

‘Their Death-Like Faces’: Physiognomy and the Uncanny in *The Man of Feeling* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*

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In 1855, the waxwork museum of Madame Tussaud embarked on a public relations campaign to rebrand what was popularly known as the ‘Chamber of Horrors’ exhibit into the more respectable ‘Chamber of Comparative Physiognomy’.¹ As a Chamber of Horrors, the exhibit’s sensational displays of violence and criminality, often directly modelled on the latest headlines, pandered to the gratuitous and morbid curiosity of Victorian audiences. As a Chamber of Comparative Physiognomy, the same exhibit (for the contents were unchanged) became an instructive opportunity for the public to learn and practice the art of detecting and repudiating immorality in facial features. The museum’s interchanging of one for the other shrewdly identifies the ambiguity between the two interpretations of the same waxworks and, under its new name, continued to attract both kinds of customers.

Physiognomy’s apparent interchangeability with sensational entertainment was a result of its declining reputation since the late eighteenth century. The seventy years between the publication of Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771) and Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) were characterised by an increasing loss of faith in the art of reading faces, a change in attitudes that the two novels track. But as their protagonists struggle to interpret a world of uncanny and duplicitous faces, the cynicism of both novels begins to extend beyond the reading of features and into reading itself. Like the waxwork faces at Madame Tussaud’s, sentimental novels present a representative surface

¹ Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010) pp.38-9.

that claims to provide moral instruction through interpretation, especially through its characteristic bodily displays of weeping and suffering. By tracking the changing status of physiognomy through the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, Mackenzie and Dickens's texts also acknowledge the analogous decline of the sentimental novel itself, as it begins to occupy an increasingly ambiguous position between moral 'Physiognomy' and gratuitous 'Horror'.

The classical tradition of physiognomy operated on physical and ostensibly observable correlations between the body and the mind. The *Physiognomonica*, a treatise commonly misattributed to Aristotle and the earliest surviving Greek work on physiognomy, suggests that

when investigating the external marks of courage, we ought to collect all brave animals, and then to inquire what sort of [physical] affections are natural to all of them but absent in all other animals...[T]o be able to tell whether our selected marks were really signs of courage or of this other character...[the animals] must not have any mental affection in common except that one which we are investigating the signs.²

This kind of inductive investigation, employing an almost scientific method of observation, collation, and control, establishes classical physiognomy as a tradition of physical evidence. As the pseudo-Aristotle admits, such a practice is therefore limited to physical information, and cannot interpret

affections of soul whose occurrence produces no change in the bodily marks on which the physiognomist relies...you cannot recognise a doctor or a musician, for the fact of having acquired a piece of knowledge will not have produced any alteration in the [body].³

Although heavily influenced by the *Physiognomonica*, early modern physiognomists distinguished themselves from the classical tradition by grounding their practices in supernatural and religious justifications. For example, Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1643) claims that 'There are mystically in our faces certaine characters which carry in them the motto of

² Aristotle, 'Physiognomonica.' Trans. T. Loveday and E. S. Forster. *The Works of Aristotle*. Ed. W. D. Ross (London: Oxford UP, 1913), pp.805b-6a.

³ *Ibid.*, p.806a.

our Soules, wherein he that cannot read A. B. C. may read our natures...The finger of God hath left an inscription upon all his workes.’⁴ Although he explicitly cites ‘Aristotle...[and] his acute and singular book of physiognomy’, Browne’s physiognomic practice is very different, a deduction from an assumption of divine creation rather than an induction from observation.⁵ In another homage to the pseudo-Aristotle, in 1702 booksellers printed and sold a work entitled *Aristotle’s Compleat Master Piece*, a collection of seventeenth-century essays on midwifery, physiognomy, palmistry, and home remedy recipes all (strategically) misattributed to Aristotle.⁶ Exploiting Aristotle’s name and (erroneous) association with physiognomy to fantastic success (the work reached thirty editions by 1771), the *Compleat Master Piece* reproduced some of the pseudo-Aristotle’s principles but also added claims that the configuration of the face was determined by the planets and the Zodiac, and that physiognomy interpreted the future as well as personalities. As well as bastardising the *Physiognomonica*, however, the *Master Piece* is also clearly influenced by Thomas Browne’s new, divine conception of physiognomy in its description of ‘the Head and Face’ as ‘the *Index* which Heaven has laid open to every one’s View to make a Judgement therefrom’.⁷ In the eighteenth century, the inductive logic of classical physiognomy had been adapted into a practice based on supernatural and religious faith in the honesty of physical signs.

So rather than expertise or specialised knowledge, Henry Mackenzie’s 1771 sentimental novel *The Man of Feeling* portrays physiognomy as a deeply spiritual and ethical practice. Harley, the eponymous *Man of*

⁴ Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici [and] Its Sequel Christian Morals*, ed. John Peace (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1844), p. 102, quoted in Juliet McMasters, ‘Physiognomy: The Index of the Mind,’ *Reading the Body in the Eighteenth-century Novel*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 42.

⁵ Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 102.

⁶ Although technically the writers of the *Compleat Master Piece* are also technically pseudo-Aristotles, to avoid confusion, I will continue to refer to the third-century B.C. writer of *Physiognomonica* as ‘the pseudo-Aristotle’.

