Yet the reliance upon disability in narrative rarely develops into a means of identifying people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural constituency. The ascription of absolute singularity to disability performs a contradictory operation: a character ‘stands out’ as a result of an attributed blemish, but this exceptionality divorces him or her from a shared social identity. (Narrative Prosthesis 55)

David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s primary plaint in Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse (2000) is that Victorian and early modern literatures habitually spin disability into a spectacle, into a flashing sign or symbol meant to attract attention to something other than itself. Fictional disability often functions as a crutch or prosthesis upon which characterization, plot, theme, and tone may lean, little attention being drawn to the larger disabled population represented by the single, imaginary example. The physically disabled character’s very distinctiveness can lead, not only to isolation from those other fictional persons who react with distancing pity or disgust, but to a kind of representational disconnect from those real-world individuals with disabilities whose numbers—recognized within the boundary of the novel or short story—would strip the character’s exceptional disability of its rhetorical power. Mitchell and Snyder suggest that Victorian literature is highly dependent upon such “static languages,” that it predicates itself on predictably “sterile” and delimiting formulae of narrative-making (142). The question of whether this generalization can be justly applied to the work of one of Victorian England’s most prolific writers serves as the governing impetus for this essay.

Charles Dickens seems an intuitive choice for literary defender of the intellectually disabled, a manifestly humanitarian author likely to carve out in his fiction that welcoming, inclusive space so wanting in a Victorian milieu increasingly preoccupied with education, industry, and self-reliance. Dickens’s first three novels bespeak a ready advocate for victims of many kinds of social injustice. The Pickwick Papers (1836–7), Oliver Twist (1837–9), and Nicholas Nickleby (1838–9) together establish what will
become life-long, very loud sympathies for the destitute, the orphaned, the poorly educated, and the imprisoned debtor. Like his friend and collaborator Wilkie Collins, Dickens also manifests an enduring interest in the physically disabled, especially those whose vision impairment, faulty hearing, mobility difficulties, or visible disfigurement are compounded by class inequities and poverty. Intellectually disabled characters provide an even more severe indictment of Dickens's society: the author ties the origins of figures like Smike, Mr. Dick, and Maggy right back to contemporary medical, educational, and social problems.

And yet, while Dickens often appears sympathetic to the plight of these various groups, his body of work complicates any attempt to cast him as a consistent progressive. As Peter Akroyd notes in his biography of Dickens, the novelist "was a radical by instinct rather than by ideology," a disjunction that results in curiously disparate approaches to the same oppressed populations as one moves from novel to novel (137). Dickens's representations of the intellectually deficient are, like his renderings of the physically disabled, tonally complex and, occasionally, ethically suspect. Only gradually does the maturing author move from old stereotypes that operate in traditionally limiting—often internally inconsistent—ways, towards more stable and three-dimensional configurations of the idiot and imbecile. Notably, as these disabled figures grow more nuanced and less bound to one-dimensional role-plays that functionally ostracize them from their peers, they also become both more peripheral to the plot and more easily absorbed into the communities of their respective novels.

Dickens's fiction provides disability studies with plenty of fertile ground in which to cultivate its embodied concerns, particularly as the popular Victorian novelist seems to move mischievously back and forth between what modern sensibilities would consider politically assailable and more politically correct portraiture. His steady attention to corporeal difference can manifest itself in a gothic fascination with grotesquerie, concentrated compassion towards a visibly disadvantaged social group, or an even-handed approach that considers the disabled as in no intrinsic way different from anyone else. His books in the late 30s and early 40s, for instance, often rely on old pseudo-philosophical equations linking physical appearance or disability with a surplus of either virtue or vice. Dickens deploys egregiously physiognomic formulae to forecast the malevolence of both Nicholas Nickleby's schoolmaster Wackford Squeers and Daniel Quilp of The Old Curiosity Shop (1840–1), giving the former a suspiciously solitary eye and the latter the stunted stature of a classically villainous dwarf. He builds the temperaments of the crippled Tiny Tim and Nicholas Nickleby's partially paralytic Newman Noggs atop an equally simplistic, albeit conversely figured foundation, awarding both disabled heroes intensely virtuous, altruistic sensibilities. Elsewhere, Dickens interrogates all such simplistic character formulae. Towards the end of
Our Mutal Friend (1864-5), for instance, he allows the mobility impaired Jenny Wren to display a vindictive streak, a surprise in one hitherto constructed as routinely compassionate. In similar fashion, the blind and poor Stagg of Barnaby Rudge (1841), a greedy companion of Barnaby Rudge's murderous father, is allowed to debunk outright the facile equation Dickens appears to rely on elsewhere— that a disabling condition somehow, necessarily generates moral character.

