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Little Dorrit: Dickens and the Language of Things¹

In Dickens's novels, natural or man-made things nearly always react in some way or another to the person who owns or uses or perceives them. Being endowed with a life of their own, they are frequently presented as subjects rather than objects. Dorothy Van Ghent, in her classic essay on "The Dickens World," describes "the principle of relationship between things and people in the novels of Dickens" as "the imitation of the human by things demonically possessed" (24), while people who have been engaged in "the manipulation of their fellows as if they were things, themselves develop thing-like attributes" (25). This observation, whereas it certainly holds true for a number of cruel and spiritually perverted people and their surroundings, implicitly attaches rather little value to things themselves. They are, as it seems, mainly regarded as opposed to meaningful human life and to humane forms of interaction.² The concept of reification or commodification, however, upon which this view is based, fails to do justice to many forms and functions of things in Dickens's novels.³ This can perhaps best be seen when looking closely at the function of things in the communicative process. Focussing on *Little Dorrit*, I would like to draw attention to the value of things as a means of exchange between persons; rather than assuming a demonic sort of life things may come into their own *as things* when they begin to "speak" and are used to express essentially human concerns.

Little Dorrit begins with a scene in which things indeed seem demonically possessed. What is more, they are dumb: "Everything" (I/1, 1) just stares; "Staring white houses, staring white walls, staring white streets" paralyse all the "descendants from all the builders of Babel" who have come to trade at Marseilles. The confusion of tongues which prevents verbal communication is closely connected with a world of things which is speechless: thus the allegorical dumb show of animated things by which strangers are "stared out of countenance" points ahead to the play proper, put on stage by human actors in a social world where staring marks, for example, the absence of even the most rudimentary kind of conversation and polite exchange. There is an exception to the hostility of staring things, however: "The only things to be seen not fixedly staring and glaring were the vines drooping under their load of grapes. These did occasionally wink a little [...]." In the next but one paragraph we learn that the "dusty vines overhanging wayside cottages [...] drooped beneath the stare of earth and sky" (2). Among the many aggressive things there is one that is patient or suffering, as is pointed out by the repetition of "drooped under" and "drooped beneath." This contrast in the world of things is reflected by the relationship between the first persons who enter the stage, the murderer Rigaud-Blandois, endowed with "pointed weapons" of eyes which "a clockmaker could have made [...] better" (3), and the harmless smuggler John Baptist Cavalletto, whom he bullies into his service. John Baptist, who is called "a clock" (4) for his ability to tell the time, is shown to interact in a meaningful way with the few things he owns. To him his knife, for

¹ I am grateful to Inge Leimberg for her critical reading of this essay, which is supplemented by my forthcoming article on "Foreign Languages and Original Understanding in *Little Dorrit*."

² On a larger scale, the subject is treated by Fawcner, who seems to share the negative view of things when he regards "the tension between the human and the non-human" (12) as a fundamental dichotomy in Dickens's works. But Fawcner also stresses that "In Dickens objects become as humanly individual and alive as the characters" (20). Fawcner is not so much concerned with the language of things, however, as with the fact that Dickens's technique of animating the inanimate usually "causes no feeling of alienation or meaninglessness" (26).

³ In a somewhat simplistic way, the grid of Marxist terminology is laid upon Dickens's text by Tambling (1995, e.g., 106), who turns Mr. Meagles into one of the arch-capitalists of *Little Dorrit*: "Reproduction culture and capitalism go together, and both are associated with the fetishising of people; [...] Pet stands framed in the doorway, reduced to the commodity by being turned into a picture."

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example, is a magic "sauce" which transforms his dry loaf of bread into a melon or an omelette (7); when Rigaud has told him about the death of his wife for whose murder he is going to be tried, Cavalletto brightens his knife upon his shoe to indicate what he thinks about it (12). Cavalletto is a person who skilfully uses the language of things as well as the language of gesture (in particular the expressive "back-handed shake of the right forefinger," 8), which corroborates the fact that in *Little Dorrit* things begin to speak intelligibly when they serve as a personal means of expression. This is also emphasized by the theatrical character of the whole first chapter (cf. Rigaud's "theatrical air," 9), since stage-properties (such as a knife) are speaking things *par excellence*.

