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Materializing Mourning: Dickens, Funerals, and Epitaphs

Catherine Waters

On 8 May 1858, the *Saturday Review* greeted the Library Edition of Dickens's *Works* in characteristically outspoken terms by objecting to the 'very strong dose of sentiment' mixed into his writing:

No man can offer to the public so large a stock of death-beds adapted for either sex and for any age from five-and-twenty downwards. There are idiot death-beds, where the patient cries ha, ha! and points wildly at vacancy — pauper death-beds, with unfeeling nurses to match — male and female children's death-beds, where the young ladies or gentlemen sit up in bed, pray to angels, and see golden water on the walls. In short, there never was a man to whom the King of Terrors was so useful a lay figure.¹

The review was almost certainly written by James Fitzjames Stephen, who had already attacked *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) in the *Edinburgh Review* for its satiric portrait of the Circumlocution Office, and who was now waging a campaign against Dickens, and other practitioners of what he spurned as 'light literature', in the pages of the *Saturday Review*. Such criticism of Dickens's reputation as a sentimentalist, as a writer too much devoted to playing upon the reader's heartstrings, would become more common as the century progressed. George Stott, for example, remarked in 1869 that 'Mr Dickens sets himself to work to make us cry just as openly and deliberately as to make us laugh, but his resources for producing the two effects are anything but equal'.² Comparing Dickens and Thackeray in 1871, the *Dublin Review* observed that '[w]e suspect there are very few young people of the present day so "exceedingly young" as Mr Littimer would say, as to be attracted by Mr Dickens's pathos'.³ While in 1882 the *Fortnightly Review* argued that '[o]ur descendants will have, we may be very sure, too frequent and too real claims upon their compassion to let them spare many tears for those rather theatrical personages which Dickens too often employed to point his moral'.⁴ We can see how this sort of critical trajectory is heading in the direction of Oscar Wilde's famous quip about his inability to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.

Changes in the formal and thematic preoccupations of fiction throughout the nineteenth century, combined with more general cultural shifts in sensibility, no doubt account in part for these developments in Dickens's critical reputation. But I begin with the *Saturday Review*'s jibe, because while it refers to the sort of deathbed scenes that led

Trollope and others to mock Dickens as ‘Mr Popular Sentiment’, the language of its attack points us towards another important feature of his work: namely, that it is the material culture of mourning that persistently engages Dickens’s imagination. The language of commodification and utility employed by the *Saturday Review* invites us to think about his engagement with death — and the feelings of grief and loss, the practices of mourning and the impulse towards memorialization connected with it — in terms of the extent to which these are bound up with the material and commercial culture of his day.

The *Saturday* reviewer complains about Dickens having to hand a wide-ranging ‘stock’ of deathbeds, and attacks his readiness to ‘use’ death, and the emotional effects associated with it, for popular purposes. The idea of holding a ‘stock’ of deathbeds, suitable for any occasion, suggests that Dickens is dealing in ready-to-wear goods, cheaply made and mass-produced, rather than exercising the one-of-a-kind artistry of the bespoke tailor. It suggests a versatility and enterprise shared perhaps with the celebrated Mr Jay, whose General Mourning Warehouse in Regent Street was advertised inside the wrappers for the instalments of a number of Dickens’s novels: a particularly canny form of product placement if we consider deathbeds to preponderate as the *Saturday* alleges. Mr Jay boasted the largest stock of family mourning in Europe, and readers were no doubt reassured to learn from him that ‘mourning costume of every description is kept ready-made, and can be forwarded in town or country at a moment’s notice’.⁵ To have a ‘stock’ of deathbeds on hand likens Dickens’s imaginative use of death to material goods traded for commercial gain, as the *Saturday* insinuates in objecting to the strategic intent with which Dickens has ‘[f]rom first to last, [...] tried about as much to make his readers cry as to make them laugh’.⁶ It implies, above all, that there is something *inauthentic* about the materialization of sentiment in Dickens’s writing.

Dickens was fascinated with the material culture of the nineteenth century — with objects and things, and the way in which they mediate feelings, relationships, and identities. As Michael Hollington observes, it ‘is a kind of trademark of his imagination’: he ‘depicts a society where people treat other people and even themselves as things to be bought and sold’.⁷ He was not alone in devoting attention to the newly abundant world of consumer goods that was expanding around him. The Great Exhibition of 1851, seen by some six million visitors, marked a watershed in the development of commodity culture, and scholars of Victorian literature and culture have in recent years become increasingly interested in ‘Victorian Things’, and what they can tell us about the people who bought

and used them.⁸ The recent appearance of so-called ‘thing theory’ is a notable indication of this critical trend, and it refocuses attention on the kind of symbolic work that objects perform in a novel. Thing theorists, like Bill Brown, ask us to think about ‘how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects’.⁹ However, we have only to recall Boz’s description of that ‘burial place of fashion’ in his early sketch of Monmouth Street — where ‘whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of imaginary wearers; [and] lines of trousers have jumped down to meet them’ — to know that such questions as Brown raises here had already been asked by Dickens, who anticipates these ways of thinking about material culture in the extraordinarily dynamic interrelationship between people and things in his work.¹⁰ Dickens’s interest in the peculiar relationship between discarded dress and death — cast-off clothes as effigies of their former wearers — as he wanders through what he calls the ‘extensive groves of the illustrious dead’ in the markets of Monmouth Street, is only one example. His imaginative preoccupation with corpses, coffins, waxworks and second-hand clothing — with objects that inhabit the borderland between the living and the non-living — demonstrates that he was drawn towards the Victorian management of death even as its extravagance repelled him.¹¹

