



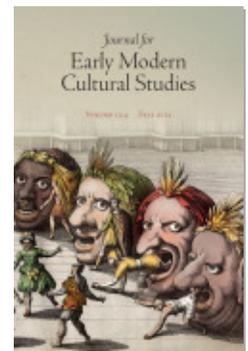
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Clowns on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown: Dickens, Coulrophobia, and the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*

ANDREW MCCONNELL STOTT

ABSTRACT

*Why do clowns appear so frequently in popular culture as frightening and psychopathic figures? When and how did they change from representatives of fun to representatives of menace? This essay argues that we may find the answer in both the notion of the comedian's bifurcated identity inherent in nineteenth-century conceptions of humor and the use of the clown as a representative of cultural exhaustion developed in the wake of the decline of the Georgian pantomime. Through a focus on the career of the British pantomimist Joseph Grimaldi (1778–1837) and a reading of his *Memoirs* (1838), edited posthumously by Charles Dickens, this essay seeks to demonstrate that what we often term coulrophobia (the fear of clowns) has its origins in a narrative of memorializing that takes place in the midst of rapid social change.*



At the end of the nineteenth century, a new figure emerged from the ashes of the harlequinade—a clown intent not on laughter, but on awful, bloody revenge.¹ He made his first appearance in Ruggero Leoncavallo's opera *I Pagliacci* (1892), an enormously successful piece that combined the characters of the *commedia dell'arte* with adultery, jealousy, and murder via a *mise-en-scene* in which the comic cuckoldry of the *commedia* was mirrored by the real-life infidelities of its itinerant actors. Having discovered that his wife Nedda is conducting an affair, Canio, dressed for his role as clown, confronts her and her lover and murders them both. This traumatic irruption of death into comedy suggests, as in the opera's iconic closing line "*la commedia è finita*," that generic terms themselves have been irrevocably changed.² Clowns traditionally subvert expectations for comic effect, but as a killer, Canio becomes a

kind of meta-clown, one capable of performing subversion on a generic level by replacing the happy expectations of comic resolution with the barren nihilism of death.

For the purposes of sensationalism, at least, killer clowns are an incredibly efficient image. Lurid and overly emphatic though they may be, by placing the pleasures of laughter in close proximity to mortal threat, they embody a particularly tense and volatile contradiction. They are also a particularly modern phenomenon. Though reminiscent of the early modern jesters revelling in the dance of death, the killer clowns of the modern age possess an identity beyond their role that makes it clear that they are not universalized types but individuals in costume and makeup. It is this discrepancy between the motives of the individual and the expectations of the role that makes them at once acutely unsettling and particularly appealing as protagonists. Consider, for example, some of the clown characters that appeared in the decades following *Pagliacci*: the anti-hero of Leonid Andreyev's absurdist play *He Who Gets Slapped* (1914), a cuckolded and plagiarized writer who becomes a circus clown to indulge his feelings of humiliation, before falling in love with, and ultimately murdering, a beautiful bareback rider; the clown who commits suicide in front of a laughing audience in Fritz Lang's *Spies* (1928); and the clown in the Lon Cheney movie *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (1928) who, while undergoing treatment for a depression brought on by unrequited love, kills himself in the throes of an hallucination by zipping down a high wire on his head. In all of these examples, as with *Pagliacci*, clowns become unsettling only after the audience has been introduced to the private life of the performer against which the on-stage persona may be contrasted. As the clown's private life is generally marked by sexual rejection and romantic disappointment, he is established as a hapless naïf adrift in a scheming world. This tone is best captured in the visual depictions of clowns found in the work of artists of the avant-garde: the blank-faced harlequins of Picasso and Cocteau, taking solace in a glass of absinthe and the company of gaunt prostitutes, images that encapsulate particularly well the pall of anachronism that hangs around them. Reading these marginalized and disillusioned figures, the art critic Benjamin Buchloh has called them emblems of "melancholic infantilism" who stand as ciphers for a "social archetype of the artist as an essentially powerless, docile, and entertaining figure performing his acts of subversion and mockery from an undialectical fixation on utopian thought" (118).

The question of anachronism is key to understanding the role of clowns in popular culture post-*Pagliacci*, and in particular, the degree of uncanniness

with which they invite us to remember the past. While clowns in the first half of the twentieth century were viewed as harmless, sentimental victims, in more recent years they have become significantly more sinister, foregoing idealism and pathos in favor of terror and debauchery. This is especially true of clowns found in a subgenre known as “dark carnival,” a mix of circus imagery and horror motifs that depict pleasure pushed past its tipping point to become something much more troubling and perverse.³ The roots of dark carnival can be found in the long and shabby decline of the vast tented circuses that toured the United States in the golden age of the railroad; the Great Depression wiped out many of those circuses, but they struggled through something of a resurgence during the Second World War before the increase in television viewing in the 1950s led to their ultimate end.⁴ Attendant to the declining popularity of circuses was the rise of reported instances of “coulrophobia,” a disorder that, although not listed in either *Webster’s* or the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is widely known as a fear of clowns. Coulrophobia, it would seem, is an aggregation of fears that results when certain triggers accumulate in a single figure: triggers that include disguised strangers; masks or concealed faces; the threat of humiliation that comes with a clown’s familiar tendency to incorporate spectators into his or her act; and the potentially disturbing question of why adults would willingly infantilize themselves and dress in such peculiar clothing. The latter question is further muddied by its overlap with a contemporary understanding of drag, which clowning confuses by avoiding any overtly gendered or transvestite content. Understood this way, donning a clown costume might be read as a form of transvestism in which sexuality is all the more suspect for being elided. Certainly, a key theme of coulrophobia is the sufferer’s suspicion that clowning provides cover for sexual predators and child abductors.⁵ In the words of Bobcat Goldthwait, writer and director of the parody film *Shakes the Clown*, for example, “most people get nervous when they see a clown, because clowns give off this vibe that they are going to make you touch their penis” (qtd. in Keaton 63), a fear that suggests that the clown’s costume can no longer be read as part of a characterization intended to generate laughter, but as a tactic in a much more complicated game of sexual subterfuge.⁶ Such fears are vindicated in the minds of coulrophobes by the traumatic case of the US serial killer John Wayne Gacy, who on occasion offered his services as “Pogo the Clown” to community groups and fund-raisers.⁷ “Nobody ever questions what clowns do,” Gacy is reported to have said. “Hell, clowns can go up to broads on the sidelines and squeeze their tits, and all the women do is giggle. You know, clowns can get away with murder” (qtd. in Marling 146).