⁷ ‘Aristotle’s compleat master piece, in three parts: displaying the secrets of nature in the generation of man. Regularly digested into Chapters and Sections, rendering it far more useful and easy than any yet extant: To which is added, a treasurer of health or, the family physician: Being Choice and Approved Remedies for all the several Distempers incident to Human Bodies.’ The thirtieth edition. (London, 1771) *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale, University of Sydney. 21 Nov. 2013. 114.

Feeling, encounters a series of faces throughout his travels in London and the countryside that test his ability to interpret and respond to the genuine and the deceptive. In one of his successful physiognomic readings, Harley notes the ‘thin and hollow’ face of a prostitute, and is able to interpret its ‘remains of tarnished beauty’, its ‘deadly paleness’, the ‘clayey whiteness’ of her lips, and eventually the ‘glisten of new-washed tears’ on her cheeks.⁸ Moved by Miss Atkins’s verbal and facial tale of woe, Harley feeds her and gives her money. Although mocked by the ‘the sneer of the waiter’ who identifies him as a ‘cully’ (39), and subject to ‘a burst of laughter round the table’ by friends who believe him to have been ‘bubbled by a fine story invented by a whore’ (40), the prostitute’s honesty and Harley’s reading are both eventually validated by the timely arrival of her father as a corroborating witness. This episode of physiognomic success not only vindicates Harley’s perceptiveness, but also his generosity and benevolence, as well as his trust in the conformity of signs to significance. Harley’s ability to interpret and react to faces without suspicion or dismissiveness is a mark of faith and moral distinction that sets him above his friends and the hotel waiter.

As well as physiognomy, Harley’s behaviour also exemplifies the models of sympathy and sensibility developed during the eighteenth century. Texts like Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) responded to philosophical debates about the origin of moral motivations by pointing to sympathy as an imaginative moral sense. These eighteenth-century debates in Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, and primarily the works of Hume and Hutcheson, investigated the universal human capacity for ‘pity or compassion...[that] The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without’ and attempted to determine its cause.⁹ Smith’s model argued that ‘our fellow-feeling for the misery of others...[originates] by changing places in fancy with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or to be affected by what he feels.’¹⁰ For example, Smith identifies our instinctive flinch at the sight of others’ physical traumas as the same instinct that makes ‘the very appearance of grief and joy inspire us with some degree of the like emotions’, a spontaneous and imaginative creation of ‘an analogous

⁸ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers, Stephen Bending, and Stephen Bygrave (London: Oxford U.P., 2001), pp. 37-41. All subsequent references to this edition are incorporated in the text.

⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 11

¹⁰ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 12.

emotion...in the breast of every attentive spectator' that compels us to react to suffering.¹¹ Smith's valorisation of sympathy as a universal moral sense was influenced by, and in turn informed, the popular eighteenth-century concept of sensibility. As Janet Todd has noted, sensibility in the eighteenth century was similarly understood as a moral sense, a 'delicate emotional and physical susceptibility...the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and quickness to display compassion for suffering.'¹² In both sympathy and sensibility, perceptiveness is intrinsically linked to compassion.

Mackenzie's portrayal of Harley's sympathetic perception anticipates the model of ethical physiognomy that Johann Caspar Lavater, a Swiss pastor, would develop five years after *The Man of Feeling*. In addition to consolidating information from the *Physiognomica*, *Religio Medici*, and other disparate sources, Lavater's work is also visibly influenced by theories of sympathy and sensibility.¹³ Speculatively connecting physiognomic interpretation with moral philosophy, Lavater argues that 'Physiognomical sensation is in itself as truly good, as godlike...as moral sensation; perhaps they are the same.'¹⁴ Such a conflation casts the physiognomist in the role of Smith's 'attentive spectator', creating a new parallel between physiognomy and the moral perceptiveness of sympathy and sensibility. As Barbara Benedict has argued, these already interconnected philosophies lend themselves to cooperation:

Physiognomy provides two stable concepts that make it especially appealing to sentimentalists. First...[sentimentalism] advocates a rarefied perceptive sympathy similar to the perception endorsed by physiognomy. Secondly, physiognomy presupposes a unity between observer and observed, object and meaning, sign and significance, that heroicizes naïve perception.¹⁵

¹¹ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 13-4.

¹² Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 7.

¹³ *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* had been translated into German in 1770.

¹⁴ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomy, Or, the Corresponding Analogy between the Conformation of the Features and the Ruling Passions of the Mind* (London: Cowie, Low and co, 1826), p. 314.

¹⁵ Barbara M. Benedict, 'Reading Faces: Physiognomy and Epistemology in Late Eighteenth-Century Sentimental Novels.' *Studies in Philology* 92.3 (1995): 318-9.

By presenting physiognomy as a moral sense, both Lavater and Mackenzie depict the physiognomist as someone who conflates perception with moral reaction. In the eighteenth century, Harley's ability to read Miss Atkins's face and his predisposition to respond compassionately are not independent qualities, but one and the same.

