

CHILD MURDER AND
BRITISH CULTURE
1720–1900

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CHAPTER 4

'Bright and countless everywhere': the New Poor Law and the politics of prolific reproduction in 1839

THE NEW POOR LAW AND THE CULTURE OF KILLING

The two child murderers that emerge from the Revolution controversy of the 1790s – Martha Ray, the destitute unmarried mother who kills her child in despair, and Dame Nature, the cruel, institutional killer – cast their shadows over British culture throughout the nineteenth century. But they loom most menacingly at the end of the 1830s, especially in radical and plebeian culture.

Open any edition of the Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, for instance, and one is struck by seemingly incessant accounts of infant violation, as child casualties of industrial accidents jockey for space with equally pathetic victims of domestic mishaps: twenty-six children drowned in a coal pit in Silkstone; a roll call of infants killed by tea kettles – Elizabeth Sharpe, Mary Milner, Isaac Hartley.¹ And there are numerous victims of murder. A strong sense emerges that a generalised threat to infant life lies abroad, a fear that all children, like Oliver Twist, the eponymous hero of the 1837 novel, are 'unequally poised between this world and the next'.² Their violators are everywhere, encoded in culture both high and low. In August 1838, for instance, the *Northern Star* reports that 'the admirable picture of Medea, by M. Delacroix has been bought . . . for the museum in Lille'; and there are references to the scandalous case of Maria Monk, whose infamous accounts of rapes and child murders in Canadian convents had titillated a broad reading public since their publication in 1836.³ But most poignant are the stream of real child murders reported in the press, usually – although not always – committed by poor, unmarried mothers of newborns like Martha Ray, uprooted and deranged by their misfortune.⁴ Witness for instance a 'tall woman having on a cloak, [who] was observed to be wandering about the spot' where the corpse of a nameless child was discovered in August 1838, under an arch in Battle Bridge near Bradford⁵ – a

mysterious female stranger, like a character in a romance or ballad, haunting the newly industrialised landscape.

What is distinctive about the flurry of interest in child murder at this time, however, is that according to the radical press, the greatest threat to infant life was not represented by these poor unwed mothers, but rather by the state itself. The 1834 New Poor Law had introduced new measures for the administration of the poor modelled on Malthusian principles, aimed to cut the cost of poor relief, and to discipline the poor into better habits of self-reliance.⁶ Among its highly controversial new provisions was the compulsory incarceration of the poor in workhouses, redesigned to provide minimum levels of subsistence and a measure of discomfort, especially through the separation of married couples and families.⁷ It also incorporated new provisions for bastardy, ending the mother's right to petition the father for financial support. With sole responsibility for her illegitimate child, the mother was frequently compelled to enter the workhouse, where the treatment of unmarried mothers was notoriously stringent.⁸ While the authors of the 1834 Poor Law Report defended themselves against the objection that the arrangements for unwed mothers 'promote[d] infanticide', their opponents attacked the entire regime as an infanticidal one: the New Poor Law was 'the new starvation law', a 'cannibal invasion of the defenceless hearths and homes of our weaker brethren';⁹ it was the repressor of populations, and murderer of babies. Here was the transmogrification of Malthus's Dame Nature into a principle of government. The 'stern mistress' no longer turned the hungry and needy away from the feast; she actively engaged in an assault on society's weakest and most vulnerable charges.

Opposition to the New Poor Law came from many quarters, including from Tories who saw the new legislation as an attack on the forms of patronage and charity that had shaped traditional relations between rich and poor.¹⁰ But the loudest and most troubling protests came from the groundswell of working-class people, those who felt most at threat from the new provisions.¹¹ Popular opposition to the New Poor Law gathered momentum in 1837, when the Poor Law Commission began to instigate its new policies in the northern industrial regions. Mass demonstrations and riots took place as protestors attempted to obstruct the business of the new boards of guardians, which were designed to play an instrumental role in the law's implementation at a local level, including establishing workhouses in groups of parishes. Prominent among the law's critics were the Chartists, radicals who were increasingly distancing themselves from the Whigs since the Reform Act of 1832 had failed to provide any form of political representation for working people. The Chartists saw the New Poor Law

as a further Whig betrayal and sought to use it as a means of harnessing support for their own political ends. Indeed, by 1839 anti-Poor Law protest had become thoroughly enmeshed with the Chartist cause, supplying the northern Chartists with a vocabulary of suffering and violation, and a moral justification for concerted resistance.¹²

In this fraught political context, the spectre of child murder assumed heightened potency. It is noticeable, for instance, that in the radical press, real child-murder cases, reported from the coroner's courts, always elicited political commentary. Thus in 1839, a newborn, strangled by its aunt – a curiously Dame Nature-like figure, a school keeper named Mary Brown – provokes the coroner to exclaim, and the editor of the Newcastle-based Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Liberator*, to concur, that '[t]here is no use in concealing the fact, to this the practice has come, but it is only one of the fruits of the inhuman New Poor Law'.¹³ Or the baby found dead beneath the arch at Battle Bridge, is deemed '*another example*, if any were wanting, of the evil-working of the New Poor Law Bill' (my emphasis).¹⁴ A wearying sense of the familiarity of these events always comes through; corpse on corpse is discovered, suggesting a relentless culling of innocent lives. But it is not merely individual acts of child murder that figure in this rhetoric. The deaths of infants are held to be over-determined by the new legislation: workhouses kill children through their harsh, unsanitary conditions; children are not born, because of the New Poor Law's adoption of Malthusian principles of moral restraint and the segregation of husbands and wives in the workhouses; surplus children are transported to the colonies; babies die in shipping accidents when parents emigrate to escape the strictures of the poor law;¹⁵ illegitimate newborns are murdered by their mothers on account of the punitive new bastardy provisions; and, as we shall see, children are killed by their parents for insurance payoffs from burial societies.¹⁶

Mary Howitt's poem, 'Nature versus Malthus', printed in the radical press in March, 1839, pitches the deathly force of Malthus against the goodness of prolific nature:

'Mid the mighty, 'mid the mean,
Little children may be seen,
Like the flowers that spring up fair,
Bright and countless everywhere.¹⁷

In the context of the infanticidal New Poor Law, natural acts of reproduction are a way of cocking a snook at the authorities. A weaver named Joseph Ashworth who had recently fathered triplets – expanding his family to thirty

children – is congratulated in December 1838 in the *Northern Star* under the heading, ‘Anti-Malthusianism’.¹⁸ An ideal vision of a swelling, healthy, infant population counters the proliferating infant corpses caused by the New Poor Law, the casualties of this latter-day massacre of the innocents. And as in the depictions of the Biblical episode in the visual iconography of an earlier period,¹⁹ the mass of infant corpses seems to take on the attributes of cherubs, becoming ephemeral and saintly – in Mary Howitt’s case, like flower-fairies. Thus etherealised, they seem to undercut the evils of the New Poor Law.