Explaining the ostentatious paraphernalia of Victorian mourning customs and ceremonies, John Morley argues that the romantic legacy of feeling that ‘produced the keepsake and sentimental ballad and that effloresced in the Valentine, found its reverse expression in objects, poems, ceremonies and clothes in remembrance of the defunct’.¹² However, a rapidly expanding commodity culture had much to do with this burgeoning market in funereal goods too. Analysing the power of the souvenir, Susan Stewart argues that

[w]ithin the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical. As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence.¹³

Things seem to promise that contact and that presence in their tangibility; they seem to relieve us from a sense of disconnection or abstraction. When they are memorial objects, they seem to enable the living and the dead to find a form of proximity, a form of touch. The Victorians produced a wide range of things to express their sense of loss and to

memorialize their dead — jewellery, clothing, mourning-cards, wreaths, handkerchiefs edged with black borders, even post-mortem photographs, as well as tombstones, monuments and epitaphs. As Nicola Bown writes of the consolation provided to grieving parents by the post-mortem portrait of a lost child, its material form was crucial: ‘It is not only the contemplation of the image that produces the emotions which give photographs their extraordinary affective power but the tactility of the photograph as object. We touch, and are touched.’¹⁴ Dickens was well aware of the powerful affect that can reside in objects: witness, for example, the handkerchief in *Bleak House* (1852–53), which Esther places over the dead baby of Jenny, the brickmaker’s wife, and which eventually passes into the despairing clutch of her mother, Lady Dedlock; or the ring Dickens took from Mary Hogarth’s finger after her death and wore for the rest of his life.¹⁵ However, alongside such precious objects that attempt to bind the living and dead in his fiction, we find other forms of mourning which raise questions about the authenticity of the sentiments memorial objects are meant to express, questions that seem to have a particular urgency in the context of a rapidly developing commodity culture.

Dickens inherits his interest in sentiment from the eighteenth century, when it was close in meaning to sensibility, and was seen as a political force for good, leading those who had it to ameliorate social injustice. The eighteenth-century discourse of sensibility was crucial to political debates about the establishment of charitable institutions, such as Thomas Coram’s Foundling Hospital, memorably described by Dickens in his leader for *Household Words*, ‘Received, a Blank Child’, published on 19 March 1853. The title of the essay refers to the official document recording the admission of a foundling into the home, and Dickens goes on to describe the poignant tokens left by mothers with their children as a means of identification should they ever be in a position to reclaim them:

Most of these tokens were small coins, or parts of coins; sometimes, an old silk purse was substituted; sometimes, doggrel verses were pinned to the poor baby’s clothes; once a lottery ticket was so received. The Hospital chronicles do not record that it turned up a prize — the blank child was true to its designation.¹⁶

Deposited as a ‘distinguishing mark’ for the purpose of identification, the tokens were not given to the children, and thus, for those who were unclaimed, remained an unknown memento left by a mother they never knew. Now on display in the Foundling Museum, they still speak eloquently of the sentiment of maternal loss, of bereavement, even as they remain shadowed by a discourse of economic deprivation that is ironically stressed in the

allusion to a receipt for exchange in the title of Dickens's essay. Like the locket stolen by old Sally from the dying Agnes in *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), which provides the evidence of that foundling's true identity, these objects are laden with affect that overwhelms any monetary value they might possess. Agnes's locket is sold on by the Bumbles to Monks, who throws it into the river. But at the end of the novel Oliver has another way of remembering the mother he lost in the form of the 'white marble tablet' standing 'within the altar of the old village church' which bears the single word 'AGNES' inscribed on it.¹⁷ This closing tableau is the subject of the substitute plate that George Cruikshank was obliged to provide when Dickens objected to his original scene portraying Oliver in a fireside group with the Maylies [*Fig. 1*].



Fig. 1: George Cruikshank, Rose Maylie and Oliver.

Scanned image by George P. Landow

<<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/cruikshank/26.html>>

As Michael Slater notes, in contrast to the cancelled plate, which made no reference to Agnes, the final version was much more daring: more likely to raise Mrs Grundy's eyebrows in giving pictorial expression to the text's memorialization within a church of a fallen woman.¹⁸ The efficacy of this monument, which concludes a novel that in many

ways looks back to eighteenth-century influences, stands in contrast to a number of later graves and epitaphs that appear in Dickens's fiction, as we shall see.

