

**‘A man of great feeling and sensibility’:
The *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* and the Tears of a Clown
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In the ‘Concluding Chapter’ of his *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838), the ‘edited’ autobiography of the famous pantomime performer, Charles Dickens offers a general appraisal of his subject’s life.¹ As the editor of the piece, Dickens closes the work by summarizing the evidence of the foregoing chapters that were provided by Joseph (or ‘Joe’) Grimaldi himself, and uses this as the basis for an overall evaluation of his subject’s life. Dickens seems to be merely finishing the work that Grimaldi and his original editor Thomas Egerton Wilks started, but were unable to conclude due to Grimaldi’s premature death. In conjunction with his ‘Introductory Chapter’ at the beginning, Dickens’s conclusion thus neatly bookends Grimaldi’s work with his own modest interventions. This limited level of intervention would certainly accord with the impression that Dickens himself publicly projects at the start of the *Memoirs*, where he claims that ‘there has been no *book-making* in this case’ (*MG*, I, p. xi (emphasis in original)) and that his role in the work was confined to that of a mere editor.

However, a closer examination of the *Memoirs* reveals that Dickens’s contribution goes much further than this, as he in fact deliberately composes two mutually supportive narratives which reflect both his desire to construct Grimaldi as an admirable figure and his preoccupation with the theatrical nature of human life. Although the frustrating absence of the original manuscript makes any firm assertions difficult, I will demonstrate through close textual analysis and comparison with other works how Dickens was in fact presenting the carefully crafted conclusion of a very deliberately constructed narrative, in order to tell the life story of someone who he describes as ‘a man of the kindest heart’ (*MG*, II, 209).

In the first section, I will examine how Dickens marshals the biographical material available to him through the careful choice of incidents from Grimaldi’s life and the method by which he presents Grimaldi and others within those incidents. I contend that through this strategy, Dickens reconstructs Grimaldi as a real-life counterpart to his own popular model of exemplary benevolence, Samuel Pickwick. In the second section, I will trace the powerful counter-narrative also at work in the *Memoirs*, which is related to the theatrical nature of human life and the *theatrum mundi*. I argue that Dickens’s decision to

meditate on this concern within the life story of a theatrical performer makes for a thematically rich text but also forces us to reappraise the authenticity (or otherwise) of Grimaldi's expressions of feeling and emotion. Finally, I will show how the tension between these two narratives can be resolved, and how they are supportive of each other rather than opposed. In this way, the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* could be described as the triumph of the authentic and felt over the artificial and contrived. I suggest that this model of the 'feeling performer' (including its tragic conclusion) is one which could also be applied to Dickens himself.

I

Samuel Pickwick and Joseph Grimaldi: Lives of Feeling

Within the context of Dickens's writing career, the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* could be described as a minor but nonetheless significant foray in his ongoing battle with one of his early publishers, Richard Bentley, whom Dickens would later memorably recast as 'the Burlington Street Brigand'.² Dickens took on the job of putting Grimaldi's reminiscences and anecdotes into a publishable state at the end of October 1837, after Bentley had purchased the already once-edited manuscript from the hack-writer Thomas Egerton Wilks. The aggressive publishing timetable for this task — which would see the final published form appear in February 1838 — added to what was already a congested period of writing for Dickens. Both *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) and *Oliver Twist* (1838) were being serialized, and he was also editor of *Bentley's Miscellany* at this time.

When considering the level of Dickens's creative input into the *Memoirs*, it is important to note that the ongoing development (and success) of *The Pickwick Papers* (described by S. J. Newman as 'the most good-natured book in the language') provided Dickens with an excellent model for framing the narrative of a good-natured man predisposed to the comic in life.³ For although Dickens would later claim that 'The world would not take another Pickwick from me, now', it seems that at this early stage in his career he was quite willing to exploit the popularity of a character who was still at the forefront of his readers' minds.⁴ This may be demonstrated by considering two of the most striking similarities between the two protagonists: firstly, Pickwick and Grimaldi share a predilection for helping desperate criminals out of their difficulties; and secondly, they

both possess a concomitant naivety and unworldliness which Dickens seems to suggest is the enabler for their benevolence.

Both of these aspects of Pickwick are aptly demonstrated in his first encounter with Jingle within the Fleet Prison. The once audacious strolling actor and confidence trickster has fallen on difficult times, and in his reduced condition he shows Pickwick — his erstwhile victim — a darker world previously uncharted in his supposedly extensive travels around the country. At one point, Jingle explains how he has had to pawn his possessions in order to pay for basic necessities and Pickwick's only frame of reference for the situation is a narrow selection of reading and received anecdotes: “Lived for three weeks upon a pair of boots and a silk umbrella with an ivory handle!” exclaimed Mr Pickwick, who had only heard of such things in shipwrecks, or read of them in Constable's *Miscellany*.⁵

However, precisely because he has no previous experience to draw upon, Pickwick is able to respond in a natural and unaffected fashion. In a direct expression of his emotions, with ‘four large tears running down his waistcoat’ as well as ‘a sparkle to the eye and a swelling to the heart’, Pickwick performs a practical act of benevolence by offering monetary relief to Jingle. Dickens further underscores the goodness of this caring act by contrasting it with the ‘sound, hearty cuff’ (*PP*, p. 569) that one might expect, given how often Jingle had wronged him during their previous encounters.