Of course, as we have seen, child murder had been used for polemical ends since the beginning of the eighteenth century. But at the end of the 1830s, it emerges as a topos for political opposition of extraordinary power and varied application, which is used with an intensity that exceeds even that inspired by Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* in 1729. This is most clearly evident in relation to the so-called ‘Marcus’ pamphlets and the furore that surrounded them. These scandalous works, which circulated from late 1838, described a government plot to exterminate the third and subsequent children of all poor families. They consciously referred back to Swift’s work, repeating his conceit that government policy – in this case, the New Poor Law – was tantamount to child murder, and evoking his idiom of political satire. The pamphlets were extremely controversial, provoking indignation and horror among many of their readers. But what is most intriguing is the variety and style of response they elicited, for while some readers clearly did hold the pamphlets to be in ‘grim earnest’, as Carlyle claimed them to be in *Chartism* in 1839,²⁰ other readers colluded with their fictional status in much more knowing ways, engaging with ‘Marcus’ as political satire, and appropriating his deadly tales to other, subversive ends. The effects of the ‘Marcus’ pamphlets can be traced across the print culture of the time, as they are taken up by people of diverse political opinions – Chartists of various factions, Owenites, as well as Tories – acting as a conduit of feeling and opinion, and are even constitutive of the very forms in which political resistance took place.

In this chapter, I shall examine the ‘Marcus’ pamphlets and responses to them alongside another discussion at this time that also focused on the idea of child murder. This was the controversy surrounding burial societies, held by many middle-class writers to be the cause of parental murder of working-class children for monetary gain. Also a response to the New Poor Law, the burial-society controversy should be seen as closely linked to the ‘Marcus’ affair. Taken together, the two sets of material demonstrate the

way in which the figure of child murder had become a highly significant term in political discussion, as a sign open to interpretation, and a tool in a propaganda war.

The mode of these representations of child murder ranges from realism to melodrama to satire, producing a dizzying array of effects, from fear to laughter. One of the distinctive features of this material, however, that pervades all its different manifestations, is that the visceral realities of child murder – its pains and sufferings and injustices – often seem to recede in the midst of an outrageous joke. The figure itself assumes a spectral quality as a term haunted by its forgotten referent. This lends a peculiarly ghostly texture to the representation of society across the writings of political opposition: in 1839, we shall see, the world is supposed to be inhabited by the sinister shadows of murdering mothers, but also by hobgoblins and fairies – the spectres of the infants murdered by the Malthusian machine.

MARCUS'S 'BOOK OF MURDER': SURPLUS POPULATION AND THE
CHILD DEATH FACTORY

Rumours of the existence of literature recommending the extinction of children of the working class began to circulate at the end of 1838. On 8 December, the *Northern Liberator* referred to a pamphlet, 'privately circulated at first, but now openly published, recommending the MURDER by wholesale of new-born infants, by a scheme called "Painless Extinction!"' It went on, 'we have the pamphlet in our possession, and shall, if possible give extracts next week; but topics so thicken in that we hardly know where to turn first'. Two weeks later, the paper contained a detailed report of its content.²¹ The work in question was *The Essay on Populousness*, 'printed for private circulation'; it had been reprinted in the substantially longer work, *On the Possibility of Limiting Populousness*, authored by the pseudonymous 'Marcus', and printed by John Hill.²² Both works carried the explicitly neo-Malthusian message: that the root of all current social problems lay in overpopulation. Both claimed that the means of their solution was in the restriction of pauper families to two children per family. And both were taken to be the work of the shadowy 'Marcus'. The second pamphlet adopted the circumlocutory style of political economy: it spoke only of the economic benefits of restricted population, and the environmental factors that in fact did restrict population. However, the first scandalously appended a supposedly scientific plan for achieving this end: 'Marcus's infamous theory

of 'painless extinction' – that is, the gassing of new-born children in hospitals constructed specially for the purpose. Drawing on a hotchpotch of contemporary scientific beliefs, about embryological development, excitation of the nervous system, miasmatic poisoning, and adopting the impassive voice of scientific rationality, 'Marcus' outlines his theory: he writes 'before birth, it [the foetus] . . . was sustained and nourished by the flow of maternal blood and life. But now that supply is cut off . . .'.²³ Evading direct mention of the fact that after birth, the baby is to be taken into hospital and poisoned by gas, he goes on: 'all vitality sinks by one same cause – want of excitement and of nourishment. No pang is felt, for no sensation is shocked . . . Instead of growing quickly towards full formation, it decreases; instead of being awakened, it is dulled.' Euphemistic and evasive though it is, the pamphlet outlines a chilling prescription for mass infanticide.

The authenticity and the intent of the pamphlets were never entirely evident.²⁴ Radical opponents reasoned that they were the work of a philosophical radical, Poor Law Commissioner, or other government agent, but it is not clear that they believed them to be so. Indeed, commentators on the pamphlets tend to drift in and out of an apparent conviction that the pamphlets are an authentic part of government policy, from a much more distanced and knowing participation in the works as satire. The pamphlets' resemblance to Swift's *A Modest Proposal* would have been apparent to a literate readership in the early nineteenth century,²⁵ and this would have meant that some readers at least would have come to 'Marcus' with the conventions of political satire firmly in mind. The similarity of the name 'Marcus' to Malthus, and the perceived coincidence of their economic and social beliefs encouraged commentators to read 'Marcus' as a monstrous reincarnation of Malthus. Indeed, the theory of painless extinction seemed to some to be a scientific elaboration of Malthus's principle of population, a dramatic extension of the deadly work of Dame Nature.

For a short time between late 1838 and 1840, the name 'Marcus' came to stand for the murderous plot of Malthusian population theory. As the editors of the *Northern Liberator* wrote in an open letter to Lord John Russell, 'MARCUS, MALTHUS, MURDER, THE POOR LAW, AND THE GOVERNMENT, are now all MIXED TOGETHER in the minds of the people, in such a way as hardly to admit of being unmixed again'.²⁶ 'Marcus' had become a hybrid philosophical-radical-cum-mad-scientist, a parable against the dangers of morally unchecked scientific experimentation, on the lines of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1815). This

MARCUS UNVEILED.



MARCUS' EXPERIMENT ON THE SLEEPING INFANT.