The ability of these sorts of memorializing objects to express emotions of loss is addressed in Wordsworth's influential essay on epitaphs, written in 1810. In keeping with the affirmation of sincerity as a poetic value in the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's essay attempts to identify the criteria by which the merit of an epitaph may be judged, beginning with 'the first requisite [...] that it should speak, in a tone which shall sink into the heart, the general language of humanity'. He acknowledges the role of the gravestone in enabling the living and the dead to find proximity via material objects and places, noting that the epitaph must if possible be situated 'in *close connection with the bodily remains of the deceased*'.¹⁹ Dedicated to the expression of sincerity, the epitaph 'forbids more authoritatively than any other species of composition all modes of fiction': 'It is truth hallowed by love — the joint offspring of the worth of the dead and the affections of the living!'²⁰ '[U]pon all men', he writes,

an Epitaph must strike with a gleam of pleasure, when the expression is of that kind which carries conviction to the heart at once that the Author was a sincere mourner, and that the Inhabitant of the Grave deserved to be so lamented.²¹

The truth of feeling it expresses is inherent in the material form of the epitaph itself, for 'to raise a monument is a sober and reflective act' rather than an impulse of the moment: 'The very form and substance of the monument which has received the inscription and the appearance of the letters, [testify] with what a slow and laborious hand they must have been engraven.'²²

Wordsworth's evaluation of the epitaph focuses upon the evidence of 'sincerity', which applies to human beings and actions and implies a correspondence between inward disposition and outward appearance. In contrast, 'authenticity' is a matter of being or ontology and can be applied to objects as well as subjects. Arguably, while the Victorians inherited Romanticism's preoccupation with both of these concepts and with their union in the idea of the 'genuine', the concern for 'authenticity' acquired a new urgency in the context of an expanding commodity culture. We can see evidence of this as the nature of sepulture and commemoration became the subject of aesthetic and religious debate in the 1840s, under the influence of the High Church movement and growing concern about the sanitary problems associated with intramural burial. In 1844, reviewing Loudon's *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries and on the Improvement of*

Churchyards, alongside surgeon G. A. Walker's exposé of the unsanitary conditions of graveyards and Edwin Chadwick's report on the inquiry into interment in towns, the *Quarterly Review* called for the 'exercise of an enlightened and chastened taste' in monuments and epitaphs, arguing that 'we are still in want of a good collection of posies for country churchyards, to replace "Afflictions sore long time I bore," and others of that class'.²³ Dickens's *Household Words* helped to popularize the campaign for reform, with an essay on 'Graves and Epitaphs' by James Hannay, published in 1852. Hannay reprises elements of Wordsworth's discussion, expressing the same concern for truth of feeling in epitaphs, but he combines this with a new awareness of the commercial industry that has grown up around the Victorian management of death. 'Cemeteries', he writes, 'express the feelings and meet the wants of an altered time', and while 'evidence enough we shall find of care shown, expense lavished, to pay offerings to the dead', too often these thwart the real purpose of the memorial.²⁴ 'How absurd', he argues, 'is a monument that symbolizes nothing but the statuary's bill'.²⁵ Similarly, he complains that the use of such decorative features as stone canopies, broken pillars and sham urns in tomb design has turned commemoration into spectacle: 'you attract passers-by, not to pause reverently and merely to look, but to stare in a *dilettante* fashion, as if they were in a wax show'.²⁶ 'A good epitaph has become one of the rarest things in literature', he writes; indeed, it now 'passes proverbially for something even mendacious'.²⁷

The shift apparent here — from regarding the epitaph as 'truth hallowed by feeling' to viewing it as the latest evidence of vulgar commercialism vitiating the sentiment it is meant to express — may lie behind the later satiric use made of epitaphs in Dickens's fiction. He is typically less sanguine than Wordsworth about epitaphs as authentic expressions of feeling. Just three years on from the publication of *Oliver*, when Nell and her grandfather encounter Codlin and Short, the exhibitors of Mr Punch, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), that wooden hero is shown comically 'perched cross-legged upon a tombstone' [*Fig. 2*].²⁸



Fig. 2: Illustration from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Chapter 16), by Phiz

His awkward pose is captured in Phiz's illustration and the narrator remarks that 'Punch [...] 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.' (*OCS*, p. 129). A much later example of such scepticism about the truthfulness of the epitaph occurs in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), when the narrator describes the churchyard where Bradley Headstone makes his desperate marriage proposal to Lizzie Hexam as

a paved square court, with a raised bank of earth about breast high, in the middle, enclosed by iron rails. Here, conveniently and healthfully elevated above the level of the living, were the dead, and the tombstones, some of the latter droopingly inclined from the perpendicular, as if they were ashamed of the lies they told.²⁹

It takes a child's point of view — that of the young David Copperfield — to underline the reliance upon convention in epitaphs with his literalizing imagination: David gazes up at the memorial tablets from his pew in the village church in chapter two of his fictional autobiography, and tries to think of

Mr Bodgers, late of this parish, and what the feelings of Mrs Bodgers must have been, when affliction sore long time Mr Bodgers bore, and physicians were in vain. I wonder whether they called in Mr Chillup, and he was in vain; and if so, how he likes to be reminded of it once a week.³⁰

A similar literalizing effect is found in the well-known opening of *Great Expectations* (1860–61), as Pip attempts to derive an impression of what his parents were like from the epitaph on their tombstones:

The shape of the letters on my father's gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of

the inscription, ‘*Also Georgiana Wife of the Above*’, I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly.³¹

While for Wordsworth, the material continuity between the epitaph, the labour that painstakingly produced it, and the identity of the person it commemorated, was an important constituent of its sincerity of feeling and authenticity as a memorial, for Pip, the text on the tombstone serves only to materialize his own lonely powers of fancy — a darkly comic reminder of his orphanhood. In each of these cases we find not so much ‘truth hallowed by affection’, as truth hallowed by the child’s point of view.