In the eighteenth century's version of physiognomy, the ability to interpret and react appropriately becomes a test of moral standard and religious belief. Building on Thomas Browne's idea that the face is an 'inscription' left by 'the finger of God',¹⁶ Lavater represents physiognomic interpretation as a means of understanding or rejecting divine and moral precepts:

Give the eye that asks, that comes recommended to thee by Providence, or by God himself, and which to reject is to reject God, who cannot ask thee more powerfully than when entreating in a cheerful, open, innocent, countenance. Thou canst not more immediately glorify God than by wishing and acting well to a countenance replete with the spirit of God, nor more certainly, and abhorrently, offend and wound the majesty of God, than by despising, ridiculing, and turning from such a countenance.¹⁷

So far from being an elite skill or an eccentricity, Lavater's physiognomy is an essential instinct of recognising the moral instructions divinely inscribed onto every 'countenance'. As he argues, 'all scepticism, infidelity, and ridicule of religion, naturally originate in the want of this knowledge and sensation.'¹⁸ The failure of Harley's friends to recognise genuine suffering has much more serious implications than merely the economic; in such a test of faith, physiognomy and sensibility are moral standards that sort the virtuous from the unfeeling.

But it is not only God's inscription of faces that compels moral behaviour and tests sensibility; so too do authorial inscriptions of texts, especially sentimental literature. Lady Louisa Stuart's frequently quoted recollection of reading *The Man of Feeling* '[as] a girl of fourteen not yet versed in sentiment' anxiously recalls her 'secret dread [that] I should not

¹⁶ Browne, *Religio Medici*, p.102.

¹⁷ Lavater, *Physiognomy*, pp.317-8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.45-6.

cry enough to gain the credit of proper sensibility'.¹⁹ Similarly, an anonymous writer in *The Monthly Review* asserts that 'the Reader, who weeps not over some of the scenes [*The Man of Feeling*] describes, has no sensibility of mind.'²⁰ Both of their accounts testify to the way in which readers were expected, not only to be affected by the novel, but to physically mimic Harley's tearful reaction to most of the novel's scenes. The novel is a sentimental education that combines lesson and test: designed to induce a particular response through example, it also serves as a benchmark for that response. Robert Burns, as a devoted student of the novel, declared it 'a book I prize next to the Bible...[and one of] the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct'.²¹ Later, writing to another friend, Burns reiterates:

From what book, moral or even pious, will the susceptible young mind receive impressions more congenial to humanity and kindness, generosity and benevolence...than from the simple affecting tale of poor Harley?²²

Burn's comparison of the sentimental novel to 'even pious' texts echoes both Browne's description of the face as divine inscription and the novel's conception of its own story, which the curate describes in the framing narrative as being 'no more a history than it is a sermon' (4). At the end of writing Harley's life, his biographer also reflects on it with religious and moral awe as being 'worth a thousand homilies! every nobler feeling rises within me! every beat of my heart awakens a virtue!' (98) Both the sentimental novel and the human face are therefore readable surfaces from which interpretation is inextricably connected with moral sensation. Just as Smith's 'attentive spectator' is motivated into moral action through sympathetic spectatorship, and Harley is physically and emotionally

¹⁹ Louisa Stuart, *Lady Louisa Stuart; Selections from Her Manuscripts*. Ed. James Home (New York and London: Harper & Bros., 1899) p.235.

²⁰ 'Art. 21. The Man of Feeling.' *The Monthly Review, Or, Literary Journal*. Ed. Ralph Griffiths and George Edward Griffiths. Vol. 44. (London: Henderson, 1771), p. 418.

²¹ Letter to John Murdoch, 15th January 1783, in Robert Burns, *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 17.

²² Letter to Mrs Dunlop, 19th April 1790, in Robert Burns, *Works: With an Account of His Life and Criticism on His Writings, to Which Are Prefixed Some Observations on the Character and Condition of the Scottish Peasantry*, ed. James Currie (Philadelphia: Crissy & Markley, 1847), p. 155.

compelled to benevolence by his sentimental reading of faces, *The Man of Feeling* facilitates a reading that similarly compels its readers to virtue.

The novel, however, is by no means consistent in its endorsement of sensibility, physiognomy, sentimental literature, or even its own protagonist; all four occupy difficult and ambiguous positions within *The Man of Feeling*. Although Harley constantly ‘blesse[s] himself for his skill in physiognomy’ (34), his encounter with Miss Atkins is outweighed by many more instances in which misreading renders him vulnerable to exploitation and ridicule. Harley mistakes a former pimp for a gentleman (22-3), a ‘decent-looking’ madman for a sympathetic guide (24), and a con man for a generous sentimentalist (33-6), to which his more worldly friends respond with the advice ‘to be a little more cautious in the future; and as for faces – you may look into them to know, whether a man’s nose be a long or short one.’ (40) Harley’s repeated failures – or as he understates, the fact ‘his inclination to physiognomy had met with some rubs in the metropolis’ (57) – seem to validate this kind of materialistic suspicion against physiognomic idealisations of divinely inspired surfaces.²³ Furthermore, the inclusion of these episodes of misinterpretation subtly undermines Harley through an increasing ironic distance as the story passes from Harley to his biographer, to the framing editor who rediscovers the manuscript, to Henry Mackenzie, and finally to the reader.

