Colloque de Cerisy

Charles Dickens,
Modernism, Modernity

II

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Editions du Sagittaire
Collection Histoire littéraire

Couverture de Rémi Vimont d'après une illustration de Kat. V. et une photo du carrelage du chalet Dickens de Condette (Pas-de-Calais, France) de Rémi Vimont.

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Volume 1

Dickens and Ambiguity: The Case of *A Tale of Two Cities*

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1. Ambiguity as a "test case" of Dickens's modernity

The description of the theme for the conference on "Dickens, Modernism, Modernity" says that "modernity foregrounds the power of words" as well as "the text's capacity to create an autonomous world." This "power of words" as well as the "capacity to create an autonomous world" has been related to an increase in complexity of expression in modern/modernist texts and, hence, ambiguity has been identified as the central paradigm of modernism. In this view, the degree of complexity and ambiguity indicates the modernity of a text, i.e. becomes an appropriate response to an increasingly complex world.[1] Accordingly, when it comes to the relation of ambiguity and modernity, the style of a text is the key to the idea.

We would like to put this hypothesis to the test of some close readings. To this end, we will try to specify some ways in which ambiguity is relevant to Dickens's novels and will ask if ambiguity can really be taken as a sign of their modernity. Critics seem to have believed so and, in the heyday of Derridean deconstruction, regarded at least some of Dickens's works as evincing a (post-) modernist attitude and style.[2] With regard to *A Tale of Two Cities*, for example, an "absence

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[1] Bode, for example, describes ambiguity as an essential criterion of modernity: "je komplexer, vieldeutiger, desto moderner" (1). Modern literature therefore no longer follows the principles of mimesis and autonomy of the narrated world (see Bode 7). See also Lodge, *Working with Structuralism*, where he refers to ambiguity as one of the "characteristics of modernist art in general, and of modernist writing in particular" (71).

[2] One of the first examples is J. Hillis Miller's preface to the Penguin edition of *Bleak House*, in which he claims that the novel "has exactly the same structure as the society

of stable meaning" (Lloyd 167) and a "haunting uncertainty in the novel's hall of mirrors" (Davis 421) has been diagnosed. Taken at face value, this amounts to saying that we cannot know what the novel means and, if one thinks of the "hall of mirrors," we are confronted with an endless doubling or double-sense that defies unequivocal interpretation or even interpretation at all. We are not so sure that this is indeed the way in which the notion of ambiguity can be applied to Dickens. At least one should know the price of doing so: the moral dimension of Dickens's novels, for example, may become doubtful or even non-existent if a general instability of meaning is assumed.

The text that is at the basis of the readings just quoted, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), lends itself particularly well to being a test case for both ambiguity and, consequently, Dickens's modernity – maybe more so than *Bleak House* with its two narrators, and *Great Expectations* or *David Copperfield*, for that matter, with their characteristic distinction between and conflating of a narrating and an experiencing I, which may produce ambiguity.[3] We think that in *A Tale of Two Cities* ambiguity comes to the fore not just with regard to the narrative mode or to a narrator's multi-layered rendering of his present and former attitudes and perceptions. In *A Tale of Two Cities* it is seen as a feature of the represented world as a whole. In fact the doubling and the use of

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it exposes. It too assimilates everything it touches into a system of meaning. In the novel each phrase is alienated from itself and made into a sign of some other phrase. . . . The fabric of Dickens's style is woven of words in which each takes its meaning not from something outside words, but from other words" (29–30). For a critical response to Miller's analysis, see Leimberg and Černy 144–46.

[3] On the ambiguity caused by the distinction and conflation of the narrating and the experiencing I, see, for example, Bauer, *Das Leben als Geschichte*; Anne Reboul; Audrey Jaffe (esp. ch. 4); and Bauer, Knape, Koch & Winkler (esp. 31–32). John O. Jordan comments on the two narrators in *Bleak House* as well as on the ambiguity of Esther as a narrating and an experiencing I (see esp. Chapter 1, "Voice" 1–25). On the alternative and ambiguous endings of *Great Expectations* see esp. Edgar Rosenberg.