Soon after this, Pickwick's feeling nature is demonstrated in another way: he is so touched by the people and incidents that he encounters in his travels around the prison, that his previously indomitable spirit of adventure and desire for the variety of life are temporarily quashed, and replaced with introspective solitude as he admits that ‘My head aches with these scenes, and my heart, too’ (*PP*, p. 610). But even at this point, Dickens is keen to demonstrate that his earlier charitable gesture is not merely a token impulse made at a moment of emotional vulnerability. Pickwick's benevolence continues despite his self-imposed solitary confinement, in the form of the provision of proper food and lodgings for Jingle and his manservant Job Trotter, prompting Sam to describe him as ‘a reg'lar thorough-bred angel’ (*PP*, p. 608).

Pickwick thinks of the fate of others even at the very moment of his release from prison. He offers provision for Sam's landlord at the Fleet, whose case is trapped in Chancery, and who we are told ‘bust out a cryin’, Sir, and said you wos wery gen'rous and thoughtful’ (*PP*, p. 631). As we shall see in the *Memoirs*, rather than just using direct

authorial interjections to show our heroes' depth of feeling, testimonies of their kind-heartedness are also put into the mouths of those around them, which both reinforces the impression and attempts to counterbalance any sense that the narrator is guiding us in a particular direction. When his release removes him entirely from the world of the Fleet, Pickwick cannot put his prison experiences entirely behind him. His charity thereafter takes on a more permanent form as he buys off Jingle's debt at considerable loss to himself ('ten shillings in the pound' according to the clerk Mr Lowten (*PP*, p. 701)) and provides Jingle with the chance of a new life in the West Indies.

At this point Dickens also puts Pickwick's kind-heartedness into relief by contrasting it with the feelings of the more cynical attorney Perker. For example, the nature of the advice each gives to Jingle is one clear point of contrast. Pickwick suggests that Jingle 'must be careful not to play any more desperate cricket matches [...] or to renew [his] acquaintance with Sir Thomas Blazo' (*PP*, p. 703), referring to one of Jingle's previous tall tales with no hint of irony, and indicating his simple inclination to take people at their word. In contrast, Perker's language is more direct, pragmatic and entirely grounded in the real world: 'let me advise you, gentlemen, not to be too knowing in the West Indies. If you throw away this chance, you will both richly deserve to be hanged, as I sincerely trust you will be' (*PP*, p. 704).

But while Perker is initially sceptical about Pickwick's hope that his generosity towards Jingle could lead to a 'permanent reformation', Dickens ensures that Pickwick's naivety is not the subject of either derision or pity. For Perker ultimately concedes that Pickwick's 'object is equally honourable, whatever the result is', and that his untainted view of the world is in fact what makes his acts of kind-heartedness possible. Indeed, Perker suggests that Pickwick's unworldly optimism, which acts for the best and risks disappointment, is preferable to 'that species of benevolence which is so very cautious and long-sighted that it is seldom exercised at all, lest its owner should be imposed upon, and so wounded in his self-love' (*PP*, p. 704).

Turning from *Pickwick* to the *Memoirs*, we can see that Dickens's portrayal of Grimaldi similarly epitomizes this combination of benevolent action and unworldliness. Dickens declared this as his intention in a letter to Grimaldi's doctor, in which he explains how he deliberately shaped the narrative in this way, commenting that 'I was very much struck by the many traits of kindheartedness scattered through the book, and have given it that colouring throughout'.⁶ In the 'Concluding Chapter', Dickens describes Grimaldi as

not merely ‘a man of the kindest heart’ but also of ‘the most child-like simplicity’, who was ‘innocent of all caution in worldly matters’ (*MG*, II, 209). Both of these aspects of his character are presented to us in Grimaldi’s encounters with the highwayman George Hamilton and the society fraudster Mackintosh.

At his first meeting with Hamilton, Grimaldi’s immediate reaction is to help his fellow man. Hamilton lives a dissipated life, being ‘rather too much addicted to drinking and squandering his money’, and Grimaldi’s ‘good-hearted impulse’ tempted him to ‘remonstrate with him upon his folly’. However, on this occasion the modest Grimaldi is dissuaded from acting upon his feelings due to their ‘slight intimacy’ (*MG*, II, 43). Hamilton soon resorts to supporting himself through criminal means, which culminates in his armed robbery of Grimaldi on Highgate Hill. Rather than using the scene as an opportunity for some ‘Newgate’ sensationalism Dickens instead prefers to expend his energy in considering the consequences of the act. Like Pickwick’s treatment of Jingle in the Fleet, Grimaldi’s thoughts are far from vengeful and his depth of sensibility is such that he is more concerned with the indirect victim of this crime than his own misfortune. If Hamilton was tried and sentenced to death based on Joe’s indictment ‘it would probably involve the fate of his young wife, of whose meekness and gentleness he had seen so many tokens’ (*MG*, II, 61). Grimaldi therefore hopes that the official mechanisms of state justice, which would lead to ‘a violent death’ for his ‘fellow-creatures’ and doom their families to ‘living and hopeless wretchedness’ (*MG*, II, 62), are somehow thwarted. Such sentiments, perhaps unsurprisingly, leave the patrol and magistrate in ‘high dudgeon’ (*MG*, II, 63) but demonstrate Grimaldi’s generosity of spirit.

When he is finally called upon to identify Hamilton as his assailant, Grimaldi is willing to lie in order to obstruct the supposedly barbaric system of justice. Yet Dickens offers no censure for such behaviour in his commentary, and instead points out that Grimaldi’s primary thought is a charitable one — he acts in this way to ‘save this young man, whom he strongly suspected to be but a beginner in crime’ (*MG*, II, 65). When Hamilton is acquitted he immediately shows his gratitude like Sam’s landlord in Chancery, visiting Grimaldi to thank ‘his benefactor in the warmest and most grateful manner for his clemency’ (*MG*, II, 65). At this meeting, Grimaldi urges him to reform and pay more attention to his wife, which a thoroughly contrite Hamilton promises to do — a promise that he is equal to, as the narrative later shows.