1. Legacies and the Language of Food

Whether things in the human world add up to a meaningless and threatening heap of objects (the stony fragments that remain of the Tower of Babel)⁴ or whether they "wink a little" like the vine seems to depend on personal interaction, through which they may become meaningful signs. (*To wink* meaning "to convey intimate information or to express good-humoured interest" is Dickens's very own word.)⁵ This is why even persons may be called or described as things without the inevitable implication of unnatural treatment or thing-like manipulation. An example which combines very different aspects of the world of things in *Little Dorrit* is Mr. F.'s Aunt, who is described as having "a face like a staring wooden doll too cheap for expression" (I/13, 157). This poor old demented woman seems like a thing demonically possessed when she utters darkly menacing remarks upon a system to which "the key [...] was wanted" (157). Mr. F.'s Aunt neither manipulates nor is being manipulated; she is rather a fearsome image of the decay that may be the fate of everyone. When Flora Finching calls her the late Mr. Finching's "legacy" she uses a word referring to material things rather than persons (Arthur Clennam at first takes her to mean "worldly substance"). But in Flora this is not a disparagement. For her, this human doll is a thing with a meaning, a legacy in the sense of a sign given to her by the person with whom she decided to share her life when her love to Arthur could not find fulfilment. However much self-delusion goes along with it, Flora cares for her ward in remembrance of Mr. F.; an act of charity which is also made manifest by the language of things. At tea-time, when Mr. F.'s Aunt has eaten "her piece of toast down to the crust," it is "solemnly handed" to Flora who eats it "as a matter of business" (II/9, 535). The way in which the two ladies communicate, the sharing of bread as a sign of Flora's fulfilling the New Testament commandment of love as a matter of course, shows that she has accepted the message of Mr. F.'s legacy.

Flora's patience stands in marked contrast to Mrs. Clennam, who regards herself as the instrument of a revengeful god belonging to the "old days" (II/31, 792) and has to be reminded by Little Dorrit, who quotes Christ's words at the Last Supper, to "do everything in remembrance of Him" (792). In a negative way, the language of food used by Mrs. Clennam may also be seen against the background of the Eucharist. Her supper on the evening when Arthur (who believes her, like the reader, to be his mother) comes home after twenty years in

⁴ The tower of Babel is not only referred to in the "impious tower of stone [...] built up to scale heaven" by Mrs. Clennam (I/5, 47) but also at the beginning of Book II, which in many ways reflects the opening of Book I. The way up to the Pass of the Great Saint Bernard is compared to "ascending the broken staircase of a gigantic ruin" (II/1, 432), which in the context of references to the Deluge and the "Ark" points to the punishment of man's hubris in the Old Testament. But again there are also grapes (430) in this post-Babylonian world of stone, alluding both to the Last Judgement (Rev. 14:18-19) and the true vine (Jn. 15:1). The ubiquity of storeys and stairs in *Little Dorrit* is also part of the Babylonian scenery. – Topical interest could well have sustained Dickens's imagery, as Austen Henry Layard had been digging at Nimrud for the remains of the original tower of Babel between 1845 and 1851; see Minkowski (1991, 109-110). On the image of archaeological ruins in *Little Dorrit* and the portrayal of London as a city of the dead see Metz (1990).

⁵ *OED* wink, v.¹ 8. The first two references are from Dickens (*Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*).

China, clearly shows that she does not communicate: she is served a meal of host-like rusks which she dips into spiced wine and eats all by herself (I/3, 33). This corresponds to the fact that Arthur and Mrs. Clennam still preserve the "rigid silence" in the midst of which Arthur sat "speechless" when he was a child (33). Mrs. Clennam is served the elements of the Eucharist, bread and wine, but she does not invite Arthur to share them with her. The language of things thus poignantly underlines the fact that there is no meaningful communion – or communication – between mother and son. When Arthur later dines with Mrs. Clennam's old servant Jeremiah Flintwinch he has to find that "his father's picture, or his father's grave, would be as communicative with him as this old man" (I/5, 55). This lack of verbal exchange is again underlined by the unwillingness to share one's food; Mr. Flintwinch greedily "suck[s] up all the gravy in the baking-dish with the flat of his knife" (55). These unholy suppers at Mrs. Clennam's are set off against the meals Little Dorrit takes by herself on the days when she comes to work for her as a seamstress, for Little Dorrit's "extraordinary repugnance to dining in company" (63) is the very opposite of a refusal to communicate. She wants to be alone in order to share with her father, as her solitude allows her to take her meals home as a sign of her love and care for him (I/8, 81).

