

Theoretically opposed to idealist abstracting is Oppenheim's appeal to "temporality," and I read her as stressing the absolute flow of time in aesthetic experience. I have no objection to reader-response analysts' exploring the single dimension of subject-object relations in the aesthetic event. I never thought, however, of my being, in Oppenheim's terms, "forced to touch on the temporal constitution. . . ." I had thought that my discussion led rather naturally to the direct observation of audience-subject/play-object relations in Section v. But that dimension of audience vis-à-vis performance only opens us up again to manifold dimensions that involve imaginative constitution of a world not fully and immediately present as well as the (absent) "reality" of the artist (Sec. vi). Thus my discussion involved historical temporality and my moment. I found it important to at least notice certain differences between Ostrovsky's and Chekhov's plays, differences grounded both in time, culture, and aesthetic theory and in the playwrights' revealed selves. If I could not, as Oppenheim says, "take full account of the temporal evidence," my omission lay at the multiple temporal levels, not simply at the level of constitutive aesthetic activity. Examinations of, and comments on, texts are not pure analysis or description, bound in a single series of moments that I could lay out in my discussion as a pristine record of my aesthetic moments; rather they are in some sense "deconstructive." With my necessarily limited experience of historical-biographical contexts, I am not only "reading" a text but also "reconstructing" it *for my purposes* (again, necessarily). Thus any such activity "reveals" and "conceals." And most such reconstructive activity, though developing from, and I would hope remaining close to, the radical temporality of aesthetic activity, involves both intentionality and intuitions of order that are neither purely subjective nor absolutely there in the "object" but instead complicated. If I merely described the temporal aesthetic I would hardly get beyond it and into the intersubjectivity that is assumed by my even talking about it.

I defend my approach, then, by invoking (as in the article) multiplicity, possibility, tentativeness. I decline Oppenheim's advice, not because my discussion is uncorrectable or unneeded of improvement and expansion, but because her demand is restrictive. It would take me back to abstract, static presuppositions like "presuppositionlessness," and it would in the name of temporality restrict me to a theoretical abstraction that reduces temporality to absolute moment. Though Oppenheim seems to like "mobility" and "potentiality," she seems to want to limit the practice of the (many) phenomenologies

(and save *the* phenomenology from the merely "phenomenalistic"), thereby reducing phenomenology to a pure, logocentric, ideal *unity*—the "formal-logical univocity" Heidegger eschews for the sake of "multiple mobility." By multiple mobility, at least, Heidegger and I (a small fish swimming after him) hope to get off the abstract hook.

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The Victorians and Death

To the Editor:

John Kucich presents an ingenious critical reading in "Death Worship among the Victorians: *The Old Curiosity Shop*" (*PMLA*, 95 [1980], 58–72). I have chosen the word "reading" carefully, however, to suggest a limitation, as well as the strength, of Kucich's approach. For despite brief references to Victorian funeral practices and to other contemporary writing, his essay essentially reads the novel's text but ignores or inadequately represents its necessary context.

This failing is evident in Kucich's presentation of a key part of his argument, the assumption "that the Victorians were able to value, as an initiation into a kind of transcendent genuineness, their contact with the abyss of negativity represented by death and that they were able to express this genuineness in a way that was more than just culturally acceptable." Kucich prefaces this generalization by first noting the extravagance of Victorian funerals, which he sees as indicative of a belief that death was "the most important event of an individual lifetime." Kucich then sets up as straw men two common explanations of this fascination with death: it was "a vehicle for stylized postromantic indulgences in emotion" and "a concession to or a defense . . . against grim fact," the "high early-death rate" (p. 59). Since neither explanation is adequate, the answer for Kucich is the embracing of death as an ultimate form of existential freedom and, through death, the cultivation of a deeper sense of community.

