

SOUNDING HOLLOWNESS: A CARTOGRAPHY OF A CHILD'S MIND IN *THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP* (1840-1841)

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Abstract

The article analyses the interplay between space, time and sound in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Focus is on the reflection of these dynamics in Little Nell's mind as well as on Kit's interaction with sounded hollowness. The research methodology is grounded in phenomenology of sound with elements of deconstruction and existentialism. It is suggested that the structure of sounded and ghostly temporality from *A Christmas Carol* could be instrumentalised as part of the phenomenological analytical platform so as to attune this paradigm specifically to the Dickensian world. The research results show that phenomenological investigation of the auditory dimensions in *The Old Curiosity Shop* could help understand the functioning of the child's mind while surrounded by hollow spaces. Such a positioning disperses one's temporality/voice and reinforces a painful awareness of a nearing death, which promises a realisation of the novel's silent tragedy.

Keywords: hollow, echo, Little Nell, Kit, child, consciousness, time, Dickens

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Contextual scope, aims, and limits of the present investigation

The present text aims to focus on the character Little Nell from Dickens's novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) and the aural way in which the consciousness of her impending death interacts with space. This interaction is connected both to the phenomena experienced by her consciousness and the way in which the consciousness toys with the phenomena via the forces of the child's imagination. I will attempt to describe how such processes of the consciousness prove to be the main engine of the tragedy of Little Nell's death.

For this purpose, I employ phenomenology, or rather, phenomenologies of sound. One of the main works that I will use was written by the phenomenologist Don Ihde and bears the name *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. It was first published in 1976. Crucial for the development of such a kind of phenomenology proved names as Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Jaques Derrida, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Nancy – for the present article, we shall content ourselves with only a mention of them, to rescue the focus of this piece of research from wavering, and in view of a larger investigation of which the current may be deemed an element. A basis – biographical, historical and intertextual – for the suitability of applying such a methodological platform to the interpretation of Dickensian novels could be found in the works *Stenography and Orality in Dickens: Rethinking the Phonographic Myth* (2017) by H. Bowles, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* by Charles Babbage (1837), *Pen Photographs of Charles Dickens's Readings: Taken from Life* (1868) by Kate Field, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005) by I. Kreilkamp, *Victorian Soundscapes* by J. Picker (2003), *Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity* (2012) by J. Wolfreys, and *Dickens and Soundscape: The Old Curiosity Shop* (2016) by J. O. Jordan. I choose to discuss one of the works numbered – the one by J. O. Jordan – because of its direct relation to the present theme. This piece of literary criticism would offer some guidance in probing the hypothesis of whether Little Nell's consciousness of death reinforces the tragedy of the events because it is experienced as sounded hollowness. Her consciousness seems to transcribe its processes to outward objects while 'emptying' itself in acts of imagination that are oriented towards the uncanny world of the dead.

The contradiction of analysing sounds described / 'heard' in texts:**Ihde and Ricoeur**

One may as well begin by dwelling on acts of sounding hollowness. This is the sonorous part of the title of the current research. The second part of the title evokes something connected not to sounding hollow spaces but, rather, to visualising space by acts of mapping. Of course, this is to be understood as a metaphorical mapping of the child's consciousness of time and her experience of sound. It also touches on the form of the novel as a graphic representation of events which implies a 'functional "contradiction"' (Ihde, 2007, p. xx), as Ihde expresses himself. As long as we are trying to follow a phenomenology of sound and trace instances of such a phenomenology in a literary work, it becomes inevitable that we stumble upon such a contradiction. The way out of this knottiness is the act of consciousness by which the visually perceived becomes a sonorous experience in our minds. This is a very good example of synesthesia. Ihde gives an example with being able to 'hear' the voices of his friends while reading something written by them:

There are vast differences between hearing voices and reading words; yet the distance between the language embodied visually and that which is heard is sometimes broached. Sometimes there is a "singing" of voice in writing. I have often been shocked at "hearing" a friend's voice on reading his or her latest article or book. The other sounds through in an auditory adherence to what is ordinarily soundless. The same phenomenon occurs with trained musicians who can "hear" the music they see when reading a score. (Ihde, 2007, p. xx)

This phenomenon of the consciousness provides us with the cautious bravery to claim that one sense could function through the other, achieving a bodily wholeness or even something close to a totality of perception, or to what Ihde terms 'artifactual synesthesia'¹ (Ihde, 2007, p. xvi). Artifactual synesthesia occurs when the process of synesthesia is set in motion by a certain artifact that could simultaneously be perceived on different sensory levels. One example is an image that could be 'heard' not because it actually emits any sound but because the visual suggests it, and the mind imaginatively