As these examples show, articles of food are especially suited to draw attention to the important role of material things in the communicative process. In different ways, they point towards the sacred tradition of regarding things as a connection between the human and the divine, and in particular towards the Eucharist as the prototypical "thing" that becomes a "sign." In the world of the later Dickens, where the light of "the blessed later covenant of peace and hope" (II/31, 793) only shines from afar, this sacred function of things is most genuinely felt when they serve to establish links between human beings. To give one example from *Great Expectations*, Joe's and Pip's "freemasonry as fellow-sufferers" is expressed by their "evening habit to compare the way [they] bit through [their] slices, by silently holding them up to each other's admiration" (2, 8-9).

The language of things assumes many different forms in *Little Dorrit* but they all contribute to a coherent view of the communicative process. A thing given by one person to another may literally be speaking, like Mr. F.'s Aunt, or it may do so in a figurative sense, like the watch Arthur Clennam's father sends as a "token" (I/5, 48) to his wife shortly before his death. With its inscription "D.N.F." (for "Do Not Forget," I/30, 355-356) it points out to the reader that a message of things, like a message of words, may be distorted and misread: what was sent as a reminder of Mrs. Clennam's own guilt (II/30, 777) is read by her as a reminder not to forget the "deadly sin" of her husband and his beloved (II/30, 775). The watch itself with its inscription combines *res* and *verba*; its function as a thing which tells the time (and has a face as well as hands) makes it especially apt for its task of conveying a message of admonition. It serves to emphasize that a thing is not simply an object-referent but a medium as well and that both verbal and "material" forms of communication may only be successful if all participants are willing to understand each other.

2. Pecuniary Testimonials and Other Offerings

The connection between speech and things as means of social exchange is also pointed out by the use of the word "Testimonial" for the gifts Mr. Dorrit solicits from those who visit or leave the Marshalsea prison. For example, Mr. Dorrit, in the presence of Arthur Clennam, deliberately mentions a gentleman who "did that handsome action with so much delicacy" (1/8, 83) and "conversed [...] with great – ahem – information" (84). We are told that his conversation mainly consisted in giving Mr. Dorrit a geranium wrapped in a paper which contained two guineas. "Testimonial" may be a gift presented "as an expression of appreciation" (*OED* 5.), but its current modern sense is "a writing testifying to one's qualifications and character" (*OED* 4.). To Mr. Dorrit the "Testimonials" are indeed like statements on his character, as they enable him to keep up his role as the Father of the

Marshalsea (and provide him with ready money), but he fails to recognize genuine appreciation.⁶ When poor Mr. Plornish, who genuinely respects and esteems him, offers a tribute in copper, Mr. Dorrit harshly turns him down. "How dare you!" he bursts out in response to the gift which was "well meant" (I/6, 66), shedding tears of self-pity. This is as fatally cruel as a rejection of the widow's mite would be, and hardly redeemed by the fact that Mr. Dorrit afterwards "eagerly" asks Mr. Plornish to give him the money back (67). Mr. Dorrit's eagerness seems at least as much directed towards the cash, however small, as towards accepting the message it was meant to bear.

The religious overtones of the testimonial-giving are confirmed by Mr. Dorrit's equating them with "offerings" (II/19, 648), a term connected in the English Bible with the Levitical Law rather than the gospel.⁷ Mr. Dorrit, a caricature of God Father, is as far removed from the "blessed later covenant" as Mrs. Clennam. Like Mr. Plornish's copper testimonial, the offerings made to Mr. Dorrit by young John Chivery express a genuine feeling of trust and devotion. Mr. Dorrit is John Chivery's god since he is the father of Little Dorrit, whom John adores: his "hand falteringly presented cigars on Sundays to the Father of the Marshalsea, and the Father of the queen of his soul" (I/18, 211). The repeated emphasis on the day of the Lord underlines the quasi-religious nature of this burnt-offering ("he took the cigars, on Sundays, and was glad to get them," 213). Again, however, William Dorrit only accepts the thing as an object of his greed rather than as a sign of devotion. This becomes evident when he no longer needs to be given things to be fed or to boost his status. Thus, when Mr. Dorrit has become a rich man, John Chivery takes the liberty of paying him a visit at his hotel and repeating the old gesture. What follows is one of the most painful moments of perverted meaning and broken trust in the novel, for the language of John's cigars is totally rejected by Mr. Dorrit, who feels deeply hurt by what he regards as an insulting reminder of his time in the debtors' prison: "Now, sir," said Mr. Dorrit, turning round upon him and seizing him by the collar when they were safely alone. "What do you mean by this?" (II/18, 631).