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dichotomy that becomes obvious in the title of the novel and that is one of the novel's major structuring devices has been linked to ambiguity.[4] It seems to us that the two cities and all they represent may alternatively be seen as forming a contrast and as two versions of the same place, in each case indicating the condition of humankind.[5]

2. The opening paragraph

When it comes to *A Tale of Two Cities* as a test case for Dickens and ambiguity, the famous opening paragraph of the novel asks for a close reading. Critics have suggested that Dickens here "uses antithesis to indicate the contrasting ways in which it is possible to regard the state of England and France in 1775" (Brook 36). We do not think that this description is quite correct. For antithesis, as Hugh Blair has it in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (London, 1787), is founded "on the contrast or opposition of two objects" and serves to make "the contrasted objects appear in a stronger light" (Lecture XVII, 443); it is thus (as the rhetorical tradition has it) a form of *comparatio* (see Sonnino 44–45).[6] A Dickensian example is "whereas he often came home after banking hours with clean boots, he often got up next morning to find the same boots covered with clay" (*TOTC* 58).

But let us see what Dickens does in his opening paragraph:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of

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[4] See, e.g, contributions by Murray Baumgarten, Paul Davis, Albert Hutter, Sylvère Monod.

[5] A model for such a contrast is the City of Destruction vs. the Celestial City in Bunyan (and his models); a model for regarding the two cities as variants of the same could be the City of Destruction and Vanity Fair.

[6] Blair also warns against the overuse of the device (445).

Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (5)

Whereas in antithesis two different things or states of things are contrasted with each other (the boots at night and the boots in the morning), and are frequently part of a syllogistic conclusion,[7] Dickens here contrasts the same things (time, age, epoch, season) with each other, that is, he presents us with logical contradictions rather than antitheses.[8] The result is a sort of tilting image: as in the famous picture in which the onlooker may discover an old woman and a young one but never a mixture (or a middle-aged one), there are different (and equally true) statements about the time which cannot be reconciled. Dickens's point is not so much that these are "ways in which it is possible to regard the state of England and France in 1775" but that the views are (1) mutually exclusive and (2) going to extremes (which enhances the contradiction). Furthermore, Dickens, in this paragraph, says nothing about the views being possible (in the sense of being warranted by

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[7] Sonnino (63) cites an example from Henry Peacham's *The Garden of Eloquence*, 2nd. ed. (London, 1593): "They which may do me good, will not, and they which are willing, cannot, therefore my distress remaineth" (162–63).

[8] Comstock writes about the opening paragraph that it "institutes just that movement which Robbe-Grillet cherishes: a 'double movement of creation and destruction,' which leaves us dangling form the ruins of our preconceptions" that are evoked by the narrator (Comstock 43–44). Goldberg sees in these "[j]uxtapositions . . . aspects of the central method of both [Carlyle's] history [*The French Revolution*] and the novel. Combined with deterministic language, they are used to emphasize the major theme of inevitability by recalling the past and suggesting the future" (Goldberg 112). See also Goldberg 119 on this aspect.

facts), he says nothing about England and France, and he says nothing about 1775. In fact, at first he says nothing about views at all but just presents contradictory statements which we must assume to be the narrator's own. As a result, we must either assume the narrator to present himself as an unreliable, self-contradictory speaker or we reinterpret his contradictions as ways of saying that the time (age, epoch etc.) itself was so extreme and contradictory that there is no other way of describing it. This is where ambiguity first comes in: the statement makes us wonder whether it is the narrator who is contradictory or his subject matter, and if the latter, if the subject itself is ambiguous (i.e. the time being the best and the worst simultaneously; ambiguity thus being a way of interpreting the contradiction) or if this is a matter of conflicting interpretations (less likely, for Dickens, as pointed out, does not say: "To some, it was the best of times, to others, it was the worst of times")?