Grimaldi's dealings with the villainous John Mackoull or 'Mackintosh', a confidence trickster and charlatan more directly in the style of Jingle, follow a similar pattern to the Jingle and Hamilton episodes. Thus Grimaldi, 'apart from all personal considerations' (*MG*, II, 13), provides testimony to acquit Mackintosh from charges of burglary and offers his assistance if it is ever needed again. Once again, Grimaldi offers the hand of charity to one who had wronged him. In all of these examples, after a series of misdemeanours, the villains reach a moment of crisis in which they face the full extremity of the law, at which point any anger or remorse that our protagonists might feel is quickly superseded by stronger feelings of compassion and kindness.

A final example of Grimaldi delivering others from lives of crime is briefly alluded to in Dickens's concluding chapter, but is no less significant. It was not included in the main narrative, we are told, because the modest 'Grimaldi shrunk from the slightest allusion to the story' (*MG*, II, 209), but it nonetheless neatly encapsulates the moral of all of the more prominent examples that I have discussed above. The action itself is briefly described — at some point during his life, Grimaldi had secured the 'release of a brother actor from Lancaster jail' — but the conclusion that Dickens draws from it is crucial to our understanding of his retelling of Grimaldi's life story. Dickens claims that Grimaldi's part in this episode plainly showed 'a pure benevolence of heart and delicacy of feeling, that would have done honour to a prince' (*MG*, II, 209), a statement which to many readers would validate the entire biographical project. A. O. J. Cockshut describes the intention behind biography as 'a persistent attempt to establish heroism', and despite his undisputed popular appeal and stage prowess, Grimaldi was no great historical figure.⁷ Dickens therefore had to establish his heroism in other ways. As biography became a more democratic form, and moved its subject matter away from kings, warriors, and saints, biographers sought to find those same heroic qualities in actors, inventors, and engineers. Samuel Smiles neatly captures the spirit of this process in his own *Self-Help with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (1859) when he comments that 'Biographies of great, but especially good men are [...] most instructive and useful, as helps, guides, and incentives to others'.⁸ By equating Grimaldi's actions with those of a prince, Dickens ennoble his subject and elevates him in the moral hierarchy.

In both *Pickwick* and the *Memoirs*, Dickens emphatically underscores the social value of his protagonists' well-meaning actions by forestalling any debate about their long-term benefit. Through his narrative strategy of following the respective stories of

Jingle and Mackintosh and Hamilton beyond their encounters with Pickwick and Grimaldi, he makes it very clear that such benevolence is thoroughly successful. Thus Pickwick, we are told, ‘never had occasion to regret his bounty to Mr Jingle, for both that person and Job Trotter became in time worthy members of society, although they have always steadily objected to return to the scenes of their old haunts and temptations’ (*PP*, p. 753). Mackintosh’s later life is similarly presented as a universal lesson in morality: ‘It says something for the honour of human nature and the sincerity of the man’s repentance, that he never took undue advantage of this permission [to ask for Grimaldi’s assistance], and, indeed, was never heard of by Grimaldi again’ (*MG*, II, 16). Hamilton also repays Grimaldi’s trust and kindness — he soon bore ‘the reputation of an honest man’ (*MG*, II, 66) — and his ultimate vindication occurs when he dies trying to save his neighbour’s children in a house fire. The implication here is that Grimaldi’s good feeling offers an inspirational example that positively influences the actions of others.

Both figures conclude their public lives through rituals of formal leave-taking and Dickens uses these scenes as another opportunity to exemplify the benevolence of his protagonists. On the most practical level, Grimaldi’s final benefit appearances were intended to provide him with a retirement fund, but on a symbolic level, they also presented a very tangible means for his benevolence to be acknowledged and rewarded. This point is demonstrated from the very start of the preparations. When Grimaldi declares that he is ‘too ill and depressed’ to ‘venture to undergo the labour of getting [a benefit] up’ (*MG*, II, 176), his friend Miss Kelly immediately shows *her* gratitude towards him — and again demonstrates the positive effect of benevolence on others — by taking control of the organization of the entire event. Other significant figures also show him this kind of reciprocal generosity: for example, the proprietors of Sadler’s Wells receive him ‘with the greatest friendship and liberality’ and offer him the ‘use of the house gratuitously’ (*MG*, II, 176). Similarly, Grimaldi’s friend and former colleague Thomas Dibdin secures the services of the theatre company for free, as ‘every person in the theatre was anxious and eager to render every assistance in his or her power, and to “put their shoulders to the wheel, in behalf of poor old Joe”’ (*MG*, II, 177). The actors and performers of Drury Lane perform the same service for Joe’s second benefit.

Joe’s humble farewell speeches at the benefit events offer another opportunity for the positive effects of his previous benevolent acts to be demonstrated. At Sadler’s Wells, ‘[h]e was received and listened to, in the kindest and most encouraging manner’ (*MG*, II,

179) and at Drury Lane ‘the audience cheered loudly, and gave him every possible expression of encouragement and sympathy’ (*MG*, II, 193). Large crowds gathered in the streets outside the playhouse and followed his coach home, where he was ‘hailed with a similar overwhelming shout of approbation and regard’ (*MG*, II, 194). In both speeches, Grimaldi recognizes the kindness and charity of others towards him, and through the narrative of the *Memoirs* Dickens has also made it clear that this kindness is largely a corollary of Grimaldi’s own benevolent actions towards others. Pickwick’s farewell dinner similarly articulates both his principal credo of kind-heartedness and its effect on others. Pickwick states that the ‘happiness of young people [...] has ever been the chief pleasure of my life’ and if ‘I have done but little good, I trust I have done less harm’ (*PP*, p. 749). Both ‘Emily and Arabella sobbed audibly’ in response to these sentiments, and ‘his friends rose with one accord and pledged him from their hearts’ (*PP*, p. 749): his own warmth and expression of feeling are replicated in others.