Few critics have yet begun to excavate Dickens's configurations of intellectual disability, let alone bring them into the light of social psychology. Dickens scholars may praise the author's genius in creating such comically naïve characters as the bumbling spendthrift Mr. Micawber and the child-like Harold Skimpole, but they seem comparatively uninterested in those other secondary characters with more profound intellectual deficiencies. Contemporary critics who do venture into such territory tend to read intellectually disabled characters in metaphorical or mechanical ways. Critics like Patricia Pucinelli treat the "idiots" of American novels as mere plot devices enacting the predictable, limited roles prescribed by literary tradition, such as the moral yardstick against which other characters are measured, or the reliable plot catalyst. Others, including Martin Halliwell, cast literary idiots and imbeciles as endlessly multivalent, ultimately unmappable sites containing all manner of symbolic associations. Few, however, consider characters like Smike, Barnaby Rudge, Mr. Dick, Maggy, and Sloppy in terms of successful or failed mimesis, as representations of an actual, disabled population in uneasy dialogue with society.

Dickens's constructions of intellectual disability actually cover as broad a range as his portrayals of physical difference. Early figures like Smike and Barnaby Rudge slip easily into the snug garments laid out by convention, playing synthetic, perfunctory roles that disqualify them from full participation in their respective communities. Later characters like Mr. Dick and—to an even greater degree—Maggy and Sloppy, largely avoid such typecasting. While it would be difficult to demonstrate a strictly linear progression from functional caricature towards more nuanced characterization across Dickens's collected works, his increasingly empowering portraits of the intellectually disabled do suggest a writer more and more attuned to the social and intellectual prejudices working against this population. In her recent Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture (2004), Martha Stoddard Holmes suggests that such a maturation process informs Dickens's rendering of physically disabled characters as he invests successive disabled female characters with growing sexual and relational power. My discussion here tracks a similar pattern, using close readings to map a path from those principal characters in the 1830s and 40s whose intellectual disability compels them to serve predictably limited functions, towards those later, peripheral characters who somehow evidence greater practical and
relational agency than their more visible antecedents. This cartographic process will not preoccupy itself with nosologies, with hasty attempts to lay contemporary medical and legal distinctions atop Dickens’s changing constructions of intellectual disability. Forcibly employing such distinctive, diagnostic signposts would over-simplify our investigation of Dickens’s work, preempting closer consideration of both those earlier narratological strategies that seem to have demanded ultra-flexible characterizations of imbecility, and those more stable and socially viable configurations which followed in the 50s and 60s. Determining, for instance, that Barnaby Rudge resembles imperfectly and inconsistently the figure of an “idiot,” that Maggy’s behavior and language are faithfully “imbecilic,” and that the (anachronistic) category of “feeble-minded” best describes young Sloppy would provide a deceptively convenient, incomplete picture of Dickens’s changing practice over time. At least as important as the growing technical accuracy and internal consistency of his sequential portrayals of intellectual disability are the rhetorical and ideological means serviced by these characters within the socio-imaginary bound by each of Dickens’s novels.

Smike Nickleby: A Pitiful Case

Mr. Dick and Barnaby Rudge may constitute the two “most prominent” examples of the Dickensian natural fool (Schmidt 93), but Nicholas Nickleby’s closely orbiting satellite, Smike, is without a doubt Dickens’s best-known simpleton. Nicholas Nickleby remains one of Dickens’s most popular novels to this day, an admiration demonstrated most recently by two able film adaptations released in the last four years. The friendship between the morally expert, hard-working Nicholas and the crippled, emotionally debilitated, and intellectually compromised Smike constitutes the most compelling relationship amidst a narrative replete with romances, antagonisms, and comic entanglements. While their friendship’s unabashedly maudlin texture accounts in part for its attraction, this pairing so beloved by the public deserves further analysis, its recognizable sentiment belying Dickens’s curiously complicated depiction of Smike and his disability. For example, while Dickens roots Smike’s weak intellect in the toxic soil of Wackford Squeers’s Yorkshire school—the boy’s deficiency is clearly the result of the “care” provided by Wackford and his wife—Dickens simultaneously configures Smike’s impediments as insurmountable in the same way that congenital idiocy limits mental improvement. Likewise, the tonal quality of Dickens’s characterization shifts vertiginously. At moments Smike seems accepted by his community, at others, sidelined and removed. Smike alternately assumes the roles of pathetic victim, courageous runaway, slapstick theatre entertainer, sad romantic, and terminally ill invalid, a fluidity of function that limits more than it enables. While humorous
encounters with Vincent Crummles and Mrs. Nickleby leaven the melancholy atmosphere that hangs about Smike, the air he breathes remains thick with his neighbors' pitying exhalations. Ultimately, this pity brings a new kind of isolation, then death—the very act of condescending kindness effectively divides and separates, removing Smike from the close-knit band into which he has ventured. In the final analysis, the reader's fondness for Smike cannot rescue the character from the partition prescribed for him well outside community—a bounded, remote space akin to that relegated the idiot by Victorian society and an older, well-established literary tradition.

