No Plots for Old Men

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Collected in *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Charles Dickens’s melancholy story “Scotland-yard” chronicles “the advance of civilization” and “improvement” of the eponymous locale after the erection of a new bridge across the Thames in 1832 (88). White tablecloths appear at the neighborhood eating place, the fruit pie maker acquires the genteel moniker “pastrycook,” and the “loud song and the joyous shout” of the coal heavers no longer shakes the roof of the public house (89). Alongside this improvement in manners materialize more visible signs of progress: the boot-maker adds a first floor to his business, a jeweler sets up shop, and the once conservative tailor hires a coterie of uniformed assistants. Yet near the end of this sketch appears the figure of an old man: “Amidst all this change, and restlessness, and innovation, there remains but one old man. . . . Misery and want are depicted in his countenance; his form is bent by age, his head is gray with length of trial, but there he sits from day to day, brooding over the past; and thither he will continue to drag his feeble limbs, until his eyes have closed upon Scotland-yard, and upon the world together” (89–90). Set against the background of Scotland-yard’s bustle, the anonymous old man is Dickens’s way of representing that which has been left behind by the youthful narrative of development that modernizes the world around him. The old man endures alongside this meaningful development, asserting his own stubborn existence as proof that he is not only the excess of modernity but also that which exceeds it.

Most critics assume that the developmental plots of modernity are primarily concerned with the maturation of youth. In what Franco Moretti identifies as a central means of understanding the “bewitching and risky process” of modernity, the bildungsroman relates the story of a youth who passes into adulthood amidst great struggle, eventually reintegrating into the society from which he or she has been alienated (5). In the English bildungsroman, “Youth acts as a sort of *symbolic concentrate* of the uncertainties and tensions of an entire cultural system,” and so it must be overcome in the process of achieving a stable maturity (Moretti 185).1 Reaching a very different conclusion, Patricia Meyer Spacks nevertheless claims that for Victorian novelists like Dickens “the adolescent . . . becomes a version of the self,” a point of “predominant wistful identification” (195). For Spacks the problem is that overcoming the dangers of adolescent aggression and sexual energy merely results in “[t]he necessity, the discipline, the sorrow of maturity” (217). Providing different accounts of the progression from youth to maturity, Moretti and

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1 In his recent account of the modernist bildungsroman, Jed Esty argues that youth is suspended as a means of interrogating the contradictions of progress in a colonial and global context. In his preliminary reading of Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, for example, the eponymous hero’s “anti-developmental bildungsroman” “literalizes the problem of colonialism as failed or postponed modernization” (14). Esty’s argument circumscribes adolescence as a discrete stage of life, downplaying the intervention of old age—in the form of the elderly Lama—on shaping the trajectory of Kim’s youthful plot.
Spacks represent a larger critical tendency to abstract old age from developmental narratives. By overstating Dickens’s fascination with the dynamism and vitality of youth, critics ignore his investment in that which follows the telos of development and maturity. In Dickens’s novels this takes the form of the elderly man, who emerges as the byproduct of an unsuccessful attempt to represent modernity as complete or “mature.”

Appearing regularly in Dickens’s early fiction, the aged male serves as a human reminder of that which has been left behind by both the rationalization of plot and the modernization of the marketplace. As historians of old age have shown, the elderly were pressured out of work as industrialization took root in England. Jill Quadagno observes that “generally, the work of the aged was marginal and sporadic” (21) and “the labor market in general was more rigid for older people” (63). Pat Thane adds that “[t]echnological change might erode the occupations old people could cling on to” (275). As young labor was increasingly privileged by manufacturers, cultural institutions such as the family had yet to adjust to the changing attitudes toward age. Ostensibly supported by male income, the idealized Victorian family structure was based on a tacit belief that the paterfamilias would be able to support his wife and children well into old age. While some individuals secured a pension by contributing to Friendly Societies, many working-class and some middle-class men staked their future on the uncertain prospect of being able to work late in life. The difficulties that old age presented for the integrity of the family were systematized by the passage of the New Poor Law in 1834. The uneven ability—or willingness—of family or kin to support elderly parents set the groundwork for this reform, in which the local and haphazard deployment of relief to the aged poor by the parish gave way to a more centralized and depersonalized model. Though critics are divided about the efficacy of the poor laws in distributing relief, few would argue with the fact that the workhouse was regarded with horror by the elderly. The New Poor Law was symptomatic of the elderly man’s exclusion from the cultural narratives he had helped to produce: his aged body revealed that the ideology of family and work were not universal truths but temporally contingent.

Jettisoned to the plotless fringes of society, the old man’s existence provides a test case for how the Victorian novel represents and constructs the social margins. We tend to discuss marginality and the novel in terms of who is included or excluded, observed or ignored. Alex Woloch and Emily Steinlight have each directed our attention to the novel as an elastic form that includes a surplus of human life that constantly threatens to overspill the bounds of representation. Both critics think of the excesses of the novel in spatial terms. For Woloch it is “the many” who “jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe” (13), where for Steinlight the density of character presents the problem of “too many bodies to too little space” and the “mass of life that defies containment” (231, 234). But the

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2 David Thomson suggests that “the majority of all elderly persons in England were maintained by the poor law” (202), while Thane asserts that relief was still distributed unevenly (168–70, 175–76). Also, see Karen Chase’s work on almshouses in chapter 2 of The Victorians and Old Age.
elderly man draws attention to the fact that the realist novel’s aspiration to represent the social will always be burdened with a temporal compromise—that as the spaces enlarge to accommodate the swell of urban life, the time allotted to represent the social becomes shorter. In other words, because so many characters appear in the Victorian novel there is simply not enough time to consistently represent the transformations that age registers on this multitude of characters.

The omission of aging is inherent not only in the novel’s temporal form but also in the bewildering progress of a modernizing society that suddenly finds itself irrevocably changed. In what follows I argue that the old man lingers at the intersection of Dickens’s attempt to represent modernity and the temporal limitations of his realism. Tending toward digression, stasis, and senile confusion, Dickens’s old men resist the progressiveness and causality of linear plotting. Yet in the process of resisting, they create the conflicts that enable developmental narrative to successfully unfold. In The Old Curiosity Shop (1840–41), Martin Chuzzlewit (1843–44), and A Christmas Carol (1843) I identify a pattern where old men not only function as a counterpoint to the developmental plots of youth but also serve as imaginative catalysts for the literary reconfiguration of the social. Built into Dickens’s realism is that discarded remainder, a narrative compulsion that continues in the afterlife of plot: an unplotted energy that threatens to nullify the very structures—of development, of modernity—that it has helped to realize.