The final means by which Dickens demonstrates the quality of feeling in both men is through his presentation of their attitudes to their last days. Significantly, it is through their experiences of retirement that the characters of Pickwick and Grimaldi are at their most divergent. While Pickwick’s declining years are strongly marked by idealized comfort, the conclusion of Grimaldi’s life is plagued by the unhappy consequences of many years of physical exertion and personal tragedy. In contrast to Pickwick’s vague condition of being ‘somewhat infirm’ (*PP*, p. 753), Grimaldi’s appearance is changed ‘in a few weeks, to that of a shrunken imbecile old man’ (*MG*, II, 210). Pickwick can still take countryside walks and visit the Dulwich Art Gallery, whereas Grimaldi was ‘deprived of all power of motion’ and ‘doomed to bear [...] the worst bodily evils of the most helpless old age’ (*MG*, II, 211). Every year, Pickwick is able to repair ‘to a large family merry-making at Mr Wardle’s’ (*PP*, p. 754), but Grimaldi by contrast was ‘condemned to drag out the remainder of his days in a solitary chamber, when all those who would make up the sum of home were cold in death’ (*MG*, II, 211). Unlike Grimaldi, Pickwick is physically capable of continuing his benevolent works to the very end of his life. But in Grimaldi’s case, Dickens shows how he attains a higher level of sensibility and feeling through his equanimity towards his own suffering. Despite his extensively catalogued tribulations, including the double tragedy in the loss of his wife and son, we are told that he ‘lived to recover his cheerfulness and peace’ and ‘in time grew contented, and even happy’ (*MG*, II, 211). In fact, through the transcendence of such a grim history of personal

misfortune represented by these qualities, it could be argued that Grimaldi ultimately ‘out-Pickwicks’ Pickwick himself.

II

‘We are all actors in The Pantomime of Life’: Life as Performance

According to a number of contemporary reviews, Dickens largely succeeded in focussing his narrative on the sentimental side of Grimaldi’s character. For example, the *Athenaeum* (3 March 1838) commented that the *Memoirs* ‘shows a true-hearted, excellent man, and great actor, in many pleasing lights’, and the *Literary Gazette* (17 February 1838) noted that in particular ‘the whole story of his tender passion for Miss Hughes [...] and her tender compassion for him, is very tenderly and pleasingly told’.⁹ However, this biographical imperative to show Grimaldi as a man of feeling is in fact counterpoised by a different, contesting narrative. This alternative narrative represents a development of ideas that Dickens had originally presented in *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and an essay in the March 1837 edition of *Bentley’s Miscellany*, entitled ‘The Pantomime of Life’. In both of these works, Dickens, in full creative flow, suggests that identity is not based on interior feeling and emotion, but on external performance and effect. As I will show, he deliberately reworks these ideas through the life story of Grimaldi.

In *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens observed a number of figures who formulate this kind of theatrical identity in order to improve their social and economic standing within a society seemingly predicated on surface and appearance. For example, Samuel Smith, assistant at ‘a dirty-looking ticketed linen-draper’s shop’, recasts himself as Horatio Sparkins and puts on a performance to convince an offstage audience — the Malderton family — that he is a gentleman-poet and a thoroughly eligible bachelor.¹⁰ Similarly, in ‘The Dancing Academy’, a dancing master with the stage-Italian name of Signor Billsmethi engages in the elaborate pretence of tuition while trying to marry off his daughters to eligible and rich young gentlemen like the hopeless dupe Mr Augustus Cooper.

Another group of sketches — including ‘Private Theatres’, ‘Mrs Joseph Porter’ and ‘Astley’s’ — all take the playhouse as their subject, but are composed in such a way as to make wider points about the inherent theatricality of life as a whole. Before presenting the performance itself, just over half of ‘Mrs Joseph Porter’ is spent describing

the most extensive preparations at Rose Villa, Clapham Rise, for an evening of private theatricals. This bias is even more pronounced in ‘Private Theatres’, in which the entirety of the sketch is given up to describing the backstage preparations — it ends pointedly with the line ‘The bell rings — the tragedy opens (!) — and our description closes’.¹¹ According to William Axton, Dickens dwells on the activity behind the curtain in order to accentuate further the difference between appearance and reality, as the ‘hollow contrivances of the stage to simulate the appearance of reality are exposed and ridiculed’.¹² However, this method also serves to underscore an important point that Dickens would make in a number of his works and which has a direct relevance here. We do not need to see the final, formal production, he seems to be saying, because all of the episodes that have led up to it are just as theatrical as anything that could be produced within the narrow, scripted confines of the playhouse stage.

In another sketch, ‘Astley’s’, Dickens further emphasizes this view. Instead of directing their gazes towards the stage, the crowd turn towards each other for their entertainment. As Boz puts it, ‘Our histrionic taste is gone, and with shame we confess, that we are far more delighted and amused by the audience, than with the pageantry we once so highly appreciated’.¹³ The rest of the sketch thus presents ‘the scenes in the circle’, the private dramas of the offstage figures, ignoring those onstage entirely. J. Hillis Miller expands this impression to encompass the *Sketches* as a whole, whereby the ‘theatre returns so often [...] that London in this book comes to seem a place where everyone is in one way or another engaged not in productive work but in performing or witnessing scenic representations’.¹⁴ In ‘The Pantomime of Life’, Dickens similarly drew a number of comparisons between the principal characters of a pantomime show — the Clown, the Pantaloon, the Harlequin, and so on — and the types of people he encountered in everyday life, reaching the conclusion that the world outside of the theatre was full of figures who were just as artificial and contrived as their stage counterparts.