After the dash, however, beginning with "in short," all these possible meanings are reversed again, or rather: the ambiguities mentioned become part of another ambiguity, for now it seems that all the statements which form the first part of the sentence are presented as examples of what the "noisiest authorities" insist upon. The contradiction gives evidence to the cacophony of their voices. The reader has fallen into a trap: accepting the descriptions of the time in "the superlative degree of comparison" makes one appear as stupidly taking at face value the clamorous statements of noisy authorities (not a very likable set of people). Ambiguity is here also shown to be a matter of perception or processing on the part of the reader; it is dynamic in that the frame of reference may shift. In this case it shifts from the matter referred to, which may be one thing or another, to the utterances about that matter.

What we learn after "in short" is that the time of the story, which is not the present, is like the present: for in each time there are noisy authorities who claim that the time they/we live in is only to be described as either extremely good or extremely evil. While the narrator thus implicitly criticises a view that lacks differentiation he does not completely dismiss the opening statements either,[9] for as the story unfolds, we see that the time he presents is indeed marked by a superlative degree of cruelty and destruction as well as by solidarity and love. If the contradictory opening statements are no longer spoken by the narrator, as we thought when we began to read, but by the "noisiest authorities," ambiguity shifts. We may dismiss the authorities and come to the conclusion that times were and are actually quite different from what those authorities claim them to be, namely neither unambiguously "the best" nor unambiguously "the worst" but, ambiguously, both good and evil. What is more, the temporal structure of the opening sentence suggests that, on the one hand, extreme characterisations may be correct, and on the other, that those who proclaim extreme characterisations, do not speak the truth.

Moreover, both are not just part of a bygone historical period, before the author's lifetime: Dickens goes out of his way to stress that what he describes is very much "like the present period" (i.e. both like the historical moment at the time of publication and like the transhistorical moment of readers, in any time or age, immersing themselves into this work of the imagination). Throughout the novel, the specific nature of the time of the French Revolution is shown to be, simultaneously, like that of the present or any time; an example being the narrator's warning, "Crush humanity out of shape once more, under

similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms" (385).[10] The problem is, however, that this relationship of the past to the present is an ambiguous one. This finds expression in the syntactically ambiguous "so far . . . that" in "was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted . . . ," which contributes to the overall ambiguity of presenting "It was the best of times . . . ," as both the contradictory description by the narrator and the statement of questionable authorities. For it may either mean that the time was so similar to the present one that the authorities reacted the way they did, or that the times were similar in so far as there were those authorities claiming them to be the best and the worst.

3. Doublings and contrasts

At the beginning of the novel, Dickens works with dichotomies, pairs and oppositions, which is a pattern he follows throughout *A Tale of Two Cities*. There are the two cities, London and Paris, and locations like Tellson's Bank in London and Tellson's Bank in Paris, or Tellson's Bank and the wine shop of the Defarges (both preeminent sites of communication); there are characters like Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton as well as Madame Defarge and Miss Pross, there are actions like Darnay's trial in London and his trials in Paris, and actually the two trials in Paris which are contrasted with each other and give evidence to the incalculable reversals of public opinion. In most cases, contrasts go together with similarities, which can best be seen in Carton's being both Darnay's double and opposite; in fact, Dickens seems to have taken up

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[9] See, e.g., Comstock who notes that: "this passage leads us through one deconstruction after another of our historical conventions, and deposits us in the company of the 'noisiest authorities' for our efforts" (43).

[10] An analogous method of referring to historical time ambiguously can be seen in Carlyle's *The French Revolution.* An example is the question "Or is this same Age of Hope but a simulacrum; as Hope too often is?" at the beginning of Book 2 (1: 36), in which the reference of "this same" is ambiguous. The ambiguity of whether "this same Age of Hope" is a true description or not has its parallel in Dickens's "spring of hope."

the principle underlying the romantic motif of the *doppelganger* (in which the *alter ego* is simultaneously the same and the opposite) and extended it to localities, human actions and the like. Still, we do not think that it is sufficient to describe the world of *A Tale of Two Cities* as being dominated by this coexistence of doublings and contrasts.

