

Crooked Antics: The Visions of Jenny Wren in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*

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Abstract. The art and aesthetics of the Victorian period are often interpreted through lay culture as representing unproblematic ideals of beauty. The acceptance of certain axiomatic conceits influences literary interpretation within the academy too. In Dickens's final published novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), the young cripple, Jenny Wren, conveys two transcendental experiences: being borne aloft by her 'blessed children' when in pain, and smelling 'miles of flowers' whilst working in the porch of her dingy city lodging. These have been read by critics as evocations of comfort and escape, linked to a beneficent Christian ethos. I challenge these readings as a way of positing that Dickens himself wanted to suggest something commensurate to the greatest extent of pain or suffering, when physiological register can segue into the hallucinatory. I look closely at the imagery and language that Dickens uses to articulate Jenny's conceits to realize the aesthetic mechanics and to ask whether these can be judged as beautiful, celestial, or if there is a greater complexity at play. I invite suggestion as to a similar reappraisal of our canonical acceptance of dreamy beauty in late Pre-Raphaelite art, where the effect of satiety might trigger uncomfortable as opposed to purely appreciative feelings. The purpose of my essay is to interrogate our staple ideas of beauty in Victorian culture. On a broader level this might premise a critique of a still prevailing stereotype that Victorian beauty is commensurate to inanity, tweeness, or even lack of intelligence.

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Our Mutual Friend (1864–65), Dickens's last completed novel, represents an anchor point in several ways: a maturation in the sophistication and ambiguity of the author's characterization and moral problematics, and an investment in the cultural climate of aestheticism, anticipating at times the souring of the era's veneration of beauty in the knowing pulchritude of decadence. This article examines the visions of the 'little crooked antic of a child', Jenny Wren, as a way of focusing on anchorage tensions.¹ We can view these as leavening

¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 226. All future references to this edition in text.

our understanding of Jenny's character, and locating those cultural presences, but most importantly as showcasing how her words, and the aesthetic specifics of the multi-sensory experiences they convey, represent palpable measures of unease. Scrutiny allows us to reappraise not only the local instances in Dickens's novel, but to probe the paradigms, which at first reading may pertain readily to generic tropes of beauty and comfort, that Dickens employs.

Jenny Wren, an impoverished dolls' dressmaker implicitly in late childhood or early adolescence, lives with her friend Lizzie Hexam and her sorry father, nicknamed 'Mr Dolls', an alcoholic dependent. Her disability affects her lower body; she is of stunted growth and carries a 'little crutch-stick' to aid mobility (p. 433). Twice in *Our Mutual Friend* Jenny relays experiences of disconnect from reality that manifest as escalations of the physiological senses. The first is an olfactory happening, when she suddenly smells 'miles of flowers' whilst working in the evening; the second describes the visual apparition of angel-like beings, Jenny's 'blessed children', descending to relieve her from pain (pp. 239–40). Critics have not overlooked the fact that Jenny's conceits abut or disguise material discomfort, but trust in their efficacy and in Jenny's supernumerary agency, typically appraising 'a heightened imaginative faculty that helps her survive difference'.² An archetypal sublimity is inferred, as well as the success of the transcendent moment. I question this, seeing these compacted narratives as having secular dangers: pain, illness, proximity of death, *built within*, as opposed to disjoined in their entirety. In addition, I see critical explication as best facilitated by plastic contrivances, artworks and artefacts, as opposed to spiritual ideologies. I keep the designation 'visions' for ease of reference, though my purpose is to interrogate their multiform complexity.

Jenny is equipped with a celestial singing voice and keen musical ear that, like her 'golden bower' of luxuriant hair, disarm those who register physical awkwardness as a galling reminder of earthly mischance (p. 439). Her presence at the bedside of the convalescent Eugene Wrayburn, near fatally injured in an attack toward the novel's end, is marked by her palliative singing and also by his direct referencing of those breaks with reality: 'Ask her if she has seen the children? [...] if she has smelt the flowers?' (p. 737). It is possible that Eugene, the character most cognisant with the ironies of contemporary discourse, humours Jenny's visions as self-preserving feint. If so, he acknowledges a striated psychological strength predicated on internal antitheses. The unspoken subtext is one of shared suffering and partial coping mechanisms, as opposed to accreditation of fantasy. The two characters are already connected through a metatextual in-joke. For much of Dickens's novel Jenny is effectively side-lined 'as [one] who should moralise, "Oh this world, this world!"' (p. 224). Others make the lazy assumption that her difference makes Jenny inviolable to affect,