When John Chivery points out that he would have been "too proud to come" (632) if he had thought Mr. Dorrit would take his gesture ill, William Dorrit begins to weep. It remains open whether this is again just a sign of self-pity or whether he now pays attention to the language of things and realizes the message of faithful remembrance conveyed by John's cigars. On the one hand, he does not really accept them but gives them away to be smoked by his Courier (634); on the other hand, the scene marks the beginning of Mr. Dorrit's return from his insubstantial "Castle in the Air" (as the chapter is called, II/18) to the reality of his former life in prison where in spite of his degradation he experienced genuine human bonds.

Mr. Dorrit's "pecuniary Testimonials" (II/19, 648) draw attention to money as the prototypical thing-sign of the social world. When the narrator stresses that Arthur Clennam's "locked-up wealth of affection and imagination" is like "Robinson Crusoe's money; exchangeable with no one" (I/13, 150), he takes it for granted that money means nothing unless it is put to good use in personal exchange. The common denominator of affection, imagination and money is not to be found in Mr. Merdle, the new messiah of Society (cf. II/13, 571). This supposed genius of finance is certainly not the Word incarnate, for he is almost inarticulate. He is believed to be the "mastermind of the age," which, however, has "as little as possible to say for itself and great difficulty in saying it" (II/24, 700); he speaks only when "Mrs. Merdle's verbs" are "pressingly presented to Mr. Merdle to conjugate" (II/12, 558). People from all walks of life are attracted to invest their money in Mr. Merdle's speculations, but in the end this community of investors turns out to be a community of victims. Meaningful

⁶ According to the *OED*, "Testimonial" was not yet used for a gift expressing appreciation (5.) at the time of the novel's action (the 1820s). The first example (from Lord Cockburn's *Journal*, dated 1838) stresses the doubtful nature of this usage: "It has come of late to denote [...] a sort of homage always as a donation, and generally in a permanent form, to supposed public virtue."

⁷ Cf. *OED* 2.a. and Heb. 10:8.

exchange is replaced by a "moral infection" whose poison is "communicable" (II/13, 571).⁸ Dickens does not present money as an evil in itself, but he shows the fatal consequences of believing it to be a superhuman, magic kind of discourse. Mr. Merdle's money is just as much gibberish as the mysterious memorials offered "to the presiding Idol of the Circumlocution Office" (I/10, 117). Money, in *Little Dorrit*, thus belongs to the theme of communication. It is a means of exchange but in Mr. Merdle's case all that people are given for offering him their money are empty speculations. All who had hopes of "realising" (II/25, 709; II/26, 712) their investments find this impossible. This expression, "realising," refers to substance or reality as well as to understanding or communication, as it means "to make real" (*OED* 1.a.), "to bring vividly or clearly before the mind" (2.a.), "to understand or grasp clearly" (3.a.) and "to convert ... into cash" (4.a.). Paradoxically, only when he has made up his mind to annihilate himself, Mr. Merdle turns his attention to a "real" object, the tortoise-shell penknife he borrows from his daughter-in-law (II/24, 701).

3. Abstract Things and Household Objects

The relation between words and material things in the communicative process assumes a more definite shape when seen against the background of Dickens's well-known attack on the literalism propagated by Thomas Gradgrind and his model school in *Hard Times*. Mr. Gradgrind and the government officer visiting the school severely criticize one of the pupils, Sissy Jupe, for wishing to carpet a room with representations of flowers, as they maintain that "You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets" (I/2, 7). Their inability to distinguish between an object and its representation corresponds to their being unable to describe reality in a meaningful way. Taking pride in their model boy Bitzer's definition of a horse ("Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, [...] I/2, 5), they advocate an abstract system of classification which utterly falls short of Sissy Jupe's experiential knowledge of what horses actually are. Like John Baptist Cavalotto in *Little Dorrit*, Sissy has a spontaneous and immediate relationship to the real things belonging to her environment and may thus use them in an imaginative way as meaningful signs. The "facts" of the Gradgrind school, on the other hand, are quite removed from immediate experience, and will, as they cannot be put to any meaningful use in human exchange, assume a threatening kind of materiality. Accordingly, Mr. Gradgrind's wife is "invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact tumbling on her" whenever she evinces "a symptom of coming to life" (I/4, 15).

The example of *Hard Times* shows that the lifelessness or reification of human beings often goes along with a disregard for the things themselves. The non-human world is misused by being defined in an abstract manner just as much as people are misused who are treated as objects.⁹ It is just as if the world of things took revenge upon the people who do not respond to it adequately, transforming them, for example, into a *homo quadratus* like Mr. Gradgrind. Instead of the literalism that goes hand in hand with the "figures" of abstract definition, things in Dickens's novels seem to demand the close attention to their specific qualities which goes hand in hand with their figurative or symbolic function in human discourse.