A rather more complex use of the child’s perspective to consider authenticity of sentiment is made in Dickens’s handling of the undertaker, Mr Omer, his daughter, Minnie, and his workingman, Joram, in Chapter 9 of *David Copperfield* (1849–50). Still at Salem House and having been informed of his mother’s death by Mrs Creakle, David’s first bout of tears gives way to reflection upon the factitious nature of his reception of the sad news. ‘When I was left alone’, he writes,

[I] looked into the glass to see how red my eyes were, and how sorrowful my face. I considered, after some hours were gone, if my tears were really hard to flow now, as they seemed to be, what, in connexion with my loss, it would affect me most to think of when I drew near home — for I was going home to the funeral. I am sensible of having felt that a dignity attached to me among the rest of the boys, and that I was important in my affliction. (*DC*, p. 98)

David’s self-consciousness regarding his comportment as a mourner is juxtaposed with the sincere expression of feeling conveyed in the comically lugubrious but nonetheless heartfelt ‘sheet of letter-paper full of skeletons’ given to him by Traddles at parting (*DC*, p. 99). The account of Mr Omer’s shop that follows suggests that for Dickens, conveying genuine feeling on bereavement may in itself be problematic. David observes ‘three young women at work on a quantity of black materials’, ‘who appeared to be very industrious and comfortable’, stitching away, while ‘at the same time there came from a workshop across a little yard outside the window, a regular sound of hammering that kept a kind of tune: RAT — tat-tat, RAT — tat-tat, RAT — tat-tat, without any variation’ (*DC*, p. 99). David reports hearing this ‘tune’ three times, in between observing the cheerfulness of the workers and the philosophical reflections of Mr Omer on the changefulness of fashion, but it is not until Minnie forestalls her father’s invitation to view the finished article that David openly admits what clearly he already knows:

I can’t say how I knew it was my dear, dear mother’s coffin that they went to look at. I had never heard one making; I had never seen one that I know of; but

it came into my mind what the noise was, while it was going on; and when the young man entered, I am sure I knew what he had been doing. (*DC*, p. 101)

This is one of those moments of ambiguous knowing and not-knowing that Rosemarie Bodenheimer has written about so compellingly.³² The Dickensian child is often conscious of knowing something he or she should not: in this case, David expresses his sense of knowing about bereavement at too young an age. But the delay in the child's admission of this knowledge, which has been held in abeyance by David as narrator, creates an unsettling effect in the context of the child's self-consciousness about his mourning demeanour. The poignancy of the overheard tune made by the hammer on the coffin is disturbed by the impossibility of clearly separating the seeming naivety of the child's perspective from the artfulness involved in the older David's description of it.

Little Dorrit (1855–57) takes these questions about feeling, truth-telling and interpretation a stage further, in presenting a comic, and yet at the same time, poignant exploration of the fictive possibilities of the epitaph in its account of Young John Chivery, the 'sentimental son' of the Marshalsea's turnkey. Imagining his attachment to Amy being fulfilled in their union, and the trajectory of their married life together, 'Young John drew tears from his eyes by finishing the picture with a tombstone in the adjoining churchyard, close against its prison wall, bearing the following touching inscription':

Sacred to the Memory of JOHN CHIVERY, Sixty years Turnkey, and fifty years Head Turnkey, Of the neighbouring Marshalsea, Who departed this life, universally respected, on the thirty-first of December, One thousand eight hundred and eighty-six, Aged eighty-three years. Also of his truly beloved and truly loving wife, AMY, Whose maiden name was DORRIT, Who survived his loss not quite forty-eight hours, And who breathed her last in the Marshalsea aforesaid. There she was born, There she lived, There she died.³³

While the misplaced reverence for the family name of 'Dorrit' signaled in the mention of Amy's maiden name is a touching reminder of Young John's ingenuousness, this effect of naivety is also qualified by the self-conscious artistry implied in the tears which are '[drawn] from his eyes by finishing the picture'. As Hannay argues in his essay for *Household Words*, 'an epitaph is strictly a publication': 'It publishes itself in open sunshine to all the world; and, indeed has a far better chance of being read, than one book out of every five hundred.'³⁴ Young John's epitaphs, however, are entirely imaginary compositions. Mini-autobiographies of a peculiar, post-mortem variety, part of their appeal for him is the opportunity to write in the third person, since it satisfies his impulse for self-dramatization. But their fictionality is of course underlined when the happy-ever-

after story of John and Amy Chivery has to be revised because Little Dorrit rejects his advances; and it is replaced with the following proclamation of woe:

Here lie the mortal remains of JOHN CHIVERY, Never anything worth mentioning, Who died about the end of the year one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six, Of a broken heart, Requesting with his last breath that the word AMY might be inscribed over his ashes, Which was accordingly directed to be done, By his afflicted Parents. (*LD*, p. 185)