Figure 4. 'Marcus Unveiled', from *Northern Liberator*, 2 March 1839, p. 3

was elaborated in an article in the *Northern Liberator*, entitled 'Marcus Unveiled', a report of a lecture supposedly given by 'Marcus' in an imaginary Hertford College, Cambridge:

On Thursday the 7th of February . . . that celebrated room where the sage Malthus had so often demonstrated to admiring audiences, the deep truths of his profound philosophy was brilliantly lighted up. Additional gas burners had been constructed, so that the hall of sciences shewed . . . one blaze of light.²⁷

In this article, possibly authored by the Chartist, Thomas Doubleday,²⁸ 'Marcus' appears in front of an appreciative audience of Poor Law Commissioners, government ministers, fashionable ladies, and philanthropists, who are covertly named in the article (for instance Lord [Brougham], the Bishop [Blomfield], Miss [Harriet Martineau], and Peter Thimble [Francis Place]²⁹), and represented in the accompanying illustration (see Fig. 4).³⁰ 'Marcus' conducts his experiment on a sleeping baby, extinguishing life,

to the ‘breathless admiration’ of the audience: “‘Exquisite” whispered Miss [Martinieau], as she watched eagerly the pulses of the beautiful babe – “exquisite”. This first light was extinguished!’

‘Marcus Unveiled’ elaborates on the scientific knowledge that is evidenced in the first of the ‘Marcus’ pamphlets, wittily underlining some of the targets of the original pamphlet’s satire. The emphasis on the ‘blaze of light’ evokes the use of gas light, newly introduced to the urban streets as part of Poor Law Commissioner Edwin Chadwick’s larger project of social and moral hygiene aimed to dissipate the various threats of city life. It suggests here an easy slippage between the use of gas for urban hygiene and human eugenic ends. Carbonic acid, the deadly gas used by ‘Marcus’, was also associated with urban housing. Chadwick’s *Sanitary Report* (1842) is full of accounts of the homes of the urban poor in which carbonic acid is identified as the fatal product of overcrowding.³¹ According to Chadwick, overcrowding was the cause of more fatalities than wars. In the *Sanitary Report*, the risks to health posed by poor housing conditions are intensified by the moral dangers of unsegregated sleeping quarters. Miasmatic contagion and unwanted offspring are thus the twin products of slum living.³² The ‘Marcus’ satire, however, purposefully transfers blame away from working-class dereliction and moral turpitude, to the state’s impoverishment of the poor. In the first pamphlet by ‘Marcus’, the point is underlined by the satirical imperative that ‘the stomach [of the child] be not too full’ when the lethal dose of gas is administered.³³ In ‘Marcus Unveiled’, the joke is extended to attack London decadence, and superciliousness towards the northern working class: carbonic acid is, he declares, ‘only known in London as a component part of soda water, ginger pop, bottled ale, treacle beer, imperial, wow-wow and swipes – (hear, hear,) – but in the north is perfectly well known amongst the collieries as “choke damp”. The “ignorant colliers”, exclaimed ‘Marcus’, ‘often blunder into it themselves, though the barbarians never have the wit to put their superfluous children into it! (A laugh!)’³⁴

A poem that was published in both the *Northern Star* and the *Northern Liberator* announced the spoof lecture. Entitled ‘Peter Thimble [Francis Place] to Lord Durham’, it provided yet more publicity for the ‘Marcus’ pamphlets. Treating the event as though it were a reality, it reads:

... fortune in our way God sends throws
 A prime philosopher! His name is Marcus
 And he exclaims ‘now by the holy poker
 I’ll give their surplus progeny choker!’

In short, my Lord, we find that our salvation
 Rests solely in carbonic acid 'Gas'.
 And to our doctrine to convert the nation
 Is all we now need bring to come to pass:
 To put the matter out of all conjecture,
 'Marcus', next week, my Lord, intends to lecture!³⁵

The newspapers' satire invents a fictional world of events that gathers its own momentum. Print produces more print – a textual explosion that eventually encroaches on 'real life'. The radical Tory, G. R. Wythen Baxter, in his compilation of anti-Poor Law writings, *The Book of the Bastiles* [sic] (1841), recorded an anecdote about four pregnant women in a workhouse. 'About the period that "Marcus's" book was talked so much of', the babies of three of four 'unfortunate mothers' died after having been administered medicine in the workhouse. The fourth, however, 'resolutely refused' to take the medicine, and 'both she and her child did well. Does not this fact speak volumes?'³⁶ The final remark is a chance one – a throwaway cliché of everyday speech – but the idea that a 'fact speaks volumes' nicely draws attention to the slippage between texts and realities that the 'Marcus' hoax exploits.

Immediately following the publication and circulation of the original 'Marcus' pamphlets at the end of 1838, a muted response is registered in the radical and Tory press. But intense outrage is generated by the formidable figure of the Reverend Joseph Raynor Stephens, the radical – at this point, a Chartist – preacher, the 'fire-brand demagogue' of Ashton. Stephens's constant references to the pamphlets in his highly politicised sermons and speeches opened a new chapter in the print history of 'Marcus'.³⁷ Stephens was an outspoken agitator for factory legislation and against the New Poor Law, and it was he who drew the scandalous 'Marcus' even further into the public eye. Stephens was arrested in late December 1838 very controversially for speeches delivered in the previous months, in which he had incited crowds to violence and incendiarism, and in the eight months between his arrest and trial and imprisonment in August 1839, he travelled the country delivering speeches and having them published.³⁸ In these, he made copious references to the work of 'Marcus' as incontrovertible evidence of the dangerous threat that the government posed for the very existence of the poor. In fact, Stephens had already made powerful use of the idea that the New Poor Law was a killer of children even before the eruption of the 'Marcus' scandal. One speech, for instance, as reported in the *Northern Star* in November 1838, incorporates the following piece of sentimental melodrama:

it had been proved in scores and hundreds of instances, that young women had taken their children and destroyed themselves too in consequence of the operation of that infernal enactment. He had read the other day of one young woman who took her little child, and, with a bandage, fastened it round her own bosom, and plunged herself and her baby into a stream, and as they could not live together, they must die, and trust to god's pity, rather than to man's mercy (great sensation) . . . she must either take herself into the Bastile, and be kept a prisoner all her life, and have the baby taken from her either to be poisoned or strangled, or cut up alive or dead by the damned doctors, or sent abroad to the plantations, – she must do all that, or bind her baby to her broken heart, and together with it plunge into the stream and die. (Tremendous sensation, mingled with horrible groans).³⁹

It was not surprising, therefore, that Stephens was one of the first to pick up on the 'Marcus' pamphlets, and publicise their deadly content.

Amid the furore following Stephens's arrest, various radical imprints of the 'Marcus' pamphlets were published, including the *Book of Murder*, published by William Dugdale, the radical publisher and pornographer of Holywell Street, London,⁴⁰ and a 'People's Edition', printed in Leeds, and sold through the office of the *Northern Star*. The publishing success of these works must be tied to the controversy surrounding Stephens and his arrest. In the *Northern Star*, for instance, the 'People's Edition' of the *Book of Murder* is advertised week in week out, often alongside advertisements for Stephens's sermons. Stephens and 'Marcus' thus provided mutual publicity for each other – and in fact, after Stephens is imprisoned, in August 1839, the name 'Marcus' gradually slips out of view.