The Gradgrind school in *Hard Times* has been read as a satire of utilitarian and materialistic philosophies; Barry Thatcher, for example, has recently shown how Jeremy Bentham's language theory is reflected and satirized in the novel.¹⁰ In particular Dickens points

⁸ The chapter heading is "The Progress of an Epidemic."

⁹ Cf. Heidegger (162): "Die Wissenschaft trifft immer nur auf das, was ihre Art des Vorstellens im Vorhinein als den für sie möglichen Gegenstand zugelassen hat. [...] Die Wissenschaft macht das Krug-Ding zu etwas Nichtigem, insofern sie Dinge als das maßgebliche Wirkliche nicht zuläßt." ["Science meets only what its own way of presentation has previously admitted as a valid object. [...] Science annihilates the jug-thing, in so far as it does not admit things to be its criterion of reality."]

¹⁰ Thatcher (22-30); see especially 26-27 where the literalism and non-descriptiveness advocated in Bentham's theory is discussed with close reference to the novel.

out that the very concept of a materialistic "utilitarianism" fails to do justice to both the material world and the idea of adequate usage. Bentham, in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, gives a definition of "utility":

Utility, what. By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness [...] to the party whose interest is to be considered; if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community; if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual. (Mill and Bentham 66)

The language of this definition, marked by expressions like "property," "object," "produce," "party" and "interest," indicates that "utility," to Bentham, is to be conceived in terms of a production process fuelled by the partisan interest of those who are involved in it. Bentham apparently has the financial meaning of "interest" in mind when he describes it as tending "to add to the sum total" of somebody's pleasures (66).

Dickens' criticism of this concept is obvious, but he takes issue not so much with single aspects of it but with the dichotomies upon which it is based. Instead of Bentham's alternative of "a particular individual" and an abstract "community in general," Dickens is oriented towards the meaningful interaction between human beings. In *Little Dorrit* Bentham's dichotomy is reflected in the lifeless and impersonal "Society" which provides an excellent excuse for the pursuit of particular interests. Thus when Bishop rather feebly wishes Mr. Merdle "continued things in general" (I/21, 252), he inadvertently draws attention to the total lack of any personal concern on the part of Mr. Merdle, who has never "done any good ... to any earthly thing" (II/17, 556). Similarly, the Circumlocution Office is characterized by "having something to do with everything" (I/10, 105), which of course means that it has nothing to do with anything in particular. The emptiness of the "community in general" is embodied by Mrs. General who, "in her emotionless and expressionless manner" (II/5, 474), never engages personally with "that extensive miscellany of objects which it is essential that all persons of polite cultivation should see with other people's eyes, and never with their own" (II/2, 448). Like Mr. Gradgrind, Mrs. General maintains that "it is better not to wonder" (II/5, 475; cf. *HT* I/8, 49-54), that is to say, never to be really affected by the things encountered outside one's own self. The words taught by Mrs. General (the "polite beads, Papa, Potatoes, Poultry, Prunes, and Prism," II/19, 644) are all thing-words, but none of the things referred to are of any concern to her. Her heap of words exactly corresponds to the heap of things she sees during her travels; as the form of the lips is more important than what passes them, the "varnishing" (II/7, 502) or "surface" (II/5, 480) of persons and things replaces the genuine article.

John Locke maintains that men "if they will be understood, when they speak of Things really existing, they must [...] conform their *Ideas* to the things they would speak of: Or else Men's Language will be like that of *Babel*; and every Man's words, being intelligible only to himself, would no longer serve to Conversation [...]."¹¹ Dickens, whose narrator severely criticizes empty speech in the very name of the "Circumlocution" Office, certainly subscribed to this view; and yet it seems that to him the relation between words and things is more complicated since "Things really existing" are themselves part of a language that serves human exchange. Just as words are more than "polite beads" or gibberish only when they mean something, things are more than a heap of objects only when they act as signs; in each case meaning presupposes a personal relationship. The cottage of the Meagles family is a storehouse of "an infinite variety of lumber" (I/15, 193) but its collected articles all have a meaning to their owners (in particular the scales and scoop, which are Mr. Meagles's personal emblems), whereas Mr. Merdle is helplessly "creeping about among the rich objects of furniture" he feigns to possess (II/12, 558).

