DICKENS AND THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

ALAN SHELSTON

The title of this essay implies perhaps a connection between Dickens and T.S. Eliot: “The Burial of the Dead” is the title of the opening section of *The Waste Land*, and associations between Eliot’s urban poetry and the city of Dickens are familiar ground. But Eliot, of course, took his title from the Anglican liturgy, where it appears as the title of the funeral service. Dickens, in Eliot’s phrase, had a “love for death”, in the pages of his fiction certainly: we think of the deaths of Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*, of little Paul Dombey, of Jo in *Bleak House*, and most famously of Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, all lovingly prepared for and ruthlessly executed. Furthermore, if Dickens had a vested interest in fictional deaths he rarely left the bodies unburied. One of the earliest memories of David Copperfield is of the preparations for his mother’s funeral, with the tapping of the hammer of Mr Omer, “DRAPER, TAILOR, HABERDASHER, FUNERAL FURNISHER, &c” (125, ch. 9),¹ as he nails down her coffin – a sound that David only half understands, but whose portent he certainly fears – and Dickens himself was to become expert on funeral practices. From the pages of his early novels in particular we might write a history of the undertaking profession in the first half of the nineteenth century. In *Oliver Twist* we have Mr Sowerberry, blessed with a wife who “had a good deal of taste in the undertaking way” (33, ch. 5). Sowerberry, like Mr Omer, is a small town practitioner who is astutely aware of developments in his profession. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* there is Mr Mould, whose cheerfulness of manner belies his name. Mould, like Sowerberry, is driven by his consciousness of the relationship between bereavement and ceremonial, but his is a London practice and rather grander. Sowerberry’s profits are small, but then, as Mr Bumble notices, so were his coffins. Mr Mould is introduced to the reader as a “professional person”: he observes that “the laying-

¹ All page references to works by Dickens included in the text are to the relevant volume of the Oxford Illustrated Dickens, London, 1947-58. In this edition, separate volumes are devoted to *Master Humphrey’s Clock* and *The Uncommercial Traveller* and page references to these works are to these volumes. For convenience of reference to other editions, chapter references, and in the case of *The Uncommercial Traveller* essay titles, are also given.
out of money with a well-conducted establishment, where the thing is performed on the very best scale, binds the broken heart, and sheds balm on the wounded spirit” (321, ch. 19). In Dombey and Son the “grand funeral” of little Paul with its “feathers” which “wind their gloomy way along the streets” (240, ch. 18) is in sad contrast to the desolation of the occasion, and in Bleak House the contrast between high and low is never more starkly demonstrated than it is by the extremes of the mausoleum at Chesney Wold where Lady Dedlock is finally laid to rest and the burial-ground in Tom-all-Alone’s where her lover lies in an unmarked grave. Two of the three final illustrations of Bleak House are of these locations: they remind us, finally and emphatically, that in their deaths the Victorians were very much divided (figs 6, 7). Most famous of all of Dickens’s deaths is that of Little Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop: not only does the novel conclude with her death and carefully described interment, but her progress in life reads at times like a guidebook to the graveyards of rural England. In this essay I shall disinter for one more time the corpse of Little Nell, and then suggest that Dickens’s interest not only in death but in the burial that comes after it has a dimension that goes beyond the fictional, both for him and for his contemporaries. I shall argue in particular that the processes of urban burial focus anxieties for Dickens’s generation and indeed for his successors on the London scene about what might really be involved in the passage from this life to the next.

To some extent Dickens’s fascination not only with death, but with the apparatus that surrounds it, is a matter of personality. Not long before the death of Little Nell, Edgar Allen Poe was published for the first time in England, in Bentley’s Miscellany, the periodical which Dickens had edited, and in which he published Oliver Twist. Poe’s fascination in particular with stories of being buried not dead but alive is something that we find in Dickens, too. The obsession with death and burial is a strange one for a young man still in his twenties – just how intense it was we can see from the circumstances surrounding the original publication of The Old Curiosity Shop which began in 1840. The first instalments of the novel appeared in the early numbers of Dickens’s purpose-built periodical Master Humphrey’s Clock. In fact, the novel soon took over the periodical completely, and the separate material from the early numbers is now largely forgotten. But if we go back to the stories which precede The Old Curiosity Shop in the opening pages of the Clock we find that they are all concerned with matters of death and burial. One of them, for example, is told by a narrator awaiting execution for the murder of his nephew, whom he has buried in his own garden. “‘While I write this’, he says, ‘my grave is digging and my name is written in the black book of death’” (42). Another of

---

2 All of the illustrations referred to in this paper are taken from the original editions of the works concerned. In the case of Bleak House, these were by Hablot K. Browne (“Phiz”).
3 The Fall of the House of Usher first appeared in England in Bentley’s Miscellany, VIII, 1840. By this time, Harrison Ainsworth had taken over the editorship of the journal.