As we have seen in the opening paragraph, Dickens (in this case, by turning contrast into contradiction and by showing likeness to consist in or lead to the alleged omnipresence of contradictory extremes) effectually submits the very categories of contrast and similarity to critical reflection. Thus Dickens does not simply contrast, for example, good and evil (even though he makes use of that archaic opposition in the fight of Miss Pross and Madame Defarge). Neither does he, however, present just a "haunting uncertainty" or a general "absence of stable meaning." This would not be in keeping with the palpable ethical, as well as existential, dimension of the work. But we do not want to just assert this. We will rather consider three examples of ambiguity in *A Tale of Two Cities* which will hopefully show what we mean.

4. Three paradigms
4.1 Lexical ambiguity: the example of "business"

Dickens, in *A Tale of Two Cities* at least as much as in his other novels, establishes a number of leitmotifs in the sense of repeated phrases or words contributing to the thematic and rhythmical structure of the work. Familiar examples are the revolutionary motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or Death" and, in Book 3 of the novel, the biblical (Jn 11:25) tag from the burial service, "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. . . ." The very repetition invites reflection on the meaning of the words and phrases (see Koguchi 8), and while they provide coherence, they also change their meaning, and make us aware of ambiguity. Thus

the ideals (or the lip-service paid to the ideals) of the Revolution can be qualified by Dickens in an extremely economical manner:

> "I think you may take that liberty," the Doctor answered, smiling.
> "For gracious sake, don't talk about Liberty; we have quite enough of that," said Miss Pross. (300)[11]

The most complex example of this kind, however, is a word that at first seems to have little to do with the historical subject matter of the novel. "Business," as Koguchi has noted, occurs 134 times, more often than any other noun (names excluded). It is most strongly connected to the character of Mr. Lorry of Tellson's Bank, who constantly calls himself a man of business: "I have been a man of business, ever since I have been a man. Indeed, I may say that I was a man of business when a boy" (322). The very paradox (he was a man when he was a boy) indicates that it is by no means obvious what "business" means in Lorry's case. Of course, it refers to the banking business and to Mr. Lorry as "as a plodding man of business who only deals with such material objects as guineas, shillings, and bank-notes" (212). Mr Lorry even goes so far as to describe himself, in a phrase strongly reminiscent of Carlyle's idea of a "cash nexus," as having "no feelings," and as holding with his fellow-creatures "mere business relations" (26); to Carlyle, we remember, "cash payment" had become the "universal sole nexus of man to man" ("Chartism" 162; see also 164 and 168–69).[12] But of course we realise that Mr. Lorry is anything but an example of

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[11] See the ironical comment on the perversion of "liberty" in Book 3, Chapter 1: "Three turnkeys who entered responsive to a bell she rang, echoed the sentiment, and one added, 'For the love of Liberty'; which sounded in that place like an inappropriate conclusion" (264–65).

[12] For Dickens's debt to Carlyle's "Chartism," especially in *Barnaby Rudge* but also in *A Tale of Two Cities*, see, e.g., Goldberg 101 and his Chapter 8.

Carlyle's scathing diagnosis. Neither is Mr. Lorry ironical, however, when he says such things. He means them, and it is the narrator's turn to point out his inconsistency: "'A – a – a – business, business!' [Mr. Lorry] urged with a moisture that was not of business shining on his cheek" (40). But it is not just that Mr. Lorry is characterised by unacknowledged emotions and sympathy contrasted with his emphasis on business.

Again we see Dickens's stylistic and conceptual principle at work: there is contrast *and* the qualification of that contrast by means of ambiguity. The term "business" itself assumes a meaning quite different from any mere cash nexus. It stands for duty, service, responsibility, and rational behaviour in a world dominated by the reckless exertion of power, by suffering, hatred and incalculable passions. One might even come to the conclusion that in such a world to do "business" is a salvific act. At least Dickens is quite coherent in integrating the ambiguity of "business" into the ambiguity of "saving." Mr. Lorry is a man who "saves": "What he could save for the owners, he saved. No better man living to hold fast by what Tellsons's had in keeping, and to hold his peace" (290).