Old Curiosities

Published in weekly parts between April 1840 and December 1841, Master Humphrey’s Clock was intended as a collection of “sketches, essays, tales, adventures, letters from imaginary correspondents” organized “to diversify the contents as much as possible” (Dickens, Letters 563–64). In the preface, Dickens suggests that the new publication enterprise developed partly out of his concern that the reading public would become bored with the twenty monthly installments that made him famous (Clock iii). If revitalizing the reader’s attention was indeed the goal of Dickens’s shift in publication strategies, it seems a strange choice for him to introduce his magazine through the character of Master Humphrey, who describes himself as a “mis-shapen, deformed, old man” and spends most of the first installment complaining about his difficult childhood and alienation from others (3). As head of a club where elderly men meet regularly to share stories, Humphrey also serves as the frame for the stories that appear in the publication: in the first eleven numbers of Master Humphrey’s Clock, the perspective shifts between Humphrey’s first-person narration in the present and the storytelling voice of the club’s members.

Beginning in the fourth number of Master Humphrey’s Clock, The Old Curiosity Shop would quickly dominate the pages of Dickens’s publication, eventually replacing the short and disconnected sketches with a continuous novel-length project. It begins with Humphrey as a first-person narrator helping the young girl Nell find her way home. Nell lives with her grandfather Trent, a dealer in curiosities, who attempts to gamble her into “a fine lady” (Shop 15). In order to fund his misguided ambition, Trent borrows money from the demonic Quilp, who eventually calls in his debt. Unable to bear his misfortunes, Trent becomes ill and loses his mental
faculties, eventually agreeing with Nell that they should abscond from London. The rest of the novel follows the picaresque wanderings of Nell and Trent and the attempts made to discover their whereabouts by Quilp and Trent’s good-natured brother, known in the context of the novel as “the single gentleman.” The novel is notable for the lack of development of its youthful protagonist: Nell is good from the beginning of the novel and she remains so until she dies. Instead, the youthful plot of development is displaced by the plotless wanderings of Grandfather Trent, whose old age comes to serve as a metaphor for the restless energies of narrative at the impasse of closure.

Like almost every other character in the novel, Humphrey cannot stop thinking about Nell. After delivering the girl to her grandfather, Humphrey muses: “I had ever before me the old dark murky rooms . . . the faces all awry, grinning from wood and stone—the dust and rust, and worm that lives in wood—and alone in the midst of all this lumber and decay, and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumber” (Shop 22). Imagining the youthful Nell framed by “decay” and “ugly age,” Humphrey critiques the dusty objects of the curiosity shop owned by Grandfather Trent. However, he also gestures toward himself as the narrator and to the club of men—old curiosities themselves—who listen to the story. Humphrey’s description of his own house in Master Humphrey’s Clock, with its “worm-eaten doors,” “moth and spider,” and “staring portrait[s],” directly recalls the worm, decaying lumber, and grinning faces that he imagines to terrorize Nell (Clock 2, 49). That Master Humphrey’s Clock serves as the frame for The Old Curiosity Shop suggests that while “ugly age” is stigmatized through images of decay, it is also the imaginative conduit through which the reader’s attention is channeled.

Writing about the aged in Dickens’s work, Karen Chase observes that the “elderly often appear as a kind of fiction in Dickens—a kind of specter—fading into impalpability” (36). Humphrey proves Chase’s claim more literally than she probably intended it. Referring to himself repeatedly as a ghost or shade in the opening installment of Master Humphrey’s Clock and disappearing from The Old Curiosity Shop after the third chapter, Humphrey draws attention to his own era sure from the text. Moreover, following the conclusion of The Old Curiosity Shop, in the forty-fifth number of Master Humphrey’s Clock, he reveals that the first-person narrator of the first three chapters was, in fact, a fiction. To the surprise of his fellow club members and the readers of Master Humphrey’s Clock since its publication, Humphrey claims that he was the irascible single gentleman, the estranged little brother of Grandfather Trent, who pursues Nell for over half the novel with the desire to improve her fortunes. Robert L. Patten is representative of the critical response to Humphrey’s late revelation when he says: “Master Humphrey, misshaped, deformed, a recluse, has nothing in common with the haphazardly energetic Single Gentleman . . . . It is clear that Dickens, at the last minute, was straining his ingenuity beyond credible limits to provide some explanation of the novel’s original title [Personal Adventures of Master Humphrey]” (63).

But what if the discrepancy between the single gentleman and Humphrey is more than just Dickens’s hackneyed repair for a broken Clock? From this perspective, the vast difference between the two men is not an aesthetic blunder on Dickens’s part but rather a means of representing the tremendous transformative
potential of old age. Described as “growling and cursing in a very awful manner” (Shop 269), the single gentleman suffers from “constitutional irritability and haste” (292) and is referred to by the narrator variously as “the impatient gentleman” (309) and the “restless gentleman” (355). In contrast, Humphrey claims that “retirement has become a habit with me” (Clock 1), recognizing in his own step “the failing tread of an old man” (2). Not many characters are more constitutionally dissimilar than the single gentleman and Humphrey. However, this is precisely Dickens’s point. The vast divide between the personalities of the two characters underwrites the physiological and emotional changes that occur over a biological lifespan. The single gentleman’s impulsive and brusque manner has transformed into Humphrey’s careful and monotonous reflections. This transformation not only suggests that the change between the two characters is one of obvious decay—that old age is a pathology to be feared and avoided—\(^3\) it also suggests the fertility of literary imagination: the creation of something different and new from the established patterns of the past.\(^4\) Old age facilitates new perspectives even as transformation from the single gentleman to Master Humphrey is represented as one of decline.

Grandfather Trent has this catalyzing effect on the imaginations of the characters of The Old Curiosity Shop. Though Nell has received the attention of readers since the novel’s publication, the real motivation for the plot falls on the feeble shoulders of Grandfather Trent. Fleeing into the countryside when Quilp calls in his debts, Trent’s frantic desire to get away from London lacks direction. When they first leave the house, Trent looks “irresolutely and helplessly” around him for guidance (103), and as Nell leads him out of the city the narrator observes them “wandering they knew not whither” (105). Offered a place to rest early in their travels, Trent urges that they move blindly on, telling his granddaughter, “Further away, dear Nell, pray further way” (127). The plotlessness of the old man’s uneasy wanderings has the surprising effect of intensifying the imaginative activity that provokes plotting in others. When Nell and Trent encounter the traveling Punchmen Short and Codlin, Short observes to his companion: “Have you seen how anxious the old man is to get on—always wanting to be furder away—furder away. Have you seen that?” (145). It is the very fact that Trent has no more direction “than the man in the moon” that Short supposes “he has given his friends the slip, and persuaded this delicate young creetur all along of her fondness for him to be his guide and travelling companion” (145). In response, Short constructs a plot of rescue, imagining heroically returning Nell to her friends in London; Codlin, on the other hand, imagines a plot in which kidnapping and ransoming Nell results in a reward.