Different interpretations of whether the novel genuinely promotes Harley’s practices of sensibility and physiognomy as useful models of behaviour have therefore divided on how closely the multiple framing perspectives should be conflated. Many modern critics like Ralph Jenkins echo Burns’s perspective by seeing Mackenzie as ‘hold[ing] up Harley as a model for emulation’.²⁴ Other critics, like David Spencer, have been more cautious in reading a ‘significant distance between Mackenzie himself and Harley his hero’ by suggesting that Mackenzie, although sympathetic and appreciative of the ideals that Harley represents, ultimately advocates a perspective ‘tempered with common sense and worldliness [which] his

²³ For Harley’s interpretive errors, also see Maureen Harkin, ‘Mackenzie’s Man of Feeling: Embalming Sensibility.’ *ELH* 61.2 (1994): 330-2.

²⁴ Ralph Jenkins, ‘The Art of the Theorist: Rhetorical Structure in *The Man of Feeling*.’ *SSL* 9 (1971): 5, quoted in William Burling, ‘A ‘Sickly Sort of Refinement’: The Problem of Sentimentalism in Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling*.’ *Studies in Scottish Literature* 23.1 (1988): 138.

hero's is not'.²⁵ Less commonly, critics like Michael Rymer and John Sheriff have argued that the novel is an outright anti-sentimental text that satirises and deprecates the ideals of its own protagonist.²⁶ Depending on the amount of ironic distance each critic varyingly interprets between Mackenzie and Harley (with the biographer and the editor subsumed in between), the novel can ambivalently compel the reader to behave more like its protagonist, or warn the reader to do the exact opposite.

Because *The Man of Feeling* passes such an uncertain judgement on Harley, rather than a sentimental education, the novel becomes an existential dilemma in interpretation. The novel can function as an endorsement of sensibility and physiognomy *only if* the reader already takes the novel at 'face value' as a sentimental text. Similarly, the novel can only warn its readers against 'naïve perception' if they are already suspicious enough to detect Mackenzie's warning. The circular logic of both interpretations makes determining any moral recommendation from the text impossible. To do the first, and conflate the novel's multi-layered frames with its surface, is to expose oneself (like Harley) to exploitation and ridicule. To do the latter, and emphasise the satiric gap between framing narratives, is to risk becoming (like Harley's friends) part of the 'selfish, interested, and unthinking world' (95) that would have dismissed Miss Atkins's genuine suffering as 'a fine story invented by a whore' (40). William Burling has blamed this uncertainty on a 'failure' of clarification:

[Mackenzie's] failure to make [his point] clear in *The Man of Feeling* resulted from two artistic faults: the lack of a clearly defined, admirable protagonist; and the unfortunate decision to employ a fragmented, episodic plot. These flaws have produced the wildly diverging interpretations.²⁷

Burling concludes, 'Artistic ineptitude can, indeed, result in interpretive problems.'²⁸ But rather than a failure to articulate a clear position either way, the fragmented scraps of narrative, accidentally salvaged by a stranger

²⁵ David Spencer, 'Henry Mackenzie: A Practical Sentimentalist.' *PLL* 3 (1967): 314-26, quoted in Burling, 'Sickly Sort of Refinement', 138.

²⁶ Michael Rymer, 'Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*.' *DUJ* 68 (1975): 68, quoted in Burling, 'Sickly Sort of Refinement', 139; John K. Sheriff, *The Good-natured Man: The Evolution of a Moral Ideal, 1660-1800* (University: University of Alabama, 1982), p. 90.

²⁷ Burling, 'Sickly Sort of Refinement', 136-7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

from a curate's gun, recreate the kind of difficult and uncertain surface that repeatedly confounds Harley's physiognomic skills.²⁹ Just as Harley struggles to interpret and react appropriately to an imperfect and duplicitous world, the reader's interpretation and reaction to the fragmented text forces an impossible choice between compassionate naïveté and unfeeling worldliness.

A shift between the two opposed modes of interpretation can be seen reflected in the novel's changing reception from its initial success in 1771 to its deeply unfashionable reputation in the nineteenth century. Lady Stuart, rereading *The Man of Feeling* aloud to a party in 1826, notes a 'sad change' in audience reactions that many critics have cited as emblematic of a shift in reading tastes:

Nobody cried, and at some passages, the touches that I used to think so exquisite – oh dear! They laughed...Yet I remember so well its first publication, my mother and sisters crying over it, dwelling on it with rapture...This circumstance has led me to reflect on the alterations of taste produced by time.³⁰

Lady Stuart's conclusion is very perceptive in its imputing of 'This circumstance' to a general, social change in modes of reading. Later in the century, an 1886 edition of the novel would append a facetious 'Index of Tears' that, as Stephen Balding speculates, suggests that 'the repertory of sentimental effects...has become a repertory of mirthful effects, perhaps to be read aloud in the Victorian parlour to an audience only needing to hear these categories of tears in order to trigger a rather different physical response.' (110) More than just a change in fashion, however, the transformation of tears to laughter represents the reading public's increasing ironic distance from the sentimental hero, and a change in reader identification from Harley to 'Harley's sober friends, who often laughed very heartily at [his] awkward blunders' (14). If physiognomy and sensibility compel the reading subject to physically mimic the read object, to weep when they see weeping, then the new satiric mode of reading is an anti-physiognomic mode that compels an opposite physical reaction to surfaces, that laughs when Harley bursts into another fit of tears.