Popular entertainment is awash with examples of sinister clowns of this kind: the possessed clown doll in the movie *Poltergeist* (1982); Pennywise the Dancing Clown in Stephen King's novel *It* (1986); photographer Cindy Sherman's psychedelic clown series of 2004; Batman's nemesis, the Joker; and, in a satirical vein, *The Simpsons'* Krusty the Clown, whose multiple heart bypasses and third nipple convey the irredeemable delinquency of the clown as an image in popular culture. All of these characters, so blatantly at odds with contemporary ideas of "innocent fun," use their anachronism as a means of forcing their victims to revisit childhood memories and examine the menace latent therein, while simultaneously questioning their commitment to pleasure by asking if they are truly willing to pay the price of their appetites. The Joker is the undoubted apotheosis of this movement, especially his most recent incarnation in Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knight* (2008), made all the more unsettling by the untimely death of Heath Ledger, the actor who portrayed him, and by reports that the sole suspect in the July 2012 Aurora multiplex shootings compared himself to the character at the time of his arrest.⁸ Ledger's Joker shares the humiliation of the clowns of the avant-garde by evoking a private life beyond the makeup, yet, whereas those earlier clowns sought to juxtapose earnest simplicity against cultured cunning, Ledger's Joker consistently refuses to avow a simpler life. He first blames his father's brutality for the gruesome scars that form his smile, and then he claims it was self-mutilation performed to appease a distraught wife—the baldly contradictory stories that constitute his origin myth suggesting that the idea that any singular event might be responsible for his psychosis is itself a fiction. Not only does this refusal to locate a solitary cause problematize the rationale of the recent Batman films that have worked so hard to retrofit their hero with a psychologically compelling reason for his vigilantism, but it also serves to amplify further the Joker's menace by jettisoning any rationale for his behavior. Though the Joker may certainly be, in the words of Michael Wood, "the image of everything we don't understand, a travesty of highly intelligent, meaningless design" (32) he still invites us to consider a life before the makeup, if only to uncover its non-existence.

From *Pagliacci* to Gacy and the Joker, then, the clown becomes troubling only after a second, private, persona has been revealed that stands in morbid opposition to the first. It is tempting to read this as an embodiment of Freud's theory of the tendentious joke, a joke whose seeming innocence conceals thoughts and desires antagonistic to social norms, for, as Freud makes clear,

beneath the surface of palatability, the tendentious joke serves only two purposes, hostility and obscenity.⁹ Indeed, Freud's central assertion that "a jest betrays something serious" (107) might be read as the primary authority for the twentieth century's "coulrophobic turn," thanks to its insistence on humor as force that is essentially symptomatic rather than substantive, and the urge to joke as somehow furtive, compensatory, and predatory. Such a conception of humor shares some similarities with that of the Italian sociologist and eugenicist, Cesare Lombroso, best known for his atavistic theory of criminality. In a 1889 text entitled *The Man of Genius*, Lombroso argues that what society traditionally recognizes as brilliance is in fact a form of hereditary insanity in which gifted individuals possess a "double, or even contrary, personality" (24), a second persona that is a virtual inversion of the one revealed in their moments of greatest inspiration. Taking as his cue the interest in double lives that had been at the heart of a series of cases that similarly inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Lombroso proposed that radical thinkers possessed conservative habits, actors were generally solitary, and that clowns were prone to private melancholy.¹⁰ The doubled personality, however, is not in perfect equilibrium, for in the case of clowns the ludic is always built on a foundation of depression that is inevitably viewed as a more substantial and weighty affect than fleeting and frivolous laughter. Mirth, then, is an inadequate salve to the abiding melancholy that precedes it, and while the ability to make people laugh is an important and culturally valued talent, it also reveals an essential failure of the comedian who is seen to be putting on a brave face before he or she has even begun, making them seem all the more pathetic, beseeching, and sad.¹¹

To illustrate his theory of the doubled identity of the professional humorist, Lombroso uses the case of the British clown Joseph Grimaldi (1778–1837), a particularly instructive choice given the inordinate degree of influence Grimaldi has had on subsequent ideas of clowns and clowning among professional clowns and coulrophobes alike. Grimaldi was a superstar of Regency theater who first rose to prominence as Clown in Thomas Dibdin and Charles Farley's *Harlequin and Mother Goose; or, the Golden Egg*, a pantomime that debuted at the Royal Theatre, Covent Garden, on 29 December 1806. Thanks largely to the strength of Grimaldi's clowning, the show was an unprecedented success, running for 119 nights and netting over £20,000 in profits that saved the theater from financial ruin.¹² His Clown, an "incorrigible, emblem of gross sensuality" (89) according to Charles Dibdin, the pantomime arranger and

manager of Sadler's Wells Theatre who helped to shape it, propelled Grimaldi into the highest echelons of Romantic celebrity: "Grimaldi is the principal cause of crowded lobbies and scarcely standing room," wrote *The Monthly Mirror* in 1807 (1: 437). "Many of our second and third-rate tragedians would give their ears to meet with half the plaudits which are every night conferred on Grimaldi for his inimitable exertions. His Clown has not been equalled—we never expect to see it surpassed. He has arrived at an *acme* of all clownery" (2: 218). Grimaldi's success would continue for twenty years, earning him enormous fees and friends as notable as Lord Byron and Edmund Kean. At the peak of his career, it was calculated that his shows were visited by an eighth of the London population annually.¹³ His fame inspired "tribute" acts (very possibly the first of their kind in the British entertainment industry), and when he died, his first biographer was the novelist Charles Dickens.¹⁴