In common with much radical print of the time, the *Book of Murder* is a dialogic text; its many-voiced form makes the authorial intent opaque, and opens the text to a variety of interpretations. Each of its voices is stylistically and typographically marked, and of different and mysterious authorial origins. On the title page, the work is announced as a 'vade mecum' for the commissioners and guardians of the New Poor Law. Selling for three pence, it comprises a cheaply produced edition of the first, privately circulated 'Marcus' pamphlet, together with a 'refutation of the Malthusian doctrine', for 'the edification of the Labourer'. The first section of the *Book of Murder* is an introductory essay, in the authentic voice of the radical, denouncing the New Poor Law on the grounds that it is a Malthusian conspiracy: there are vivid accounts of the sufferings of the poor, of women forced to kill their children, and a legal system that virtually excuses them; and a repetition of Stephens's call to direct action. This has recently been identified as the work of the Owenite, George Mudie.⁴¹ The second and third sections reprint the first of the 'Marcus' pamphlets, and these adopt

different voices and styles too: one is in the voice of the political economist, the other that of a popular scientist. The tone of both of them is difficult to gauge, and both open a chasm beneath the more certain terrains of belief and disbelief, of fact and fiction.

The true identity of 'Marcus' was never authoritatively established at the time,⁴² and the lack of certainty regarding both authorial designation and intent enabled the pamphlets to circulate like the work of an *agent provocateur*, sending ripples into late 1830s political culture. The pamphlets circulated anonymously, and their political potency accrued in part from this circumstance. The anonymity of 'Marcus' is therefore a significant aspect of the pamphlets' effects. Paradoxically, the secrecy that shrouded them above all seemed to mean that they could not be dismissed as fakes, and, moreover, that various people could be incriminated as their author. Baxter accused Lord Brougham of having written them,⁴³ and Stephens generated a great deal of publicity by claiming in his speeches that they were the work of one of the three Poor Law Commissioners. This was considered a serious enough charge to provoke letters to the press, from both Edwin Chadwick, the chief Poor Law Commissioner, and his assistant. Stephens penned a long letter of response, denying the accusation of libel, but took the opportunity, in any case, to claim that, if one of the three Poor Law Commissioners had not authored the pamphlets, it must have been Brougham, Place, or Martineau.⁴⁴ The correspondence was widely reprinted, and the accusation continued on the title page of *The Book of Murder*: 'Marcus, One of the Three' [Poor Law Commissioners]. Elsewhere, the three commissioners are referred to, with Herodian overtones, as the 'Three Kings of Somerset House', and there are lots of apocalyptic references to three-headed monsters. Like un-fathered or bastard children, the pamphlets brought about all kinds of disorder through their promiscuous reproduction and illegitimate status.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the accusation of obscenity was never far away. In their open letter to Lord John Russell, the editors of the *Liberator* speculate on the role of a respectable publishing house, Sherwood, Neely, and Piper which had been implicated in the publication of the 'Marcus' pamphlets – a piece of evidence that proves for them that power and influence must be behind 'Marcus':

If it be possible *to speak or write crime*, here it must be spoken and written; or we must dismiss not only law but gospel – make a saint of Herod, and turn the 'murder of the innocents' into a good joke, if not a wise piece of politics. Obscenity, however flagrant, is nothing to this. And therefore, we affirm that the house of Sherwood and Co. would no more have thought of publishing 'Marcus' than they would

have thought of publishing the elaborate impurities of John Cleland [author of the pornographic novel, *Fanny Hill*] – unless – unless, my Lord, they had been acted upon by motives and strengthened by *guarantees*, of which it is easy to conceive the nature, though difficult to conceive the existence.⁴⁵

Their Malthusian theme connected them to birth-control literature that was circulating around this time, by writers such as Robert Owen, Richard Carlile, and Francis Place. And birth control was associated with sodomy. According to an editorial in an earlier edition of the *Northern Liberator*, ‘even sodomy has been covertly defended by its advocates – for a palliation, if not a defence, even of the crime against nature – logically springs from the system of Malthus’.⁴⁶ The ‘Marcus’ pamphlets operated in a context in which pornography, sodomy, and birth-control advice all sparked the same kind of controversy. Reason enough, then, that they should be suppressed by government order in January 1839 – the effect of which was merely to increase their market value, and spread their notoriety.⁴⁷

By early 1839, the infamy of ‘Marcus’ was so well known that ‘Anti-Marcus’ had become a name adopted by opponents of the New Poor Law. The correspondence pages of the *Northern Star* printed letters from ‘Anti-Marcus’, and a long, melodramatic poem by Stephen W. Fullom published in London in 1839, describing the effects of the Poor Law, stands beneath the title, *Poor Law Rhymes: or Anti-Marcus*. There were no direct references to child murder in Fullom’s work, but, nevertheless, the poem demonstrated that ‘Marcus’ had become a by-word for the human degradations brought about by the New Poor Law.

The melodramatic tone of Fullom’s poem is typical of much of the writing that exploits the ‘Marcus’ affair. For instance, G. R. Wythen Baxter, the radical Tory, used the ‘Marcus’ pamphlets in a highly sentimental account of the demoralisation of the poor brought about by the New Poor Law. In *The Book of the Bastiles* he cited his own open letter to Brougham ‘on his creation and advocacy of the demoralizing, starving, poisoning, murdering “painless extinction” New Poor Law’ (the allusion to ‘painless extinction’ is of course a direct reference to ‘Marcus’):

gracious heaven! where are thy thunderbolts! by framing an enactment to massacre in cold blood, and that, too, by the most excruciating deaths, *i.e.* by *famine, slow poisons, ‘painless extinctions’* (?) and broken hearts, the pauper population of the queendom – an enactment which has paved our streets with the bodies of murdered babes, and choked our rivers with the corrupted remains of their unfortunate mothers!⁴⁸

The histrionic style here is the standard fare of radical campaigns of the time. The sentimental appeal to the demoralised domesticity of the 'queendom', and the ironic drawing together of gold and infant corpses (which in this case, 'pave our streets'), recall the terms of the rhetoric against the factory acts, for instance, where similar references are made to notions of respectable domesticity. In a footnote, Baxter adds a direct appeal to the new Queen, calling on her sympathies as a mother to nurture her child-like subjects: 'Queen Victoria, you know... what the pangs of child birth are... I am asking you to become a nursing mother to your people when *you do not suckle your own child!*'⁴⁹

