



Becoming Automatus: Automata in The Old Curiosity Shop and Our Mutual Friend

<http://www.firstlight.cn> 2008-12-31

An automaton is a mechanical dissembler, appearing to possess that which by definition it cannot – autonomy. In the Victorian material imagination, this liminal figure appears as an analogy for both normal and pathological behaviours, as a paradigm and a warning, as a doppelgänger of the ideal worker and a symbol of all that was held to be reactive, affectless and inhuman. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens merges this symbolic automaton with the marvellous showpieces and mass-produced toys of popular culture, creating an ambiguous, distressed figure whose unstable autonomy casts doubt on the authenticity of the freedom of automatus (automaton-like) characters. *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which features a cameo by an automaton, draws on factory literature's shifting material subjectivity in its portrayal of Little Nell and Quilp's automatus affinities. In *Our Mutual Friend* musical automata and speaking machines are models for human degradation. In both novels, automatus humans appear to be autonomous self-movers, but are perhaps, like android automata, dissemblers performing an imperfect impression of human agency.

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