¹ An artifactual synesthesia is when the same data (which in our case could be sensory data) that is used for producing a visual image is used to produce an auditory image (cf. Ihde, 2007, p. xvi).

fills the gap between the suggestion and its realisation. Such a statement broadens the act of listening and endows its interpretations with new horizons that, to a certain extent, give new weight to imagination as a force uniting the senses. As Ihde says: 'Listening begins by being bodily global in its effects' (Ihde, 2007, p. 45). Hearing participates in the sight, the touch, the smell, the taste, in one's imagination, or, more precisely, through one's imagination. If the senses provide the raw data, then imagination makes the multimodality of this data possible. Ricoeur stated that 'imagination [...] **consists in the interpretation of the sensation**, as when we say this shadow is a person approaching in the fog' (Ricoeur, 2024, p. 24, emphasis added). He also commented on listening as an act of imagination: 'To listen is to know how the music will go on. It is the incorporation of this phase of knowing how that may be fancied. The element of fancy is put in this active phase of perceiving' (Ricoeur, 2024, p. 110). In the cited extract, we can see that, the line between a raw sensation and sensation as an act of imagination is very thin. We could even say that, for Ricoeur, there is no such thing as pure sensation, or a sensation *in vacuo*. Sensation, be it seeing or listening, is always already contaminated by, or it always contains traces and residues of, imagination, which helps the senses be alert in the face of the unknown.

Visions could be perceived as something speaking or emanating voice even when they remain silent. This is what happens with the act of reading fiction. Dickens seemed to be very well aware of such philosophy. For in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, we can encounter such sentences as 'they could only see him speak: not hear him' (Dickens, 2001, p. 325). Such a statement makes one infer the author's position on the matter of the fluidity of senses. He applies this fluidity to his characters' experiences of objects and sound. The application takes different forms. They are discussed by J. O. Jordan.

Taxonomies of Dickensian sounds: John O. Jordan's taxonomy

One of the most interesting and comprehensive analysis of soundscapes in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is probably the one developed by John O. Jordan. Its title is *Dickens and Soundscape: The Old Curiosity Shop*. Therein Jordan suggests a taxonomy of the different types of sounds that could be detected in the novel. There are non-human sounds (the sounds produced by nature and its various entities), mechanical sounds, human speech (the characters' idiosyncratic vocalisations), 'uncanny' sounds, and silence (cf. Jordan,

2016, para. 11). I number these categories of sound production described by Jordan and appearing in the Dickensian novel because they offer a very structured prism of analysing the soundscapes while applying a basic differentiation between them. We will need the vocabulary of this differentiation to achieve our goal of explicating the way in which the child's mind gets shaped, influenced, changed or determined by them.

I attempt to study the child's consciousness of time in a sonorous context, and regarding this issue, there are some important observations on the part of Jordan which may be deemed apt and cannot be overlooked. One such observation that acts as a fruitful starting point is his remark considering the focalised narrative voice. Even though *The Old Curiosity Shop* begins with a first-person narrator, he abdicates shortly from this role and abandons the narrative to its characters, so that they can 'speak and act for themselves' (Dickens, 2001, p. 28). Jordan notes that there are episodes that are 'focalized entirely through the listening consciousness of Nell' (Jordan, 2016, para. 23). This shows us that even if the authorial voice after the first three chapters is prevalently omniscient, we could still be able to analyse the novel phenomenologically because there is access to the child's consciousness of time which is also a 'listening consciousness'. 'Listening consciousness', in the context of Jordan's text, could be defined as a moment when a character in a literary work is perceiving and experiencing the world through sounds. Depending on the sounds, the characters may feel either something as a communion with the world, or a sort of separation and estrangement from it.

The next important thing is that there is a direct allusion to sound in the name of Nell which is homophonous to 'knell', for instance (cf. Jordan, 2016, para. 40). In the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)* (Davies, 2018), we can find that knell is defined as 'the sound of a bell rung slowly to announce a death or a funeral or the end of something', and that the most common collocate of 'knell' is the noun 'death'. The two aspects, time and sound, as naturally conjoined in the child's consciousness, are presented to us through the monosyllabic name 'Nell'. This may also be interpreted as an instance of an 'incurable sense of derivativeness' (Rowland, 2021, p. 221), which is like a sense of a constant partition placed between one's actions and the world. It could also be described as a sense of secondariness, an existential lack of originality, an existential lingering between the echoes while losing a connection with one's own voice. This could be one of the reasons for the prevailing hollow tone of Nell's existence. She might even be

perceived as a character representing embodied hollowness (she looks like her deceased mother). The sense of derivativeness could be felt because the bell that is tolled to announce one's death is something that derives from that person's life and the source, or the origin of the sound (the person's life, the person's presence) is no longer there.