Besides his unique comic gifts, Grimaldi was an innovator, his principal contributions coming in the form of changes he made to the clown's dress and appearance, the first of which he introduced at Sadler's Wells Theatre in the spring of 1801. Widely acknowledged as the father of modern "slap and motley," Grimaldi oversaw the transition from the red-haired "rustic booby" that had remained more-or-less unaltered since its popularization by Richard Tarlton in the sixteenth century to the heavily made-up and colorfully attired clowns that we are familiar with today. Rejecting the tatty liveries of an Elizabethan dogsbody in favor of waistcoats, ruffs, and breeches similar to those worn by the pupils at Georgian boarding schools, Grimaldi dressed himself in vivid colors and bold patterns in order to achieve the same visual impact as the spangle-covered Harlequins he appeared alongside. Those Harlequins had themselves found it necessary to heighten their appearance by the enlargement of the patent theaters in the last decade of the eighteenth century.¹⁵ According to Dickens's friend, Andrew Halliday, Grimaldi's new costume gave him the appearance of a "great lubberly loutish boy," irrevocably altering the clown's persona from an identifiable (though outdated) servant into some kind of temporally nonspecific man-child he called "Joey" (35). The most dramatic transformation, however, took place in his makeup. Previously, recalled Charles Dibdin, the clown had "painted his face merely in imitation of florid nature" (47–48) by adding a circle of rouge to each cheek. Grimaldi retained this mark of his predecessor in the form of two stylized chevrons, but he extended the idea of facepaint to a white foundation that covered the hands and neck and every inch of the face, including the inside of the ears, lips, and nostrils, to which he added a

red mouth and arching brows. As no visible part of the performer's body remained unaltered by this new creation, the makeup implied a much stricter division between character and performer than had been presented before. Grimaldi was literally subsumed beneath "Joey," and subsequently, "Joey" and "Grimaldi" came to be perceived as distinct entities, even opposites engaged in a battling but reciprocal relationship.

The dual identity of Grimaldi was a notion that would gain considerable traction following speculations about his mental health that arose during the initial success of *Mother Goose*; Grimaldi, it was reported, was subject to debilitating bouts of depression when not on stage. As soon as the pantomime closed, wrote one periodical, he was "resolved to betake himself to *sack cloth and ashes!*" (Daly 1: 81), reports he himself chose to confirm with a punning quip, "I am GRIM ALL DAY, but I make you laugh at night" (Oxberry 2: 113).¹⁶ Over the course of his career, the striking contrast between Grimaldi's private melancholy and his ability to create public laughter came to be seen as the key to his talent, a contrast made largely possible by the emphatic difference between his appearance both in and out of make-up. As Leo Braudy has argued, the logic of celebrity in the early nineteenth century operated according to a system of inference that took cues from the surface of its objects in order to impute much greater depth to that which could not be seen, what Braudy calls a "fascination with a kind of visual glamor that takes its material from surfaces only to hint at what lies behind and beyond them" (406). The vivid and opaque features of "Joey," then, were an invitation to speculate about that which was concealed, and they subsequently inspired a series of anecdotes, the most famous of which dates from the 1820s and involves a supposed visit to the surgeon John Abertheny, himself known for his broad sense of humor and lecture hall histrionics. Grimaldi, hoping to find a cure for his depression, asks Abertheny for advice, and the surgeon, unaware of his client's identity, prescribes the diversions of "relaxation and amusement":

"But where shall I find what you require?" said the patient.

"In genial companionship," was the reply; "perhaps sometimes at the theatre;—go and see Grimaldi."

"Alas!" replied the patient, "that is of no avail to me; I *am* Grimaldi."

(Goodwin 14)¹⁷

This story (also presented as clinical evidence of the melancholia of funnymen in Lombroso's *Man of Genius*) not only conveys the tragic irony of a comedian walled off from himself and denied access, Midas-like, to the riches he embodies but also suggests that the performer's life is solitary and sacrificial, a talent that gives so fully it retains nothing to nourish the self. Such public presentation of Grimaldi served two purposes. On the one hand, its mystified and sensationalist version of the creative process held an obvious appeal to a journalistic class that was only then in the process of developing a language of entertainment celebrity. The tortured and two-personed Grimaldi exemplified the "branded identity" whose emergence in the age of Romanticism has been charted by Tom Mole as a publicly circulated persona whose "commercial success was ensured because it was easily recognizable in the crowded marketplace, continually developing to offer new satisfactions but remaining reassuringly familiar" (21).

A second, related, effect of Grimaldi's melancholy was that it afforded him a legitimacy that was otherwise denied by his profession. Despite its great popularity, pantomime was an afterpiece, and as such (in the patent theaters at least), its performers were considered extensions of the *corps de ballet* and therefore legally prevented from speaking dialogue on stage or applying for membership to the theatrical funds.¹⁸ As a result, critics praising Grimaldi inevitably found themselves making excuses for his form's lack of credibility, or, like the *Monthly Mirror*, equating Grimaldi not with premier performers but with "second and third-rate tragedians." Wrote a critic in *The Champion* in 1819:

With respect to this high and mighty paramount of all existing and remembered buffoons—this grim Grimaldi!—his buffoonery is, in its kind (like the philosophy of professor Kant) transcendent: and positive excellence, of any sort, even of nonsense or absurdity, indicates something of genius and originality; and is sure to command—what might be called respect; if our pride were not unwilling to give it so respectable a dominion. (qtd. in Findlater 185)

By contrast, knowledge of the clown's depression helped to alleviate doubt about his less-than-credible form by drawing from the same well of affectivity that had inspired Romanticism for the previous two decades. Melancholy, viewed as the scholar's disease since Aristotle's original equation of it with the frustrations of excessive cogitation in the *Problemata*, was in sympathy with

both Romantic notions of creativity and the cult of Wertherism that rejected stoic masculine roles in favor of a taut sensibility at the edge of illness and hysteria, where fragility was not to be taken as a sign of weakness so much as its victim's superior feeling.¹⁹ For some, such as the German dramatist August von Kotzebue, whose translated works both preceded and inspired pantomimes on the Georgian stage, melancholia was a lightning rod for inspiration: "Never . . . either before or since," he wrote of his depression, "did I feel such a rapid flow of thoughts and images; and I firmly believe, that there are some maladies, especially those by which the irritation of the nerves is increased, which stretch the powers of the mind beyond their usual reach; just as, report says, *diseased muscles*' [sic] *shells produce pearls*" (qtd. in Ryan 2: 39).