Young John is one of Dickens's tender-hearted simpletons, like Mr Toots, and his fondness for self-dramatization through the composition of sentimental epitaphs is perhaps forgivable, especially since, unlike Toots — who is rewarded for his devotion to Florence with marriage to Susan Nipper — Young John remains unpartnered. But a much more egregious example of the use of the epitaph to express the self-regard of the compositor is Mr Sapsea's epitaph for his wife in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870):

ETHELINDA.
 Reverential Wife of
 MR THOMAS SAPSEA
 AUCTIONEER, VALUER, ESTATE AGENT, &c.,
 OF THIS CITY
 Whose Knowledge of the World,
 Though somewhat extensive,
 Never brought him acquainted with
 A SPIRIT
 More capable of
 LOOKING UP TO HIM
 STRANGER PAUSE
 And ask thyself the Question
 CANST THOU DO LIKEWISE?
 If not,
 WITH A BLUSH RETIRE³⁵

As Wendy Jacobsen notes, Mr Sapsea's epitaph flouts all of the rules laid down by the reformers and arbiters of taste in matters of sepulture.³⁶ Reporting the views of an 1844 essayist in the *Ecclesiologist*, John Morley observes that epitaphs were to be brief, 'not more than twenty words', so this one is almost three times longer than it should be. 'All lines were to be of uniform length without breaks' and '[n]o epitaphs [were to] be constructed in the shape of urns or altars', as this one is.³⁷ The epitaph's address to the passerby, based upon the Roman's injunction, '*Siste, viator!*' ('stop, traveller!') on the monuments placed along the great Roman roads, was held to be no longer appropriate for the gravestone situated in a churchyard or cemetery. Similarly, argues the *Ecclesiologist*, such 'paganisms' as the mention of irrelevant information referring to the age, trade, or

craft of the deceased should be omitted. Even worse, as Hannay argues in his essay for *Household Words*, is the provision of such information relating to the living: ‘The mention that the deceased was the son, or wife, &c. of John So-and-so, “Pork Butcher in Smith Street”, is intolerable. What business has an advertisement in such a place?’³⁸ What business, indeed, but to further Mr Sapsea’s commercial interests.

The epitaph that Dickens left instructions to be composed for himself provides a stark contrast to Mr Sapsea’s effusion:

I DIRECT that my name be inscribed in plain English letters on my tomb, without the addition of ‘Mr.’ or ‘Esquire’. I conjure my friends on no account to make me the subject of any monument, memorial, or testimonial whatever. I rest my claims to the remembrance of my country upon my published works, and to the remembrances of my friends upon their experience of me in addition thereto.³⁹

The slab covering his grave in Westminster Abbey bears only the inscription of his name and dates of birth and death. Its minimalism recalls the emotive simplicity of Agnes’s memorial tablet in *Oliver Twist* or Jo’s humble epitaph, dictated to Alan Woodcourt as he lies dying in *Bleak House*. Such effects of restraint are put to a rather different purpose in an arguably even more affecting example: Scrooge’s epitaph in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) [Fig. 3].



Fig. 3: John Leech, *The Last of the Spirits*

After being made by the Last of the Spirits to witness the sale of the very sheets and curtains from the bed upon which his own, as yet unrecognized, corpse lies, Scrooge is shown the ‘bare, uncurtained bed; on which, beneath a ragged sheet, there lay a something covered up, which, though it was dumb, announced itself in awful language’.⁴⁰ Asking finally to know the identity of this dead man, he is transported to a churchyard, where the Spirit points inexorably towards a grave: ‘Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name’ (*CC*, p. 82). The poignancy of this epitaph consists in its being just that — a bare name, shorn of all other evidence of identity or relationship and marking the site of a man ‘unwatched, unwept, uncared for’ (*CC*, p. 76).

While the imagined prospect of being unremembered and unmourned forms the lowest point for Scrooge in his process of transformation, and strikes a strong chord of feeling in keeping with the emotional appeal found elsewhere in the demise of Little Nell or Paul Dombey, Dickens’s engagement with death and Victorian mourning customs and ceremonies is more often satiric than sentimental. His attack upon pretentious funeral performance begins as early as *Oliver Twist*, with Mr Sowerberry’s anticipation of the ‘superb effect’ that might be achieved by the innovative employment of Oliver as ‘a mute in proportion’ for children’s funerals (*OT*, p. 35). The satire on mutes continues in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44), as the preparations for Anthony Chuzzlewit’s funeral are underway and Mr Mould, the aptly named undertaker, exults to Mr Pecksniff:

‘Such affectionate regret, sir, I never saw. There is no limitation — there is positively NO limitation,’ — opening his eyes wide, and standing on tiptoe, ‘in point of expense. I have orders, sir, to put on my whole establishment of mutes; and mutes come very dear, Mr Pecksniff; not to mention their drink. To provide silver-plated handles of the very best description, ornamented with angels’ heads from the most expensive dies. To be perfectly profuse in feathers. In short, sir, to turn out something absolutely gorgeous’.⁴¹

Despite the disapproval of such elaborate funeral furnishing implied in his satire, Dickens clearly delights in the grandiloquence of Mr Mould’s salesmanship: a stylistic preference for the exaggerated and the exuberant that is held in tension with his call for plain and unaffected commemoration elsewhere, as we shall see.