Looking at the *Memoirs*, it is clear that Dickens wished to continue a number of the themes from these earlier pieces. From the very outset, the world in which the young Joe Grimaldi grew up is described in performative terms. Even the family home where Joe lived as a child, a site where one might reasonably expect to find a last refuge of authenticity and true feeling, is immersed in theatricality. In an early episode from his childhood, Joe’s father shows the boy the importance of performance in the formation of one’s identity, particularly class identity. Joe is due to visit his grandfather across town

and, ‘anxious that he should support the credit of his family’, his father prepares the boy carefully for his public appearance. Dickens expends at least half a page in describing the costume of ‘the little clown’ in terms that constantly draw attention to its status as a stage prop and underscore the theatricality of the occasion. From his ‘green coat, embroidered with [...] artificial flowers’, down to ‘a little cane in his hand, which he switched to and fro as our clowns may do now’ and ‘a small watch set with diamonds — theatrical, we suppose’ (*MG*, I, 23), Joe’s entire outfit is composed of stage props, items which give the impression of reality but which are either not entirely real or are no longer put to their original purpose. Nonetheless, when his father inspects his efforts, he declares the act to be a convincing one, claiming that ‘Dere now, you are a gentleman’ (*MG*, I, 24), and crowns the entire ensemble with a shilling for the boy’s pocket — which he only in fact lends to him, further enhancing the impermanent, ‘borrowed’ status of the boy’s identity.

Having been set this example by his father, and having spent much of his early life within the playhouse, Joe soon begins to exhibit this same tendency towards offstage performance himself. In fact, Dickens suggests that this is an appropriate strategy within a hostile world in which others attempt to define and fix your identity for you. In a scene that would be echoed in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), Joe’s eccentric father feigns his own death to discover the true nature of his family’s love for him. Joe quickly spots the ruse, and Dickens presents his reaction in language that clearly identifies it as an act, or rather a counter-act. After he had ‘perceived what line of conduct he ought to adopt’, he ‘rolled about in a seeming transport of anguish’ and burst ‘into a roar of the most distracted grief’ (*MG*, I, 28). Here then, the apprentice actor Joe judges the situation, selects the appropriate emotion from his repertoire, and externalizes it as directly as he can.

By externalizing the required emotion in this way, Joe utilizes what Martin Meisel calls the ‘iconography of emotion’, through which an assumed ‘interior experience’ is expressed ‘through a conventionalised language of facial expression, pose and gesture’.¹⁵ This kind of broad, gestural iconography had been developed to suit the conditions of the late eighteenth-century playhouse. For example, the new Drury Lane theatre reopened in April 1794 with a new capacity of over 3600 spectators, which was nearly double its previous size.¹⁶ Such large, noisy performance spaces meant that any subtlety of facial expression, gesture, or speech would be lost to the vast majority of the audience. The means to overcome these difficulties were provided by acting manuals like Leman

Thomas Rede's *The Road to the Stage; or, The Performer's Preceptor* (1827) (later updated as *The Guide to the Stage* (1868)), which outlined how the actor could communicate inner emotion through external means.

Thus Rede depicts grief as 'sudden and violent, [which] expresses itself by beating the head or forehead, tearing the hair, and catching the breath, as if choking; also by screaming, weeping, stamping, lifting the eyes from time to time to heaven, and hurrying backwards and forwards', a description that certainly has affinities with Joe's alarming reaction.¹⁷ Moreover, Rede emphasizes the inherent theatricality of this particular emotion when he comments that grief is 'a passion, which admits, like many others, of a great deal of Stage trick', and this is precisely what Joe is employing to such effect here.¹⁸

This is underscored even further as Joe's staged demonstration of appropriate feeling is explicitly contrasted with the more genuine conduct of his brother. John had 'not seen so much of public life as his brother', we are told, and so openly celebrates his father's demise in an unaffected performance, skipping about the room, 'indulging in various snatches of song, and snapping his fingers' (*MG*, I, 28). When the father's ruse is finally revealed it is the honest John who is thrashed, while the performer Joe is 'received with every demonstration of affection, as the son who truly and sincerely loved him' (*MG*, I, 29). At other moments of crisis within Joe's life, his identity once again appears to be based on the assumption of a role appropriate to the situation rather than on real or lasting sentiments. In another early episode, his house is under threat from burglars and we are told that Joe's strategy for confronting his assailants is to swap one stage persona for another. He shows himself at a window 'looking much more like Robinson Crusoe than [...] the "Little Clown"', and addresses the intruders in a voice 'something akin to that in which his well-known cry of "Here we are!" afterwards acquired so much popularity' (*MG*, I, 65). Joe has once again been forced to choose from his publicly performed roles in order to frame an appropriate response to a threat.

On another occasion, Joe is late for a performance, so has to run to the theatre in his full costume and makeup, and he is immediately recognized in the street. The adoring yet large and unregulated crowd chase after him and eventually corner him in a carriage. Fearing the crush of this mob, instead of showing an alternative, 'offstage' side of himself, he is once again forced to step into role again in order to pacify others — 'suddenly poking his head out of the window, he gave one of his famous and well-known laughs' (*MG*, II, 76). In order to satisfy the expectations of his mob-audience he had to give them

a performance of the version of Grimaldi they wanted, regardless of what his real emotions may have been. These themes are also reflected in Dickens's characterization of other figures in the *Memoirs* — all of the truly memorable figures are presented by Dickens as actors within performances, rather than as authentic, historical presences. Two of the most prominent examples of this are 'Old Lucas', the corrupt beadle who attempts to arrest Grimaldi on several occasions, and the confidence trickster 'Mackintosh', discussed above.