Though central to the production of coulrophobic interpretations through its construction of the clown as a figure troubled and divided, Grimaldi's melancholy was only one factor contributing to the later fear of clowns. Of equal importance was the rapid and premature physical decline he experienced as a result of his exertions onstage. From 1806 on, in addition to the regular round of injuries affecting all performers of his kind, he began to suffer from a series of incapacitating muscular and digestive illnesses that frequently left him unable to walk and which ultimately denied him the use of his legs. In spite of these medical complications, he continued to perform for another fifteen years, whereupon, at the relatively young age of 42, he called time on his career. (His father, Giuseppe, also a clown, had continued performing into his seventies.)

For the body of a revered pantomimist to deteriorate so publicly was particularly cruel given the extent to which physicality lay at the heart of his performances. In the absence of speech, the pantomime body bore full communicative responsibility, developing a rich language of posture and movement which in the person of Clown was synonymous with extreme volatility, being by turns explosive, protean, violent, gymnastic, lewd, and simpering. The pantomime body could also expand and contract on demand through the use of tricks and prosthetics that included miraculously lopping off and regenerating limbs, shrinking, or undergoing Brobdignagian spurts of growth.²⁰ Danger was an inherent part of the act. The Persian ambassador to the British court Mirza Abul Hassan Khan, who saw Grimaldi in action in 1811, described with amazement how he "would leap from a high window and just as easily leap back up again, returning each time as a different character" (92), a routine that gave rise to the popular expression "Grimaldi's leap," used to refer to any maneuver, literal or conceptual, performed at great personal risk.²¹

As early as 1813, however, *The Times* was already expressing misgivings about the sustainability of such extremes: "It is absolutely surprising that any human head or hide can resist the rough trials which he volunteers. Serious tumbles from serious heights, innumerable kicks, and incessant beatings, come on him as matters of common occurrence, and leave him every night fresh and free for the next night's flagellation" (*Percival* 4: 78). Such misgivings were also mirrored in private conversations among those who handled his act. Charles Dibdin, writing in 1810 to a colleague at Covent Garden, for example, explained that his financial backers were concerned that Grimaldi would injure himself through overexertion and thereby damage their most profitable asset. More than anyone, Dibdin was aware of potential dangers becoming horribly real, as he had been present when another Wells pantomimist, Paulo Redige, was killed when his head collided with an exposed rivet while diving through a backcloth (Dibdin 115).

By the time Grimaldi's career reached its premature end, he was on the brink of permanent disability, and nowhere were the devastating effects of clowning more emphatically displayed than at his delayed retirement benefit held at Drury Lane in 1824. Here Grimaldi was led onto the stage dressed as Joey, "labouring under great bodily infirmity," whereupon he supervised an olio of his favorite scenes but was unable to perform himself, managing only to contribute a couple of songs from a chair before turning the stage over to others for the night's performances. As the event drew to a close, he came again before the audience, this time divested of his slap and motley and wearing evening dress. "I am sinking fast," he said, giving a speech that the poet Thomas Hood composed for him. "I now stand worse on my legs than I used to on my head. But I suppose I am paying the penalty of the cause I pursued all my life; my desire and anxiety to merit your favour has excited me to more exertion than my constitution would bear, and, like vaulting ambition, I have overleaped myself" (*Times* 30 June 1828). With the speech's echo of *Macbeth* emphatically placing the evening within the context of tragedy, Grimaldi made a spectacle of his own unmasked decrepitude that turned the idea of pleasure back upon the audience, inviting them to consider the cost of their laughter. Subsequently, many found themselves retrospectively thoughtless and selfish: "Poor Joe," wrote William Robson several years later. "It was like the boys and frogs; it was sport to us, but it was death to you" (242).

With the retirement of its greatest exponent, pantomime entered a period of decline, the slapstick interactions of the characters of the harlequinade

replaced with ever-more spectacular stage effects and scenery. Thus the downward fortunes of pantomime were already well established by the time Dickens came to edit *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, a text compiled third-hand from a packet of reminiscences Grimaldi had written in retirement. A publisher could not be found for this manuscript, now lost, but described in an 1874 auction catalog as “filling 400 closely-written pages,” and being “as genuine and faithful an autobiography as ever was written, full, frank, and delightfully clownish, childlike and simple.”²² Grimaldi made an arrangement with the theatrical journalist Thomas Egerton Wilks to “re-write, revise and correct” the entire manuscript, but died before Wilks had finished it (Dickens, *Memoirs* 299). Wilks “applied himself to the task of condensing it throughout, and wholly expunging considerable portions, which, so far as the public were concerned, possessed neither interest nor amusement” (11), but ultimately he abandoned the project and sold it to the publisher Richard Bentley, who put the manuscript in Dickens’s hands. Dickens inherited an evidently garbled text, but appeared to be the perfect choice as editor. Like so many of his peers, he idolized Grimaldi as a child, fondly recalling trips to Covent Garden “to behold the splendour of Christmas Pantomimes and the humour of Joe” (Dickens, “Speech” 76), his own work sharing such an apparent affinity with the clown that critics commended “the spirit of Grimaldi” (qtd. in Eigner 6) in his *Sketches By Boz* (1836), published around the time of Grimaldi’s death. He proved unwilling to work on it, however, initially refusing the project and complaining to Bentley that “it is very badly done, and so redolent of twaddle that I fear I cannot take it up on any conditions” (*Memoirs* 299–300). He eventually relented, and then revised and sent off the memoirs in a matter of weeks, dictating the narrative to his father, John, who could be found “in exulted enjoyment of the office of amanuensis” (*Memoirs* 300).