\(^3\) Stephen Katz notes that in the nineteenth century there was a growing trend toward pathologizing old age: “The medical impetus was to discover increasingly subtle distinctions and ailments that marked the aged body not simply as degenerative but also as different” (44).

\(^4\) The condition of old age facilitates the kind of ambivalent imaginative transformation that Garrett Stewart identifies in Dickens’s work. Writing on Dick Swiveller’s “transfiguration” of gin and water into “rosy wine” through his poetic restyling, Stewart points out that the “change that is wrought comes to symbolize the miracle worked by all imagination, both in art and in daydream, on the stuff of reality” (xiii). By the end of the novel, however, Swiveller has learned that “imagination begins to learn its surcharge” (113).
While most of the plots constructed by characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop* take Nell as the subject, it is the restless energy of the old man that inspires them. This energy is on display following Nell’s death. Though Nell and Trent finally arrive at a quiet parish where they can live peacefully, the peace that pervades the atmosphere is that of death: the difficulties of the journey have stressed Nell’s body beyond its limit and she eventually dies. Surviving his granddaughter and yet oblivious of her death, Trent “had some hope of finding her again—some faint and shadowy hope, deferred from day to day, and making him from day to day more sick and sore at heart” (545). He falls into the habit “every day, and all day long” of waiting at Nell’s grave, “murmuring to himself, ‘She will come to-morrow!’” (546). Trent’s reaction to Nell’s death is suggestive not only of his grief but also of the difficulty of coming to terms with a plot that nears its end: lapsing for some time into delusional repetition, it is not long before the “broken hearted man” dies (546). Without a plot of his own—his story is hinged to that of Nell—Trent stubbornly and pointlessly continues to exist. The old man’s continued existence in the aftermath of Nell’s death illuminates a narrative compulsion that survives in the afterlife of plot. Symbolizing that which is left behind by developmental plots, the old man also lives beyond them—a satellite that orbits around the gravity of Nell’s corpse.

Grandfather Trent is not the only old man who is drawn to the corpse of Nell: the old sexton, the “bachelor” of the parish, the schoolmaster, and the single gentleman also cluster around Nell’s deathbed at the end of the novel. James Buzard describes this tableau as a “self-negating inventory of spent men gathered around the figure of Nell” (204). But what do these men hope to gain from their vigil? In Theodor Adorno’s essay on *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he claims that “[t]he novel is nothing but the story of [Nell’s] sacrifice” (173). For Adorno, Nell and her grandfather are “formed of the same materials [and] the two remain inseparable; neither could exist as an autonomous being, the child no more than the feeble-minded old man” (173). The path that the novel charts from Trent’s guilt to Nell’s sacrifice is the fated result of the “revolt from bourgeois society” that is staged over the course of their journey (Adorno 173). In Helen Small’s revision of Adorno’s argument, youth and old age are distinct. In her account, while the novel still critiques industrial society, Nell’s sacrifice is “upheld but also denied” (*Long Life* 194). The sacrifice represents the philosophical “hope of a beyond” that is “exposed as the murderous proof that ‘mere existence’ is all we have” (194). Youth takes on the burden of the aged and is destroyed in the process of trying to guard against the nearness of death (198).

Old men show such interest in Nell’s sacrifice because the stasis and discontinuity of her death—Nell is “mute and motionless for ever” (540)—embodies a comforting suspension of the inexorable march toward their own demise. Nell’s death purchases relief for the aged men in the novel that is at odds with the tragic sentiment that Dickens clearly wanted to inspire in his readership. It is the inability of Nell’s story to move forward that enables the pleasurable displacement of encroaching mortality. “When Death strikes down the innocent and young, for every fragile form from which he lets the panting spirit free, a hundred virtues rise, in shapes of mercy, charity, and love, to walk the world. . . . In the Destroy-
er’s steps there spring up bright creations that defy his power, and his dark path becomes a way of light to heaven” (544). The narrator’s mawkish reflections on death belie a therapeutic model of narrative activity—a “hundred virtues rise . . . to walk the world” and “there spring up bright creations”—that surfaces at the moment of most radical closure. While Adorno and Small argue that there is no “beyond” in The Old Curiosity Shop—of either bourgeois society or “mere existence,” respectively—narrative continues in the wake of death, igniting the imagination of the old men who see in Nell’s corpse a way of coming to terms with the ends of their own lives.

In The Old Curiosity Shop old men consistently use the plotlessness of another’s death as a way to confront anxieties about encroaching mortality. When Nell and Trent retreat into the countryside, the first person to help them is an elderly gentleman who addresses his anxieties about death by comparing his own age to that of another: “He had changed . . . eighty-four [was] a great age, though there was some he had known that had lived to very hard upon a hundred—and not so hearty as he, neither—no, nothing like it” (126–27). The elderly gentleman takes comfort in two aspects of his reference. The chronological disparity between his own age and that of his example distances himself from the end that he fears. And the plotlessness of his allusion—to “some he had known that lived to very hard upon a hundred”—erases the context and narratability of human life. Rather than provoke existential terror, imagining aged corpses in descriptive rather than narrative terms allows the elderly gentleman to mystify the forward progress of development that propels him to death.

The elderly gentleman’s comparison performs the function of a popular genre of writing that recorded the lives of centenarians. One of the most popular, James Easton’s Human Longevity (1799), collects the names, ages, place of residence, and year of decease for 1,712 people over the age of one hundred. In the midst of Easton’s many examples, there are some exquisitely drawn characters. For example, the description of Daniel Bull M’Carthy, who died in the year 1752 at the age of 111: “Of the county of Kerry, in Ireland. At the age of eighty-four he married a fifth wife, aged fourteen, and had by her twenty children, one every year; he was always very healthy, and never observed to spit” (36). One can easily imagine a less prolific version of Daniel Bull M’Carthy appearing in the pages of a Dickens novel. The point of Easton’s Human Longevity, however, is not to render old age exceptional but to make it something commonplace and within the compass of the reader’s experience. This effect is achieved partly by the form of the piece, which presents a series of discontinuous sketches that are meant to increase the reader’s credulity through repetition and a highly particularized, if sometimes absurd, level of detail.5 Thomas Wiggin, aged 108, made a “very fair corpse”; Dr. Glysson, aged 100, had hair that “very much resembled snow”; Agnes Milborne, aged 106, had “twenty nine sons and one daughter . . . twenty of whom frequently followed her to church” (11, 24). Daniel Bull M’Carthy thus emerges not as an exception but

5 As Katz points out in his book Disciplining Old Age, it was not until the publication of Thomas Bailey’s Records of Longevity in 1857 that “skepticism about the miraculous cases of long life-spans” was introduced along with an extensive list of long livers (Katz 45).
as the necessary remainder—that which is excessive and unaccountable—which is necessary for Easton’s account of long livers to seem comprehensive and credible.