Smike appears first as but one of a horde of degraded products turned out by Squeers's educational machine. The squalid environment of Dotheboys Hall stunts the intellectual and physical development of all its young denizens, the desperate spectacle of which stuns Nicholas when he first steps into the boys' classroom:

Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meager legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offsprings. (97; ch. 8)

Smike himself lacks the conspicuous physiognomy of some malformed peers, but his partial lameness and that haggard countenance so fancied by theatre-master Crummles do mark him as the archetypal, much to be pitied, victim. In a depraved society where "the world [rolls] on from year to year, alike careless and indifferent" to frequent examples of "injustice, and misery, and wrong," Smike serves as one of many inevitable, irrefutable results of society's sins (653; ch. 53).

Smike's defects, then, result not from the hereditary or gestational conditions usually implicated in developmental disability, but from the abuse that follows abandonment. Smike's delicate health and damaged frame are the direct result of "brutality and hard usage" at the hands of Mr. Squeers; even the soft-spoken and sanguine Nicholas recognizes in Smike the "wreck" of a human being, blaming his condition on years of ill-treatment in a most "loathsome den" (247; ch. 20, 557; ch. 45). Dotheboys Hall not only constricts the young imaginations of its students—in a fashion that anticipates Mr. Gradgrind's utilitarian school in *Hard Times* (1854)—it squeezes out any hopes of better treatment and effectively squashes the boys' dreams of being one day reclaimed by friends or family. The hazardous domiciliary of Dotheboys cramps Smike's natural growth, misshaping his body and mind into a mockery
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of what they would have otherwise become. Smike’s guardians, that is, create his slowness, despite Ralph Nickleby’s claims to the contrary. Still unaware of their kinship, Smike’s wealthy father labels the boy an “imbecile” and claims Smike has been “of weak and imperfect intellect” from birth (562; 557; ch. 45). The evidence, however, contravenes this assertion. Just days before Smike escapes from Dotheboys, the villainous Mrs. Squeers herself comments on Smike’s mental degeneration, noting to her husband that Smike appears to be “turning silly” (90; ch. 7). Predictably, neither she nor her husband trace the boy’s condition back to their own faulty care, tender mercies which also appear to have compromised Smike’s memory. After years of living anxiously in the present to avoid the punishments that presumably followed slowing down to reflect, Smike has lost the ability to retain substantial chunks of information. Smike demonstrates the degree to which his once strong memory has faded by forgetting, mere hours after meeting Nicholas, whether his new friend was living at Dotheboys when a fellow student died (267; ch. 22; 106; ch. 9). When fate brings the escaped Smike across Squeers’s path in London, the headmaster is implicated yet again in Smike’s enervated state. The narrator explains that “such mental faculties as the poor fellow possessed...utterly deserted him,” that the boy freezes, “stunned and stupefied” (472–3; ch. 38). Smike’s reaction denotes a pathological learned helplessness, an inability—now and during John Browdie’s rescue attempt hours later—to recognize his agency in the face of Squeers’s intimidating will (481–2; ch. 39). “Stupefied” in the above passage also reiterates a second, more serious and lasting consequence of Squeers’s attentions. Smike has not only been crippled, but has been literally made stupid by “rigour and cruelty in childhood...years of misery and suffering lightened by no ray of hope,” resulting in the current “night of intellect” (476; ch. 38). That Dickens intends the benighted Smike to function at least in part as an imbecile or simpleton is underscored by Frank Stone’s accompanying illustrations; one illustration in chapter twenty-five depicts an ungainly, stringy-haired Smike with goggle-eyes and open mouth.