Another word, appearing in every textbook as the standard example of lexical ambiguity,[13] is connected to "business" in this respect. In "the deluge of the Year One of Liberty – the deluge rising from below" (283) which is part of the seed sown even "along the fruitful banks of the broad rivers" (283),[14] the "Bank" of Tellson's (or rather Mr. Lorry's service to it) can be seen as an attempt to shore up the flood. No other kind of "saving" is possible in a world where savagery rules,[15] than the humble one represented by Mr. Lorry's doing business, as Dr. Manette's futile pride in having "saved" Charles Darnay shows. Thus his proud but mistaken declaration "I have saved him" appears as the last sentence of Book 3, Chapter 6 and the first of the following chapter (297, 298).

Mr. Lorry's ambiguous emphasis on being merely a man of "business" is thus a means of protection and survival in the face of unpredictable political and social developments; but it also indicates the metaphysical dimension of the novel:

> [H]ow many accounts with Tellson's never to be balanced in this world, must be carried over into the next; no man could have said, that night, any more than Mr. Jarvis Lorry could, though he thought heavily of these questions. (269)

George Herbert, in his poem called "Businesse," expressly combines the notion of worldly business, of losing "gold, though dross" with the business of him who "di'd for thee" and our kneeling "in heart." This connection reminds us of the saviour figures in the novel, Sydney Carton dying for Lucie and her family, and Lucie herself, weeping and kneeling down for sins she never committed.

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[13] See, e.g., Cruse 245.

[14] See Book 3, Chapter 6: "On his coming out, the concourse made at him anew, weeping, embracing, and shouting, all by turns and all together, until the very tide of the river on the bank of which the mad scene was acted, seemed to run mad, like the people on the shore" (296).

[15] See Book 1, Chapter 1: "Your lighter boxes of family papers went up-stairs into a Barmecide room, that always had a great dining-table in it and never had a dinner, and where, even in the year one thousand seven hundred and eighty, the first letters written to you by your old love, or by your little children, were but newly released from the horror of being ogled through the windows, by the heads exposed on Temple Bar with an insensate brutality and ferocity worthy of Abyssinia or Ashantee" (56).

4.2 Ambiguity of specification: "Jacques" and "Saint Antoine"

Before considering this notion of sacrifice a little further, however, we would like to point out that individual action itself is to be seen in the context of ambiguity. If a particular action is to be assigned to an individual agent who may be held responsible for it, this agent must be identifiable. Dickens makes us aware of the fact that the degree to which we can specify the source of an action is not always to be determined. Especially when it comes to the names of agents, specification may be ambiguous.

One example of this is the name "Jacques" that is used in the novel to refer to the people as opposed to aristocrats. This manner of naming goes back to the farmers' revolt in 1358 when farmers were called *Jacques Bonhomme* by the aristocracy (see Maxwell 455 n8; Müller 84).[16] Defarge calls himself so[17] when he accompanies Mr. Lorry to Dr. Manette and Lorry asks him whether he makes "a show" of the doctor and how he chooses those that may see him: "I choose them as real men, *of my name – Jacques is my name –* to whom the sight is likely to do good" (40; our emphasis). At Charles's second trial in Paris, however, Defarge, who openly denounces Darnay, is addressed as "Ernest Defarge" (328). He uses the name "Jacques" merely to designate himself as a member of a particular class – and, consequently, there are ever so many "Jacques" in the novel: when the Bastille is stormed, for instance, the proper name becomes the name of 25,000 people – "Work, comrades all, work! Work, Jacques One, Jacques Two, Jacques One Thousand, Jacques Two Thousand, Jacques Five-and-Twenty-Thousand" (224). The ambiguity of specification with regard to the