Old Lucas is consistently associated with theatricality in a number of ways. For example, the scene in which he tries to arrest Joe on spurious charges of hunting an over-driven ox on Sadler's Wells Fields is presented as a piece of theatre. Significantly, this encounter occurs at 'the stage-door' (*MG*, I, 115), situating the event at the very boundary between the theatre and the 'real' world. Joe is accompanied by a group of his fellow actors who defend him against the false accusations and engage Lucas in a question-and-answer exchange more suited to the stage. At one point Lucas, 'looking at Grimaldi, demanded whether he was ready; in answer to which question the whole party shouted "No!" with tremendous emphasis' (*MG*, I, 116). Grimaldi's friend Dubois dismisses Lucas's claims in dramatic terms and his speech is full of theatrical bravado: 'Look here, Lucas [...] you are an old scoundrel! [...] take yourself into custody and take yourself off under penalty of a ducking!' (*MG*, I, 116). Here, Dubois brings his onstage rhetorical skills to bear in an offstage situation and in the climax to the scene the same 'orator' addresses the crowd in defence of Joe, as Dickens notes that he 'had reserved the loudest key of his voice for the concluding point' (*MG*, I, 117). The scene is made even more of a theatrical spectacle when Dickens refers to the presence of a live audience observing these protagonists: we are told that Dubois's 'speech was received with a shout of applause, not only by the speaker's companions, but by several idlers who had gathered round' (*MG*, I, 116). Roused by his words, this audience transforms into 'the mob', chasing Lucas down the street in a manner reminiscent of Dickens's description of the mob-audience in 'The Pantomime of Life'.

Old Lucas's final defeat is also imbued with a sense of the pantomime. His attempts to extort money from Grimaldi are finally ended by the mysterious agency of 'a stranger to the party' who, taking from his pocket 'a silver staff', 'shook it at Lucas' and orders him to the Police-office. The silver staff seems to have magical qualities reminiscent of harlequin's bat, as Lucas 'appeared to succumb before the vision of the

silver staff' (*MG*, I, 121) and submits to this unknown figure. This person also later intervenes to give evidence that acquits Grimaldi from all suspicion. The magistrate seems to know who this figure is, but his enigmatic nature is maintained when Grimaldi comments — 'with profound respect and an air of great mystery' — 'Who this gentleman was, I never could ascertain' (*MG*, I, 123).

The final judgement on Lucas is also presented in the manner of pantomime, reminiscent of the very public spectacle of the clown's onstage punishment. Initially, a joke is made of his discomfort at being punished, as we are told that he 'foamed at the mouth in a manner not unlike the over-driven ox' and 'protested [...] with many disrespectful oaths and other ebullitions of anger' (*MG*, I, 123). He displays an exaggerated and gesticulatory style of anger wholly suited to a performing figure, and consistent with the external mode of emotional display recommended by the likes of Rede. Lucas is finally sentenced, to the delight of not only the accused but 'the officers also, who [...] participated in the general dislike of [him]' (*MG*, I, 123). Here, the officers and Grimaldi's company form a kind of retributive mob-audience, gladly participating in the punishment and enjoying the spectacle. His incarceration is described as lasting six hours, 'the whole of which time he devoted to howls and imprecations' (*MG*, I, 124).

The villain 'Mackintosh' is another figure in the *Memoirs* whose identity appears to be entirely based on theatrical and performative tropes. Mackintosh tries to deceive Grimaldi on a number of occasions through the assumption of the role of a gentleman in both countryside and town, and while Old Lucas's theatricality represents the operation (albeit flawed) of the law, Mackintosh's represents its defiance and subversion. He is a more troubling and extreme version of the social role players Samuel Smith and Billsmethi, a type that Dickens also explored more fully through the figure of Alfred Jingle, the 'strolling actor' of *The Pickwick Papers*. Like Jingle, Mackintosh's identity is a highly protean one, entirely contingent on his surroundings and circumstances. Joe first meets him when he is invited to shoot game on what turns out to be someone else's land, and here Mackintosh unashamedly describes the performative nature of his identity. He claims that 'I never let my London friends know who or what I am [...] I just lead them to guess I'm a great man, and there I leave 'em' (*MG*, I, 189). This again echoes Samuel Smith, who provides a variety of suitably ambiguous answers to the questions that the Maldertons and Flamwell ask about his background, and is also reminiscent of one of Jingle's early speeches when he prevents Tupman from announcing their names at the

Rochester ball, explaining that ‘*incog.* the thing — Gentlemen from London — distinguished foreigners — anything’ (*PP*, pp. 33–34). Later on, Mackintosh introduces Grimaldi to a circle of ladies and gentlemen who pretend to be respectable members of society but are actually burglars and forgers.

All of these figures are keen to avoid any attempt to fix their identity and thrive on ambiguity rather than any sense of authenticity. During Mackintosh’s trial, the prosecutor’s counsel attempts to discredit Grimaldi by appealing to antitheatrical prejudice and in doing so neatly encapsulates the counter-narrative of the *Memoirs* by firmly associating performance with falseness. Here, Joe’s performances are conflated with criminal activity; the counsel concludes that because Grimaldi is ‘a common player’, he must therefore be ‘a mountebank-stroller’ and ‘necessarily a systematic liar’ as well (*MG*, I, 13).