Of course, Dickens was not alone in attacking the extravagance of funeral furnishing. The *Quarterly Review* denounced the ‘Five millions sterling, on a moderate calculation’ spent annually on funerals in England and Wales alone, ‘four’ of which it says

‘may fairly be set down as squandered on the mere fripperies of death’: ‘silk scarfs, and brass nails — feathers for the horses — kid gloves and gin for the mutes — white satin and black cloth for the worms’.⁴² *Punch*, too, waged a campaign against commercial greed in the funeral industry from the late 1840s, attacking the self-interested opposition of undertakers to proposals for government regulation in cartoons such as the ‘Starved-Out Undertakers’ and the expense of “Performers” after a Respectable Funeral’.⁴³ Nevertheless, Dickens was ‘recognized as a pioneer of funeral reform’.⁴⁴ In June 1850, *Household Words* carried two articles in support of the General Interment Bill, then before Parliament, that was designed to regulate the funeral trade. One of these satirizes the middlemen involved in funeral performance, describing the so-called ‘Black Jobmaster’ who had ‘let the coaches and horses to a furnishing undertaker, who had let ’em to a haberdasher, who had let ’em to a carpenter, who had let ’em to the parish-clerk, who had let ’em to the sexton’ and so on, in a long list recalling the House that Jack built.⁴⁵ The range of consumer goods required to furnish a respectable funeral is revealed in this example of the undertaker’s sales pitch:

‘Hearse and four, Sir?’ says [the Black Jobmaster to the bereaved gentleman]. ‘No, a pair will be sufficient’. ‘I beg your pardon, sir, but when we buried Mr. Grundy at number twenty, there was four on ’em, Sir; I think it right to mention it’. ‘Well, perhaps there had better be four’. ‘Two coaches and four, Sir, shall we say?’ ‘No. Coaches and pair’. ‘You’ll excuse my mentioning it, Sir, but pairs to the coaches and four to the hearse, would have a singular appearance to the neighbours. When we put four to anything, we always carry four right through’. ‘Well! Say four!’ ‘Thank you, Sir. Feathers of course?’ ‘No. No feathers. They’re absurd’. ‘Very good, sir. *No* feathers?’ ‘No’. ‘*Very* good, sir. We *can* do fours without feathers, Sir, but it’s what we never do. When we buried Mr. Grundy, there was feathers, and — I only throw it out, Sir — Mrs Grundy might think it strange’. ‘Very well! Feathers!’ ‘Thank you, Sir’. — and so on.⁴⁶

Interested in extracting the maximum amount of profit from the sale of his undertaking services, the Black Jobmaster plays upon the social status he suggests will be expressed by an extravagant display. The contrast between the terse responses of the mourner and the repetitively expansive sales pitch of the Black Jobmaster, with its carefully modulated marks of seemingly deferential politeness, serves to express the mixture of grief and exasperation of the former. However, while Dickens’s satire is clearly directed against the rapacious middleman who seeks to mediate the family’s mourning, it is juxtaposed with his imaginative investment in the salesman’s patter to create a tension in the narrative,

providing another instance of the way in which, as I have described elsewhere, *Household Words* partakes of the very discourse of advertising that it simultaneously seeks to critique.⁴⁷

Two years later, in Chapter 53 of *Bleak House*, we find another satirically charged example of the material culture of mourning in Mr Tulkinghorn's funeral, which is distinguished by the preponderance of empty carriages in the procession sent in lieu of the mourners:

[T]he amount of inconsolable carriages is immense. The Peerage contributes more four-wheeled affliction than has ever been seen in that neighbourhood. Such is the assemblage of armorial bearings on coach panels, that the Heralds' College might be supposed to have lost its father and mother at a blow. The Duke of Foodle sends a splendid pile of dust and ashes, with silver wheel-boxes, patent axles, all the last improvements, and three bereaved worms, six feet high, holding on behind, in a bunch of woe.⁴⁸

Here the materialization of mourning is manifested in the funerary parade of gorgeous but empty carriages — objects without subjects. In a characteristic confusion of persons and things, the 'inconsolable carriages' don't merely represent, but *partake* of the grief of their owners. At the same time, however, they are said to be no more than 'dust and ashes' — reduced to mere matter, like the man whose funeral they attend. Meant to substitute for the peers who own them, these 'splendid piles' serve instead as emblems of the levelling effects of mortality.

If feelings of grief and expressions of loss are transferred to the horses and carriages that attend Mr Tulkinghorn's funeral as part of Dickens's critique of a defunct aristocracy, the obsequies attending the death of Mrs Joe, in *Great Expectations*, display an imitation of gentility that is equally ludicrous. Arrived at the cottage, Pip finds that 'two dismally absurd persons, each ostentatiously exhibiting a crutch done up in a black bandage — as if that instrument could possibly communicate any comfort to anybody — were posted at the front door' (*GE*, p. 275). As Morley reports, the standard panoply of the Victorian funeral was based upon the heraldic array of a baronial funeral, and the two men who stand at the doors were supposed to represent the two porters of the castle, with their staves, in black. The comic discrepancy between baronial original and village imitation here is underlined by Pip's recognition of one of these symbolic porters as 'a potboy discharged from the Boar for turning a young couple into a sawpit on their bridal morning' (*GE*, p. 275). Although, as Morley notes, the symbolic meaning of these items of funeral

pomp would have been unknown to many of those who paid for them, they nevertheless represent the ‘corporealization of an idea’ — a material expression of the aspiration towards gentility: the desire for social ‘[d]isplay did not stop short at life; death also had its consumer goods’,⁴⁹ and Mrs Joe’s funeral illustrates their variety:

‘Pocket-handkerchiefs out, all!’ cried Mr Trabb at his point, in a depressed business-like voice — ‘Pocket-handkerchiefs out! We are ready!’