²⁹ Also see Barbara Benedict, 'Reading Faces', 327: '[T]he reader who sees only the surface is a fool or a hypocrite...if he sees beneath the surface, he perceives his own duplicity, and stands self-condemned for deceit.'

³⁰ Stuart, *Selections*, p. 235.

Besides Harley's worldly friends, however, the satiric reader of the nineteenth century also becomes more troublingly embodied by the character of Daniel Quilp in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Quilp's comic sadism exemplifies the inappropriate reaction, the compulsion to laugh at the sight of weeping:

[Nell's] voice was lost in sobs as she dropped upon the old man's neck; nor did she weep alone.

These were not words for other ears, nor was it a scene for other eyes. And yet other ears and eyes were there and greedily taking in all that passed, and moreover they were the ears and eyes of no less a person than Mr Daniel Quilp, who...actuated, no doubt, by motives of the purest delicacy...stood looking on with his accustomed grin.³¹

The emphatic repetition of 'other ears' and 'other eyes' not only serves to emphasise Quilp's intrusion, but also to draw a disturbing parallel between Quilp's voyeurism and our own. Unlike the typical sentimental novel, which hopes to shape the reader into the sentimental hero through sympathetic involvement, the privacy that Dickens emphasises in this scene perversely identifies the reader, not with Nell and her grandfather, but with the detached position of the sadistic voyeur, reaffirming the distance between the sufferers and the ostensibly sympathetic spectator. As a fellow reader of the sentimental 'scene', Quilp interrupts our interpretation with his own, brings our 'motives of the purest delicacy' into question, and enacts the potential of the reader to regard Nell's tears with humour rather than pity, with ironic distance rather than sympathetic connection. As an embodiment of the anti-sentimental, anti-physiognomic, satiric mode of reading, Quilp's presence in the novel anticipates the perspective of Oscar Wilde's now famous witticism, that 'One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.'³² Such a readerly reaction is one that Quilp, had he survived to witness Nell's death, might have happily agreed with.

In addition to embodying the satiric reader, Quilp also functions as a satiric display. As a display, the face of the ideal physiognomist is not only

³¹ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 95-6. All subsequent references to this edition are incorporated in the text.

³² Priscilla Schlicke and Paul Schlicke, *The Old Curiosity Shop: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Pub., 1988), p.69.

a reflection of their virtue, but also the kind of honest surface that validates physiognomy itself in a demonstration of ‘unity between observer and observed, object and meaning, sign and significance’.³³ This important function of the physiognomist’s face leads Lavater to suggest that

No one, whose person is not well formed, can become a good physiognomist...No person, therefore, ought to enter the sanctuary of physiognomy who has a debased mind, an ill-formed forehead, a blinking eye, or a distorted mouth.³⁴

Quilp, who has all of these features, is a physiognomic nightmare where signs are wholly disconnected from significance:

[Quilp was] so low in stature as to be quite a dwarf, though his head and face were large enough for the body of a giant. His black eyes were restless, sly, and cunning... his complexion was one of that kind which never looks clean or wholesome. But what added most to the grotesque expression of his face, was a ghastly smile...appearing to be the mere result of habit and to have no connexion with any mirthful or complacent feeling... (Dickens 28)

The size of his face is not an indicator for the size of his body, the appearance of his complexion is independent of his actual cleanliness, and his smile has ‘no connexion’ with any significance usually imputed to the smile. Just as anyone who reads the face of the ideal physiognomist is reassured that surfaces reflect meaning, and are therefore compelled to become more like the ideal physiognomist themselves, conversely, anyone who reads Quilp’s face is confronted with the gap between sign and significance, and are more likely to be driven to suspicion and paranoia.

Both in his face and his behaviour, Quilp’s satiric display resembles the figure of Punch, the hero of the portable puppet show. In their encounter with Short and Codlin, two Punchmen, Nell and her grandfather notice ‘the figure of the hero himself, his nose and chin as hooked and his face as beaming as usual...unequally balanced against his exceedingly slight legs’ (Dickens 163) The ‘imperturbable character’ of the puppet Punch therefore uncannily recalls the similarly disproportionate body of

³³ Benedict, ‘Reading Faces’, 318.

³⁴ Lavater, *Physiognomy*, 97.

Quilp, especially his fixed and decontextualised smile. Aside from physical resemblances, Rachel Bennett has also compiled an extensive series of similarities between Quilp's behaviour and Punch's: they both taunt dogs; bully others verbally and physically, and with improvised weapons; delight in surprising others, especially by returning from the dead; abuse their wives; mistreat children; and attempt to evade arrest.³⁵

The 'deliberate connection between Quilp and Punch' that Bennett notes throughout the novel serves to reinforce Quilp's connection to satiric reading.³⁶ Punch shows derive their enjoyableness from a black humour that provokes audiences to laugh at Punch's serial killings of his wife and child. Importantly, the audience's satiric reaction depends on an anti-physiognomic assumption of ironic distance between representation and reality, between surface and meaning. Just as Lady Stuart's friends laugh at Harley's weeping because its representative excess disconnects it from real suffering, Punch's audiences also laugh at the excess of an act of *puppet* infanticide, not a real one.³⁷ As Dickens attempts to explain in a letter in 1849, eight years after his depiction of Punch in *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