The ring of the name of the main character leads us to an understanding of the novel's form and prevalent themes. We sense that the book will be about the tragic death of a child and it could be identified as tragedy because the very name of Nell announces it as such. The novel, quite literally, 'begins and ends with Nell's death' (Lamb, 2013, p. 127). An argument supporting the statement of classifying the novel as tragedy could be found in Ihde's phenomenology: 'In the wider Greek culture, however, the Apollonian love of light was balanced by the Marsyasian love of sound. The tragedies spoke in sonorous voices through the persona, or "masks," which later are held to mean also persona or "by sound"' (Ihde, 2007, p. 14). This deconstructionist connection between characters in tragedies living and acting and participating in the unfolding of the tragedy 'by sound' could act as a reasonable explanation of why one of Dickens's most extremely hopeless and heartbreaking novels is so full of soundscapes. He seems to prefer the aural over the visual. Little Nell, as presented in the novel, is the sounded hollowness of her mother's existence and, as such, her own derivative existence is doomed to peter away quite soon. Therefore, the way in which her name alludes to a sound that stands for death, and the fact that she, herself, stands for her mother, who is no longer among the living, are driving mechanisms decentralising the existence of Dickens's main heroine.

An alternative taxonomy of sound and temporality

It might be regarded as quite unusual, but for the interpretation of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, I should like to propose another taxonomy of sound and temporality, in order to 'attune' the analysis to the specific purposes of this text. Precariously enough, it may be based on another of Dickens' literary works – *A Christmas Carol*, which (rather than be involved in a conventional compare and contrast analysis), shall be employed as another dimension to our analytical platform. Dickens's novelette *A Christmas Carol* presents us with three ghosts – the ghost of the past, the ghost of the present and the ghost of the future. Temporality in Dickens's works is almost always, perhaps, united to

sound. And the way in which the ghosts, symbolising different temporal dimensions, are sounded, could tell us a lot about the logic behind the mechanics of such connection.

The voice of the past is presented in the following way: 'The voice was soft and gentle. Singularly low, as if instead of being so close beside him, it were at a distance' (Dickens, 2013, pp. 26-27). The spirit of the present speaks with a 'cheerful voice' (Dickens, 2013, p. 48) from the beginning and after that he starts speaking with the words of Scrooge himself. The ghost of the future is silent; it does not utter a word. This personified and ghostly structure of time is very interesting and could give us a foundation that could come in handy while we attempt to delineate the child's consciousness of time in *The Old Curiosity Shop* as in other Dickensian novels. Sonorous time, therefore, could be said to be represented by the three spirits accordingly. We have a temporality which is close to us but sounds as if it comes from a distant place against the logic of its proximity. The voice gets lost somewhere between the entity that produces it and the entity that is supposed to hear it. We have the echoing temporality which, instead of giving us something new, echoes, or reflects, previous sayings and sounds. This temporality is of chief importance in an analysis of the child's mind in *The Old Curiosity Shop* – we shall argue that Little Nell's consciousness is just like her name – a sounded hollowness spreading or expecting an announcement of death. Many sounds reverberate in her consciousness, but she is not the source of them. This echoing temporality is the temporality of the present. The temporality of the future, as we have mentioned before, is a silent temporality. In Scrooge's story, this is the emptiest ghost of all – a ghost who does not speak a word, who is almost immobilized and who, unlike the other ghosts, seems to be composed of a hood and a dress that seem to be hollow, with nothing filling the frame. This image is connected with the process of growing old and being closer to the event of one's death. This is the temporal stage in life when 'man's spastically falling apart and losing contact with the world' (Rowland, 2024a, p. 224) plague one's existence and show the 'grief of the devastating muteness of departure that man dwells in' (Rowland, 2024a, pp. 224-225). Man begins to inhabit the fringes of his own existence by being de-voiced and emptied of content while his clothes are the only thing preserving his likeness to a human figure and his bond to an embodied human existence. The clothes appear as a skeleton of his social existence that is somehow industriously holding the threads of the perishing form of a man together.