² See Melissa Free, 'Freaks That Matter: The Dolls' Dressmaker, the Doctor's Assistant, and the Limits of Difference', in *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*, ed. by Marlene Tromp (Ohio: Ohio State University, 2008), pp. 259–81 (p. 260).

possessed of a more objective view of human relations. But the phrase echoes the sentiment — if not the precise titular wording — of Thomas Middleton's play, *A Mad World, My Masters* (1608). Jenny's preoccupation with social hierarchies strengthens the link: 'Don't look like anybody's master', she muses, when introduced to the odious Fascination Fledgeby (p. 280). We register the undertones of barbaric sensuality that the Jacobean stage genre brings, wherein identities are so skewed as to disrupt normative readings or resolution. Eugene dubs himself 'Sir Eugene Bountiful' in parallel to Middleton's male lead, Sir Bounteous Progress, a lascivious old county knight (p. 237).³ Problematic patron and court commentator, freak, or fool: both he and Jenny participate in something to which only T.S. Eliot, reprising Middleton in *The Waste Land*, the working title of which derived from *Our Mutual Friend*, pays tangential tribute.⁴

Jenny relays her vision of 'blessed children' when speaking to Eugene and to Lizzie, individuals she trusts. Although articulated second to her audience, this comes first in her life narrative, as she herself reveals:

For when I was a little child [...] the children that I used to see early in the morning were very different from any others I ever saw. They were not like me: they are not chilled, anxious, ragged, or beaten: they were never in pain. They were not like the children of the neighbours; they never made me tremble all over, by setting up shrill noises, and they never mocked me. Such numbers of them, too! All in white dresses, and with something shining on the borders, and on their heads, that I have never been able to imitate with my work, though I know it so well. They used to come down in long bright slanting rows, and say all together, 'Who is this in pain? Who is this in pain?' When I told them who it was, they answered, 'Come and play with us!'. When I said, 'I never play! I can't play!' they swept about me and took me up, and made me light. Then it was all delicious ease and rest till they laid me down, and said all together, 'Have patience, and we will come again.' (p. 239)

The negative disclosure of permitted memory is only just held in abeyance by the apparently benign calibre of the redress. We learn that these 'children' are not 'like' young Jenny: 'they are not chilled, anxious, ragged, or beaten: they were never in pain'. 'Pain' — a concept notoriously broad in semantic range — here bridges physical pain, from cold, degradation, to implicit abuse ('beaten') and psychological pain.⁵ A rough designation of the latter might be that it involves an absence, loss, or stress that must exist within a functioning psyche: the unacceptable housed in variant spatial relation to everyday thought. Here,

³ See Thomas Middleton, *A Mad World, My Masters*, ed. by Standish Henning (London: Edward Arnold, 1965).

⁴ Eliot's title for Section II, 'A Game of Chess', echoes Middleton's 1624 play of the same name. See T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ed. by Michael North (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 2001), p. 8 n. 6. The poem's working title was 'He do the Police in different voices' from *Our Mutual Friend* (p. 192).

⁵ 'Pain [...] a host of phenomena'. See Joanna Bourke, 'What is Pain? A History. *The Prothero Lecture*', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 23 (2013), 155–73 (p. 155).

the shocking plot revelation comes in a preliminary exchange which suggests that Jenny's disability may have been the preventable outcome of child labour exploitation:

'Why, if we were all as industrious as you, little Busy-Body, we should begin to work as soon as we could crawl, and there would be a bad thing!' 'Do you mean,' returned the little creature, with a flush suffusing her face, 'bad for your back and your legs?' (p. 238)

Then we learn of Jenny's childhood peers: '[t]hey were not like the children of neighbours; they never made me tremble all over, by setting up shrill noises, and they never mocked me'. '[S]etting up' captures the paranoia of being panicked by commotion that cannot be located, especially by one incapacitated physically.

Suffering informs the conceit itself in three interlinking ways: psychological, physical, and aesthetic. 'Pain' — a word of almost phonetic agency, such is the long keen of its vowel sound — forfeits that through repetition, with each reappearance losing some of its thrust, until it becomes anaesthetized within the mantra: 'Who is this in pain?'. It is perhaps a measure of the child's own survival strategy that reality is dispersed into narrative, thereby breaking up potency, just as Jenny's hand is incrementally raised '[b]y degrees', so marking time on the organic seep of 'this remembrance' (p. 240). Damaged children throughout Dickens's oeuvre use words as literal cover, helping to modify reality for both bystanders and readers, sewing back and forth over the breach with devices such as Paul Dombey's articulate 'waves' and Johnny Higden's animate toys.⁶