In my opinion the Street Punch is one of those extravagant reliefs from the realities of life which would lose its hold upon the people if it were made moral and instructive. I regard it as quite harmless in its influence, and as an outrageous joke which no one in existence would think of regarding as an incentive to any course of action, or a model for any kind of conduct. It is possible, I think, that one secret source of the pleasure...is the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstance that likenesses of men and women can be so knocked about, without pain or suffering.³⁸

If physiognomy and sensibility insist on an unbroken chain between representation, interpretation, sympathetic reaction, and moral behaviour, Punch shows are designed to break that chain, to isolate representation from 'the realities of life', and to separate surfaces from moral meaning.

³⁵ Rachel Bennett, 'Punch Versus Christian In The Old Curiosity Shop.' *The Review of English Studies* XXII.88 (1971): 426-33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 429.

³⁷ Wilde, playing on the same joke, also laughs 'to read the death of Little Nell', not to see it.

³⁸ Letter to Mary Taylor, 6th November 1849, in Charles Dickens, *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Jenny Hartley (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2012), p. 204.

The role of the 'spectator', rather than a Smithean process of imagining in themselves the 'pain or suffering' of the spectacle, becomes one of enjoying a representation of pained or suffering bodies by *not* sympathising.

The same ironic distance between reality and representation that makes Punch shows enjoyable also provides the 'secret' pleasures of the Victorian waxwork. Again, uncanny objects of satirical reading are marked by an interchangeability with Quilp's body: Nell is terrified of Mrs Jarley's waxworks due to her 'imagining a resemblance, in some one or other of their death-like faces, to the dwarf...she would almost believe he had removed the figure and stood within the clothes...they looked so like living creatures' (288).³⁹ So although Mrs Jarley repudiates Punch as 'a low, practical, vulgar wretch, that people should scorn to look at', her own waxworks are associated with exactly the same kind of morbid entertainment that Punch provides and Quilp enjoys. As Mrs Jarley explains of her model of 'Jasper Packlemerton':

[He] courted and married fourteen wives, and destroyed them all by tickling the soles of their feet when they were sleeping in the consciousness of innocence and virtue. On being brought to the scaffold and asked if he was sorry for what he had done, he replied yes, he was sorry for having let 'em off so easy...Let this be a warning to all young ladies to be particular in the character of the gentlemen of their choice. Observe that his finger is curled as if in the act of tickling, and that his face is represented with a wink, as he appeared when committing his barbarous murders. (Dickens 282)

³⁹ Rather than Freud's concept of the uncanny, which dismisses the 'Uncertainty [of] whether an object is living or inanimate' as being 'quite irrelevant in connection with...other, more striking instance[s] of uncanniness', this essay will borrow more from Ernst Jentsch's earlier study *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*. For Jentsch, the uncanny quality of lifelike dolls, waxworks, and corpses arise from their subversion of 'The human desire for the intellectual mastery of one's environment'. See Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Josef Breuer and Anna Freud. Trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), p. 230; Ernst Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny,' trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki: A Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2 (1996): 16.

Like Madame Tussaud's, Mrs Jarley directs her audience to an interpretation of waxwork features that conveys a specific moral 'warning to all young ladies'. This ostensibly moral goal, however, is undermined by her ludicrously sensationalised tale of unrepentant murder and implied sexual deviance, which is obviously the real draw of the show.⁴⁰ For Mrs Jarley's audiences, the moral pretence of physiognomic reading creates a guise of social respectability under which they can freely enjoy sensationalism and titillation.⁴¹ Furthermore, the physiognomy that Mrs Jarley encourages reveals, not the moral and creative powers of God, but Mrs Jarley's cartoonish depictions of the 'wink' and the (also euphemistic) curled finger. For Dickens's own audiences, the juxtaposition of pain and laughter in death-by-tickling becomes reflected in the laughter with which readers are compelled to react to the darkly comic figure of Jasper Packlemerton. Both Mrs Jarley and Dickens use the waxworks as a source of morbid pleasure and black humour, of 'sensation' without 'moral sensation', by exploiting the disconnection of representations from reality.

But although satiric reading itself asserts the distinction between black humour and real sadism, the line between represented and actual suffering is one that Quilp blurs and exploits for his own entertainment. His ability to laugh at Nell's weeping is partly due to his voyeuristic tendency to regard it as a 'scene'; later, after enacting his plot to frame Kit for theft and exile him to Australia, Quilp purchases 'a great, goggle-eyed, blunt-nosed figure-head of some old ship' (609) that he considers to resemble Kit, and takes as much pleasure in violently assaulting Kit's uncanny double as he does ruining the real Kit:

⁴⁰ This seems to have been a recognised sensational trope in the nineteenth century. An 1869 edition of the *Illustrated Police News*, another purveyor of criminal sensationalism, reports (and depicts) a man in Northumberland tickling his wife into madness. See 'Tickleing a Woman's Feet - A Wife Driven Mad.' *Illustrated Police News* [London] 11 Dec. 1869: 1. Paul Margueritte's 1886 pantomime *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* ('Pierrot, murderer of his wife'), cited in Derrida's discussion of mimesis, also features a husband who tickles his wife to death. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, ed. Barbara Johnson. (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 292. See also Joost Abraham Maurits Meerloo, *Creativity and Eternization* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967), p. 218, '[B]eing tickled to death means taking part in sexual orgasm and experiencing the *stirh und werde* feelings (to die and to be resurrected) provoked by deep sexual satisfaction.'