On the other hand, Smike cannot be simply classed as a paradigmatic intellectual degenerate. The narrator’s description of him as a “half-witted creature” (105; ch. 8) testifies, perhaps unwittingly, to the complexity—even inconsistency—of Smike’s portrayal. He is indeed a half-wit, but more in the sense that he demonstrates a normal wit only half the time than that he sports only a fraction of a normal person’s intuition and cognitive powers. At moments, Smike appears uncannily perceptive, his language becomes unusually eloquent, and he demonstrates a mature and noble willingness to sacrifice himself to defend his protector. Like one of Shakespeare’s court fools, Smike often sees to the heart of the matter. He recognizes Nicholas’s increasing paleness,
thinness, and financial concerns despite the latter’s attempts to hide the truth, and, notwithstanding his eloquently stated desire to “go with [Nicholas]—anywhere—everywhere—to the world’s end—to the churchyard grave,” considers abandoning his friend to spare him the burden of providing for a fellow traveler (162; ch. 13; 251; ch. 20). Recaptured by Squeers, Smike demonstrates the real seriousness of his commitment to Nicholas’s well-being, preferring to resume the old psychological and physical suffering than betray to Squeers anything that could compromise his new benefactor. But then, before the reader can grow accustomed to the new and improved, rational and heroic Smike, Dickens complicates his character once more. In this particular situation, the narrator undermines Smike’s courage immediately upon describing it with all possible pathos:

a confused and perplexed idea that his benefactor might have committed some terrible crime in bringing him away, which would render him liable to heavy punishment if detected, had contributed in some degree to reduce him to his present state of apathy and terror... Such were the thoughts—if to visions so imperfect and undefined as those which wandered through his enfeebled brain, the term can be applied—which were present to the mind of Smike, and rendered him deaf alike to intimidation and persuasion...(475; ch. 38)

Dickens appears unable, or unwilling, to present a coherent portrait of Smike’s mental faculties. Here, the narrator prevents unequivocal praise of Smike’s heroic intentions by mixing proof of his valor with doubt about whether the boy’s scattered “thoughts” are even worth the name. Other inconsistencies emerge if one considers the former evidence of Smike’s faulty memory in conjunction with his surprising ability to navigate London’s winding streets, not only those walked multiple times with Nicholas, but those he has never traversed except in a state of panic (471; ch. 38, 483–5; chs. 39–40). Smike’s ability to acquire new knowledge and skills appears similarly irregular. Though he successfully learns a number of lines for his role as apothecary in Crummle’s production of Romeo and Juliet, elsewhere he “[pores] hard over a book,” “vainly endeavouring to master some task which a child of nine years old, possessed of ordinary powers, could have conquered with ease” (318; ch. 25; 148; ch. 12).

The different degrees of support offered by Nicholas during these last two crises help explain Smike’s varying levels of success to a point, but they also indicate the tale’s ambivalent relationship with Smike. When the young man tearfully informs Nicholas that he cannot complete the earlier reading task, Nicholas successfully discourages Smike from further attempts, claiming “in an agitated voice; ‘I cannot
bear to see you” (148; ch. 12). Smike’s later attempt to memorize lines for a play that will provide living expenses for them both bumps up against similar obstacles, but this time Nicholas jumps at the opportunity to help Smike and, bit by bit, helps him negotiate the challenge before him. Such apparently incongruous moments provoke a number of questions. To what degree does Nicholas consider Smike a charity project and to what degree a true confidant and friend? Are Smike’s intellectual deficiencies insurmountable or not? If not, what kind of environment does Smike’s improvement require? Dickens’s changing portrayal of Smike’s intellect might be defensible as a narratological strategy that underdetermines Smike’s limits to keep the audience guessing as to his final destiny, or perhaps as a more socially minded tactic to disrupt the readerly impulse to pigeon-hole the intellect of and thus prescribe the proper place for Smike (and those real people like him). The problem is, from a cultural studies perspective concerned with how fictional mimesis both reflects and shapes societal forms, that Smike’s unrealistically variable nature prevents his full assimilation into Nicholas’s family and, arguably, paves the way for both his removal from the tale’s central community and his subsequent death.