'[E]arly in the morning', alone and presumably prostrate, Jenny lives through her pain. Were she to have died, her apotheosis (inevitably then, recycled by another) may have segued into the ethereality that both subscribes to aesthetic convention, Christian platitudes, and represents a physical relenting. (George Cattermole's illustration of Little Nell's ascent to heaven, cradled by graceful angels and axiomatic cloud, embodies this.)⁷ As it is, Jenny's vignette could be read as housing within it the resistance of the body as it fights threat. Her hallucinatory experience could be adduced as arising from the liminal margin of extreme pain, wherein the body ignites some kind of 'near death' eventuality, un-commandeered by cerebral consciousness. This pre-empts developed taxonomies such as Joanna Bourke's, who conceptualizes pain as a 'type of event', and implicitly emphasizes the infinitesimal, potentially segregated nature of 'being-in-pain'.⁸

The defining aesthetic qualities of Jenny's 'blessed children' are *indeterminate*

⁶ See chapter 16, 'What the Waves were always saying', in Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 236–41; *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 330.

⁷ 'Tailpiece [The soul of Little Nell ascending]' (1841), reproduced in Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 355 (illus.).

⁸ See Bourke, p. 160.

brightness: ‘all in white dresses, with something shining on their heads’, and *conglomerate* action, a hard, martial stringency: ‘Such numbers of them [...] in long bright slanting rows’. A conventional topos, fatally skewed, Jenny isn’t granted the clarity that gives little Paul Dombey the privilege of aesthetic, and thereby semantic, enjoyment when he contemplates the Rembrandt etching of Christ at Doctor Blimber’s.⁹ The brightness may result from Jenny’s eyes being semi-closed, comprehending form through colour and luminosity as opposed to detail, or her struggling to corral the very sense of sight through delirium. The hardness of the angelic formation, by contrast, makes this corpus literally ‘not-at-home’, *unheimlich*, as if a foreign body asserts itself upon the wavering, untenable, business of mediating aggressive pain.¹⁰ Perhaps the figures owe their homogeneity to Jenny’s singular resolve. Only at the point of conceptual disjuncture do they seem to offer something pervasive, fluid, when Jenny is lifted up, ‘made light’, and feels ‘delicious ease’. This median zone of utter disconnect could be interpreted as the trance-like state induced by drugs. Opium-based painkillers were readily available in pharmacies catering to the working classes during the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹ Fittingly, ‘delicious’ offers an expansiveness and delectation which breaks free from the promissory bulk of Jenny’s account. There is a hint of sensuousness that belongs to the heart of 1860s Aestheticism and sits at odds with the remedial in the religious, or morally instructive, respect.

To shed light upon this angelic body as potentially ‘unkind’, alien, and strange as opposed to unambiguously ‘blessed’, I wish to consider a few parallel artefacts that provide creative sounding rather than scholarly parity. Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s poem, ‘The Blessed Damozel’ (first published in *The Germ*, 1850), documents a tale of liminality that is similarly conceived and just as integrally ambivalent. Did Dickens know it? He was aware of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which Rossetti had helped inaugurate, and wrote a damning critique of their art for *Household Words*.¹² Rossetti’s beautiful, deceased protagonist speaks from ‘the gold bar of heaven’, looking down upon earth in a geocentric model redolent of medieval philosophy.¹³ Illicitly, she misses her human lover,

⁹ See *Dombey and Son*, p. 206. Leonée Ormond identifies this as *Christ Healing the Sick*, the so-called ‘Hundred Guilder Print’, in ‘Dickens and Painting: Contemporary Art’, *Dickensian*, 80 (1984), 3–25 (p. 21).

¹⁰ As per Freud’s study of ‘the German word *unheimlich* [of which the nearest semantic equivalents in English are “uncanny” and “eerie”, but which etymologically corresponds to “unhomely”]’. See Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, in *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 121–62 (p. 124). I take ‘not-at-home’ from Valentine Cunningham’s bipartite rendering of ‘*unheimlich* [...] uncanny/not-at-home’; see Valentine Cunningham, ‘Dickens and Christianity’, in David Paroissien, ed., *A Companion to Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 255–76 (p. 275), n. 4.

¹¹ See Terry M. Parssinen, *Secret Passions, Secret Remedies: Narcotic Drugs in British Society 1820–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 42–58.

¹² ‘Old Lamps for New Ones’ (15 June 1850). See Charles Dickens, *Selected Journalism 1850–1870*, ed. by David Pascoe (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 521–26.