name "Jacques" therefore seems to lie in the sheer endless number of referents.[18] The use of the name *should* thus be highly ambiguous but this proves not to be the case because, by adding the numbers, the general expression is used as an individual name. Jacques is therefore identifiable, for instance, when Defarge calls out to the other "Jacques": "Keep near to me, Jacques Three, . . . and do you, Jacques One and Two, separate and put yourselves at the head of as many of these patriots as you can" (223).[19] Thus the individuality of the name is first obliterated in the ambiguously general name and then perversely reintroduced as a mere number, which means that, what we find here, only *seems* to be a disambiguation. A similar process can be perceived in the use of "Monsieur" and "Monseigneur": members of the aristocracy have not behaved like individuals but only acted as a class, and they are presented accordingly.[20]

This once more suggests a dynamic concept of ambiguity, which involves the way in which the narrator assigns reference to names as well as the reader's gradually perceiving an overall meaning in the way naming is shown to become ambiguous (in this case, for example, the precarious identity of individuals in a revolutionary mass of people).[21] Another case in point is the name of St Antoine. In some

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[16] In order to stress the cruelty of the mob, Dickens drops the "Bonhomme" in *A Tale of Two Cities* and refers to the revolutionaries as "Jacques" only.

[17] See also his introduction of the mender of roads to his wife: "I have travelled certain leagues with this god mender of roads, called Jacques" (172).

[18] Bowen sees a link between "modernity and enumeration" here (114).

[19] See also the mender of roads who is called "Jacques" (172). Bowen regards this as a strategy to "represent popular or mass action. . . . These include strategic delay, anonymity and non-differentiation in naming . . . through quasi-allegorical figures such as St Antoine and the sea; characterisation by profession or type, including 'the mender of road,' 'Monsieur,' 'the Vengeance' and the endlessly proliferating semi-anonymous Jacques" (107).

[20] "Stripping aristocrats of Christian and family names strips them of the markers of kinship and distils them to an identity of sheer entitlement" (Elliott 91).

[21] That there is some dynamics at play here has also been recognised by Monod who writes: "the personification of Saint-Antoine . . . might be placed in the same category as the gradual metamorphosis of 'Monseigneur' into a collective entity" (179). The

passages in the novel, it is not quite clear who or what St Antoine refers to:

> Saint Antoine had been, that morning, a vast dusky mass of scarecrows heaving to and fro, with frequent gleams of light above the billowy heads, where steel blades and bayonets shone in the sun. A tremendous roar arose from the throat of Saint Antoine, and a forest of naked arms struggled in the air like shrivelled branches of trees in a winter wind: all the fingers convulsively clutching at every weapon or semblance of a weapon that was thrown up from the depths below, no matter how far off. (222)[22]

We know that Saint Antoine is a quarter in Paris, but here it is anthropomorphised, while, at the same time, its inhabitants are dehumanised by means of the simile "like shrivelled branches of trees in a winter wind." This description entails much more than the presentation as a "quasi-allegorical figure" (Bowen 107). What we can see here is the dynamics of ambiguity at work: Saint Antoine is a saint, actually the patron saint of the poor (Černy 181), who gave his name to a church. This church then gave its name to a quarter in the city, and this quarter now becomes, or is treated like, a person, like a saint, while, in fact, it turns out to be a demon. The dynamics involved here not

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point is, however, not a "gradual metamorphosis" but an oscillation between the use of the term to refer to an individual and to a group.

[22] See also: "Thus, Saint Antoine in this vinous feature of his, until midday. It was high noontide, when two dusty men passed through his streets and under his swinging lamps: of whom, one was Monsieur Defarge: the other a mender of roads in a blue cap. All adust and athirst, the two entered the wine shop. Their arrival had lighted a kind of fire in the breast of Saint Antoine . . ." (172); "Haggard Saint Antoine had had only one exultant week, in which to soften his modicum of hard and bitter bread to such extent as he could, with the relish of fraternal embraces and congratulations, when Madame Defarge sat at her counter. . . . There was a change in the appearance of Saint Antoine; the image had been hammering into this for hundreds of years, and the last finishing blows had told mightily on the expression." (230–31).