In Dickens's view, what is of interest to any one person or persons can never be communicative unless it is personal. This is confirmed by the use of things in communication

¹¹Locke (1975, 456), Book III, chap. VI, § 28.

by the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard, that oasis in the wilderness of London whose name already indicates the prevalence of emotional qualities. The people who live there take pity on John Baptist Cavalletto, the poor Italian exile who has fled from his self-appointed master Rigaud. They assist with his efforts to learn English by means of real things:

As he became more popular, household objects were brought into requisition for his instruction in a copious vocabulary; and whenever he appeared in the Yard ladies would fly out at their doors crying "Mr. Baptist – tea-pot!" "Mr. Baptist – dust-pan!" "Mr. Baptist – flour-dredger!" "Mr. Baptist – coffee-biggins!" At the same time exhibiting those articles, and penetrating him with a sense of the appalling difficulties of the Anglo-Saxon tongue. (I/25, 303-304)

The ladies' method of going back to the things themselves in their conversation is clearly reminiscent of that famous scheme for "an universal language to be understood in all civilized Nations, whose Goods and Utensils are generally of the same kind," which is presented in part three of *Gulliver's Travels* (185). The Academy in Lagado, in Baconian fashion,¹² maintains that "Words are only Names for *Things*" and therefore holds it "that it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such *Things* as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on" (184). There are differences, of course, one of them being that in *Gulliver's Travels* the ladies tend to object to this burdensome procedure while in *Little Dorrit* they bring it up themselves. Swift satirises the illusory wish of rational scientists for unambiguous signification. The language of things promoted in Bleeding Heart Yard, however, seems to underline the reality of the people's lives there, including the fact that they talk about *something* while Society talks about *nothing*. This is further emphasized by the fact that Daniel Doyce, very much a man of real things, has his workshop in Bleeding Heart Yard.¹³ The people in Bleeding Heart Yard seem to believe that there is such a thing as unambiguous communication, and the narrator does not dismiss their belief. As distinct from Swift's academicians, moreover, the ladies in Bleeding Heart Yard do not use their household articles as subjects of their conversation but as means to an end, namely to instruct. Things are used as the medium or language by which Cavalletto is introduced to the English tongue; the "household objects" actually serve as "household words" to teach more words.¹⁴ The allusion to the journal Dickens edited when he wrote *Little Dorrit* is quite appropriate since *Household Words* was "Designed for the Instruction and Entertainment of all Classes of Readers."¹⁵ The idea behind the title of Dickens's journal (a quotation from *Henry V*)¹⁶ seems to be that there are certain words, mostly of an imaginative kind, which are at least as essential for our daily lives as certain household objects.

The eloquence of physical things is of course as old as rhetoric itself, of which we are reminded in *Tristram Shandy* (III/14, 146), where the narrator informs his readers that it was "a singular stroke of eloquence [...] when eloquence flourished at *Athens* and *Rome* [...] not to mention the name of a thing, when you had the thing about you, *in petto*, ready to produce, pop, in the place you want it." (In this chapter, Dr. Slop vainly tries to emphasize his maieutic skills by producing his newly invented forceps at the climax of his argument.) What Dickens stresses in *Little Dorrit* (and elsewhere) is that the success of a communicative process depends upon the intentions and willingness of the participants, and in particular upon the

¹²The Baconian background to Swift's satire is critically discussed by Real (1997), who points out that "Swift's satirical point is the belief that man should visualize himself as at all able to [abolish] all words whatsoever" (351-352).

¹³Doyce's role as a promoter of communication is stressed by Heaman (40-41).

¹⁴See Bauer (forthcoming) on the increasingly popular "natural" method of language teaching employed by the ladies.

¹⁵See the handbills announcing the publication of *Household Words*, reproduced by Stone in Dickens (1968), vol. 1, plates 4 and 5. Cf. also Stone's introduction (13) for Dickens's choice of the title.

¹⁶In each issue of *Household Words*, the title was superscribed "Familiar in their mouths as *HOUSEHOLD WORDS*."—SHAKESPEARE." The slightly changed quotation ("their" for "his") is from King Henry's "Crispin's day" speech in III.iv.52. In Shakespeare, "household words" refer to the names of the king and the English noblemen who will be talked of again and again by the old soldier who has survived the battle.

emotional and imaginative quality with which the medium of expression may be endowed. Material objects may be charged with these communicative energies.