Each entry in Easton’s *Human Longevity* tells the story of a life in abbreviated form—one that compresses the narrative development of a life into a descriptive moment. As Amanpal Garcha shows, a similar kind of descriptive nonnarrativity exists alongside the progressiveness and causality of novel plots. The preponderance of descriptive prose and episodic narrative fragments of the nineteenth-century novel resists “the forward drive of narrativity and the coherence of plot, and instead puts forth an alternative model of temporality—a model in which time is disorganized, nonprogressive flux and in which stability appears not through developmental, teleological plots, but only through the consistency and stasis of an author’s style or distinctive voice” (Garcha 42).

Garcha uses this tension between plot and discontinuity to suggest that “the pleasures of Dickens’s early works . . . often lie not in his hopelessly melodramatic plots, but rather in the descriptive moments or digressive episodes that interfere with the narrative’s move forward” (45). *Human Longevity* helps to contextualize the nature of this pleasure, which is effected principally not by the knowledge that other people have lived longer than oneself but, structurally, through the synchronic arrangement of long livers in catalogue form. The very nonnarrativity of the centenarian’s life allows for the imaginative suspension of the teleological plot that organizes biological life.

As *The Old Curiosity Shop* nears its end, the old men in the parish seem to grow increasingly sensitive to old age and death. This is particularly true of the old sexton, whose fear of death takes the aggressive form of displacing the weakness of age onto others. Tasked with digging a grave, the old sexton requires the help of the parishioner David (another old man) because he is too feeble to dig the grave himself. Looking on as another man carries out his work, the sexton nevertheless projects debility onto his companion: “[W]hen the sexton . . . exchanged a remark with him about his work, the child could not help noticing that he did so with an impatient kind of pity for his infirmity, as if he were himself the strongest and heartiest man alive” (406). When the old sexton leaves the scene, David reciprocates when he observes to Nell that the old sexton is “failing very fast. He ages every day” (408). In the next sentence the narrator wryly observes: “And so they parted: each persuaded that the other had less life in him than himself” (408–9). Seeing in each other the aged man that they fear for themselves, the old sexton and David demonstrate how old age gives rise to a burst of imaginative activity that reframes the lives of other old men as exhausted past usefulness to the community. Unable to live up to the standards of Victorian masculinity—represented here by the inability to continue working digging graves—the old sexton becomes increasingly sensitive about his age, evincing a deep-seated anxiety about lapsing into the plotlessness of unemployment.6

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6 Peter Stearns writes, “Men’s growing dominance over work through most of the nineteenth century subjected them to many demanding challenges—for work was where industrialization created greatest flux and uncertainty—but it served as a badge of masculinity and a source of real power that were carefully fostered” (52).
Critics working on the issue of age in the nineteenth century agree that the aged man took on the characteristics of Victorian femininity. Thomas Cole and Claudia Edwards suggest that old men were closely associated with the feminine sphere during the Victorian era (254), and Teresa Mangum claims that old men were rendered absurd by being feminized (76). Lisa Hamilton makes an even stronger case, stating that “[t]o be a man in decline was to become like a woman” (75). For the old man, the fear of death is coupled with an anxiety about the inability to live up to masculine expectations and the consequent loss of social and physical power. While developmental narratives structure masculine experience—where youth develops into maturity and power—this does not account for how age enacts physiological changes that make sustaining this linear narrative untenable for old men. *The Old Curiosity Shop* reveals this pervasive bias toward youth even as it reinscribes old age as a central means of imaginative and literary transformation. What emerges from Dickens’s experiment is a cadre of tenacious old men who recycle the youthful energies that surround them.

Narrative Inheritance

In the previous section I argued that aged men who are confronted with unemployment or the possibility of being physically unable to work embody a plotlessness that exists in tension with the developmental tendency of narrative. *Martin Chuzzlewit* inverts this problem by giving the elderly man a surfeit of resources in the form of inheritance, thus radically changing the role of the old man in the scheme of this novel’s developmental plot. Spanning the city and countryside of England and America, the main plot of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is set in motion when Young Martin is disowned by his wealthy grandfather, Old Martin, after the grandfather learns of the young man’s intention to marry his servant and companion, Mary. While the focus of the plot is on Young Martin’s development, this development is more a product of Old Martin’s elaborate schemes than a process of self-willing on the part of youth. In the process of setting his grandson on the path that will enable him to learn his lesson, Old Martin is carried along on his own improving journey. In the tension that arises between generations, *Martin Chuzzlewit* disables inheritance as a means of supporting masculine subjectivity in a society where male power is increasingly threatened by age; instead, the old man engages in acts of deferral that invest his aged frame with narrative control and social relevance.

Old Martin is introduced as suffering from a stomach complaint. Far from indicating his decrepitude, the illness merely serves to highlight the old man’s robust constitution: “He was, beyond all question, very ill, and suffered exceedingly: not the less, perhaps, because he was a strong and vigorous old man, with a will of iron, and a voice of brass” (24). Not registering the signs of physiological decay that usually accompany old age, Old Martin’s body is made to signify his stubborn refusal to submit to the will of others: “[T]his old man, and even his grip of

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7 As “muscularity” and athleticism became defining characteristics of masculinity at the mid-century, Kay Heath suggests that “the older man increasingly was pushed to the margins, and aging became more and more debilitating and effeminizing” (30).
the stout stick on which he leaned, were all expressive of a resolution not easily shaken, and a purpose... such as in other days might have survived the rack” (136). All the more odd, then, when Old Martin seeks refuge from the avaricious members of his family by moving in with his most villainous relative, the architect and arch-hypocrite Seth Pecksniff. As Young Martin had recently apprenticed himself to Pecksniff, Old Martin’s sudden desire to cultivate ties with his relation triggers the removal of his grandson from the house. This serves as a ruse by which Old Martin can set his grandson free from the influence of Pecksniff, do penance for his own pride, and punish Pecksniff in the process.