Recent historical and critical work on this period has emphasised the way in which radical rhetoric frequently adopted melodrama as a genre, or 'mode', in which to stage class conflicts.⁵⁰ Highly charged emotional scenarios, usually of domestic breakdowns that have been caused by upper-class fecklessness or cruelty, are used as a way of underscoring the political message in the context of a Manichean terrain of good and evil. The references to child murder in New Poor Law opposition can be seen as constituents in such a melodrama: Poor Law Commissioners are turned into evil murderers, and the poor, their defenceless victims. Like the seduction narrative, another common melodramatic plot, whose role in popular opposition has been well documented,⁵¹ the story of child murder exposed the poor as the innocent victims of class exploitation – morally vindicated, if in some cases relieved of agency. Melodrama is used extensively, but by no means exclusively, by radical Tory writers, such as Baxter, who found in the genre a certain kind of nostalgia – what Elaine Hadley characterises as a 'regressive' impulse – which embraced as ideal the social relations of a past, deferential society.⁵² Frances Trollope's anti-New Poor Law, child-murder novel, *Jessie Phillips* (1842–3), would fall into this category. In this, Jessie Phillips is punished for killing her illegitimate child, when in fact the real murderer is her seducer, the dastardly son of the squire. The novel thereby dramatises both the injustice, but also, as Trollope puts it, the lack of *chivalry* in the law, harking back to an era of paternalism and deference.

In the aftermath of the 'Marcus' affair, child murder is incorporated into a more complex and diverse array of narratives in which the melodramatic mode combines with other genres and stories, to reflect heterodox political opinion and varied forms of resistance.⁵³ The Chartist, W. J. Linton, for instance, in *The National*, his journal venture of 1839, takes up the 'Marcus' theme rather differently than Baxter. For him, it elicits a much larger critique of institutions. He wrote under the pseudonym of Gracchus, which

linked him to both Roman and French republican radicalism. Gracchus was the egalitarian land-reformer who in 131 BC fruitlessly proposed extensive land distribution, while the French radical Babeuf, who adopted Gracchus as his forename, was organiser of the proto-communist Conspiracy of Equals in Paris in 1795–6. Linton would have been familiar with the Italian Buonarroti's account of the Conspiracy of Equals, that had been published in English translation (by the Chartist, Bronterre O'Brien) in 1836.⁵⁴ He uses the 'Marcus' pamphlets as an occasion for attacking the New Poor Law, not for its demoralisation of the poor in itself, but rather for its role in a much larger and more systematic oppression of the people. 'Which is the fouler crime,' he writes,

to destroy an infant; or to flog a man to death to the sound of martial music, to murder men by thousands on a battle-field, to bind tens of thousands of families to the unresting wheel of misery? Which is the greater wrong – to deprive a mother of her children; or to doom those children to a life of agonizing toil, to the horrors of prostitution, and having so disposed of them for the service of the better classes, to separate the parents, to sunder those whom God has joined, and bury them, bowed with their long servitude, and heart-broken, while the breath is yet in them, in divided graves – as a punishment for being crushed by the ruling Evil?⁵⁵

Linton interweaves an emotional appeal to sentiment, not dissimilar to Baxter's, with a rational discourse in which he weighs the comparative benefits of the death of a child against other social ills. In doing so, he evokes Godwin's critique of Malthus, in which Godwin had claimed, 'I had rather a child should perish at the first hour of existence, than that a man should spend seventy years of life in a state of misery and vice.'⁵⁶ For Godwin and Linton, child murder is the lesser evil; in fact, as for Swift in the civic humanist, republican idiom of *A Modest Proposal*, it is a redemptive act in the face of generalised oppression. Linton's affiliation with this tradition is evident throughout *The National*, but especially in his inclusion, in a later edition, of Rousseau's account of the episode from the history of the Roman Republic, in which Brutus condemns to death his own sons for the sake of upholding the law, and the republic. 'Will it be said that Brutus ought to have abdicated the consulship, rather than have condemned his own children? I answer, No!' writes Rousseau/Linton.⁵⁷

Joseph Raynor Stephens presents a further variant on the child-murder story. In his sentimental descriptions of demoralised domesticity, and his melodramatic dramatisation of the suffering of the poor through the figure of a suicidal and infanticidal woman, his rhetoric also had much in common with Baxter's. However, he then goes on to use the child-murder story as the

narrative justification for a call to arms. To give extra weight to his message, he draws on the Old Testament story of the massacre of the innocents in Israel: the affliction of the poor by the government, he claims, is exactly equivalent to that of the Israelites by the Egyptian Pharaohs, who, in a Malthusian way, had legislated that all male children of the Israelites were to be strangled at birth. Moses, who survives abandonment himself, leads the people to freedom following God's words: 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.' Stephens goes on: 'Away with the sickly and hypocritical sentimentality of those that affect such horror at the slightest reference to the right to resistance.'⁵⁸ For Stephens, the child-murder narrative of this massacre of the innocents, combined with the existence of the 'Marcus' pamphlets, provides biblical and moral underwriting for his exhortation to physical force.

Stephens's rhetoric of vengeance, mediated by the outrage of the 'Marcus' pamphlets, is taken up in the *Northern Liberator*, for the cause of physical force. In an editorial dripping with sarcasm, the 'Marcus' pamphlets are presented as a way of exposing the hypocrisy of the government, and thus providing moral justification for violent revolt:

Oh! how tenderly alive the hypocrites are for the *peace* and order of society! How sensitively alive to the shedding of a single drop of human blood, even though that shedding should be necessary for the establishment of civil rights of the greatest moment to the community at large! What tender innocent doves! No objection, however, to stifle poor little infants; this is scientific and philosophical humanity. No *physical* force! Oh dear no...⁵⁹

In the context of the *Northern Liberator*, the 'Marcus' pamphlets take on their most dramatic role. They are not the inspiration of pity for the victims of government oppression, as in the paternalistic rhetoric of the Tory Radicals, nor even the necessary sacrifice that is required to redeem society, as in the abstract discourse of republicanism utilised by Linton. For Stephens, and here in the editorial of the *Northern Liberator*, the child murders of 'Marcus' are used to impel people to insurrection – to resist with physical force the oppressions of the state. Stephens' inflammatory motto, 'For child and for wife, I will war to the knife', was written on banners and chanted enthusiastically by protestors at torchlight meetings. At this moment in January 1839, the 'Marcus' pamphlets are drawn into a tense discussion among radicals about appropriate forms of political action. And they allow Stephens to weigh in on the side of brute force.

The original author's precise intention regarding the pamphlets is impossible to know. What is significant is that these different interpretations

emerged in the print culture of the time, generating different forms of resistance, and shaping the styles of political opposition. The ‘Marcus’ episode illustrates vividly the way in which ideas and motifs circulated within the culture, and were co-opted by different individuals and groups to support widely different political positions: in this case, child murder is incorporated in the rhetoric of people of party and opinion as different as the Tory Radical, Baxter, Chartists of various complexion (Stephens, Doubleday, and the republican, Linton), as well as the Owenite, Mudie. It suggests that there were very fluid channels of communication and exchange of ideas between various groups and factions, and presents a picture of a complex and dynamic culture of political opposition, in which the idea of child murder had come to play a key role.