The novelist’s haste and lack of interest is evident throughout the text. While the numerous factual errors and confused chronology may well have been present in Grimaldi’s original, the editorial abridgements, ellipses, and inelegant transposition of the text from the first person to the third convey an editor’s impatience with the material at hand. Similarly, while Dickens’s introduction claimed that there had been “no *book-making* in this case,” he contradicted himself by admitting to “a double and most comprehensive process of abridgement” as well as “altering its form throughout, and making such other alterations as he conceived would improve the narration of the facts” (*Memoirs* 12). These changes would prove profoundly significant by virtue of imposing a

structure of retrospection to fit the themes of melancholy and pain that dominated the close of Grimaldi's career to the entirety of his life. Thus *Memoirs* places him always within a trajectory of sacrificial expenditure whose inevitable end is sadness and decline.

Such arrant "book-making" is perhaps unsurprising given how, as Leigh Woods has shown, Dickens shared a suspicion of theatricality with many of his contemporaries, even to the extent of viewing performance as an "inherently destructive endeavor," in which the ideal of sympathetic imagination so prized by Romantic theater critics was viewed as "antithetical to reason, deliberation and control" by the generation that followed (Woods 144).²³ In the case of clowns, this distrust is redoubled by his view of pantomime clowning as not just anachronistic, but also somehow constituting an affront toward the cherished memories of childhood. To this end, Dickens can be considered one of the first artists to substantively represent clowning in terms that were to significantly influence later formulations of coulrophobia. His association of clowning with moral and visceral dilapidation in "The Stroller's Tale" (one of the first installments of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*), for example, predates *Memoirs* by two years, and the story clearly anticipates the tragic atmosphere in which he would frame Grimaldi. In this episode, "Dismal Jemmy," himself a down-at-heel actor, recalls the time he came across a fellow performer, a "habitual drunkard . . . enfeebled by dissipation and emaciated by disease" (Dickens, *Pickwick* 49). It is night and the theater is dark. Jemmy recalls:

I was dressed to leave the house, and was crossing the stage on my way out, when he tapped me on the shoulder. Never shall I forget the repulsive sight that met my eye when I turned round. He was dressed for the pantomime, in all the absurdity of a clown's costume. The spectral figures in the Dance of Death, the most frightful shapes that the ablest painter ever portrayed on canvas, never presented an appearance half so ghastly. His bloated body and shrunken legs—their deformity enhanced a hundred fold by the fantastic dress—the glassy eyes, contrasting fearfully with the thick white paint with which the face was besmeared: the grotesquely ornamented head, trembling with paralysis, and the long skinny hands, rubbed with white chalk—all gave him a hideous and unnatural appearance of which no description could convey an adequate idea, and which, to this day, I shudder to think of. (Dickens, *Pickwick* 50)

In what is certainly the first example of “dark carnival” in English literature, “Stroller’s Tale” portrays the clown as a monstrous contradiction, a ghoul disfigured by the immorality of the man who plays him and who later dies in a fit of terrifying hallucinations that blur fiction with reality. It is the foundational statement of coulrophobia: all humor having fled, the object of spectatorship resents being watched, is unable to differentiate between the play world and the real world, and transposes his personal demons onto the supposed joviality of his mask.

While there is good reason to assume that Dickens based the episode on the fate of Joseph Samuel Grimaldi, Joseph Grimaldi’s son who had died in 1833 at the age of 31 after a life of alcoholism and profligacy, it is clear that the clown’s physical and moral deterioration stands as a more general emblem for the twilight of a once-popular form now peopled by decadent performers and reliant on outdated modes.²⁴ The movement for the reform of popular entertainment had gained considerable momentum by the 1830s, driven by what E.P. Thompson memorably described as “magistrates, mill-owners, and Methodists” (62) and adopted by a middle class who looked back on their youth spent at the Regency theater and now found themselves unrecognizable: of “a cast and character so dissimilar to modern habits that . . . we may be said to be no longer the same people” (Angelo 1: 219). The sense of a changing tide had even found its way into some of Grimaldi’s obituary notices: “We don’t know why so much fuss has been made about the death of this certainly very clever mountebank,” read the 10 June 1837 notice in *Figaro in London*. “He certainly could cram more sausages down his throat, and make uglier faces than any man alive, but as he had for so long rendered himself unfit to do anything of this kind in public, we cannot look upon his death as a national calamity.” That *Figaro* should imply drink and dissipation in this case was unfair, though the accusation reflected a growing mood of disapproval at the conduct of performers (especially those associated with pantomime, spectacle, and the minor theaters) that extended even to periodicals generally given over to their praise. *Oxberry’s Dramatic Biography*, for example, claimed to be horrified as it took its readers on a tour of inns in the vicinity of the Surrey theater—an area known as the “theatrical barracks” for the density of its thespian population—coming across pubs packed with drunken performers, including “an excellent actor, who, from a love of intoxication, has reduced himself (although a young man) to a state of pauperism” as well as “three or four persons, striving, with all their might, to destroy themselves the same way.” None can survey the “emaciated

countenances of the dramatic group,” asserts the piece, “with all its alloy of dissipation and vulgarity, without feeling a sincere regret” (5: 161–62).²⁵

The reform of entertainment culture was a movement to which Dickens enthusiastically subscribed, and one for which he received additional impetus around the time he took on the editorship of *Memoirs*, thanks to his introduction to the actor William Charles Macready in June 1837. Dickens and Macready became close friends, with the novelist offering support for the actor’s efforts to expel prostitutes from Covent Garden theater, free Shakespeare’s texts from their eighteenth-century accretions, and impose greater discipline upon members of its company to curb its culture of wantonness inspired by libertines like Edmund Kean.²⁶ There was also a notable adjustment in the attitude to risk that had been such a prevalent feature of Georgian performances, an attitude that would ultimately conclude with the 1879 passage of the Children’s Dangerous Performances Act, although Dickens already had a dim view of those feats of Grimaldi that took “his bodily energies far beyond their natural powers,” and so “sowed the seeds of that extreme debility and utter prostration of strength from which . . . he suffered so much” (*Memoirs* 123).²⁷