Central to the success of Old Martin’s performance of decrepit old age—which serves as the engine for the novel’s plot—is a tacit belief that the inevitable progression toward the end of life is one marked by decay and debilitation. Early nineteenth-century medical discourse provides a suggestive blueprint. In “On the Climacteric Disease” (1831), Sir Henry Halford observes that “the stomach seems to lose all its powers; the frame becomes more and more emaciated... the mind grows torpid and indifferent to what formerly interested it; and the patient sinks at last, seeming rather to cease to live, than to die” (7). As the body weakens, so do moral qualities such as agency and will, leaving the elderly man in a state of passivity so complete that death itself lies outside his grasp. This sentiment is echoed by the author of the entry titled “Age” in The Cyclopedia of Medicine (1833), who likens old age to the winding down of a watch (Roget 42), and by Thomas Andrews, who writes in A Cyclopedia of Domestic Medicine and Surgery (1842) that “the slightest fall, is sufficient to arrest some one of the vital functions, and death immediately arrives, as the last term of destruction of the functions and organs” (138).

Performing these symptoms, Old Martin is able to deceive others by making his demeanor correspond with the expectations of his visible old age. After just a short time at Pecksniff’s, the ill-mannered old man “had gradually undergone an important change”: “he was comparatively subdued and easy to deal with” and “the colour of the whole man was faded... He was less keen of sight; was deaf sometimes” (409). The narrator observes that he had a “blank and motionless expression which is not uncommon in the faces of those whose faculties are on the wane, in age” (573). It is the assumption that most characters make in the novel—that old age and decay go hand in hand—that allows Old Martin to regain control of the plot by other means than the violent imposition of his will. While the characters in the novel lament his collapse under the power of Pecksniff, Old Martin has never been busier. Though rarely represented in the text, he surreptitiously motivates most of the events that move the plot forward to a satisfactory conclusion. He asks Pecksniff to remove Young Martin before the hypocrite negatively influences

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8 In Barbara Hardy’s reading, Old Martin’s impersonation represents Dickens’s “wasted opportunity” of generating some emotional identification on the part of the reader (112). He fails precisely because Old Martin is absent for so much of the novel: “Such scenes are frequent at the beginning, then thin out, and reappear in a conspicuous huddle towards the end when we have the revelation of Martin’s trick... It is important at the beginning and end but stays more or less out of sight for a large part of the novel” (111). With my reading of Old Martin, however, his absence serves a specific purpose in diverting attention away from himself as the generator of plots.
him; he anonymously sends Martin twenty pounds when Martin needs money to travel to America; the money he uses to pay off Montague Tigg allows that man to become Tigg Montague and to set up the “Anglo-Bengalese Disinterested Loan and Life Insurance Company”; and, among other things, he provides Tom Pinch with a job and orchestrates a meeting between Ruth Pinch and John Westlock, resulting in their engagement. As John Bowen observes, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, “the self is always dissolving into gesture and performance” (207), and so it is for Old Martin, whose time performing the senselessness and torpidity of old age teaches him new ways to plot for others and achieve his ends.

However, his end is not entirely clear. When he first moves in with Pecksniff, Old Martin tells him: “You and yours are to find that I can be constant, and am not to be diverted from my end. Do you hear?” (137). One cannot help thinking that Old Martin’s “end” has a different meaning for Pecksniff, who greedily anticipates the old man’s speedy demise. Around this slippage of the word *end*—as the eventual death of the old man or as the consummation of Old Martin’s plots—pivots the development of *Martin Chuzzlewit*’s narrative. In the ongoing competition between narrative and biological closure, the end of the story constantly threatens to arrive too soon: “Old Martin’s cherished projects, so long hidden in his own breast, so frequently in danger of abrupt disclosure through the bursting forth of the indignation he had hoarded up, during his residence with Mr. Pecksniff, were retarded, but not beyond a few hours” (679). Embodied in the old man—“hidden in his own breast”—the success of Old Martin’s project requires the discipline to hold the end at bay. But when is the right time for Old Martin to reveal his plot? As Sylvère Monod points out, when Young Martin returns from America, almost having died from trying to earn his fortune abroad, “nothing is said to explain why the moment of truth and revelation is further delayed” (25). Seemingly having achieved his end, with Young Martin a changed man begging for his grandfather’s forgiveness, Old Martin nonetheless perpetuates the ruse.

The deferral of Old Martin’s end is part of the novel’s larger fascination with how development—for both the narrative and the characters—is wrought by the very means that forestall it. For example, the revelation of Old Martin’s secret at the end of the novel seems to be brought about more by a crisis of narrative intensity than by the rationalization of narrative closure: “[S]cattered as his purposes and hopes were for the moment, by the crowding in of all these incidents between him and his end; still their very intensity and the tumult of their assemblage nerved him to the rapid and unyielding execution of his scheme” (679). In this case, deferral paradoxically creates the conditions that enable the realization of his end: “[T]he crowding in of all these incidents between him and his end . . . nerved him to the rapid . . . execution of his scheme” (ibid.). As Old Martin recedes into the background of the story, he deploys many of the techniques that we associate with the construction of a successful novel: usurping linear progression for a more tortuous plot, Old Martin achieves his end through a circuitous route of delay.

Old Martin serves as a pattern for how other old men in the novel defer ends as a means of realizing them. For example, the text’s dismissal of Anthony Chuzzlewit’s ancient accountant, Old Chuffey, merely emphasizes the significance of the elderly man’s revelation late in the novel. In the other major plot of *Martin*
Chuzzlewit, the reader is led to believe that Jonas Chuzzlewit has murdered his father, Anthony, in order to expedite his inheritance. When Tigg Montague learns of Jonas’s act, he uses his knowledge as leverage against Jonas, forcing him to invest capital into Tigg’s fraudulent business. Backed into a corner, Jonas murders Tigg. Shortly after, Old Martin accuses Jonas of killing his father, but before Jonas can be hauled off to prison, Chuffey comes to life: “The trembling figure of the old man shook with the strong emotions that possessed him . . . and with his gray hair stirring on his head, he seemed to grow in size, and was like a man inspired” (669). Chuffey reveals that despite Jonas’s intention to murder Anthony, he did not succeed. Discovering the poison in the drawer, Anthony only pretended to drink the liquid, dying soon after from grief and a broken heart. Exemplary of the dilatory effect of old men on narrative, Chuffey withholds his knowledge for most of the novel. As the vectors of narrative attention shift to Jonas, at a point of such intensity that deferral is no longer an option, the story bursts from Chuffey: as with Old Martin’s revelation, the end (in this case, the truth of Jonas’s subplot) seems to derive from the fact that the story has been postponed for so long.