This argument misrepresents seriously the social realities of death and mourning in Victorian England. The old commonplace that the high death rate led to a self-indulgent cult of death simply will not do anymore; in fact, the death rate in the early 1840s—when *The Old Curiosity Shop* was published—was at a historic low. Overall mortality rates were in the vicinity of 22‰ (per thousand), and the infant mortality rate was roughly 150‰. (By contrast, 100 years earlier, the figures were 50‰ and 400–500‰.) Among the middle classes,

the bulk of Dickens' readership, mortality rates were lower still and infant mortality rates sharply lower. Clearly, if a new attitude toward death developed, it was a response not to more deaths but to fewer: the general expectation was that everyone would live longer; consequently death became more important because it was increasingly rare. Grief was correspondingly intense. One can think of many examples of extreme reactions to sudden and unexpected loss: Tennyson and Hallam, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and, of course, Dickens and Mary Hogarth. What all this suggests is that the Victorian attitude toward death was a way of coping with an overpowering sense of loss, all the more difficult to accept as traditional religious consolations diminished in importance. The Victorians did not mourn to achieve "negative transcendence" but to express profound grief.

The relevant biographical information that Kucich ignores is of similar import. The salient facts of Dickens' relationship with Mary Hogarth and his reaction to her death lead us toward the same conclusion, that his interest in death has more to do with an overwhelming sense of loss than an urge toward transcendence. Little Nell was a cipher for Mary (though Nell was more than just this), and in Nell's story Dickens rather transparently reenacts the death of her original. Dickens had been haunted by Mary's death in many ways: he had dreamed of Mary every night for a year after she died and had visited her sudden illness on Rose Maylie in *Oliver Twist*, though he allowed Rose to recover. As Freud wrote (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), the obsessive repetition of painful experiences is one way in which we seek to gain mastery over those experiences, and Dickens sought this mastery through Little Nell. Again, the point is much the same: Dickens uses Nell to compensate for the real loss of Mary Hogarth. And he arranges her death with less certainty than Kucich claims. Kucich concentrates on Nell's passive acceptance of death as a part of life, but virtually to the end she feels terror too. In Chapter IV, for example, the aged sexton shows her a well in the church crypt, which they agree "looks like a grave itself." Nell calls it "A black and dreadful place!" It may be true that Dickens *wants* the reader to see death as blessed release, but his praise of death does nothing to lift the pervading atmosphere of loss.

We come to another, perhaps more significant issue, that of the quality of Dickens' achievement. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is badly flawed, and the passages Kucich concentrates on are among the worst Dickens ever wrote. Dickens' advocacy of death is turgidly written, full of cant, and absolutely unconvincing. It is difficult not to attribute the style

directly to the subject matter. As Dickens wrote to a friend, Mrs. R. Watson, some years later (7 Dec. 1857), "Realities and idealities are always comparing themselves before me, and I don't like the Realities except when they are unobtainable—*then*, I like them of all things." The tension between the ideal and the real was always present in Dickens' art, but when he gave free reign to the former, as in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the results were never happy. It was in the realm of the real that Dickens' deepest creative impulses and faculties were engaged and that his genius operated. Attention to the social and biographical context of the novel emphasizes this observation. Inattention to that context permits the construction of many variant readings of the text, but the reading that Kucich presents, even if it is a possible one, violates the essential truth of Dickens' art.

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Mr. Kucich replies:

I sincerely did not intend to attack straw men. I still do not believe I have. But when challenging a large set of traditional assumptions about a writer, all of which derive from a larger, central truism—in this case, the idea that human beings want only, or at least mainly, to defend themselves against death—it is easy to overlook some minor variations on the theme, even the more loudly trumpeted ones. In my eagerness to reverse the more fundamental psychological concept, I overlooked the two variant—and equally commonplace—deductions about *The Old Curiosity Shop* that F. S. Schwarzbach identifies: that death was fearful for the Victorians in general because of a failure of spiritual consolations and for Dickens in particular because of Mary Hogarth (the argument that death was "more important" because "increasingly rare" in Victorian England cuts two ways). I should probably have mentioned these arguments.

By restating these two explanations for *The Old Curiosity Shop*, however, Schwarzbach misses my point: I never meant to suggest that Dickens and the Victorians did not fear death. Such cultural stoicism would be unthinkable; such a critical position laughable. The point of my reading is only that to say this much is hardly enough. Dickens has a double attitude toward death that reflects the paradox of all human aspirations toward authenticity: the limitless freedom death represents—an image of quiescent transcendence—requires a dissolution of life-sustaining boundaries. In this sense, death can be both feared and desired. This paradox