¹³ See Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘The Blessed Damozel’, reproduced in Jerome McGann, ed., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), l. 2.

and longs for him, her still extant desire exerting a stronger pull than any impulse of devotion. ‘The Blessed Damozel’ becomes a poem about obedience and disobedience, and of bad fit. It is terrifying as opposed to comforting. Rossetti’s angels bear that out. They are initially portrayed as passive conscripts through the damozel’s own account: seamstresses (like Jenny) weaving robes for newcomers:

Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
And foreheads garlandly;
Into the fine cloth white like flame
Weaving the golden thread.
To fashion the birth-robes for them
Who are just born, being dead.¹⁴

The flatness of that final note, ‘being dead’, effects a dull thud that conveys a shiver of disgust. Later, the celestial crew become more threatening, ranged like a military platoon: ‘The light thrill’d towards her, fill’d | With angels in strong level flight’.¹⁵

Whether or not the Rossetti parallel is credible, we must note the similarity to Jenny’s quintessential moment, when she peers through the roof opening of Pubsey & Co., ‘looking down out of a Glory of her long bright radiant hair’, summoning visitors to ‘Come up and be dead!’ (p. 282). There is the comparable conceit of a mass acting as one, and a lone outsider comprehending that. ‘Blessed’ is ambiguous in both contexts, slippery to an almost iconoclastic degree. Rossetti’s protagonist belies her title and the poem, resisting her role as one of Christ’s handmaidens in her trenchantly earthly heart. Jenny’s designation of would-be carers as ‘my blessed children’ derives alike from maladaptation. She performs the same semantic revolution on her dissolute father, the ‘troublesome bad child’ (p. 240). Is this because Jenny had to take responsibility — retain things in her purview — from an early age, or are these visionary figures a needfully rigid corrective to the real children who bullied her younger self?

So, blessedness has an ambiguous role, as does Jenny’s relationship with Christianity and the Christian templates that her vision gestures towards but never feels fully invested in. Though it may be orthodox iconography that underpins Dickens’s imaginative feat. A possible progenitor are the Gothic wall frescoes that he encountered on his visits to Italy in 1844 and 1853. Italy was much on the author’s mind during the early 1860s; ‘I shut my eyes for a moment and stand in front of your zebra-like Siena Cathedral, and it is almost as plainly before me as this English landscape’, he reminisced in August 1863.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., ll. 109–14.

¹⁵ Ibid., ll. 136–37.

¹⁶ To W. W. Story, 1 August 1863, reproduced in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey and Angus Easson, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965–2002), x (1862–4), pp. 278–79 (p. 278).

Scholars have noted Dickens's preference for colourful Venetian art as opposed to the more linear Florentine tradition.¹⁷ But Jenny's 'long bright slanting rows [...] all together a long way off' take, if any, anatomical inspiration from the flat figurative arrangements of the early Trecento masters, who often assimilated their votaries (angels or patrons) into congregations of duplicate shapes, framing the subject as design as well as narrative ploy (p. 239). Duccio's *Maestà* altarpiece in Siena Cathedral is a magnificent example.¹⁸ The insistent visuality of Jenny's conceit is recalled in her attempt to replicate the components: 'All [...] that I have never been able to imitate with my work, though I know it so well' (p. 239). Such dazzling hybridity is the very antidote to motley emotion.

Had she proved successful, might Jenny have produced something akin to the artist, and one-time Pre-Raphaelite, Edward Burne-Jones's more contemporary image, *The Golden Stairs* (1876–80), with its lack of narrative and phosphorescent glow?¹⁹ The hypothesis requires the maturation of textual clues into full visuality, but there is something about the segregated rank of maidens that Jenny's 'blessed children' pre-empt. Furthermore, the painting generates the same receptive paradox for the viewer as Jenny's testament does for the reader: a literal inducement of soporific effect (transport) through a two-dimensional semblance of beauty. To become absorbed is to become lost, and figurative repetition and impermeable facial expressions service this. Burne-Jones's 'generalised Botticellian types' — legitimately inspired by Italian Renaissance art — compel and reject in tandem.²⁰

Such an aesthetic and physiological paradox grounds my reading of Jenny's second visionary experience:

I wonder how it happens that when I am work, work, working here, all alone in the summer-time, I smell flowers [...] I smell miles of flowers. I smell roses till I think I see the rose-leaves lying in heaps, bushels, on the floor. I smell fallen leaves till I put down my hand — so — and expect to make them rustle. I smell the white and pink May in the hedges, and all sorts of flowers that I never was among. (pp. 238–39)

Dickens has Jenny emphasize the nature of what she *does* through triplicate phrasing — 'I am work, work, working here' — which refers to seamstress labour (allusively, and broadly, women's 'work' in fiction).²¹ The implication is of unrelenting process. Karl Marx's deduction that the individual finds

¹⁷ See Leonée Ormond, 'Dickens and Painting: The Old Masters', *Dickensian*, 79 (1983), 130–51.

