwick puffed, and the hat rolled over and over as merrily as a lively porpoise in a strong tide, and on it might have rolled, far beyond Mr. Pickwick's reach, had not its course been providentially stopped, just as that gentleman was on the point of resigning it to its fate.

Mr. Pickwick, we say, was completely exhausted, and about to give up the chase, when the hat was blown with some violence against the wheel of a carriage, which was drawn up in a line with half-a-dozen other vehicles on the spot to which his steps had been directed. Mr. Pickwick, perceiving his advantage, darted briskly forward, secured his property, planted it on his head, and paused to take breath." (*PP* iv 62-63)

The drama of relation between the playful, subversive commodity and its owner is kept here very much within the comfort zone of Dickens's eighteen-thirties *Biedermeier* readership, the hat's irreverent disposition compared to that of domestic and tame or friendly animals, frolicking lambs or sportive porpoises. But although this amusing scene may convey the character of many of Dickens's early contributions to the tradition of the cussed object, we already find something much more menacing in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. It is not only the case in this novel that things possess a life of their own, it is that they seem to harbour a secret malice against human beings and are out at all times to thwart their purposes by going missing or getting seriously in the way. Kit looking for work - looking at passing carriages in the hope they will stop so that he can receive a tip

for holding their horse - finds that money and coins have maliciously gone on strike: "on they all went, one after another, and there was not a penny stirring" (xiv 112). Quilp in his curses against the world makes no distinction between things and people: they are all enemies. On the floor, looking for a key, he is described "muttering desperate imprecations on himself [i.e. Sampson Brass], and mankind in general, and all inanimate objects to boot" (xiii 103), and then proceeds to take sadistic revenge on the malevolent elements he perceives about him, "biting the air in the fullness of his malice" (xiii 103).

It is of course the presence of figures of monstrous evil in this novel that is part of the reason for the greater viciousness of things in the human environment. Objects seem to be willing to do the bidding of people like Quilp and the Brasses, as the dwarf triumphantly announces with his promise of luridly sadistic sexual traps to be set to torture his wife: "I'll have man-traps, cunningly altered and improved for catching women - I'll have spring guns, that shall explode when you tread upon the wires, and blow you into little pieces" (l 389). The furniture at their office also clearly aids and abets the Brasses in their favourite activity of screwing money out of unfortunate victims - the provision for seating is "a treacherous old chair by the fire-place, whose withered arms had hugged full many a client and helped to squeeze him dry" (xxxiii 252). The principle of contagion is indeed very much in evidence in this thoroughly Gothic place, a kind of dark counterpart to Jarley's waxworks, where the wholesale commercial imbrication of persons and things is relatively light-hearted and benign. Here all the objects described display marks of misery, oppression and pain - there is "a stunted hearth-broom" and "a carpet trodden to shreds but still clinging with the tightness of desperation to its tacks." Infecting their surroundings in this way, transforming household objects into suffering beings, Sampson and Sally Brass have also magically transformed themselves through sharp practice into reified things, introduced sarcastically merely as "two examples of animated nature" in the midst of the inanimate nature surrounding them (xxxiii 253).

No wonder, then, that they should treat the Marchioness, the stunted servant at Bevis Marks, as something lower even than a commodity. It is a logical extension of her absence of exchange value that she should have no name. "What's your name!" asks Quilp, and she replies, "Nothing." "What does your mistress call you when she wants you?" "A little devil," she replies (li 392). It's again Dick Swiveller who is the crucial counteragent to such extreme reification, redeeming and elevating the nameless girl-thing he will eventually marry when he plays cards with her and gives her her fanciful name to aid and abet his fantasy of being in high society in the company of an idle female aristocrat: "to make it seem more real and pleasant, I shall call you the Marchioness, do you hear?" (lviii 442).

So much for these brief empirical remarks about the interchangeability of persons and things in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. I shall conclude with a glance at two essays about the meaning of things in literature that can deepen our understanding of the issues I have attempted to highlight here. The first is Adorno's 1931 "Address on Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*," which is very much focussed on the role of things in this particular novel. His interpretation, strongly influenced by recent conversations with his close friend Walter Benjamin, is an allegorical one, applying to the novel not so much *Pilgrim's Progress* (the obvious paradigm of allegorical wandering for English readers) as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. It is a predominantly pessimistic one, with a glimmer or two of Adorno's favourite 'promesse de bonheur' to be found, paradoxically, not in the human inhabitants of the novel but in things.