4. Flowers and "the dearest thing that ever was"

The language of flowers is another prominent example of the use of real things in communication. In *Little Dorrit* it marks Arthur Clennam's course from his unfulfilled love for Pet Meagles to the gradual recognition of Little Dorrit's and his own mutual love. In both cases Dickens does not have his characters employ this language according to the definitions laid down in any of the vastly popular "language of flowers" books of the time¹⁷ but rather in accordance with the individual characters involved and the situations in which they meet.¹⁸ Like words and phrases, flowers must not become stereotypes but should rather be expressive of what one person has to say to another at a particular moment. The roses Pet Meagles has brought for Arthur Clennam in chapter I/28 are taken away from her by Arthur rather than given to him. They thus come to signify his resolution to relieve her of any claims on her affections he might have hoped to have:

He reassured her, took her hand as it lay with the trembling roses in it on his arm, took the remaining roses from it, and put it to his lips. At that time, it seemed to him, he first finally resigned the dying hope that had flickered in nobody's heart so much to its pain and trouble; ... (I/28, 334)

As real things looking "pale and unreal" in the moonlight, the roses launched by Arthur on the flowing river become signs of "greater things that once were in our breast" and "flow from us to the eternal seas" (338), thus pointing to the connection between the material things in man's surroundings and immaterial "things" or concerns of the human soul. This reflects in a personalized form the concept of the Book of Nature, which to nineteenth-century readers was made known, for example, by the linguist and theologian Richard Chenevix Trench. Trench takes up Boehme's expression of the "signatura rerum" and maintains that Scripture reawakens man "to the mystery of nature," on which the revelation in words is based and from which "it appropriates all its signs of communication. This entire moral and visible world from first to last [...] is from beginning to end a mighty parable [...]"¹⁹ To Dickens, the parable of the visible world is directed towards personal relationships between human beings; accordingly, in Little Dorrit's words to Mrs. Clennam, the end of Scripture is to "be guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn [...]" (II/31, 792).²⁰

The Book of Nature is connected with the healer of the sick in the person of Little Dorrit herself. Whereas Pet's roses are expressive of feelings gradually losing hold upon Arthur's life,

¹⁷In the wake of Charlotte de la Tour's *Le langage des fleurs* (1819) a number of similar books were published in England. See Haass for a survey and bibliographical information. Dickens makes fun of the fashion in *Nicholas Nickleby* where it assumes the form of cucumbers and other vegetables thrown over the walls of Mrs. Nickleby's garden by her amorously-minded neighbour. Her son is quite sure that "there is no language of vegetables, which converts a cucumber into a formal declaration of attachment" (37, 483).

¹⁸The fact that the language of things will only be understood by the right person at the right moment is repeatedly stressed in Andersen's fairy tales (e.g., by the rose and the nightingale in "The Swineherd"). In nineteenth-century literature, the subject of speaking things is perhaps nowhere more predominant than in Andersen.

¹⁹Trench's *Notes on the Parables of our Lord* (1840) are quoted from Aarsleff (1967, 232). Aarsleff refers to the revised ed. (New York, 1874: 16-17). On the tradition of the Book of Nature in England and in particular on Sir Thomas Browne, see Leimberg (1996, 54-86).

²⁰To name only one other example, the popularity of Keble's *Christian Year* (cf. Haass 1988, 243) also gives evidence to the concept of the Book of Nature being revitalized in the nineteenth century. Dickens would certainly have subscribed to Donne's phrase that "Signes, external things, assist us all" (175); the Uncommercial Traveller, working "for the great house of Human Interest Brothers" and dealing in the "many little things, and some great things" he sees on the road (*The Uncommercial Traveller*, 1-2) would have stressed, however, that things become helpful signs when they are part of a human exchange.

the nosegay he finds by his sick-bed in the Marshalsea marks the opposite process of love being fulfilled in real life. What at first, to the "dozing and dreaming" Arthur, is but an "abiding impression of a garden" (II/29, 755), materializes as "a wonderful handful of the choicest and most lovely flowers" brought by Little Dorrit. Later, when Little Dorrit reads to him, he hears in her voice "all that great Nature was doing" and "all the soothing songs she sings to man" (II/34, 815); Nature was the one who, in Arthur's youth, fostered the "seeds of imagination" into "harvests of tenderness and humility," qualities essential for the relation between human beings. Arthur is finally able to understand Little Dorrit because he remembers the language of natural things he has learned as a child; at the same time Little Dorrit utters the magic words that awaken the song which lies asleep in things;²¹ she embodies the power of harmony by means of which "We see into the life of things."²²