Dickens’s position was not without contradictions, for, as has long been noted, his support for reform had to compete with the personal sense of loss he felt for the picturesque and soul-nourishing aspects of entertainment that had been surrendered to the improving forces of culture.²⁸ Dickens explored his ambivalence in several pieces from the period. A sketch first published in 1835, for example, takes as its topic Astley’s Amphitheatre, a minor theater on the edge of the Lambeth marshes that specialized in equestrian spectacles, rope dancing, trick-riding, and pantomime. One day, Dickens happens to meet some of Astley’s performers huddled by the stage door, only to find himself shocked by the force of bathos the vision inspires: “he could not believe that the beings of light and elegance, in milk-white tunics, salmon coloured legs, and blue scarfs, who flitted on sleek cream-coloured horses before our eyes at night, with all the aid of lights, music, and artificial flowers, could be the pale, dissipated-looking creatures we beheld by day” (“Astley’s” 111). The theme was continued the following year in an essay entitled “The Getting Up of a Christmas Pantomime,” in which the novelist describes the rehearsals for the annual show before concluding that “strange as the assertion may sound, the rehearsal of a pantomime is a most melancholy sight,” as though its “scenic beauties” look tawdry by daylight, it is the actors themselves, the “*living* portion of the holiday pageant” that “suffers as much, if not more, by being submitted to the solar

beams" (288). Daylight is a particularly intrusive and dream-dispelling medium: "Is this a theatre?" whispers Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* as he surveys an interior that looks "coarse, cold, gloomy and wretched." "I thought it was a blaze of light and finery." "Why so it is," Nicholas replies, "but not by day, Smike—not by day" (320).

As these examples show, even as the necessity of change is revealed in the wearied tinsel and pallid cheerlessness of theaters and performers, they simultaneously invoke a sense of mourning for youth and lost wonderment. It is a tone that similarly permeates *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* that both opens and closes with examples of an evanescent past contrasted with a somber present. Dickens first recounts "the eagerness and avidity" with which he peruses "the exclusive accounts of the coming wonders in the theatrical newspapers" hoping to "still believe them as we did before twenty years' of experience had shown us that they were always wrong" (*Memoirs* II), before concluding the text with an exhortation to reflect upon how, for Grimaldi, "the light and life of a brilliant theatre were exchanged in an instant for the gloom and sadness of a dull sick-room" (291).

Such a process of stark comparison lends itself also to the structural principles around which the events of Grimaldi's life are organized. Indeed, *Memoirs* constitutes a veritable balance-sheet of contrasts, from providing a running tally of Grimaldi's income and losses, to keeping detailed accounts of his successes and failures, and, most importantly, providing a strictly hydraulic system of public laughter and private pain:

It is singular enough that throughout the whole of Grimaldi's existence, which was a chequered one enough, there always seemed some odd connexion between his good and bad fortune; no pleasure appeared to come to him unaccompanied by some accident or mischance. (59)

It is a pattern that is established in early childhood, with the recollection of an episode in which the young Grimaldi, then a performer of around six years of age, is discovered wandering from his chair by his tyrannical father who gives him a savage beating just moments before they are due together on stage. When they appear, the boy's makeup is smudged by his tears:

the father being in a violent rage, had not noticed the circumstance until the little object came on the stage, when a general roar of laughter directed

his attention to his grotesque countenance. Becoming more violent than before, old Grimaldi fell upon his son at once, and beat him severely, and the child roared vociferously. This was all taken by the audience as a most capital joke; shouts of laughter and peals of applause shook the house; and the papers the next morning declared that it was perfectly wonderful to see a mere child perform so naturally, and highly creditable to his father's talents as a teacher. (36)

The pattern is repeated endlessly in Grimaldi's life: the moment his first wife, Maria, accepts his proposal of marriage, Grimaldi is immediately flattened by a "heavy platform, on which ten men were standing" (59), resulting in a broken arm; he finds £599 on a street near Tower Hill, only to be embezzled for exactly the same amount by a con man; and, after he attains his life-long ambition by being preferred over his rival as principal clown at both Sadler's Wells and Drury Lane, Maria dies in childbirth, placing Grimaldi in the position of having to perform even in the depths of mourning, setting "the audience in a roar; and chalking over the seams which mental agony had worn on his face, was hailed with boisterous applause in the merry Christmas pantomime!" (112).

With the clown's "slap" as a constant reminder of self-division, Grimaldi's carefully calibrated economy of pleasure and pain becomes not only the defining feature of his career but also the mysterious source of his talent. Recounting his debut at Covent Garden in Thomas Dibdin's *Valentine and Orson* (1806), for example, a role that required an "unusual share of both mental and physical exertion," *Memoirs* tells how Grimaldi began to pay for his performance the instant the curtain fell, whereupon, "he would stagger off the stage into a small room behind the prompter's box, and there sinking into an arm-chair, give full vent to the emotions which he found it impossible to suppress" (164). The small, private room, contrasted to the public sphere of the auditorium, presents an image of doubled identity while simultaneously suggesting that the "violent and agonizing spasms" are the guarantor of his success. As Dickens confirms, "the effect produced on the audience . . . was intense," and rewarded with "compliments and congratulations which he received from persons ranking high in his own profession, in literature, and in the fine arts, [that] bore high testimony to the merit and striking character of this singular performance" (164).