Chuffey’s suppression of information quietly sets the plot of Jonas and Tigg into motion. This plot is also grounded on the machinations of another old man, the proto-detective Nadgett: “He was a short, dried-up, withered, old man, who seemed to have secreted his very blood; for nobody would have given him credit for the possession of six ounces of it in his whole body” (385). The keyword for Nadgett, as it might be for all of the old men in Martin Chuzzlewit, is “secret”: “the whole object of his life appeared to be, to avoid notice, and preserve his own mystery” (505). As Nadgett tells Tigg after giving his report on Jonas, “It almost takes away any pleasure I may have had in this enquiry even to make it known to you” (509). For Nadgett, it is not so much the act of disinterring secrets that he enjoys—his surveillance leaves him with an “anxious face and bloodshot eyes” (673)—but the condition of knowing something that others do not. As with both Old Martin and Chuffey, however, the protraction of the plot eventually yields to the crisis of necessity: with a “tone of regret in which he deplored the approaching publicity of what he knew,” Nadgett brings Jonas’s plot to a close while discharging his secret of any narrative importance (674).

The protraction of plots, the creation of new ones, and the harboring of secrets function as an alternative source of power for the old men of Martin Chuzzlewit, one that is threatened by closure and the revelation of secrets. Indeed, this narrative capital exists alongside the prospect of inheritance that looms over much of the novel, supplementing and in some cases replacing the function of wealth. The promise of inheritance and the power of money are widely acknowledged as the best way to ensure independence and respect for elderly people who might otherwise be pushed to the margins. Cole and Edwards state that “the elderly’s bargaining power over the bequest of land, tools, and other economic assets, as well as trade skills, will safeguard their comforts until death” (224). Thane adds that the elderly could command respect “by possession of property or high position” (7). And Small claims that in Martin Chuzzlewit, “The old recall and speak when the novel’s moral schema dictates, and even then their moral authority is awkwardly
dependent not just upon their retention, or retrieval, of their mental powers but on their having access to the protection of wealth” (“Unquiet Limit” 72).

Far from suggesting the “protection of wealth,” the core relationships in *Martin Chuzzlewit* suggest just the opposite: the older one becomes, the more the aged body is made to signify his or her resources. Money serves an ambivalent role in preserving the agency of the elderly, one that if taken too far has potentially dangerous consequences. Quadagno writes that while “[c]ontrol of property gave the aged a good deal of power over their children . . . the disadvantage was that it created tensions between generations. There are many folktales describing fighting and even murder between parents and children” (14). The security provided by economic assets can quickly lapse into violence. Complaining to the father he will eventually attempt to murder for his inheritance, Jonas says, “why don’t you make over your property? . . . That would be natural to your own son, and you like to be unnatural, and to keep him out of his rights” (256). In the case of Old Martin and his grandson, while money does not act as the means of destroying their relationship, it also does not help in reconciling them. He claims that his money has brought him only “pain and bitterness”: “I hate it. It is a spectre walking before me through the world, and making every social pleasure hideous” (36). It is upon this “spectre” that his relations project their attentions, anticipating the old man’s demise and the wealth he will leave behind.

Instead, reconciliation occurs through the other form of capital that old men wield in the novel: the hoarding of stories or information over time that results in the protraction of plots. It is a commonplace of the Victorian novel for the disruption of the linear trajectory of primogeniture to form the basis of the conflict while the conferral of inheritance on the real heir signals resolution. But *Martin Chuzzlewit* wants to de-emphasize the role that money plays in the motivation of its protagonists: the novel is, after all, a sustained critique of selfishness. Old Martin laments, “I have so corrupted and changed the nature of all those who have ever attended on me, by breeding avaricious plots and hopes within them” (38). Money offers no protection. In fact, it turns one into a target. Responding to the proliferation of plots against him with one of his own, Old Martin’s performance of decrepit old age allows him to influence Pecksniff and Young Martin as a means of realizing his goals. This plotting reinvests the old man with social power and narrative significance that exceed even those of wealth.

The main reason why inheritance does not work to inspire development in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is that it channels desire almost exclusively toward the end. Such is the morbid trajectory of inheritance, in which the anticipation of death confuses one’s normal sense of moral responsibility. In his study of plot, Peter Brooks suggests that “the paradox of the self becomes explicitly the paradox of narrative plot as the reader consumes it: diminishing as it realizes itself, leading to an end that is the consummation (as well as the consumption) of its sense-making. If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie at the end, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire for the end” (51–52). Placing meaning at the end of the narrative turns the process of reading into an act of consumption—one in which progress through the story does not register development (of the self, of meaning) but rather
shrinkage and diminishment. When Old Martin cries out, “A new plot; a new plot! Oh self, self, self!,” he recognizes this link between selfishness and the teleology of plot (40). Moving forward is not development but death, and so looking forward to the prospect of inheritance in Martin Chuzzlewit results in Jonas’s attempted patricide and eventual negation of self through suicide.

The deferrals enacted by the old men in Martin Chuzzlewit provide an alternative model of narrative in which desire for the end has been replaced with the compulsion to suspend narrative progress. This dilatory compulsion opens a clearing for Young Martin’s character to develop outside of the coercion of teleological plots like that of inheritance. While the agency of the old man certainly plays a role in this development, within the broader context of Dickens’s imagination he serves as the very figure of that postponement. Reflecting on Old Martin’s altered state in the Pecksniff household, Mary says: “I have sometimes heard . . . that those whose powers had been enfeebled long ago . . . have been known to rouse themselves before death, and enquire for familiar faces once very dear to them; but forgotten, unrecognised, hated even, in the meantime” (575). Just so, Old Martin and Chuffey burst from their senescent stupor in spectacular fashion near the end of the novel. But no character better embodies the fearsome energies of age than Anthony Chuzzlewit on his deathbed: “[B]attling for each gasp of breath, with every shrivelled vein and sinew starting in its place, as it were bent on bearing witness to his age . . . an old, old, shrunken body, endowed with preternatural might, and giving the lie in every motion of its every limb and joint to its enfeebled aspect, was a hideous spectacle indeed” (263). The trajectory of old age balks linearity: as with the aged sailor in Tennyson’s Ulysses, just before the end we return back to the middle. It is this elliptical movement that gives old age a surprising power that is at once terrifying and awesome.