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only show the ambiguous use of the name "Saint Antoine" in the novel but are also expressive of a process of perversion – a similar process can be observed with regard to the Guillotine that becomes "Sainte Guillotine": "The ministers of Sainte Guillotine are robed and ready" (387).[23]

4.3 Conceptual ambiguity: sacrifice

The examples of "Jacques" and "Saint Antoine" have shown that names becoming ambiguous by generalisation and then being disambiguated in a perverted process of specification produce dehumanisation. As we can see here, ambiguity is not only presented as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a process at work in the living world. Language shows this process and may even be used, as we have noticed in the case of "business," to influence it, or at least survive in it. This double ambiguity, of language and of matter (persons, actions, attitudes, etc), can also be seen in the representation of sacrifice. The ambiguity of the notion becomes obvious when we consider the following two passages:

> If my career were of that better kind that there was any opportunity or capacity of sacrifice in it, I would embrace any sacrifice for you and for those dear to you. (159)[24]

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[23] See also Jacques's – the mender of roads – saw which he has "inscribed as his 'Little Sainte Guillotine'" (288). See also: "But it's not my business. My work is my business. See my saw! I call it my Little Guillotine. La, la, la; La, la, la! And off his head comes!" (287).
[24] See the following passages: "If the Republic should demand of you the sacrifice of your child herself, you would have no duty but to sacrifice her. Listen to what is to follow. In the meanwhile, be silent!" (329); and "One of the frenzied aspirations of the populace was, for imitations of the questionable public virtues of antiquity, and for sacrifices and self-immolations on the people's altar" (345).

Every pulse and heart in Saint Antoine was on high-fever strain and at high-fever heat. Every living creature there held life as of no account, and was demented with a passionate readiness to sacrifice it. (223)

Linguistically, the two usages of "sacrifice" are not so very different (apart from the fact that in the first case it is a noun and in the second a verb, the words mean the same). The problem lies in evaluating the matter itself. While in the second case, sacrifice is clearly the result of being "demented" (i.e. being anything but business-like), the first indicates Sydney Carton's desire of giving his life a purpose and, at this point only by implication, of laying it down for another person. From the action itself, we may not be able to see the difference; we need context. In Sydney Carton, sacrifice entails a loss of identity – he *becomes* Charles Darnay, with whom he, in an early draft of the novel, even was to share the initials of his name[25] – just as the populace of France loses their identity in becoming "Jacques." Still, the similarity enhances the difference. What looks almost the same becomes quite different by being, in the case of Sydney Carton, a purposeful act of love. Carton himself is an ambiguous figure; as Mr. Lorry observes with regard to his face, "A light, or a shade (the old gentleman could not have said which), passed from it as swiftly as a change will sweep over a hillside on a wild bright day" (321) but he moves away from his possibly suicidal reasons for self-sacrifice to summing up his reasons in the phrase (to be told, as a legend, from generation to generation): "A life you love" (349).

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[25] The characters were originally named Charles Darnay and Dick Carton (for their mirroring, see, e.g., Elliott 100), their first names together forming "Charles Dick." It seems likely that "Sydney" was finally chosen as a thinly disguised reference to Sidney, the poet and Protestant "saint" who famously died having claimed his fellow soldier's need being greater than his own. Dickens parodies this very attitude in the consciously self-sacrificial Mr. Turveydrop in *Bleak House*, who quotes Sidney's alleged dictum "Your necessities are greater than mine" (603).