So, we all put our pocket-handkerchiefs to our faces, as if our noses were bleeding, and filed out two and two. [...] The remains of my poor sister had been brought round by the kitchen door, and, it being a point of Undertaking ceremony that the six bearers must be stifled and blinded under a horrible black velvet housing with a white border, the whole looked like a blind monster with twelve human legs, shuffling and blundering along under the guidance of two keepers — the postboy and his comrade.

The neighbourhood, however, highly approved of these arrangements, and we were much admired as we went through the village, the more youthful and vigorous part of the community making dashes now and then to cut us off, and lying in wait to intercept us at points of vantage. (*GE*, pp. 276–77)

Much of the humour comes from the ostentatious theatricality of the performance: the carefully scripted gestures and stage props deployed to absurd effect. The ubiquitous pocket handkerchiefs have become a statutory item for the display of grief and Mrs Joe’s coffin, metamorphosed into a giant insect blundering along on human legs, exhibits Dickens’s characteristic confusion of the animate and the inanimate. Pip’s acute consciousness both of being looked at, and of watching the spectacle from the various vantage points along the route of the procession, is part of the theatrical effect; but it also recalls his own humiliating progress through the town five chapters earlier when he was persecuted by the parodic antics of that ‘unlimited miscreant’, Trabb’s boy (*GE*, p. 242). The account of Mrs Joe’s funeral thus provokes laughter at the absurdity of its opulent furnishing, while at the same time it is narrated with a bad conscience, shadowed by the very pretensions to gentility that Pip is otherwise disavowing.

In conclusion, then, what are we to make of these recurring satiric portraits in Dickens’s fiction of the respectable Victorian funeral and other practices of commemoration and sepulture? They certainly contrast with the sort of sentimental deathbed scenes for which the *Saturday Review* attacked Dickens in the article with which I began. Dickens’s engagement with the material culture of mourning tells us something about the problematic capacity of objects to serve the purposes of commemoration in an expanding commercial society, something about their ability or inability to express

authentic feeling and to bind the living and the dead together. Another of the items of mourning paraphernalia to be found in *Great Expectations* may provide a final illustration of this point. In the second volume of the novel, Pip meets Wemmick for the first time and remarks that

he appeared to have sustained a good many bereavements, for, he wore at least four mourning rings, besides a brooch representing a lady and a weeping willow at a tomb with an urn on it. I noticed too that several rings and seals hung at his watch-chain, as if he were quite laden with remembrances of departed friends. (*GE*, p. 169)

Wemmick later explains to Pip that these are all gifts from previous clients:

‘I always take ’em’, he says. ‘They may not be worth much, but, after all, they’re property and portable. It don’t signify to you with your brilliant look-out, but as to myself, my guiding star always is, Get hold of portable property’. (*GE*, p. 199).

While Wemmick’s explanation of his mourning jewellery as ‘portable property’ may seem to suggest that it represents nothing more to him than its cash equivalent, these commemorative objects do in fact carry affective value for him, albeit of a peculiar kind. Commenting upon one of the casts he has lifted down to dust in Mr Jaggers’s office, Wemmick addresses it fondly:

‘You had a particular fancy for me, hadn’t you, Old Artful?’ said Wemmick. He then explained this affectionate apostrophe, by touching his brooch representing the lady and the weeping willow at the tomb with the urn upon it, and saying, ‘Had it made for me, express!’

‘Is the lady anybody?’ [asks Pip.]

‘No’, returned Wemmick. ‘Only his game. (You liked your bit of game, didn’t you?) No; deuce a bit of a lady in the case, Mr Pip, except one — and she wasn’t of this slender lady-like sort, and you wouldn’t have caught her looking after this urn — unless there was something to drink in it’. (*GE*, p. 198)

Significantly, it is the subversion of conventional commemorative sentiment in the brooch that makes it a repository of affection for Wemmick, notwithstanding its value as portable property. He appreciates the ‘game’ — the shared joke involved in using clichéd symbols of mourning so ironically incongruous with the parties they are meant to commemorate. The game personalizes the brooch and gives it affective value.