The Afterlife of Plot

A close reading of the old men in Martin Chuzzlewit reveals that the success of the novel’s plot has less to do with Young Martin’s attainment of maturity and more to do with opening channels where affect and resources can pass between generations. Dickens continues to develop this line of thought in A Christmas Carol, though here what is at stake is not familial relations—between grandson and grandfather—but the interiorized stages of one’s own life. Already an old man at the beginning of the story, Ebenezer Scrooge is jerked through space and time by an entourage of spirits who inspire him to change his miserly ways. Unlike the development of youth in the classic “coming of age” story, A Christmas Carol is a bildungsroman for old age, where the pathos of the story lies not in the timeliness of maturity but in a change of heart that occurs before it is too late. Where in the conventional bildungsroman youth develops into maturity through a gradual process of education, Scrooge must forget the lessons he has learned over the course of his long life. The success of this project is marked by the dissemination of Scrooge’s accumulated wealth through charitable acts at the end of the story. In Jerome Buckley’s account of the Victorian bildungsroman, “to ‘make good’ is
Money therefore assumes a new and pervasive importance in the Bildungsroman” (21). But in A Christmas Carol, “to make good” is inverted: the end of life is not the apotheosis of personal and financial development but the opportunity of return and the subversion of the accretive logic of maturing capital that underwrites linear narratives of self-development.

Scrooge’s transformation begins when he is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley. Enchained by his callous disregard for others while still alive, Marley warns Scrooge, “It is required of every man . . .  that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world . . .  and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!” (23). The end of life does not result in abrupt termination but in a lingering consciousness that lacks the ability to effect a meaningful change in the surrounding world. The Dickensian hell is one where the damned wander meaninglessly among scenes of human misfortune. For the damned of A Christmas Carol, the accumulation of resources has not enabled the reintegration into society that marks the ending of the classic bildungsroman; instead, they inhabit an afterlife of plot where they repeat indefinitely the alienating desire for personal gain.9

The hellish perpetuity of Dickens’s afterlife is a fitting punishment for the individual who identifies self-development with capital’s interminable maturation. According to Moretti, capital represents a unique problem for the bildungsroman because it closes off the possibility of concluding: “Capital, due to its purely quantitative nature, and the competition it is subject to, can be a fortune only in so far as it keeps growing. It must grow, and change form, and never stop” (26). A Christmas Carol literalizes this attribute of capital by putting the practices of misers into an imaginative context that underlines the terror of hoarding without end. To unhinge self-maturation from the maturity of capital, Scrooge must reinterpret the youthful journey that set the ground for his cynical worldview. Escorted by the Ghost of Christmas Past, Scrooge observes his young self alone and separated from his family during Christmas; he sees the magnanimity of his old employer Fezziwig; and he watches the dissolution of his engagement to Belle, as his fears of poverty cause him to place the love of wealth above all others. Scrooge’s youth results in a maturity that has determined the remainder of his life: “There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root and where the shadow of the growing tree would fall” (45). The recapitulation of Scrooge’s past ends here: after this last, great conflict of his life, Scrooge’s old age circles the desire for money with increasing intensity and futility. Scrooge merely grows older as his capital grows, and as such there is no story to tell.

9 The return to society is the most fundamental aspect of Georg Lukács’s account of the bildungsroman, where, through great difficulty, an isolated individuality is folded back into a social reality of similarly formed personalities: community “is achieved by personalities, previously lonely and confined within their own selves, adapting and accustoming themselves to one another; it is the fruit of a rich and enriching resignation, the crowning of a process of education, a maturity attained by struggle and effort” (133).
But Scrooge’s return to the past is more than just a didactic dramatization: it is an embodied renewal of the dynamic and haphazard energies of youth. When the Ghost of Christmas Past sardonically criticizes the generosity of Fezziwig, Scrooge takes offence and speaks “unconsciously like his former, not his latter self” (44). By moving between his “former” and “latter” self, Scrooge brings together the previously disparate perspectives offered by youth and old age. Such generational interplay is one of the defining characteristics of the Ghost of Christmas Past, who is described as “a strange figure—like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child’s proportions. Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin” (31).

The representative of the past—a figure that we might expect to appear in the guise of old age—uncannily embodies the features of both the child and the aged man. The distinction between youth and age is continually subverted in A Christmas Carol. While the Ghost of Christmas Present begins its tenure as a giant in the prime of its life, it “grew older, clearly older” by the end of Christmas night (77). The boy and girl who huddle under its robe—allegories of ignorance and want—are similarly disfigured: “Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shriveled hand, like that of age, had pinched and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds” (78). Written unequally on the bodies of the young and the old, age registers the social asymmetries of modern capitalism: where aged capitalists are locked into a terrifying perpetuity, the impoverished young are plunged into premature senescence.10

The compression of youth, adulthood, and old age into a single body combines the horror of a monstrous admixture with the exuberant success of Scrooge’s reformation. Waking up on Christmas day, he exclaims, “I am as merry as a school-boy,” later adding, “I’m quite a baby . . . I’d rather be a baby” (100). Avoiding the end that was not one—an afterlife tormented by the misery of others—Scrooge combines the financial means of old age with the reckless abandon of youth. Significantly, his first act of generosity is to enlist the help of a “delightful boy” who acts as his proxy in the purchase of a prizewinning turkey for Bob Cratchit’s family (101). In his change of heart, it is as if Scrooge’s aged frame requires a youthful surrogate into which his overflowing enthusiasm can be channeled. Other acts of generosity follow this one: he donates a large sum to the charity he had previously rebuked and raises Bob Cratchit’s salary. Scrooge’s youthful revitalization is accompanied by the dissemination of his wealth and further serves to destabilize the linear narrative of accumulating capital. Instead of this linear narrative, he inhabits a temporal field that extends forward and backward simultaneously: signaling his reformation at the end of the story, Scrooge says twice, “I will live in the Past, the

10 In Claudia Nelson’s book-length study on age inversion in Victorian literature, she observes how categories like “child” and “adult” “could be turned inside out to interrogate pressing questions having to do with work and family life, responsibility and desire, faith and doubt, masculinity and femininity, the primitive and the civilized, and more” (11).
Present, and the Future” (98–99). In Jesse Matz’s reading, this means that Scrooge “has learned to perform the temporal diversity modern capitalism would destroy” (274). But in *A Christmas Carol* it is a very specific kind of temporal diversity that is grounded in sociocultural attitudes toward age and in the ability that age grants Scrooge to transgress the economic system in which he is situated.