Yet while *Memoirs* is filled with examples of bifurcation, it also features a much slower meditation on the process of social change that takes the form of an account of the gradual breakdown of Grimaldi's body, a biography of his

pain that grows in proportion to the sweep of industrialization that moves across Britain. This is doubly ironic given that in his pantomimes, Grimaldi's was a frequently Luddite clown, expressing comic skepticism about the gains of industrial progress. This doubt was directed in particular at society's desire to harness sources of power and convert them into forms of mobility, an ambivalence displayed in pantomimes such as *Harlequin and the Sylph of the Oak* (1816) and *Harlequin and Mother Bunch* (1821), where puffing steam carriages and hissing steamboats would explode or run wild the moment he came upon them. As David Mayer has noted, so insistently did Grimaldi invoke the dangers of steam that the *Morning Post* complained that he should desist from jokes of this kind in case they poison the public's mind to inventions of "great importance to the world of science, and to mankind in general" (qtd. in Mayer 214). In *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, however, the dangers of steam travel are more insidious than straightforward combustion. Writing of a trip Grimaldi took to Dublin in the 1820s, for example, Dickens notes how since the clown's last visit to Ireland in 1805 the "roads and coaches had improved and steam-packets had supplied the place of the old sailing-boats, so that they reached their destination in half the time which the same journey had occupied before" (254). Once there, however, Grimaldi falls sick and is forced to acknowledge "that his strength was rapidly failing him, that his limbs grew weaker, and his frame became more shaken every succeeding day, and that utter decrepitude, with its long train of miseries and privations, was coming upon him" (256). Dublin represents the culmination of a series of journeys on roads that, while becoming considerably less rutted and unreliable, cause him more discomfort than ever before, resulting in bouts of pneumonia and arthritic pains that leave him bedridden for weeks. Lured by the fees on offer in rapidly expanding industrial cities such as Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham, he is plagued with bad luck as he travels from one engagement to the next: he is frozen to his seat, hurt in a coach crash, and during one performance, falls twice through a trap door dislocating his shoulder, before making it to his carriage "scarcely able to crawl" (193). As the sum of these misfortunes forces him at last to retire, Grimaldi returns to Sadler's Wells to take on the role of manager only to find it transformed from "a pretty suburban spot into a maze of streets and squares and closely clustered houses" (267), developed by a Tory government that wished to erase the memory of the Reformist Spa Fields riots. Outrun always by the pace of social change, then, *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* shows us a clown enduring the process of his own obsolescence, picking his way through a

landscape whose sudden transformation not only leaves him bruised and weather-beaten, but also renders all subsequent iterations of his clown as inherently anachronistic outcasts from a former age. His physical exhaustion reflecting the exhaustion of the pantomime as a viable form, Grimaldi becomes the first significant representative of the temporal asynchronicity that is fundamental to later, coulrophobic readings of the clown. Indeed, through the tone of the various discourses attached to Grimaldi's career, both at its height and posthumously, the combined themes of division, concealment, and deterioration clearly provide the basic components for the sinister clowns that stalk us in the present day.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of the introduction, "clown" is used to designate a broad range of characters and personas that have been associated with the term from the seventeenth century to the present. This includes various *commedia dell'arte* characters: Arlecchino, Pantalone, Pedrolino, and Pulcinella; Deburau's iconic Pierrot; the Clown, Harlequin, and Pantaloon of the British Regency pantomime; ancillary characters such as Clodpate and Punch; and American circus clowns, most notably the Hobo and cinder-faced Auguste, whose iconography has come to dominate popular representations of clowning. The collapse of distinctions between these various types is a function of the American circus performance and also serves to reflect the chaotic *bricolage* of clown imagery in popular culture.

2. There is some confusion whether the line is Canio's or belongs instead to Tonnio, the hunchback whose attentions have been earlier rebuffed by Nedda. See Wright.

3. While the better-known examples of "dark carnival" include the movie *Killer Clowns from Outer Space* (1988) and the hip-hop band Insane Clown Posse, the best description comes from Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (1988), in which the Joker describes memory as a fun-fair:

I find the past such a worrying, anxious place . . . Memory's so treacherous. One moment you're lost in a carnival of delights, with poignant childhood aromas, the flashing neon of puberty, all that sentimental candyfloss . . . The next, it leads you somewhere you don't want to go . . . somewhere dark and cold, filled with damp, ambiguous shapes of things you'd hoped were forgotten. Memories can be vile, repulsive little brutes. Like children, I suppose. Haha. (n. pag.)

See also Dery's chapter "Cotton-Candy Autopsy: Deconstructing Psycho-Killer Clowns" (63–86), for a vivid account of this genre.

4. For an historical survey of the decline of the American circus, see Marling.

5. Coulrophobia has been known to affect entire communities, as in the still unexplained reports of clowns harassing Boston children in 1981. So numerous were these reports that investigative counselor Daniel O'Connell of the Boston Public School Board took the unusual step of writing to every teacher in his jurisdiction: "It has been brought to the attention of the police department and the district office that adults dressed as clowns have been bothering children to and from school. Please advise students that they must stay

away from strangers, especially ones dressed as clowns.” Sterling advice, although it did little to curb the problem, and the clown sightings that had initially been confined to the city spread quickly to the Brookline area, and then fifty miles away to Providence, Rhode Island. Reports became increasingly vivid—clowns armed with long knives were enticing children into vans—but still no arrests were made. Eventually the problem passed, but it seems the suspects may have simply jumped into their clown-car and gone west, as several weeks later identical complaints were received in Kansas City, Kansas, Kansas City, Missouri, Omaha, Nebraska, and Denver, Colorado. A similar outbreak occurred in Scotland in the 1990s. Once again, police and school authorities were alerted to the reports of red-nosed, kipper-booted men driving around in an ice cream van and supposedly kidnapping children and chopping them up. Said one terrified girl, they sell the blood “with the ice cream as raspberry sauce to get rid of the evidence.” See Coleman 212–31; and Hobbs and Cornwell 203–17 and 209–10.

6. The sentiment is echoed by the writer Bruce Feiler, who spent a season as a clown with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus. “Though some people have always found clowns disturbing,” he writes, “now many feel that behind the face of a clown there may be a rapist waiting to pounce” (qtd. in Dery 66). The fear of clown as sexual predator was underlined for Feiler during his tenure with the circus, when one of his fellow performers was asked to leave after pressure from parents who were felt that his attention to children was inappropriate; see Feiler 226–28.

7. For some years after his arrest, Gacy profited by selling pencil drawings of teary-eyed clowns from his cell on death row. Gacy’s victims ranged in age from 9 to 20, adding fuel to coulrophobic fears that have particularly attached themselves to child kidnapping and paedophilia.