Interaction between temporality, space, and sound: the echoing well

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, temporality is represented mainly by past and future because distant voices and distance and hollow spaces with nothing filling the frame and breaking the silence are abundant in the story about Little Nell. The first example of such a place is the old curiosity shop itself. Other such places accompany Little Nell's journey very often, like graveyards with birds' hoarse voices echoing therein, churches, furnaces with flames that could tell tales, big manufacturing towns emphasizing the sense of loss and desensitising life. Nell's final destination mirrors the solemnity of the first destination – the shop. The child is often positioned in large buildings that are too quiet. If the space is larger, the sense of loss grows accordingly. Just like the spirit of the future seems empty and hollow. He somehow evokes a sense of death and a grave-like atmosphere. It is not a coincidence that hollow spaces in the novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* bear direct or indirect resemblance to graves. Such places affect Little Nell's consciousness of death, and she experiences them imaginatively, even without the objects' immediate presence. For instance, the old sexton with whom Nell speaks when she lives in the final stage of her journey, compares the well in the churchyard to a grave – because it is a hollow space:

'There's an old well there,' said the sexton, 'right underneath the belfry; **a deep, dark, echoing well**. Forty year ago, you had only to let down the bucket till the first knot in the rope was free of the windlass, and **you heard it splashing in the cold dull water**. By little and little the water fell away, so that in ten year after that, a second knot was made, and you must unwind so much rope, or the bucket **swung tight and empty at the end**. In ten years' time, the water fell again, and a third knot was made. In ten years more, the well dried up; and now, if you lower the bucket till your arms are tired, and let out nearly all the cord, **you'll hear it, of a sudden, clanking and rattling on the ground below; with a sound of being so deep and so far down, that your heart leaps into your mouth, and you start away as if you were falling in.**'

'A dreadful place to come on in the dark!' exclaimed the child, **who had followed the old man's looks and words until she seemed to stand upon its brink.**

'**What is it but a grave!**' said the sexton. 'What else! And which of our old folks, knowing all this, thought, as the spring subsided, of their own failing strength, and lessening life? Not one!' (Dickens, 2001, p. 389, emphasis added)

This is an interesting extended metaphor of the well resembling a grave or a life's journey. When it is emptied it resounds better, there is more of a hollow space than of the splashing of water – more of a future amounting to a more intense sense death.

Emptiness and unreachable bottoms could be sensed by the sounds. The sound somehow betrays the end (the end of the well and the end of life). We can also see how Nell's consciousness is very much influenced by the story of this well that she is carried on the brink of that very well in her imagination. She 'hears' hollowness through imagination. This makes her conscious of death. Through the voice of the sexton, she somehow gets to experience the voice of the well. The hollow space of the well is described as coaxing. It swallows the voice and when the voice resounds, it creates the sense of the whole body falling down, or, in other words, a sense of departure and uncanniness. Nell could not even hear it for herself. She could only ever hear the sounded hollowness through the words of someone's story, but even under such circumstances, she would be able to hear the well's echoing to be presented to its brink through her sonorous imagination and the capability of deep immersion into imagined or narrative and narrated sounds. In such a case, the child's imagination is wavering between what is heard and what is created as a mental picture built on the basis of what is heard as a story. The sensory data is processed in a multimodal way that weakens the reality of Nell's present location and transports her to another one through the process of listening, which is also a process of imagining. A simple cartography of places here would work quite poorly. Ricoeur warns us about the wrongness of 'asking about the mind as a place with a location for images' (Ricoeur, 2024, p. 101). The child's mind is presented, rather, as a hollow spatiality applying the act of mapping to the act of listening, instead of applying it to fixed positions and unquestionable realities.

Then, there is secondary hearing – now not of the story but of the very sounds mentioned in the story – like the sound of a voice resounding in a well. Or this is hearing what was seen through the mental picture, or hearing through an imagined visionary product of one's consciousness. This is a product whose source and foundation happens to be another person's voice. While discussing imaginative auditory experiences, Ihde explains that when the imaginative mode is 'on' it 'continues to display itself as "like," its perceptual modality' although there are some differences because the imaginative field is often a more intense and richer mode than its perceptual counterpart (Cf. Ihde, 2007,

p. 123). Therefore, Little Nell 'hears' the well through the auditory mode of her imagination. It is not difficult for her to imagine a voice in the hollowness because the perceptions and, especially, the auditory experiences of her childhood were full of such.