The argument that any inconsistencies in Smike’s intellectual abilities can be accounted for by laying a developmental map over his narrative, by seeing in him “a personality developing through self-realisation” does not rightly consider Smike’s final, fatal situation, nor his friends’ responses to it (Ball 125). His falling in love with Kate Nickleby may demonstrate his humanity and sensitivity (Ball 128), but it simultaneously highlights the emotional and social gap between him and those closest to him. This gap serves as more than another example of Smike’s failed self-confidence: we receive no indication whatsoever that such a love relationship could have ever been, even if Smike had made visible overtures to Kate. We know Kate belongs with Frank Cheerbyle from the moment the two enter the same space. And though Smike begins to fail rapidly after meeting the beautiful Kate and subsequently becoming “more conscious of his weak intellect” (463; ch. 38), no one—including Nicholas—ever considers that the onset of “rapid consumption” (687; ch. 55) might have anything to do with unexpressed, unrequited affections. Even Newman Noggs, who notices Smike tear up while listening to Noggs enumerate Kate’s many virtues, fails to discover the truth (486–7; ch. 40). Smike just does not count as a card-carrying member of this romantically inclined community which, in the comedy’s conclusion, will plump itself with a number of happy marriages. He must instead be eliminated and the reader made to feel that such a removal is not only appropriately touching, but necessary. In an effort to comfort the bereaved Nicholas upon Smike’s death, the congenial businessman Charles Cheerbye expresses an eerily pat
formula for comfort:

we must not be cast down, no, no. We must learn to bear misfortune, and we must remember that there are many sources of consolation even in death. Every day that this poor lad had lived, he must have been less and less qualified for the world, and more unhappy in his own deficiencies. It is better as it is, my dear sir. Yes, yes, yes, it's better as it is. (746; ch. 61)

Though well-meaning in intention, and appropriately pathetic for the sentimental scene Dickens means to paint here, these encouraging words blatantly counter what the careful reader already knows about Smike to this point. It is surely strange to hear Nicholas agreeing with Cheeryble’s sentiment: “I have thought of all that sir,” replied Nicholas, clearing his throat. ‘I feel it, I assure you’” (746; ch. 61).

Pleasantries aside, why would Nicholas agree with Cheeryble’s assessment of Smike’s potential? Would it not have been consistent with Nicholas’s character and previous altruism to have offered Smike a home with himself and his new bride if his friend had lived? He promised Smike such a future and introduced his friend to his own family with this goal in mind (359; ch. 29; 422; ch. 35). Would the network of friends Smike obtained in recent months have mysteriously discontinued their support of his ongoing development? He had learned the acting profession readily enough under Nicholas’s tutelage, and had quickly proven himself indispensable to Mrs. Nickleby as an attentive, sympathetic listener (426; ch. 35). Given the social and developmental progress made thus far, would he really have grown increasingly “less qualified” and “unhappy in his own deficiencies” if he had recovered from his illness? The above exchange between Nicholas and his new employer serves as more than a moment of socially appropriate consolation—Cheeryble is a bit too cheery here. His words erode the novel’s central relationship, upending the notion of an incremental progression on Smike’s part, and erasing any mistaken assumptions of (a shared) reciprocity by throwing into greater relief the lop-sided nature of Smike and Nicholas’s friendship. Nicholas might well remember the dying Smike as “the partner of his poverty, and the sharer of his better fortune” (715; ch. 58), but Smike alive and well never gave as much as he took.

Smike had hoped the balance might swing in the other direction. He had wished to be Nicholas’s “faithful hard-working servant,” taking only the comfort of Nicholas’s presence as payment (162; ch. 13). Nicholas himself had called for a more egalitarian relationship: “the world shall deal by you as it does by me” (162; ch. 13). In practice, however, conditions always favored Smike’s status as sole receiver of goods and
services. The profoundly virtuous Nicholas taught Smike to pray (535; ch. 43), got him an acting job on the merits of Nicholas’s own promising looks and abilities, and provided Smike—if briefly—with the surrogate family he desired. During one difficult period, and in an attempt to make Smike feel his worth, Nicholas had claimed that through all their difficulties Smike remained his “only comfort and stay,” adding the seemingly innocuous appendage, “The thought of you has upheld me through all I have endured today” (251; ch. 20). This gentle endearment actually, inadvertently betrayed Smike’s primary function in Nicholas’s daily life—that of a needy dependent, the *primum mobile* for Nicholas’s attempts to establish a dependable livelihood. Smike may have consistently considered ways to please Nicholas (267; ch. 22), but Nicholas was the one whose acting skills and business acumen supported the two. Smike rarely did anything beyond getting himself in situations necessitating Nicholas’s intervention. He was also the one who ultimately—in his fatal illness—had required the other’s unrelenting attention and care (711; ch. 58). Nicholas compassionated Smike with each new fit of depression that came upon him, encouraging his friend to be open with his feelings, but Smike never gained the same easy access to Nicholas’s own, innermost workings. When Smike unearthed Nicholas’s distress after the latter had finished writing Noggs for an account of Kate and Mrs. Nickleby, for instance, Nicholas denied his melancholy “with assumed gaiety,” afraid “the confession would have made the boy miserable all night” (359; ch. 29). Nicholas consciously, though not maliciously, retained emotional control over their relationship, insuring that he would never himself become the object of pity he preferred locating in Smike.

