

Dickens's Suffering Child and Anstey's Fabulous Mill

The physical comedy that envelops the father and son in Anstey's bodyswapping novel *Vice Versâ* (1882)—the one suddenly shrinking in the manner of Alice when she drinks from the bottle, while the other experiences the giraffe-like growth caused by the cake—sometimes stops readers seeing the soil from which both characters spring. Their natures as well as their names, Paul and Dick, are grounded in the knowledge which Anstey has of Dickens, and in an accompanying willingness to alter him as radically as the "Total abstinence" and "Vegetarian" editions of *Robinson Crusoe* that Dickens once imagined in *Household Words* (1 October 1853) might have altered Defoe.

Thus, the character outlines of Paul and Dick are no sooner borrowed than as if fed through the twin mills—for grinding old people young and young people old—which Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* had made into memorable revolutionary metaphors. The 56-year-old boarding-school boy on whom *Vice Versâ* paradoxically centres is the result of Anstey placing an absurdly old head on the young shoulders of a figure familiar from *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*, the isolated figure of the suffering child. The contraposed story of the son who comes to inhabit the body and usurp the authority of his "more than middle-aged" father parallels the cheeky challenge which Anstey himself, merely by having created so Dickensian a school, is delivering to the largest-looming of his literary elders and betters. (The age-gap which separates Anstey from Dickens is of exactly the same size as the one that yawns between Paul and Dick.)

On both fronts, the usurper's challenge subsides. Paul and young Dick reach an accommodation which benefits, and does credit to, them both; and Anstey's novel is eventually content to be complementary to, as well as complimentary about, its Dickensian antecedents. In the end it settles for being an appropriately Lilliputian version of *Dombey and Son*, in which the City merchant's conversion to the wisdom of the heart, instead of taking an entire generation to accomplish, is compressed into the space of a single week—a week which just happens to end on 7th February.