III

Once More, with Feeling: Reconciling the Two Narratives

As I have indicated, Dickens constructed the *Memoirs* based on two, ostensibly divergent narratives. On the one hand, he used a variety of methods to present Joseph Grimaldi as a figure of benevolence and genuine feeling very much in the mould of his current success, Samuel Pickwick. Yet this presentation is seemingly undermined by Dickens’s desire to emphasize Grimaldi’s involvement in a number of offstage ‘performances’, as well as by the pervasiveness of role playing characters in his life story, which suggest that there is no easy distinction to be made between onstage and offstage, real and performed. At first glance, this would appear to make it difficult to view Grimaldi as the ‘man of feeling’ that the first narrative claims him to be. Given the pervasive atmosphere of theatricality which Dickens places around Grimaldi it is surely possible to interpret his kind-heartedness as another form of acting, as an attitude appropriate to circumstances rather than something genuine.

However, these narratives can be seen as supportive, rather than antagonistic, and in drawing these two strands together Dickens truly captures the essence of his subject’s life as a performer. To understand this, we must consider the *style* of Grimaldi’s acting onstage. In contrast to his *off*-stage performances (which, as I have demonstrated, were often a defence mechanism), when describing his *on*-stage performances Dickens makes it

clear that he did more than just select an assumed posture from the acting manuals of Rede and his kind and in fact produced something less mannered and more approximate to genuine emotion. Dickens achieves this by subtly weaving other types of feeling into the narrative, whereby his protagonist demonstrates empathy with the emotions of the characters he plays. Thus rather than putting on and casting off his roles like his little gentlemen's suit of clothes he physically *feels* his roles, which take both a bodily and mental toll.

For example, we are told that his celebrated portrayal of the wild man Orson in *Valentine and Orson* (Covent Garden, 1806) involved 'an unusual share of both mental and physical exertion' (*MG*, I, 220). The nature of this character remains with Grimaldi when he steps off the stage and 'sinking into an arm-chair' gave 'full vent to the emotions which he found it impossible to suppress', which included loud sobs and 'agonising spasms' (*MG*, I, 221). Throughout the narrative of the *Memoirs* Dickens deliberately presents the physical and mental suffering of Grimaldi's later days as a consequence of this kind of feeling that he brought to his acting. Even at the very start of his career as a child actor, Dickens refers to his acting as 'labours' and points out that his life was lived in a precarious balance; whenever 'his gains were very great', 'the actual toil both of mind and body' was just as significant. Dickens thus offers Grimaldi's life as an admonitory example to 'stage-stricken young gentlemen'; rather than merely a simple transaction of different postures and attitudes 'the sum of most actors' lives' is 'anxieties, and hardships, and privations, and sorrows' (*MG*, I, 13) — all sources of real feeling and emotion.

In this way, Dickens deliberately circumvents any notions of Grimaldi's inauthenticity and leaves us with a final impression of the feeling, suffering self, rather than the performing self. This offers a more rounded portrait of his subject and, according to a number of performance historians and contemporary observers, a more accurate one. As Leigh Woods has argued, Grimaldi's 'intense' portrayal of figures like Orson can be linked to the 'natural' style of acting that was adopted by other actors at the same time as Grimaldi appeared on the stage. Woods describes how the natural style, which tapped into the 'sympathetic imagination' of the actor, was the 'cornerstone of English acting theory throughout the 19th century', and related to today's 'method' acting.¹⁹ A key exponent of this natural style was Edmund Kean, who used it in his tragic roles. When reviewing Kean's performances, Hazlitt neatly captures its method and effect when he comments

that Kean ‘seems chiefly sensible to pain, or the passions which spring from it, and to the terrible energies of mind or body, which are necessary to grapple with, or to avert it’.²⁰

Lynn M. Voskuil explains that this kind of natural acting used ‘the imagination to project *one’s own passion* into the situation of another’ and therefore made ‘*their subjective experience* belong concretely to everyone in their audience’.²¹ It is apparent, then, that the feelings the actor represents to his audience must necessarily exist already within him in some form in order for him to be able to present them successfully onstage, and therefore the actor’s performance can be seen as part of a consistent chain of behaviour stemming from his or her activities offstage. Charles Dibdin, Grimaldi’s collaborator in many of his pantomimes, also observed this intellectual dimension to Grimaldi’s clowning and the entire possession of his person by the emotions he was presenting. In his own *Memoirs*, Dibdin comments that ‘there was so much *mind* in everything that he did. It was said of Garrick that when he played a Drunken Man, he was “all over drunk”. — Grimaldi was “all over Clown”’.²²

If *Oliver Twist* demonstrated, according to Dickens’s ‘Preface to the Third Edition’ (1841), ‘the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last’, then ultimately the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* could be described as the triumph of the authentic and felt over the artificial and contrived.²³ Despite his great personal misfortunes — including the loss of two wives and the dissolution, insanity, and premature death of his son — and his constant exposure to a wide array of figures who represent an alternative model of life based on performativity and falsity, Grimaldi’s adherence to true feeling ultimately prevails.