How such mementoes, and other memorials, words and artefacts, may be made to convey truth of feeling when they are at the same time commodified is clearly a persistent problem for Dickens. While Victorian mourning customs and ceremonies seek to ensure

that the dead will have a continuing social presence among the living, their capacity to do so seems to be compromised by the effects of commerce and fashion, which mediate and potentially falsify emotion. Yet Dickens himself was hardly an ‘uncommercial’ writer, as Juliet John has so compellingly shown.⁵⁰ Although he advocated an aesthetic of simplicity and restraint with regard to funerals and monuments, which can be found represented in the memorial tablet of Agnes Fleming or in Scrooge’s tombstone, this sort of minimalist approach runs against his own stylistic bent, his expansive, comic genius, and is used sparingly. Instead, he relishes the ironic description of the sable fantasies of the undertaker — his enjoyment of the absurd panoply associated with Mrs Joe’s funeral is surely palpable — and in this way his ambivalent attitude towards the material culture of mourning emerges. Even as he deplores the grotesque funeral mummery of Sowerberry, Mould, Trabb and Co., and other so-called ‘medicine men of civilization’, or even as he lampoons the epitaphic self-advertisements of a John Chivery or a Thomas Sapsea, Dickens finds an ‘attraction of repulsion’ in the paraphernalia of death that stems from his deep fascination with the unclear boundary between people and things.

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¹ Unsigned review of the Library Edition of the *Works*, *Saturday Review*, 8 May 1858. Reprinted in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 383–84.

² George Stott, ‘Charles Dickens’, *Contemporary Review*, 10 (January 1869), 203–25. In *Critical Heritage*, ed. by Collins, p. 498.

³ [Anon.], ‘Two English Novelists: Dickens and Thackeray’, *Dublin Review*, n.s., 16 (April 1871), 315–50. In *Critical Heritage*, ed. by Collins, p. 551.

⁴ Mowbray Morris, ‘Charles Dickens’, *Fortnightly Review*, n.s., 32 (1 December 1882), 762–79. In Collins, *Critical Heritage*, p. 610.

⁵ Inside wrapper for the October (number 6) issue of Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. While originally published in weekly instalments in *All the Year Round*, the novel was also issued in monthly parts from June to December 1859.

⁶ ‘Unsigned Review’, in Collins, *Critical Heritage*, p. 383.

⁷ Michael Hollington, ‘The Voice of Objects in *The Old Curiosity Shop*’, *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 14 (2009), 1–8 (p. 1).

⁸ See Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

⁹ Bill Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1–22 (p.7).

¹⁰ Charles Dickens, 'Meditations in Monmouth Street', in *Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers 1833–39*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Dent, 1994), pp. 76–82 (p. 78).

¹¹ John Carey discusses this feature of Dickens's work most memorably in Chapter 4 of his *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London: Faber, 1973).

¹² John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), p. 14.

¹³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 133.

¹⁴ Nicola Bown, 'Empty Hands and Precious Pictures: Post-Mortem Photographs of Children', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 14 (2009), 8–24 (p. 20)

¹⁵ Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 100.

¹⁶ [Charles Dickens], 'Received, A Blank Child', *Household Words*, 7 (19 March 1853), 49–53 (p. 50).

¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 440.

Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁸ Slater, *Charles Dickens*, p. 124.

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, 'Essay upon Epitaphs [I]', in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 49–62 (pp. 57, 53) (original emphasis).

²⁰ William Wordsworth, 'Essay upon Epitaphs [II]', in *Prose Works*, ed. by Owen and Smyser, pp. 63–79 (p. 76).

²¹ Wordsworth, 'Essay on Epitaphs [I]', pp. 58, 66.

²² Wordsworth, 'Essay on Epitaphs [I]', p. 60.

²³ 'Cemeteries and Churchyards', *Quarterly Review*, 73 (1843–44), 438–77 (pp. 465–66).

²⁴ [James Hannay], 'Graves and Epitaphs', *Household Words*, 6 (16 October 1852), 105–09 (p. 105).

²⁵ [Hannay], 'Graves and Epitaphs', p. 108.

²⁶ [Hannay], 'Graves and Epitaphs', p. 108.

²⁷ [Hannay], 'Graves and Epitaphs', p. 106.

²⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 128. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

²⁹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 394.

³⁰ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 12. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

³¹ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 3. Further references are given after quotations in the text. (Original emphasis).

³² Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

³³ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. by Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 179.

³⁴ [Hannay], 'Graves and Epitaphs', p. 106.

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- ³⁵ Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 28.
- ³⁶ Wendy Jacobsen, *The Companion to 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. 65.
- ³⁷ Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, p. 52.
- ³⁸ [Hannay], 'Graves and Epitaphs', p. 109.
- ³⁹ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. by A. J. Hoppé, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1966), II, 421.
- ⁴⁰ Charles Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol', in *Christmas Books*, ed. by Ruth Glancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 76. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
- ⁴¹ Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 271.
- ⁴² 'Cemeteries and Churchyards', p. 466 (emphasis in original).
- ⁴³ *Punch*, 18 (January–June 1850) pp. 5, 185.
- ⁴⁴ Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, p. 20.
- ⁴⁵ [Dickens], 'From the Raven in the Happy Family [II]', *Household Words*, 1 (8 June 1850), 241–42 (p. 242).
- ⁴⁶ [Dickens], 'From the Raven in the Happy Family [III]', pp. 241–42.
- ⁴⁷ See Chapter 2 of Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's 'Household Words'* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).
- ⁴⁸ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 743. Further references are given after quotation in the text.
- ⁴⁹ Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, pp. 19, 11.
- ⁵⁰ Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).