¹⁸ See 'Virgin and Child Enthroned with Angels, Saints and Apostles', Front of the *Maestà*, reproduced in Luciano Bellosi, *Duccio: The Maestà* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), pp. 24–25 (illus.). For Dickens's account of Siena, see 'To Rome by Pisa and Siena' [*sic*], in Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, ed. by Kate Flint (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 102–15.

¹⁹ Edward Burne-Jones, *The Golden Stairs*, 1876–80, oil on canvas, 106 x 46cm, Tate Britain, London.

²⁰ Burne-Jones used one model for figurative reference. See Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989), pp. 113, 125 (illus.).

²¹ From Penelope to Pamela; see 'Letter XV', Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, ed. by Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 29–33.

erroneous subjectivity in the mode of production in which he or she is employed has pertinence: '[t]he individual relates simply to the objective conditions of labour [...] as the inorganic nature of his subjectivity, in which the latter realises itself'.²² There is the real-time impression, conveyed through the prose incline, of Jenny's working herself beyond an acceptable limit. It is at this juncture that she 'smell[s] flowers'. In the dubious locale of Westminster, built on marshy land near the unsavoury river, Jenny's experience must do more than most to counter reality. Once she has a hold on her transport, so to speak, it becomes an escalating process in itself: 'I smell roses *till* I think I see the rose-leaves lying in heaps [...] smell fallen leaves *till* I put down my hand [...] and expect to make them rustle' (italics mine). One physiological sense triggers another, in varying degrees of realization.

What strikes the reader is the concept of quantity: 'miles of flowers', 'heaps, bushels, on the floor', and, in a similar shift to excess, the implication that these blooms have almost gone over: 'fallen leaves' are autumnal stock, scent itself most heady when auguring decease. Again, there is a parallel to Jenny's physical vulnerability, working beyond sense in two ways. Rationality segues into irrationality through the premise of fantasy as opposed to imagination: 'all sorts of flowers that I never was among'. We think of the notorious Emperor Heliogabalus, reported to have asphyxiated his courtiers in a profusion of flowers. Though Dickens is unlikely to have read the Augustan histories, Heliogabalus (also known as Elegabalus) was emerging as a cultural cipher, referenced in Théophile Gautier's seminal novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), and three stories by his friend Edgar Allan Poe.²³ The dark tale is an eloquent warning against sensory overload of any kind, and the corollary to decadence is persuasive.²⁴ Closely related is the potential for eroticization in any dynamic where rudimentary action presages sensory release. More pertinent to Jenny, perhaps, is the alternative physiological transport of protracted work producing a queasy state of grace. The dancer whose arduous practice suddenly authorizes the freest movement; the writer who hammers the keys until words flow unprompted: such tropes sit at an uneasy juncture between mysticism and neuroscience.²⁵

²² 'Notebook V, 22 January — Beginning of February 1858', Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 481–554 (p. 485).

²³ See Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 219–20. For an account of Dickens's knowledge of the classics, see Iain Crawford, 'Dickens, Classical Myth, and the Representation of Social Order in Barnaby Rudge', *The Dickensian*, 93.3 (1997), 185–96. He gives an account of Dickens's 'solid grounding in Latin' and familiarity with a 'body of classical learning' (p. 185).

²⁴ Lawrence Alma-Tadema's painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) is the most famous Victorian rendition, likely sourced from the *Scriptures Historiae Augustae*. See R. J. Barrow, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London: Phaidon, 2001), pp. 134–37 (illus. pl. 131).

²⁵ See ballet dancer Edward Watson in conversation with Meg Rosoff, 'Art and the Unconscious Mind', *Artsnight*, 5 August 2016: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07n2w8t>>.

Within the story of a damaged girl on the brink of adolescence, these radii dimensions of Jenny's visionary experiences should not be ignored. Through close scrutiny of outwardly conventional paradigms of beauty, we find that Dickens has not simply serviced a Victorian appetite for sweetness and light. He has both mined the intricacies of his character's reality and provided throughways to the decadent period's accommodation of paradox, enriching his creation aesthetically and epistemologically as a result.²⁶

²⁶ '[P]aradox, a trope which crucially underpins decadent writing'. See 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to The Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–12 (p. 11).