Ultimately, the sad spectacle of Smike earns the reader’s condescension in the same way it does Nicholas’s own. We indulgently relate to the attractive hero who strives and overcomes, but watch Smike with an estranging pity that pets without embracing him. Dickens encourages such distance by diminishing Smike’s agency to almost nothing and providing the reader virtually no point of identification with one who seems made to suffer and die. In retrospect, Dickens rationalizes Smike’s final removal by having made it seem inevitable all along. With the possible exception of his heavily applauded, proud moments on the theatrical stage (318; ch. 25), Smike does not act upon anyone in a way that could help form a mutually beneficial relationship. When not provided for as a dependent, the wretch is acted upon as a most helpless victim. As mentioned earlier, Squeers plays the role of primary scourge, wreaking on Smike “the vilest and most degrading cruelty,” dressing the nineteen-year-old in a child’s clothes barely “wide enough for his attenuated frame,” habitually working his “student” to the point of exhaustion, and withholding sleep (90; ch. 7). Verbal and physical
abuse compound hard manual labor, practices Squeers accelerates when he notices Nicholas's kindness to Smike. Such a confiding connection as that shared by these two fast friends has been long in coming; Smike has for years looked through incoming letters for evidence of the parents who abandoned him in childhood, and has long feared dying without any intimate ties to the rest of humanity (89; ch. 7, 106; ch. 8). The boy, that is, ranks at least as high on the scale of sentimentality as does Tiny Tim. At times Smike's pain does provoke laughter, as when the theatre manager appraises his emaciated countenance and body as perfect for “an actor in the starved business” (275; ch. 22), or when Smike learns more quickly than his lines the notion that his character must appear extremely hungry “which—perhaps from old recollections—he had acquired with great aptitude” (318; ch. 25). Such sugared comedy, however, coasts a hard, bitter core. These wonderful flashes of comic relief, which also include Mrs. Nickleby’s repeatedly mistaking his name as “Mr. Slammons,” ultimately do little to brighten Dickens’s bleak portrait of this intellectually disadvantaged character (426; ch. 35). Smike dies as he has lived, a helpless young man supported by a strong and reliable friend—one towards whom he pathetically directs the last of his dwindling energies:

At first, Smike was strong enough to walk about for short distances at a time, with no other support or aid than that which Nicholas could afford him. At this time, nothing appeared to interest him so much as visiting those places which had been most familiar to his friend in bygone days. (711; ch. 58)

The kind of vicarious identification with the Nicklebys evidenced during Smike’s final days, together with his desire to be buried near Nicholas’s father and have a locket of Kate’s hair secreted in his coffin, continues to mark him as an outsider desperately looking in. Nicholas’s family—including the class-conscious Mrs. Nickleby—proves too kind and caring to reject Smike, but he never enters completely into their circle. The novel’s closing illustration of the heroes placing garlands on their cousin's grave (the family connection comes to light too late to gratify Smike), their infant children playing about the site and listening to softly spoken tales of Smike’s life and times, neatly captures his status while alive (777; ch. 65). He was always more a catalyst for compassionate acts and words than a vital, necessary member of the Nickleby family.

To be continued in the June and September issues, at which time the list of WORKS CITED will appear
The Cross of James Waterfield Eleyen

James's Disappearance

The Cross of Eleyen Broad

The Cross of Edwin Brander

The Mystery of the Doree Family

The Cross of Eleyen Broad

The Flight of Eleyen Doree

The Cross of Edwin Doree

The Disappearance of Edwin Doree

The Mystery of Eleyen Doree

Dead? or alive?