The old curiosity shop as a hollow space experienced by the child

An important thing to be observed regarding sound and emptiness as features of identification, is the contrast between Little Nell and all the other people and things surrounding her. Noting her unsuitability and lack of place among her companions seems like an unavoidable observation. Her repetitiveness, her striking resemblance to her mother and grandfather turn Little Nell into nothing more than alien to herself and wanting a story of her own. Someone's past could be experienced as 'a peculiar instance of self-exclusion, self-denial, self-devaluation' (Rowland, 2023, p. 89), as Rowland observes. This is the case with Little Nell who seems to have no experiences of a past and, therefore, she cannot be experienced as something living, but rather, as an unearthly creature, an angel, or someone's double/echo. She is like a pure intention, a pure listening that lacks retention (orientation of the consciousness towards the past) or protention (orientation of the consciousness towards the present).

One of the characters, the man who is enchanted by the fire because it brings him the memory of his childhood, says to Little Nell: 'You may guess from looking at me what kind of child I was, but for all the difference between us [the man who stares at the fire and Little Nell] I was a child [...]' (Dickens, 2001, p. 326). Such a remark on the part of the mysterious man implies that Nell was never really a child. She seems to be deprived of such idiosyncratic past, and this initial lack of temporality of her own makes her reflect other temporalities while never really plunging in the stream of her own. This peculiarity of the hollowness of Little Nell's consciousness of time, and thence, her temporality, is because she does not possess her past but rather the oral heritage of stories that form her as a replica of her mother. The episodes in which her grandfather told her stories about her mother are Little Nell's moments of happiness. But also, they are moments of 'primary listening' (Ihde, 2007, p. 115) in which Little Nell is more of the world around her than of herself. Ihde describes the phenomenon of primary listening in his work:

I hear the voices of others, of things, of the World long before I speak my own words-or as a matter of the correct phenomenological procedure which begins

with noema before taking up noetic acts. Phenomenologically the “self” is modeled after the World [...]. (Ihde, 2007, p. 115)

Nell seems unable to escape the mode of primary listening. We could say that this is the mode which her consciousness applies to the world around her. Nell's little world seems modelled after her grandfather's words and stories and the way in which these stories could be sounded in the hollow spatiality of the shop.

The world of Nell's predecessors and the events that happened before her existence fulfil the role of prejudices – prejudices in the way Gadamer portrays them as ‘conditions of understanding’ (cf. Gadamer, 2006, p. 278) one's world: ‘Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live’ (Gadamer, 2006, p. 278). Primary listening and prejudices as conditions of understanding seem to be exacerbated by storytelling to the extent that they encroach upon subjectivity in a suffocating, rather than auxiliary, manner. Both Little Nell and her grandfather find this sonorous escape into the past a needed one – something that maintains the illusion of the grandfather's reality – Little Nell as his daughter, and the old curiosity shop as a space in which this inherited or falsely attributed redemptive identity resides:

‘I used to read to him by the fireside, and he sat listening, and when I stopped and we began to talk, he told me about my mother, and **how she once looked and spoke just like me when she was a little child**. Then, he used to take me on his knee and **try to make me understand that she was not lying in her grave**, but had flown to a beautiful country beyond the sky, **where nothing died or ever grew old – we were very happy once!**’ (Dickens, 2001, p. 49, emphasis added)

We can see that Little Nell was deeply influenced by those stories and intentionally wanted to replace her mother so that she could bring some happiness to her old grandfather. This is another good example of the sense of derivativeness – the existence of one as someone else's copy. The words of Nell's grandfather were working on her consciousness, moulding it into an echo of her mother's. She is merely a moulded creature, ‘a wax girl’ – this positions Nell ‘outside of time and time's vicissitudes’ (Lamb, 2013, p. 129). The source of this imagined identity of Nell as a reproduction of her mother, is the voice of her grandfather echoing in the old curiosity shop, wearing away, and

altering the little child's consciousness as constant dropping of water. Some critics even go as far as to present the grandfather as one of the main villains: 'Directly responsible for her death by removing her from every point of safety and kindness, he [her grandfather], it is clear, is much closer even than Quilp to being the chief villain' (Kincaid, 1971, p. 80). Nevertheless, both of them equally suffer from one common thing: decentralisation, which is geographical and phenomenological alike. We could say that the figures of Little Nell and her grandfather both die at the end, and could be perceived as victims, because of the 'impossibility of attaining selfhood out of touch with an Other' (Rowland, 2021, p. 210). The journey out of the old curiosity shop is a journey which makes them grow apart from each other to an extent to which they appear as mutually unrecognizable. Or, they fail to be 'a steadfast external presence' (Rowland, 2021, p. 214) for each other, which would have preserved their integrity outside the shop.