THE BURIAL SOCIETY CONTROVERSY: CARLYLE, CHADWICK,
AND BRYAN PROCTER

The ‘Marcus’ tale of state-sponsored child murders was not, however, the only account of child murder to receive notoriety at this time. The controversy surrounding burial societies, roughly contemporary with the ‘Marcus’ affair, also generated sensational tales of infant massacres. Witness, for instance, Bryan Procter’s poem, ‘The Burial Club, 1839’:

The Burial Club, 1839

Soh! – there’s another gone,
How purple he looks, – but wait!
We’ll tumble him into his coffin;
And bury the body straight.

No one will see where the poison
Has trickled and left its trace!
How curled up he is! I wonder
How the blue came into his face.

We’ll find him a shroud for a shilling;
We’ll cover the limbs up tight:
Who see him shall swear we are willing
To do our duty to-night.

Dead! That’s a guinea for each:
No need to spend aught on his meals;
There’s the little one – but she’s a-dying;
And Connor, the boy, – but he steals.

I was once, I confess, chicken-hearted:
His moans made me tremble and shrink:
But I thought of the club and the money,
Grew bolder, and gave him the drink.⁶⁰

This lurid monologue, narrated by an infanticidal parent, describes the business of killing children for a burial fee, or insurance payout. With its chilling mixture of curiosity about the aesthetic effects of poison on a child's body (its colour and shape), and brusque concern for the economic benefits of poisoning, the poem is clearly intended as an indictment of what was considered by many to be a widespread practice among the working class. The poem was published posthumously in 1877, and the date of composition of the poem is unknown, despite the title. But it is likely that the case to which the poem refers is, in fact, one that occurred in the autumn of the following year, 1840. This was the notorious case of an Irish family, the Sandys, which came before the Stockport assizes in October 1842.⁶¹ Robert and Anne Sandys were found guilty of the murder of two of their daughters, and attempting to murder a third, while his brother and sister-in-law, George and Honora Sandys, who lived next door, were indicted for poisoning their daughter. The case caught the public eye precisely because its motive was financial: the Sandys expected to gain £3 8s per child. If Procter did have this case in mind, then the precise dating of the poem in the title is curious: it may imply merely that Procter had a lapse of memory; but, more speculatively, it may suggest a remembered sense on Procter's part, that 1839 was in some way an 'infanticidal' year.

Burial societies were a widespread phenomenon at the time, offering the working class a means of ensuring for themselves and their families a decent burial through subscription to a common fund.⁶² Very localised, and often short-lived organisations, based in public houses, schools, or churches, the societies proliferated throughout the century.⁶³ Like friendly societies and savings banks, burial societies were a form of the mutualist financial organisation very much encouraged under the New Poor Law, as a way of facilitating self-help among the poor. They became, however, the focus of middle-class anxieties about working-class demoralisation and degeneracy. The frequent form in which these anxieties were expressed was through the claim that burial societies encouraged the poor to murder their children for monetary gain – although this was a claim that was disputed by officials.⁶⁴

For literary writers, the burial societies provided a perfect motif with which to illustrate contemporary social malaise. In 1855, the troubled narrator of Tennyson's *Maud* famously refers to 'a Mammonite mother [who] kills her babe for a burial fee'.⁶⁵ Earlier, Thomas Carlyle had drawn on the Sandys case for his graphic description of present ills in *Past and Present* (1843). Procter, who was an acquaintance of Carlyle, may well have remembered the case through Carlyle's account of it. 'At Stockport Assizes,' Carlyle writes,

a Mother and a Father are arraigned and found guilty of poisoning three of their children to defraud a 'burial-society' of some £3. 8s. due on the death of each child: they are arraigned, found guilty; and the official authorities, it is whispered, hint that perhaps the case is not solitary, that perhaps you had better not probe farther into that department of things.⁶⁶

In line with many commentators, including Procter, Carlyle emphasises the Irish ethnicity and Catholic religion of the family, calling the crimes a representation of 'depravity, savagery, and degraded Irishism'.⁶⁷ And for Carlyle, they are an embodiment of the degraded and demoralised times.

Carlyle, however, hovers between blaming working-class degeneracy and the utilitarian policies of a morally bankrupt government. Indeed, what could express more poignantly the effects of the New Poor Law than the spectacle of working-class people murdering their young for insurance payouts? Here was the culture of greed and selfishness at its most extreme. But for government officials involved in the implementation of the laws, child murders associated with burial societies were the product of working-class depravity itself, a criminal behaviour that the new legislation was designed to punish and cure. Thus, Chadwick, discussing burial societies in his report on 'The Practice of Interment in Towns', in 1843, invokes 'the moral condition of a large proportion of the [working-class] population' when accounting for instances of infanticide for monetary gain.⁶⁸ The poor management of burial societies, which had led to the practice of multiple insurances for a single life, and the strong links between burial societies and public houses, according to Chadwick, presented conditions that were ripe for exploitation by unscrupulous parents. For him, the practice could be curtailed by tighter legislation, and in fact, the 1850 Act to Consolidate and Amend the Laws Relating to Friendly Societies (13 & 14 Vic. c. 115) introduced measures to protect children under ten from abuse of insurance by families.⁶⁹

In 'The Practice of Interment in Towns', Chadwick also gives an account of the Sandys case, alongside other cases of child murder and wilful neglect that had been witnessed by collectors from burial societies and other officials. As is typical in such enquiries, the evidence ranged from reports of documented trials, to anecdotes and hearsay: 'a minister in the neighbourhood of Manchester', for instance, is cited as being 'shocked by a common phrase amongst women of the lowest class – "Aye, aye, that child will not live; it is in the burial club"'.⁷⁰ Chadwick never doubts the authenticity of these reports: even in 1865 he maintains that murders committed for monetary gain were reasonably widespread,⁷¹ long after most other commentators had accepted that the extent of the practice had been grossly exaggerated. For others, however, the point of concern is precisely the element of gossip and rumour that escalated public fears. In fact, in 1854 a Select Committee on the Friendly Societies Bill (chaired by T. H. S. Sotherton, who had introduced the 1850 amendments), submitted a report that included an examination of whether burial societies really caused child murders, or, instead, the spectre of child murder was a mere chimera, an effect of rumour and scandal.