IV

Coda: Grimaldi as a Model for Dickens Himself

In one of his progress reports to Richard Bentley, Dickens told him that ‘[t]he Grimaldi grows under the alterations much better than I supposed possible’, and through the previous sections of this article I have outlined the possible nature of this growth.²⁴ In his *Grimaldi* Dickens formulated a hybrid figure — constructed from another paragon of feeling that he had recently invented and from his views on the inherent theatricality of life — in order to present a more nuanced portrayal of the often tragic life of one of the period’s most famous performers. However, Georges May has observed that ‘the model

which the writer has in mind [when writing a biography] is a reflection of himself”, and this point invites consideration of the extent to which Dickens’s *Memoirs* project could be seen as autobiographical, and of the implications that this has for our view of Dickens’s own identity.²⁵

A possible model for interpretation is offered by Edmund Wilson’s essay ‘The Two Scrooges’. In this influential work, Wilson connected Dickens’s art and life by reading his characters as different and often conflicting projections of his own personality. When considering Dickens’s early work, Wilson indicates that a less mature pattern of characterization operates, whereby ‘the only complexity’ possible is where ‘one of the noxious characters become wholesome’ or ‘one of his clowns turn into a serious person’ through a simple inversion.²⁶ Crucially, Wilson feels that this matches the author’s own level of emotional development at that time, when as a man in his mid-twenties he had a distinct ‘lack of balance between opposite impulses of his own nature’.²⁷ If we bring Wilson’s reading to bear upon the *Memoirs*, this distinct lack of balance certainly seems to be evident. For while the author’s explicit commentary follows convention by holding up Grimaldi’s ‘child-like simplicity’ and openness of emotion as things to be admired, a converse idea, that of life as a performance, would also have been an attractive one for a young man who had already tried on so many roles himself — journalist, critic, law clerk, actor, and most latterly the editor and storyteller ‘Boz’. This sense of hiding behind a posture or mask would also hold a dark appeal to someone who for many years was unable to articulate his own feelings and experiences directly (particularly those associated with the blacking factory) to his much-beloved audience and who would later use characters like David Copperfield as surrogates or conduits through which he could manage this very personal material more effectively.

But it was perhaps the sense of Grimaldi bringing real tears and feeling to his performances which Dickens admired the most and which also prefigured his own fate. While I disagree with Woods’s pessimistic view that ‘Dickens rendered Grimaldi’s life as a cyclical and recurrent nightmare’, the wider argument that Dickens consciously or unconsciously followed Grimaldi’s example in exerting himself on the stage at the cost of his own health is a persuasive one.²⁸ For when we read the pain of Grimaldi’s later performances, ‘when he was carried to his dressing-room exhausted and powerless’ (*MG*, II, 197), we are almost forced to recall George Dolby’s description of Dickens leaving the stage after his ‘Sikes and Nancy’ performance in ‘his feverish excitement and his bodily

pain', where he 'would have to be supported to his retiring room and laid on a sofa for fully ten minutes, before he could speak a rational or consecutive sentence'.²⁹ Writing the *Memoirs* was an education for the young Dickens, as is clear from the different tones of the 'Introductory Chapter' and 'Concluding Chapter', which move from the cheerful optimism of finding out what Clowns 'did with themselves out of pantomime time' (*MG*, I, p. v) to concluding that 'the light and life of a brilliant theatre were exchanged in an instant for the gloom and sadness of a dull sick room' (*MG*, II, 211). Through Grimaldi's example, he learnt the possible fate of the artist who showed real feeling in his work. Sadly, it was a lesson that Dickens was compelled to follow all the way through to its tragic conclusion.

¹ Charles Dickens, *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, ed. by Charles Whitehead, 2 vols (London: Bentley, 1846).

² Letter to Thomas Beard, 17 December 1839, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and Madeline House, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), I, 618.

³ S. J. Newman, *Dickens at Play* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 32.

⁴ Letter to Dudley Costello, 25 April 1849, in Dickens, *Letters*, V, 527.

⁵ Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by Mark Wormald (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 568. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁶ Letter to Dr J. A. Wilson, 14 [?] February 1838, in Dickens, *Letters*, I, 373.

⁷ A. O. J. Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Collins, 1974), p. 18.

⁸ Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (London: Murray, 1958), pp. 39–40 (emphasis added).

⁹ *Athenaeum*, 3 March 1838, p. 165; *Literary Gazette*, 17 February 1838, p. 97.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. by Dennis Walder (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 424.

¹¹ Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 152.

¹² William F. Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens' Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theater* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p. 43.

¹³ Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, p. 129.

¹⁴ J. Hillis Miller, 'The Fiction of Realism: Sketches by Boz, *Oliver Twist* and Cruikshank's Illustrations', in *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9 1970*, by J. Hillis Miller and David Borowitz (Los Angeles: William Andrew Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1971), pp. 1–69 (p. 21).

¹⁵ Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 5.

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- ¹⁶ Richard Findlater, *Joe Grimaldi: His Life and Theatre*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 63.
- ¹⁷ Lemn Thomas Rede, *The Guide to the Stage* (New York: French, 1968), p. 32.
- ¹⁸ Rede, *Guide to the Stage*, p. 32.
- ¹⁹ Leigh Woods, 'The Curse of Performance: Inscripting the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* into the Life of Charles Dickens', *Biography*, 14.2 (1991), 138–52 (p. 143).
- ²⁰ Cited in Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 232.
- ²¹ Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (London: Methuen, 1957), pp. 36, 33 (emphasis added).
- ²² *Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger*, ed. by George Speaight (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1956), p. 41 (emphasis in original).
- ²³ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Fred Kaplan (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 3.
- ²⁴ Letter to Richard Bentley, 7 [?] December 1837, in Dickens, *Letters*, I, 340.
- ²⁵ Georges May, 'Biography, Autobiography and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century France', in *Biography in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by J. D. Browning (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 147–64 (p. 153).
- ²⁶ Edmund Wilson, 'The Two Scrooges', in *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (London: Methuen, 1961), pp. 1–93 (p. 55).
- ²⁷ Wilson, 'The Two Scrooges', p. 56.
- ²⁸ Woods, 'The Curse of Performance', p. 139.
- ²⁹ Quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Minerva, 1993), p. 1123.