Laughter in the old curiosity shop

A memorable sonorous moment that has to do with hollow space is also Nell's laughter which happens rarely. That is why the moment of Kit's appearance is so precious. Kit's character is introduced by a knock at the door to which Nell responds with a child's laughter which is significant probably because of the way in which it resounds in the quiet shop and also the way in which it appears as something strikingly unusual:

We had scarcely begun our repast when there was a knock at the door by which I had entered, and **Nell bursting into a hearty laugh**, which I was rejoiced to hear, for it was childlike and full of hilarity, said it was no doubt dear old Kit come back at last. (Dickens 2001, p. 8, emphasis added)

After that Kit's manner of speaking becomes the focus of observation: 'The lad had a remarkable manner of standing sideways as he spoke and thrusting his head forward over his shoulder, as if he could not get at his voice without that accompanying action' (Dickens, 2001, p. 9). The hollowness of the shop creates these tangible and sonorous lapses in Kit's consciousness of time and that is why he, metaphorically, is trying to catch up with his voice/time for fear of losing the duration of his voice in the hollowness. John O. Jordan comments this part of the novel in a very interesting way pointing at the separation between voice and body: 'Voice here is figured as something outside the body rather than as a sound produced from within. Kit must make a physical effort to "get at"

his voice lest it elude him altogether' (Jordan, 2016, para. 29). Following Dickens's own division of sounded temporalities in *A Christmas Carol*, the voice which was somehow separated from the one who emitted it and sounded as dispersed or being far away even when it is produced in an adjacency to us, was the voice of the past. In addition to this interpretation, we could say that this separation occurs because of the hollowness of space. This hollowness seems to expand the voice of the ones who produce it at the cost of redefining the belonging of the voice. Separation with one's voice is also a separation with one's time and presence. Such a struggle, as we could see, is experienced by the consciousnesses of two of the children in Dickens's novel – Nell and Kit.

Kit, for instance, is described exactly as a child who struggles to connect or find his voice and to hold it as his own possession.

It was a great point too that Kit himself was flattered by the sensation he created, and after several efforts to preserve his gravity, burst into a loud roar, and so stood with his mouth wide open and his eyes nearly shut, laughing violently. (Dickens, 2001, p. 9)

The unexpected violent happiness seems to violate the stillness of the place. The hollowness of it probably intensifies the feeling of the sound being rather too prodigious. There is nothing wrong with Nell being so happy and about Kit being that loud. The problematic part is the contrast between the old curiosity shop and the two kids being there and laughing. When old Trent expresses his fears of losing Nell, Kit responds once again in a very loud voice, as if he is trying to make amends for the hollowness of the shop:

'I'd have found her, master,' said Kit, 'I'd have found her. I'd bet that I'd found her if she was above ground, I would, as quick as anybody, master. Ha ha ha!' Once more opening his mouth and shutting his eyes, and laughing like a stentor, Kit gradually backed to the door, and roared himself out. (Dickens, 2001, p. 10)

It seems as if Kit is scared to leave Little Nell to the voicelessness of the shop and that is why he accompanies his sayings with a great and nervously overexcited vocal enthusiasm, aiming at filling the emptiness of the place and leaving it well-voiced.

Dickens' 'realm of mute objects'

Ihde names the objects that keep the phenomenologist's attention busy 'the realm of mute objects' (Ihde, 2007, p. 50). According to him, in the history of philosophy many thinkers focused on the materiality of the visible worldly objects that take over their immediate experience. By referring to them and classifying them as 'the realm of mute objects', he achieves an intentional shift of the way in which we tend to perceive these objects. By such means, they also become part of a phenomenology of sound for they are perceived through their lack of voice. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, such objects are the well (which was already discussed), the furnace (in which the man who helped Little Nell and her grandfather in the manufacturing city, read melodious voices from the past), the sexton's spade, the Marchioness's garment, and Little Nell shoes. For instance, this is how the man who claims that he was raised by the fire in the furnace, describes it:

'It's like a book to me,' he said – 'the only book I ever learned to read; and many an old story it tells me. It's music, for I should know its voice among a thousand, and there are other voices in its roar. It has its pictures too. You don't know how many strange faces and different scenes I trace in the red-hot coals. It's my memory, that fire, and shows me all my life.' (Dickens, 2001, pp. 325-326)

Akin to the well, the poor man's fire, is turned into a melodious metaphor of human time. Hollow spaces as furnaces and wells seem to provide the needed acoustic space in which the consciousness could exercise its echoing attendance to itself. The realm of the 'mute', at first glance, objects, turns out to be functionally meaningful and to act as a sonorous reflection of the consciousness whose temporality is made visible by being thrown onto the somehow responding hollowness of their muteness and materiality.