In the course of the 1854 report many witnesses, including solicitors, coroners, and burial society officials, gave evidence based on prominent cases, such as that of the Sandys. What struck the Committee, however, were the relatively small number of cases recalled, and the even smaller number in which the charged were found guilty. It thus concluded that 'the instances of child murder, where the motive of the criminal has been to obtain money from a burial society are [too] few' to warrant legislation to prevent the crime, and that 'suspicion [has] been almost entirely founded on the few cases brought to trial, exaggerated by the horror with which the idea of a crime so heinous would naturally be regarded.'⁷² Significant here is not the minimising of the danger presented by the burial societies to infant life, but rather the Committee's emphasis on the 'exaggerated', or inflationary, effects of reports of child murders. According to this report, there is more talk about child murder than instances of it. The very nature of the crime laid it open to sensation and scandal.

The 'exaggerated' effects of reports of child murder are nicely dramatised by Carlyle in his account of the Sandys murders in *Past and Present*. He records a 'hint' that is 'whispered' by officials at the time of the Sandys crime, that the crime is not an isolated one: 'better not probe farther into that department' he warns.⁷³ He indicates a suspicion – nothing more; but just to impute this is enough, for the child murders we imagine are more scandalous and more affecting than the ones that are documented.

In this account, then, the real horror of child murder comes to exist in the workings of the imagination, where no facts can be invoked to constrain its extent or its power. It is this very process that the 1854 Report highlights: that talk about child murder creates a false, or at least a falsely inflated, horror. According to the Report, the controversy around burial societies is built on rumour and speculation, suspicions that cannot be substantiated, and whips up anxieties that reason would dampen or dispel. Just like the 'Marcus' pamphlets had done.

THE RUMOUR MACHINE: OVER-PRODUCTION AND
OVERPOPULATION IN THE 'BOOK OF MURDER' AND DICKENS,
THE CHIMES

The figure of child murder in the burial society controversy operates in precisely the way that it did in the 'Marcus' affair. One of the recurrent features in cases of child murder throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the difficulty of knowing whether or not a crime has taken place, provoking what I referred to earlier as an epistemological shortfall. But at this stage, this effect seems to be particularly intense. Rumours of widespread infanticide discredit the burial societies, and assure the middle-class commentators of working-class degeneracy; likewise, the rumours inspired and disseminated by 'Marcus' of state-sponsored, industrial-style killings of the babies of the poor discredit the workings of the Poor Law Commission. Indeed, as we have seen, the 'Marcus' scandal provokes a textual explosion that matches the extent of imagined carnage: more and more print, instilling a mass production of child murder, as dead infants multiply before our eyes – dead infants in the workhouse, dead infants in Egypt, dead infants paving the streets with gold, dead infants in the laboratory of 'Marcus'. Indeed, the rhetorical and political potency of the 'Marcus' episode is accrued from this multiplying effect: as the accounts circulate, there are more meetings, more riots, more arrests, more disruption. The impossibility of corroborating his claims, and thus his anonymity, are 'Marcus's' most powerful weapons.

In the context of both the 'Marcus' affair and the burial society controversy, child murder performs, in rhetorical terms, as a figure whose meanings are constantly inflating: born out of hearsay and rumour, it over-produces effects from a cause that is barely verifiable. The economy of representation that this implies is striking for in a curious way it resembles the very economic system that the figure critiques. Child murder consistently focuses attention on the faults and contradictions of an economic system that is

seen to be all-consuming and autonomous: the 'Juggernaut of capital', as Marx would later put it, which obliterates the labourer, his life and labour, his wife and his child.⁷⁴ In each of the writers examined here, however, the critique is different. For Carlyle, the problem lies in the dissolution of a distinction between the economic and the human – a distinction that for Carlyle has become almost sacred. Thus, for him the child murders provoked by burial societies are the symptoms of a profane society that has mistaken the limits of the market, and ascribed monetary value to human life itself. For Chadwick, on the other hand, who has no qualms about reckoning human lives in monetary terms, child murder comes to highlight anxieties about the inflationary tendencies of the market, and about market transparency. For him, parents kill children, not because their lives are insured, but because, without proper regulation, they may be over-insured, and their value grossly inflated. Child murder thus becomes the dangerous symptom of an autonomous and unregulated market, which ascribes value in a reckless and inflationary way. For both Carlyle and Chadwick, however, child murder draws attention to the autonomy of the market that undermines both individual agency and the certainties of human value.

The 'Marcus' affair uses the child-murder figure to present a more sustained and differently-conceived critique than Chadwick or Carlyle. It emphasises the notion that the market has produced what it terms, in Malthusian language, a 'surplus population': the scheme of 'Marcus', to murder the children of the poor, is a dramatisation of a theory that holds that a proportion of the population exceeds economic purpose, and thereby turns what had been the source of wealth – labour – into its parasite. According to Fergus O'Connor, in his editorial in the *Northern Star* in March 1838, entitled 'The Cause of all our Problems Answered, Over-Production and Over-Population', with its new reliance on mechanised labour, and immersion in world markets, capital has turned labourers into pariahs, a 'squalid race of living skeletons marching in sad procession . . . from the den of misery to the loathsome factory . . . to the dungeon of the remorseless Devil King'. 'It is as if the order of nature were reversed', he writes; 'the scale of population should be made subservient to the commercial speculation of the capitalist, the wants of the lords of the soil, and to the financial necessities of a money-mongering government.'⁷⁵ An inverse relationship between population and production has been established, so that capital can only expand at the expense of population, money increase as people die. And like 'the squalid race of living skeletons', the mass of murdered infants invoked by the 'Marcus' affair is another representation of the products of this system. They are ghostly and disembodied, dehumanised products of

the 'money-mongering' system. The murdered infants of 'Marcus' are the waste products of the new economic system: hollow and meaningless, they constitute a ghostly almost-presence in the new world order.

In the 'Marcus' pamphlets, there is a long description of a burial ground for murdered babies, an 'infants' paradise', which 'every parturient female will be considered as enlarging or embellishing'.⁷⁶ His detailed accounts of the disposal of the dead are a joke at the expense of public health officials, such as Chadwick, who were preoccupied with the hygiene of death; but they also raise the intriguing idea that the dead babies have an embodied form of afterlife. For J. R. Stephens, this will be no 'infants' paradise', but a 'garden of ghosts':

the bodies of the little innocents [. . . are consigned] to the paradise of infants, called up by the genius of the 'New Poor Law' whose magic wand has swept away the paradise of Eden, and left us in its stead the garden of the ghosts of our little ones scientifically slaughtered by the high priests of Moloch, the blood-thirsty monster, whom they would impiously install in the holy seat of the eternal.⁷⁷

In Stephens's account, as in that of 'Marcus', there is a suggestion that the murdered infants stand for the surplus population of the poor, starved and made ghostly by the New Poor Law, and occupying the same demi-world as the ranks of skeletons invoked by O'Connor. In these writings, the pseudo-ghosts and skeletons have a supernatural power, haunting the world in their aggrieved half-life.