8. Jack Healy and Serge F. Kovalski, “Pain and Puzzles in Wake of Deadly Colorado Attack.” *The New York Times*, 21 July 2012, Page A1.

9. “There are only two purposes that it may serve, and these two can themselves be subsumed under a single heading. It is either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire or defence,) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)” (Freud 97).

10. See Stiles.

11. In a short comment on the dysfunctionality of several modern celebrity comedians, McBride notes that some professions record a higher rate of substance abuse due to factors such as “availability; social pressure to use; separation from normal social or sexual relationships; freedom from supervision; very high or very low income; collusion by colleagues; and strains, stresses and hazards.” He concludes that “the popular ‘myth’ that beneath the motley, clowns are distressed, may account for some over-reporting of comedians’ problems.” I would argue that the myth of the sad clown is the key idea organizing modernity’s idea of humor, influencing not only how it has been used, but also methodological approaches to understanding it.

12. See Dickens, *Memoirs* 164n1.

13. At the height of Grimaldi’s celebrity, Mayer calculates that as many as 105,000 people attended his Christmas pantomimes (385n9).

14. One of Grimaldi’s apprentices, the clown Tom Matthews, played his mentor in a one-man show he called “Reminiscences of Grimaldi” that first appeared in 1857, and, according to the *Kentish Independent*, “consists of anecdotes and sketches of the history of Grimaldi and in his pantomime days . . . at one time wearing even a part of Grimaldi’s own dress.”

15. See Dibdin 47–48.

16. The same periodical suggested that Grimaldi “apply to the Foreign Office for the appointment of Ambassador or Missionary to some of the Continental States, as his powers are calculated to render them merry!” (Daly 1: 81). In c.1825, *Oxberry’s Dramatic Biography* noted that the “GRIM ALL DAY” joke had “been bandied about for the last twenty years” and was “our hero’s private property” (113). In actuality, that Grimaldi’s father Giuseppe Grimaldi (c.1710–88) was at least sometimes referred to as “Grim-all-day” is evinced by a posthumous print of him published in 1788 by J. Barry of Oxford Street, entitled “Grim-all-day at Breakfast.”

17. This anecdote first appears in print in the 1887 reminiscences of Thomas Goodwin, a theater enthusiast who had met Grimaldi numerous times as a child through his father’s position as the music librarian at Covent Garden. If it seems familiar, however, it is because it tends to recur with the names of different comedians inserted in place of Grimaldi’s—most often those of Grock or the fictional Pagliacci, but sometimes even Charlie Chaplin and the British comedian Les Dawson. This is testimony itself to the longevity of the “sad clown” motif Grimaldi engendered. Its status as kind of ironic epigram was most recently confirmed by its use in the 2009 movie *The Watchmen*.

18. As Moody and others have shown, by the first decade of the nineteenth century, the “illegitimate” theatricality of the circuses and minor theaters had significantly destabilized the strict theatrical hierarchy insisted upon by managers of the eighteenth century. This was done to the extent that incorporation of new, genre-blurring forms into the patent theaters became increasingly common, chief among which were melodrama and the many subgenres it inspired (aqua-drama, hippo-drama, and dog-drama), all of which appeared on the patent stages during Grimaldi’s career.

19. See Brodey, especially 116 and 137.

20. Alongside his remarkable physical attributes, Grimaldi may have also possessed the single most remarkable face in the history of British comedy, a “countenance,” wrote the *London Magazine*, which “is a whole pantomime in itself.” Those who saw it uniformly declared it “indescribable,” but when they could be persuaded to hazard a description called it an “encyclopaedia of wit” perpetually animated with “a thousand odd twitches and unaccountable absurdities oozing out at every pore,” so flexible that each feature seemed infinitely elastic and could be independently controlled. His eyes “large, globular, and sparkling,” carried on “without the aid of each other; one eye was quietly silent and serious, whilst the other would be engaged in the most elaborate and mischievous wink.” With one look, he could accomplish “more . . . than his rivals could effect by the most injurious and elaborate transformations.” His “oven-mouth” had a “never-ending power of extension,” his chin touching the buttons of his waistcoat. Even his nose could assume character. It was, in the words of one witness, “a vivacious excrescence capable of exhibiting disdain, fear, anger, and even joy” (*London Magazine*).

21. See George Cruikshank’s January 1813 print, “The narrow escape, or, Boney’s grand leap *a la* Grimaldi!!!”, British Museum ID 2006,U.488.

22. This catalog description comes from an unidentified clipping in the Grimaldi folders of Islington Local History Centre, London.

23. For the problematic and often contradictory nature of Victorian anti-theatricality, see Vlock, chap. 3.

24. Eigner has suggested that Dickens’s attitude toward clowns was shaped by the death of his father, whom, it is widely assumed, had been the model for Mr. Micawber and the clownish figures of Dickens’s earlier novels. Having seen his father’s corpse after a failed operation for bladder disease, Dickens was so horrified by the condition of his

body—especially a large incision behind his genitals—that the idea of bumbling benevolence with which he had been associated was replaced with a powerful image of emasculation and physical decay. Whatever the effect of that traumatic sight, however, we can see that Dickens's association of clowning with visceral dilapidation had been in place for at least fifteen years prior to John's demise. See Eigner 171.

25. By contrast, the same article suggested that “if any persons have an excuse for indulging at the shrine of Bacchus, it is those who are engaged in pantomime: the exertions they are compelled to make, require that they should resort to the use of stimulants” (161–62).

26. See Tracy. Sir Walter Scott had already blamed the “decline” of Western drama (a decline that he felt had begun in the late eighteenth century) on “the huge size of contemporary theatres, the unfavourable conditions affecting performers and authors, and the seemingly calculated encouragement of prostitution” (Donohue 337).

27. For the passage of the Children's Dangerous Performance Act, see Assael 132–35.

28. As Schlicke tells us, “though staunch in his resistance to pressures antagonistic to amusement,” Dickens was also “warmly supportive of forces improvement,” approving of those pastimes, clubs and venues that improved the population by providing “emollient for brutal tastes” (6–7).

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