The Marchioness, as Dick choses to call her, or, rather, the unnamed mysterious little girl, who lives underground and does all the housework in the home of Mr. Brass and Miss Sally, is described in the following way: 'a small slipshod girl in a dirty coarse apron and bib, which left nothing of her visible but her hands and feet. She might as well have been dressed in a violin-case' (Dickens, 2001, p. 251). Just as the Dickensian ghost of the future, the stature of the girl seems to be lost in an oversized apron compared to a violin case. This evokes another image of hollowness, not to mention her abode underground which is very much like a watery and suffocating grave. The violin part, of

course, alludes to musicality, but hollowness seems to prevail. The girl being clad in a dress that alludes to the image of the violin case suggests one being emptied of one's identity and the idea of her melodiousness being restricted to instrumentality because, as we learn from the novel, she is ill-used by her dragon of a master – Miss Sally. As James Kincaid observes: 'The Brasses treat her purely as a thing, a noise-maker' (Kincaid, 1971, p. 86) because they make her fall down the stairs in their attempt to wake their lodger and to check whether he is alive or not.

The sexton's spade once again prescribes a possible superiority in terms of consciousness and memory to the realm of mute objects: 'If it could speak now, that spade, it would tell you of many an unexpected job that it and I have done together; but I forget 'em, for my memory's a poor one' (Dickens, 2001, p. 388). The sexton tells Little Nell that the spade cannot speak, so he acknowledges its muteness but he does not deny it the possibility of possessing a consciousness. It also possesses a kind of memory that is externalised and owned by the spade but emerges as a product of the mutual work between human and spade. This phenomenon is the result of the sonorous interaction between consciousness and object, in which the objects play a superior part. Philip Rogers observes: 'The novel emphasizes the mortality of men and things: time, represented by portentous sundials, hour glasses, and tolling bells, governs the motion of the stream of life [...].' (Rogers, 1973, p. 127). In this statement, we can see that Rogers also noted the way in which human consciousness and the objects it connects with submerge and are transformed from mute objects into curiosities.

Another very powerful example of hollowness that speaks of lived experience and temporalities is Nell's shoes:

'See here – these shoes – how worn they are – she kept them to remind her of our last long journey. You see where the little feet were bare upon the ground. They told me afterwards, that the stones had cut and bruised them. She never told me that. No, no, God bless her! And, I have remembered since, she walked behind me, sir, that I might not see how lame she was – but yet she had my hand in hers, and seemed to lead me still.' (Dickens, 2001, p. 524)

Empty objects like Nell's shoes, also get voiced. They speak instead of the child telling of her experiences and what she has gone through while being on a journey with

her grandfather. All these imagined or prescribed, or visualised voices that sprout from the silence and with which the realm of the muted objects is characterised, align with the category of sound which John O. Jordan identifies as uncanny voices and silence. They also come to exemplify the hollowness and silence of the spirit of the future from *A Christmas Carol* who solemnly introduces a whole philosophical paradigm of the temporality of the future.

The child's consciousness is directed towards hollow space and towards objects. Consequently, the child's voice seems to be dislocated and to be oblivious to itself. There is always space, and there are always objects and voices that speak, live, and experience instead of the child, reinforcing the tragical element. Thus, the expectation of the child's death, manifested through the hollowness, seems to be even more frightening than the moment of her death itself.

A few words to sift the conversation spun so far

Firstly, we described the old curiosity shop as a hollow place where singular sounds of stories and laughter resound. After Little Nell and her grandfather's departure from the shop, the place is heard through Kit's ears as the hollowest ever:

A group of idle urchins had taken possession of the doorsteps; some were plying the knocker and listening with delighted dread to the hollow sounds it spread through the dismantled house; others were clustered about the keyhole, watching half in jest and half in earnest for 'the ghost,' which an hour's gloom, added to the mystery that hung about the late inhabitants, had already raised. Standing all alone in the midst of the business and bustle of the street, the house looked a picture of cold desolation; and Kit, who remembered the cheerful fire that used to burn there on winter's night and the no less cheerful laugh that made the small room ring, turned quite mournfully away. (Dickens, 2001, p. 105)