There is a strong gothic streak in these representations of a surplus population. The fashion for the gothic, which infused both élite and popular culture throughout the nineteenth century, had derived from traditional folk beliefs in a supernatural world, inhabited by fairies and goblins, and a host of other forms of unworldly beings; and had, in turn, fuelled the development of a scholarly interest in folklore. Through the collection and documentation of folk stories from different parts of the world, but especially from the Celtic fringes of Britain, a new breed of scholar set out to preserve the beliefs of traditional societies at a time that was perceived to be one of rapid demographic and economic change.⁷⁸ One of the unwitting effects of this was to popularise in literary form the residual folk beliefs of immigrant groups, especially the Irish, who now formed part of a new industrial working class – more often than not, as 'surplus population'.

Within folk beliefs, there is much to link dead children with fairies: Katherine Briggs notes that the most commonly held understanding of the origin of fairies at this time was that they were the souls of the dead, often children, especially un-baptised or still-born children;⁷⁹ and the belief

in fairy changelings, as documented in such works of folklore as Thomas Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1828) and Thomas Keightley's *The Fairy Mythology* (1833)⁸⁰ – that is, the exchange of new-born human babies with ugly, fairy children – further intensified this identification. Against this background, then, we might see that Stephens's suggestion that dead children have a supernatural afterlife makes them seem something like fairies.

Alongside the folklorists' documentation of fairy belief, a fashion for fairy painting was developing, through which visual conventions for fairy appearance took shape.⁸¹ These often emphasised the childishness of fairies, mainly through their diminutive size, which was usually conveyed through their multitudinousness: in visual representations fairies typically appear in vast crowds, suggesting that there are populations of fairies – populations of diminutive beings, like children, or even dead children. As in Mary Howitt's 1839 poem, 'Nature versus Malthus', cited at the beginning of this chapter, a fairy population of children inhabiting the 'woodland dells' and 'mountain glens'⁸² can be interpreted as the surplus population of Malthusian population theory, imaginatively transformed into fairies.

By 1839, the growing interest in folklore beliefs in literary culture thus provided an arena in which it was possible to use the figure of the fairy as a way of memorialising the surplus population of the poor that has been imagined obliterated by 'Marcus's murder machine.'⁸³ This structure of sensibility can be seen clearly in Dickens's *The Chimes: A Goblin Story*. Published in 1844, and illustrated by, among others, the renowned fairy painters, Daniel Maclise and Richard Doyle, it was inspired by the tragic case of Mary Furley, a destitute sempstress who had attempted suicide with her baby so as to avoid the workhouse;⁸⁴ Mary was saved, but her baby drowned, and she was subsequently tried and found guilty of child murder. For many commentators at the time, the cruel irony of the Mary Furley case represented the worst of the government's abuses of the poor. In *The Chimes*, a fate like that of Mary Furley is proposed as the likely destiny of Meg, the daughter of the central character, Trotty Veck; at a crucial point in the story, Trotty is shown a vision of Meg, destitute and desperate like Furley, on the point of drowning herself and her child. The vision is presented as a way of educating him in the errors of Malthusian thinking: only through this vision is Trotty able to see that his daughter's destruction of herself and her baby is an act of love rather than of negligence, and that the value of human love by far exceeds that of money, against the teachings of the various Poor Law officials who have indoctrinated him in Malthusianisms. The significant point is that the vision is shown to him by a host of goblins, which



Figure 5. Meg takes her baby to the river. Engraving after John Leech.
 'Third Quarter', From *The Chimes*

inhabit the belfry of the chimes, their multitudinous presence mocking the Malthusian discourse of surplus population. In Richard Doyle's illustration of this episode, Trotty is surrounded by a crowd of chiding goblins; the same that surround Meg in a later illustration, as she takes her baby to the river, but now in less menacing, more sympathetic, imploring mode, as though they mean to take it to safety themselves (see Fig. 5). The goblins in fact

do not appear in the written text until Trotty's encounter with them in the belfry, but their presence is evident in the illustrations right from the beginning, and it is these that emphasise the fairy theme in the story. The opening illustrations by Maclise draw on the conventions of fairy painting – crowds of floating, diaphanous creatures, and small goblins entwined in the calligraphy – and place the work securely in the genre of the fairy tale.

As Michael Slater has noted, *The Chimes* marks a stage in the development of Dickens's novelistic method, as 'his first overt entry as a novelist into the political arena'.⁸⁵ On its publication, the story was praised in the *Northern Star* for the manner in which it 'champion[ed] . . . the poor'.⁸⁶ In this light, it is striking that it adopts the motifs and conventions of fairy tales to the extent that it does. Nevertheless, it seems that its supernatural effects were felt to be its most dangerous weapon. In the following year, an anonymously authored 'counterblast' was published, entitled *Old Jolliffe: Not a Goblin Story*.⁸⁷ *Old Jolliffe* recast the story of *The Chimes*, making the characters happy with their lot and grateful for the beneficence of the workhouse. Most significantly, it was 'Not a Goblin Story', erasing all traces of a menacing supernatural world. For this writer, at least, there is no way of co-opting goblins: to make the story anodyne, the goblins must be expurgated, as though the goblins were the stuff of the over-heated imaginings of political radicals.

When Dickens wrote in defence of fairies in 1853 that 'In a utilitarian age . . . it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected',⁸⁸ it is likely that he had in mind something more complex and particular than merely a liberal defence of the imagination. *The Chimes* suggests that there was a strong political dimension to his view. In this connection it is also worth remembering that the term 'hobgoblin' was sometimes used to refer to radicals and socialists. In March 1839, for instance, the Owenite paper, *New Moral World*, records a remark at a meeting in Coalbrooke, in which socialists are compared to 'a host of hobgoblins, who came to frighten the people, and in time would disappear.' And we may recall that the first English translation of the Marx and Engel's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, published in the *Red Republican* in 1850, spoke of 'a frightful hobgoblin [that] stalks throughout Europe', rather than the 'spectre' that famously opens the now standard translation.⁸⁹ This sense that the world is haunted, I suggest, is an attribute of the texture of ghostliness or abstraction that has been introduced by the capitalist system, and especially by Malthus's theory of population. As Marx will observe in the *Grundrisse*, 'Malthusian man, abstracted from historically determined man, exists only in his brain'⁹⁰, meaning that to live in a world organised

on the basis of mistaken statistical principles is to live in an artificial world of abstractions, distanced from the real conditions of one's existence.

This is an insight that in fragmentary and diverse ways is implicit in oppositional literature around 1839, and one to which the child-murder figure contributes poignantly. This particularly intense and fluid use of child murder as a figure of implied economic critique fades in later decades, even though the concern about child murder as a *social* problem increases, reaching a peak in the 1850s and 1860s. But the varied meanings of child murder at this particular moment of social change and resistance remain embedded in the figure, and erupt again in the powerful representations of violent deaths of infants that appear in the later part of the century.