Adorno regards one particular passage about things as central to the novel's meaning. "Nell's death is resolved in the following sentence," he tells us, and proceeds to quote the passage in Chapter xii about the moment of leaving the Old Curiosity Shop itself and her regret about having to leave some things that are precious to her behind: "There were some trifles there - poor useless things - that she would have liked to take away, but that was impossible" (xii 99). In his view, the moment is potentially a revolutionary one, a breaking away from the past and assertion of freedom from it, but her inability to take the things with her signals her doom. He comments as follows: "being thus unable herself to take hold of the thing world of the bourgeois sphere, the thing world seizes hold of her, and her sacrifice is sealed." We get here, not just an idea of the contagious power of the things that surround us but their capacity completely to take over and possess human beings.

Animate, life-giving things are thus for him an absence in the entire novel, replaced by a universe of dead things which form a sequence of objects encountered by Nell in the course of her wanderings. His emphasis is thus darker than my own, but he offers some brilliant insights, for instance into the meaning of the puppet whom Nell encounters in the graveyard. "It is a Yorick scene that Dickens sketches in here," he writes, quoting the sentence "Punch, it may be remarked, seemed to be pointing with the tip of his cap to a most flourishing epitaph, and to be chuckling over it with all his heart" (xvi 128; the image figures prominently in the illustration accompanying the text) in support of his view that Nell's death is already predetermined. His approach to the waxworks is again predominantly a negative one, fastening on Mrs Jarley's comically unfortunate praise of her wares as "always the same with a constantly unchanging air of coldness and gentility" (xxvii 209) - values not often held in high regard in Dickens's writing - as an essential index to their meaning. He links it to the cold stare that Nell encounters in the faces of the people she encounters in the streets of Wolverhampton, and underlines the extreme alienation of child and grandfather in the new industrial and commercial world, where they feel like Rip Van Winkle, "bewildered, and confused, as if they had lived a thousand years before, and were raised from the dead and placed there by a miracle" (xliii 336).

Adorno is in fact particularly strong in his account of the Wolverhampton scenes - he focusses on "a kind of bundle on the ground" (xlv 349) by the side of the man whose cottage door they knock upon to beg for bread - a 'thing' which is his third dead child, another premonitory index of Nell's own forthcoming death. And he interprets the "two old, battered, smoke-encrusted penny pieces" (xliv 345) that the man at the furnace gives to Nell, arrestingly, as the last reminders of the lost "thing world" at home in the Old Curiosity Shop. But beyond saying that "Dickens realises too that this thing world, at any rate, the world of these abandoned and rejected things, contains the possibility of transition and dialectical redemption," he does not find, in the humorous imaginative practices of the novel itself, any pointer to how this reanimation of things might work and come about.

And so finally I turn briefly to a portion of Bill Brown's influential article "Thing Theory," that first appeared in Autumn 2001. In thinking about similar issues as those with which Adorno had been preoccupied, Brown engages once more with, but moves a step beyond, the Marxist-derived dialectic that his predecessor had deployed in his analysis of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Brown argues that rethinking things might be a useful contemporary preoccupation as part of rethinking society and "what it is to be human," and asks the simple but fundamental question: "how does the effort to rethink

things become an effort to *re*institute society?” At which point he first of all respectfully ‘places’ the pessimism of a writer like Adorno as a common reaction of Modernist thinkers to the fate of things (“To declare that the character of things as things has been extinguished, or that objects have been struck dumb, or that the idea of respecting things no longer makes sense because they are vanishing - this is to find in the fate of things a symptom of a pathological condition most familiarly known as modernity”) but then moves on to consider the work of Boris Arvatov, in particular his essay “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing” of 1925 as pointing a way forward. Whilst recognising that the Soviet revolution had not yet achieved anything of note in the sphere of renegotiating the relationship between humans and things, Arvatov, according to Brown, was able to imagine how such a realignment might take place:

If achieving that change meant both encouraging the “psyche” to become “more thinglike” and “dynamiz[ing]” the thing into something “connected like a co-worker with human practice,” then Arvatov was imagining a novel reification of people and a new personification of things that did not result (as it does in the Marxian script) from society’s saturation with the commodity form. Constructivist materialism sought to recognize objects as participants in the reshaping of the world.... (Brown 10)

I believe it is not difficult here to recognise thoroughly audible echoes of the trademark habits of the Dickensian imagination - more vitalist and dynamic, I think, than in Adorno’s account - as sketched above in the case of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and concur with Steve Connor and others in suggesting that ‘thing theorists’ might profitably turn their attention to Dickens’s work as a whole and to the marvel of his surrealist humour in particular.

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