Firstly, we could say that one of the reasons for Kit's deeply saddened condition, which is so untypical for him, is the indirect allusion between the poor urchins and Little Nell. He is unconsciously afraid of seeing her, even in his mind's eye, reduced to the state of poverty, a condition that her grandfather wanted to prevent her from too passionately and yet too unsuccessfully, most ironically, becoming the sole reason for her fall. Little

Nell is just like the ordinary and abandoned urchins which no one cares for. While analysing poverty and the de-facement² of children (and of their parents as figures defining the child's origin and self-integrity through voice, face, and body) in works that are crucial for defining the 'beastliness of Victorian society' (Rowland, 2024b, p. 234), Rowland notes 'The misery, defencelessness, and nobodiness of the pauper child reduce the adult to speechlessness' (Rowland, 2024b, p. 243). Till the end of the story, we could see that Kit is the only one who riots against this nobodiness and silence. He riots against the way in which the spatio-temporal constructs of both consciousness and world tend to consume and enfeeble the unrecognizable voices of the different nobodies, and especially the important 'nobody' from his childhood – Little Nell. Secondly, the segment quoted also shows us how different characters listen to the hollowness differently. Their imagination and memory adopt different directions. For Kit and Little Nell the shop is a place where they are taught to pursue their voice, to listen to it, to catch up with it, and even to be afraid of it because it would stir the thick silence. While the urchins are now playing with the silence. For them the place is not connected with memory but with mystery. What for Kit seems to be emblem of a childhood experience shaping his whole character, for them is a mere pastime which they would quickly forget when another, more interesting one, appears. Therefore, Kit is the only one bearing and 'hearing' the memory of the place.

After Nell's death, Kit becomes the 'voice' of her story. The same story of Little Nell is unwarily told by him to his children and other companions. This could lead us to the possibility that it has been Kit's child's consciousness of time the whole time, the voice we had been listening to was Kit's memories of Nell. At the end of the novel, hearing appears more superior than vision. Readers, or listeners, are brought back to the old curiosity shop and Kit, now a grown-up man with a family of his own trying to do a cartography of his child's consciousness of time by remembering where exactly the shop was but, alas, he is fretting and sweating to map it is of no avail:

He sometimes took them [the listeners of his story] to the street where she had lived; but new improvements had altered it so much, it was not like the same. The

² A very important aspect that Rowland tackles in the text *Infanticide as Self-de-facement: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"* is the way in which the parent kills her child and in the act of killing the child, she wreaks havoc in the integrity of her own voice, vision, and body. Similar themes are figuratively present in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

old house had been long ago pulled down, and a fine broad road was in its place. At first he would draw with his stick a square upon the ground to show them where it used to stand. But he soon became uncertain of the spot, and could only say it was thereabouts, he thought, and these alterations were confusing.

Such are the changes which a few years bring about, and so do things pass away, like a tale that is told! (Dickens, 2001, p. 544)

It is only the voice, the oral inheritance that remains, and his attempt to illustrate his story fails. The story also passes away. Stories get told and then they pass just like a voice dispersing solemnly into the hollow space of time. Broad roads are built in the place of the shop as a sign that life goes on, the well is already empty, there is no water, only voices that resound and perish without a trace in its dull emptiness.

Concluding remarks and trajectories for further investigation

In this text, we attempted to propose a paradigm of analysis focusing on the way in which children in *The Old Curiosity Shop* experience sounded hollowness. For Little Nell, the sounded hollowness of space happens through stories that are narrated to her by human voices. She experiences many sounds through an imaginative auditory realm which intensifies the interiorisation of those sounds. We analysed two main examples to prove the hypothesis of sounds affecting Little Nell's temporality, identity and sense of death – her grandfather's stories about her mother in the resounding cavity of the old curiosity shop, and the sexton's story about the echoing well that is deep, dark and empty. We also saw that sounded hollowness creates a sense of physical departure from one's voice. Pertinent examples include Nell's imagined hearing of the well's echo, Kit's overexposed laughter and the loudness of his voice, accompanied by the toiling process of catching up with his voice because of the way in which the hollowness of the shop steals it from him. We also discussed the realm of the mute objects in the novel and their prescribed consciousness and memory, all of which presented as voiced ones. Little Nell's visit to the manufacturing city, her last days in the rural area, her interaction with the spatiality of the house and the church there, the event of her death, the way in which the narrative voice repeats the announcement of this event with minor alterations, and the enigmatic character, life and fate of the Marchioness – these are topics that require an investigation of its own through the prism of phenomenology of sounds – much food for thought ahead, in times resounding, hopefully, with the efforts and anxieties of research this paper was born of.

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