⁴¹ Mrs Jarley's business sense seems to have anticipated the aforementioned tactics employed by Madame Tussaud's in 1855.

‘Is it like Kit – is it his picture, his image, his very self?’ cried the dwarf, aiming a shower of blows at the insensible countenance...’ Is it the exact model and counterpart of the dog – is it – is it – is it?’ And with every repetition of the question, he battered the great image...

Although this might have been a very comical thing to look at from a secure gallery, as a bull-fight is found to be a comfortable spectacle by those who are not in the arena, and a house on fire is something better than a play to people who don’t live near it, there was something in the earnestness of Mr Quilp’s manner which made his legal adviser feel the counting-house was a little too small... (610)

Quilp’s ‘earnestness’, which Sampson Brass rightly finds disturbing, breaks down the distinction between ‘the great image’ and Kit’s ‘very self’. Each repeated question ‘is it – is it – is it?’ is punctuated by an answer in the form of Quilp’s blows, which are motivated by the assumption that it is, it is, it *is* Kit that he is assaulting. In turn, Sampson Brass himself transforms reality into representation by recognising that real events – such as bull-fights, house-fires, and Quilp’s mania – can lose their reality and become ‘a very comical thing’, ‘a comfortable spectacle’, and even ‘better than a play’, given enough distance between spectator and spectacle.⁴² Sampson’s discomfit at Quilp’s beating of the figure-head, ostensibly another instance (like Punch shows and waxworks) where the ‘likenesses of men and women can be...knocked about, without pain or suffering’, seems to expose a paradox in Dickens’s defence of Punch: the fun of satiric reading depends not only on its unlikeness to life, but equally and simultaneously, on its ‘likenesses’.⁴³

If Harley struggles to read and react to the duplicitous faces of eighteenth-century London, the series of ‘insensible countenance[s]’ that populate *The Old Curiosity Shop* present even greater challenges to the practice of physiognomy. First, the hollow and unchanging expressions of the Punch puppet, the waxwork figures, and the Kit figure-head render

⁴² This potential is realised during Kit’s prison visit scene, in which Kit’s baby sibling reacts to the tears of its family and friends by ‘crowing and laughing with all its might – under the idea, apparently, that the whole scene had been invented and got up for its particular satisfaction.’ (Dickens 604-5) The baby’s inappropriate response is caused by a voyeuristic perspective very similar to the one frequently occupied by Quilp and the reader.

⁴³ Dickens, *Selected Letters*, p. 204.

them impervious to attempts to read meaning from their faces. Secondly, the ease with which Mrs Jarley ‘alter[s] the face and costume [of the waxworks]...turning a murderess of great renown into Mrs Hannah More’ (285-6) demonstrates an essential interchangeability between the faces of murderesses and moralists, which Mrs Jarley’s audiences are unable to differentiate. Thirdly, the function of Punch shows and waxworks as popular entertainment encourage sensational or satiric reactions to faces that emphasise a pleasurable, voyeuristic distance between observer and observed. The world of *The Old Curiosity Shop* teems with uncanny objects that refute physiognomic principles and encourage their viewers to read with suspicion and distance.

The final uncanny object that both *The Man of Feeling* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* present is the sentimental corpse, produced by the deaths of Nell and Harley. In both novels, the death of the protagonist is marked by an uneasy transformation of the sentimental body into the insensible corpse. Harley’s biographer, Charles, struggles to reconcile the two:

I saw that form, which, but a little before, was animated with a soul which did honour to humanity, stretched without sense or feeling before me. ‘Tis a connection we cannot easily forget...I felt a pulse in every vein at [calling his name]. I looked earnestly in his face; his eye was closed, his lip pale and motionless. There is an enthusiasm in sorrow that forgets impossibility; I wondered that it was so. (97)

Charles’s reading of Harley’s body is a confused oscillation between living and dead, between the extraordinarily feeling body of Harley and the total insensibility of the corpse. As Charles himself reflects, his inability to disconnect one from the other derives from exactly the kind of ‘enthusiasm in sorrow’ that Harley embodied in life, a physiognomic perceptiveness that conflates ‘likenesses’ with ‘the realities of life’.⁴⁴ Similarly, the characters of *The Old Curiosity Shop* ‘did not know that [Nell] was dead, at first’ (Dickens 715), a misperception drawn out by the village child’s ‘dream...of her being restored to them’ (716) and then to extremes by her

⁴⁴ Dickens, *Selected Letters*, p. 204. Charles’s reflection echoes Adam Smith’s theoretical observation that ‘We sympathise even with the dead...from our putting ourselves in their situation, and from our lodging, if I may be allowed to say so, our own living souls in their inanimated bodies.’ Smith admits that this is the ‘very illusion of the imagination’ that accounts for the moral fear of death. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 16.

grandfather's inability to recognise her lifelessness. Like Punch, Quilp's figure-head, and Mrs Jarley's waxworks, the bodies of Nell and Harley are deceptively life-like, presenting a semblance of life without life itself. The sentimental body, which ought to elicit a sympathetic and moral response to its genuineness, is ultimately transformed into another 'insensible countenance', an uncanny and duplicitous representation to confuse and confound the physiognomist.