Presented with the dismal event of his death by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Scrooge pleads: “Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. . . . But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change” (97). In *A Christmas Carol*, self-development is not a linear affair but a circuitous one that wraps around the past, the present, and the future: one does not progress to maturity and an independence secured by capital but to an old age that is saturated by the reckless energies of youth and made permeable by outlets of distributed wealth. What makes *A Christmas Carol* more than a mere bourgeois fantasy, where social integration is accompanied by economic independence, is Scrooge’s old age. Approaching the end of life, the rules that structure socioeconomic experience change. With some supernatural assistance, Dickens shows Scrooge that the goal of his life—the security offered by the accumulation of capital—decreases in importance in proportion to the amount of time that he has left to live. The spirits merely remind Scrooge of what old age enables him to do: liberated as he is from the economic necessity that compelled him to abandon his engagement to Belle, the proximity of old age to the end of life multiplies the possibilities available to Scrooge instead of closing them down.

**Conclusion**

In Dickens’s novels the elderly man emerges as the discontent remainder of the developmental plot’s teleology, bringing into relief the temporal limitations necessary to enable the expansiveness of realism. One of the ironies of the realist novel is that while its sheer length requires a great deal of time to read, the novel does a better job of representing the social spaces of modernity—the places where its characters work, interact, and gather—than it does representing the temporal continuity of an individual life. For example, while a novel like *Great Expectations* (1861) covers a great deal of time—the growth of Pip from a very young child to mature adulthood—much of his development is carried out through what Gérard Genette calls narrative ellipses: those moments “where a nonexistent section of narrative corresponds to some duration of story” (93). Pip ages eleven years in the time that it takes to transition from chapter 58 to chapter 59. Represented scenes of time passing tend to move at a much slower pace, with the human interest increasing as the temporal units become smaller. Young Pip’s long descriptions of Satis House stall the forward movement of the story even as they occupy long stretches of the narrative discourse. Able to conjure the illusion of vast and proliferating spaces, the realist novel does an inferior job at reproducing the texture of passing time over long spans.

The result is that the novel’s representation of the social is one where aging—a context that all characters have in common—is strangely absent or relegated to the
plotless fringes of the narrative.\(^1\) The temporal discontinuities that inhere in the representation of any fictional life, whether in the form of compression or elongation, are marked out by Dickens’s elderly men, who register the way in which age attenuates the relation between men and the masculine values that shape their identity: the ability to work and be a productive member of society, the maintenance of patrilineal inheritance, and the accumulation of capital that secures independence and support for one’s family. Such values were not only central to the construction of male subjectivities but also provided the ideological stimulus that ensured the proper functioning of Victorian society. What elderly men allow us to see is a fault line at the heart of Victorian culture, where the white, male, middle-class subject is forced to cede power and inhabit a position of lesser influence in old age. This transition, Dickens implies, is occluded for the sake of maintaining a patriarchal social order, a sacrifice that finds its formal analogue in the novel itself: able to reproduce a complex and coherent social panorama, the novel is unable to faithfully represent the temporal continuity of something as mundane and essential as aging.

The elderly women of Dickens’s novels provide an illuminating counterpoint. In *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), Mrs. Clennam expiates her sins by “stopp[ing] the clock of busy existence,” condemning herself to the life of an invalid by immobilizing her body for a dozen years (361). In *Great Expectations*, Pip observes that Miss Havisham’s clocks are permanently set at twenty minutes to nine, and he begins to “understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago” (60). To a lesser degree, Mrs. Skewton of *Dombey and Son* (1846–48) attempts to stop time by unnaturally prolonging the appearance of youth through the use of cosmetics and by wearing the fashions of a young woman.\(^2\) These elderly women follow a regimen of preservation that keeps up the appearance of temporal stasis. “All seasons are alike to me” (49), Mrs. Clennam tells her son, a sentiment that is echoed by Miss Havisham when she says, “I know nothing of days of the week; I know nothing of weeks of the year” (62). The behavior of these women can be read as the result of the marriage plot’s misfiring. Mrs. Clennam’s terrible marriage with her husband, Miss Havisham’s nonmarriage

\(^{1}\) As Nicholas Dames observes, there is a surplus of quantitative data about old age that makes it more “knowable” than other contexts like race, class, or gender; however, the “numerical accuracy of our age” exists in tension with the fact that old age is “far less knowable, far more internal, private, and idiosyncratic, than these other categories” (114). According to Dames, “We can guess with some confidence what an annual income of, say, £300 in 1860 might mean, even how it would ‘feel’; what it might ‘feel’ like to be 50 years old in 1860 is much more opaque” (115). As a result of this slippage, Dames suggests, “old age . . . is not fully historicizable” (116), and he calls for scholarship that is sensitive to “the formal strategies by which old age eludes the contexts that inexorably pursue it” (117).

\(^{2}\) In her reading of Dickens’s elderly women of modest means, Chase suggests that characters like Sarah Gamp and Betty Higden embody a resilience that is based on their ability to piece together a living from society’s leftovers: “[T]heirs is a resilience of the elderly bricoleuse, reduced to the most exiguous circumstances . . . who nevertheless discovers the tactics of persistence. Comic or sentimental, shrewd or innocent, these aging women retain a generative power that belongs to the composite image of the Victorian elderly and that should not be overlooked within simpler narratives, smoother trajectories” (36).
to Compeyson, and Mrs. Skewton’s attempt to attract sexual attention constitute social failures that exclude them from shared temporalities such as the seasons or calendar dates. For these women, to be outside the marriage plot is to shift from an existence where time’s passage seems to matter to one where stasis and preservation become meaningful.

The aged characters of both sexes suggest that what is at stake with the elderly in Dickens’s work is not only old age per se but also that which has been left out in the process of getting there: aging. I have focused on elderly men because their response to old age illustrates the social consequences of omitting duration as a formal principle of the novel. Where the misfiring of the marriage plot results in elderly women who refuse to acknowledge the passage of time, Dickens’s old male characters are subject to plots of ambition that no longer apply to their aged state. Instead of finding meaning in stasis, they engage in a narrative compulsion for which there is little need and for which there is no plot. They must negotiate between the modernity they wish to control and the past to which they seem to belong. Once occupying a position of cultural privilege, the elderly male subjects of my analysis find themselves in altered circumstances that raise questions central to the bewildering progress of a modernizing society: not the exuberant “what have we achieved?” but the sobering “what have we left behind?” In the realist novel’s attempt to represent the development of a modernizing society there is always something left over, a temporal remainder that, like the aged man’s existence, denies the comfort of a conclusion.

Works Cited