It is the very ambiguity of the word "business" that indicates the disambiguation of Carton's act of sacrifice. Dickens carefully changes its meaning from Carton's "I have no business to be, at all, that I know of" in Book 2 (145), given as an answer to Stryver's "You have no business to be incorrigible" (144), to the narrator's description in Book 3, indicating his transformation: "Carton's negligent recklessness of manner came powerfully in aid of his quickness and skill, in such a business as he had in his secret mind, . . ." (309–10). We might say that only because of this verbal ambiguity can we evaluate the ambiguous subject matter and, if not radically disambiguate it (Carton is not turned into an allegorical figure of the kind that has just one meaning), at least come to an appreciation of his motivation and the value of his action.

Ambiguity in Dickens, then, even in the single novel to which we have confined ourselves, requires a far more detailed analysis than we are in a position to offer. For example, we have not referred at all to the parodies of meaning carefully inserted by Dickens (Jerry Cruncher's "business" of being a "resurrection" man is to be mentioned here); nor have we looked at the ambiguities arising from the dichotomy of internal and external communication foregrounded when texts, such as Dr. Manette's prison memoir, are read and (mis)understood within the novel.[26] Still, we hope to have shown that ambiguity is part of a complex network of interactions between the properties of language and the nature of the world which it is made to represent. The fact that language is inevitably ambiguous is treated by Dickens neither as a nuisance to be ignored as much as possible nor as an invitation to give up mimesis altogether. He rather makes use of it – not primarily to turn

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[26] On the ambiguity of internal and external communication see, e.g., Winter-Froemel & Zirker.

his text into an irresolvably ambiguous one but to show us that we must constantly engage with ambiguity to become aware, for example, of perversions of thought and ideals and of the dangers of fixed dichotomies and oppositions. If modernist texts create an "autonomous world," Dickens – seen in the light of ambiguity – does not wholeheartedly subscribe to such a concept but uses style to enhance a critical view of the world he and his readers live in. Ambiguity is thus not simply a sign of modernity or the stylistic device most appropriately capturing the nature of the modern age. It may also be used to criticise the world, to show ways of surviving in it and to suggest, by presenting and inviting constant reevaluations of meaning, ways in which an ethical stance may be assumed and in which human attitudes and actions may be said to transcend the limits of the material self.

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Human, Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral? Crossovers between Organic and Inorganic Matter in *Our Mutual Friend*

Valerie Kennedy

Since at least the appearance of Dorothy Van Ghent's essay, "The Dickens World" (1950), critics have frequently observed that in Dickens's novels, as Gillian Beer says, "People are seen formulaically, like objects, and objects are endowed with the energy traditionally reserved for organic life" (40).[1] But human beings in Dickens are also often described in terms of animal and plant metaphors, so that human beings, animals, vegetable matter and non-living things frequently change places. Adrian Poole notes that in *Our Mutual Friend* the use of "the new metaphors drawn from evolutionary biology" perhaps suggests that human beings "might prove to have even more in common than allegorical tradition had always insisted" with other "bird, reptile, and animal life-forms, surviving and extinct" (x–xi);[2] he also observes that in this novel, "Nothing seems certainly dead nor entirely alive" (ix).[3]

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[1] Van Ghent identifies "things demonically possessed to imitate the human" and "human possession" which imitates "the inhuman" as "the principle of relationship between things and people" in Dickens's novels (213); see also Stewart 141. Lucas and Miller argue that people are used as objects and reified in *Our Mutual Friend* (Lucas 322–25; Miller, *Charles Dickens* 301). Miller sees the characters of *Our Mutual Friend* as "fabricating a thick texture of humanized things around themselves" (281; see also 186, 193, 199), and suggests that Dickens uses "non-ontological metaphor" to suggest the unreality of many of the characters (304–307). See also Carey 101–102, 174; Wallen 391, 395.

[2] Qualls interprets the animal imagery in the novel in terms of Carlyle's "biped-of-prey": "This image of man as a money-hungry feeding animal wallowing in filth and ooze dominates *Our Mutual Friend*" (200; see also 201).

[3] For examples of the intertwining of the dead and the living in *Our Mutual Friend* see Miller, *Charles Dickens* 313–16. See also Bowen 5; Carey 82–86, 90–91; Ledger 375;