The profusion of puppets, waxworks, figure-heads and reanimated corpses in both novels reflect the fact that, in the nineteenth century, the sentimental body was becoming increasingly replaced by uncanny representations. Dissection was (and remains to this day) a traditional and integral part of surgical training, not only for learning anatomy but also to inculcate what eighteenth-century anatomist William Hunter called 'a sort of necessary inhumanity, the use of cutting-instruments upon our fellow creatures.'⁴⁵ Even before performing dissections, a student must familiarise themselves with corpses by having 'first attended a complete course of demonstrations' by someone else, to prevent reacting with 'disgust to a study, from which he ought to receive pleasure and advantage.'⁴⁶ Viewing the corpse, a representation of the living body, desensitised medical students and suppressed their natural reactions, helping them to remain unaffected by disgust or sympathetic pain during surgeries which were still largely performed without anaesthetic.

But even as dissection distanced the student from the suffering patient, the dissected corpse itself became substituted by the anatomical waxwork, creating yet another layer of representation between the viewer and the real body. In a version of Mrs Jarley's and Madame Tussaud's exhibitions of criminality, anatomical waxworks modelled healthy and diseased bodies with their symptoms displayed and their internal organs exposed; one famous figure featured in Dr Joseph Kahn's museum was an 'anatomical Venus', the front of whose chest and stomach could be lifted up to reveal her lungs, heart, and digestive tract, all recreated in wax.⁴⁷ As

⁴⁵ William Hunter, *Two Introductory Lectures, Delivered by Dr. William Hunter, to His Last Course of Anatomical Lectures ... To Which Are Added, Some Papers Relating to Dr. Hunter's Intended Plan, for Establishing a Museum in London, for the Improvement of Anatomy, Surgery, and Physic* (London: J. Johnson, 1784), p. 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁷ A. W. Bates, 'Dr Kahn's Museum: Obscene Anatomy in Victorian London.' *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99.12 (2006): 619.

A. W. Bates has noted, anatomical waxworks attempted to function as a replacement for dissection: an anatomical Samson (reportedly to have cost 500 guineas to construct) was advertised as being ‘Very Interesting to the Faculty Medical Students and the Public...with a view to superseding the use of dead bodies’, and another advertisement exploited the scandal of ‘The dreadful murders committed to procure subjects for dissection’ to offer waxworks as a substitute.⁴⁸ Despite this, however, anatomical museums were open to both medical professionals and the general public, offering, as one review described, ‘an exhibition where scientific minds will find curious material, where ordinary minds may be brought to consider the most extraordinary facts.’⁴⁹ Satiating the demand for both sensation and instruction, anatomical waxworks are emblematic of the increasing substitution of ‘likenesses’ for real bodies, and the increasing numbness of sympathetic responses as the body passes from representation to representation.

Between 1771 and 1841, *The Man of Feeling* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* tracked the dominant mode of interpreting bodies and faces as it shifted from a physiognomist’s faith in divine creation towards an anatomist’s division of material signs from moral significance. At the same time, as Janet Todd has argued, the reading of sentimental literature underwent a similar shift:

It is not even an education in sympathy that is primarily provided [by sentimental fiction] but rather a course in the development of emotional response, whose beginning and end are literary. The reader learns how to respond to fictional or narrated misery...[which is] contrived, fictive, in no way a pattern for life, and it feeds into, rather than out of, the book.⁵⁰

Resembling the hyperbolic unreality of a Punch show, or the lifeless appearance of life exemplified by Nell and Harley’s corpses, sentimental fiction itself has become an uncanny representation, an illusion of moral meaning. Todd’s argument echoes Mackenzie’s own conclusion in 1785 that audiences have become accustomed to ‘impressions which never have

⁴⁸ A. W. Bates, ‘“Indecent and Demoralising Representations”: Public Anatomy Museums in Mid-Victorian England.’ *Medical History* 52 (2008): 8.

⁴⁹ ‘A Sight to Be Seen!’ *Leader* 10 Sept. 1853: 885+. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*. Web. 29 Oct. 2013.

⁵⁰ Todd, *Sensibility*, 93.

any effect upon their conduct ... [a] separation of conscience from feeling.'⁵¹ Just as Madame Tussaud's waxworks sensationalised the face for public titillation, the sentimental novel itself gratuitously displayed its representations of suffering as a textual 'Chamber of Horrors'. At the end of the eighteenth century, the physiognomist and the sentimentalist find themselves in an endless and inescapable world of ungrounded representations, a room of 'insensible countenance[s]' indistinguishable from the living, an environment in which interpretation and action are possible only through suspicion, dispassion, and a 'necessary inhumanity'.

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⁵¹ Henry Mackenzie's article in *The Lounger*, 18th June 1785, included as Appendix I in Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, p.102.