This process is epitomized in the name of Little Dorrit herself, for the story of Arthur Clennam's and Little Dorrit's love could be described as Arthur Clennam's failure and success in understanding what "Little Dorrit" means. In chapter 14 of Book 1, "the phrase had already begun, between those two, to stand for a hundred gentle phrases, according to the varying tone and connexion in which it was used" (171),²³ but nevertheless Arthur does not realize its full meaning before he is imprisoned in the Marshalsea and has been made aware by John Chivery of Little Dorrit's and his own love. Arthur's "realization" of this love is again brought about by means of a material thing, for John deliberately leads Arthur to Little Dorrit's former room:

The room was so eloquent to Clennam, in the changed circumstances of his return to the miserable Marshalsea; it spoke to him so mournfully of her, and of his loss of her, that it would have gone hard with him to resist it, even though he had not been alone. Alone, he did not try. He laid his hand on the insensible wall, as tenderly as if it had been herself that he touched, and pronounced her name in a low voice. He stood at the window, looking over the prison-parapet with its grim spiked border, and breathed a benediction through the summer haze towards the distant land where she was rich and prosperous. (II/27, 724)

Arthur connects the meaning of "Little Dorrit" both with the building or room which once was her home and with the sunlit country far beyond. Accordingly, Little Dorrit's nosegay which marks the beginning of his recovery represents her very self as the one who, though the "Child of the Marshalsea," from her infancy has taken the life of the fields "Full of flowers" (I/7, 69) into the "false" (70) world of the prison.

Flora Finching, the love of Arthur Clennam's youth, seems to have known this all along. She associates Little Dorrit's name with a number of real things belonging to a pastoral world far removed from the drab scenes of the prison. To her, "Little Dorrit" is "of all the strangest names [...] the strangest, like a place down in the country with a turnpike, or a favourite pony or a puppy or a bird or something from a seed-shop to be put in a garden or a flower-pot and come up speckled" (I/23, 270). Flora's own name shows her affinity to Little Dorrit, however "overgrown" (I/13, 158) she is. She knows what "Little Dorrit" means, and when she calls her "a good little thing" (I/24, 281) or "dear little thing" (I/35, 414; II/17, 621-622) or even "the dearest thing that ever was" (twice on I/34, 819), this is neither an empty phrase nor even an attempt to dehumanize her.²⁴ It rather evinces her feeling for the value of real things which, as substances in their own right, are signs or means of communication. Thus, when Little Dorrit leaves the Marshalsea, Flora stresses that the dress she has made for her "shall never be

²¹Cf. Eichendorff's "Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen" (Eichendorff 1970, 132).

²²"Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," l. 50 (Wordsworth 1994, 58).

²³Cf. also the end of chapter I/13, 165:

"From the unhappy suppression of my youngest days, through the rigid and unloving home that followed them, through my departure, my long exile, my return, my mother's welcome, my intercourse with her since, down to the afternoon of this day with poor Flora," said Arthur Clennam, "what have I found!"

His door was softly opened, and these spoken words startled him, and came as if they were an answer:
"Little Dorrit."

²⁴In marked contrast, Little Dorrit it also repeatedly called "thing" by her sister Fanny, who constantly belittles her (cf. "mean little thing" [I/20, 243], "bad little thing" [I/31, 367], "Darling little thing" [II/24, 696]).

finished by anybody else but shall be laid by for a keepsake just as it is and called Little Dorrit" (I/35, 416-417). Little Dorrit, whose own old dress is part of her identity (cf. I/36, 429; II/29, 756), is herself the message of the things she does or makes or owns or gives away. In the first part of the novel, the narrator identifies the destinies of different life journeys by means of things, such as "the mitre and the workhouse, the woolsack and the gallows, the throne and the guillotine" (I/15, 179). At the end, Arthur realizes that to him Little Dorrit is the thing-sign, the "figure" towards which he has travelled: "Looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing-point. Every thing in its perspective led to her innocent figure" (II/27, 733).²⁵

To Giambattista Vico the first language of mankind began "with signs, whether gestures or physical objects, which had natural relations to the ideas"; accordingly "logos, or word, meant also deed to the Hebrews and thing to the Greeks" (Vico 1968, 127). This original unity of action, thing, sign and idea is embodied in Little Dorrit, who from her earliest childhood is the symbol of the spirit in which communication becomes possible. The identity of sign, thing, and person in Little Dorrit also points to the figure of Christ in the glass window through which the sun shines at Arthur's and Little Dorrit's wedding (II/34, 825). Christ is the logos, the word-person that is announced to Mary, in the A.V. translation of Luke 1:35, as "that holy thing which [...] shall be called the Son of God." Little Dorrit, the daughter of the weak old father-god of the Marshalsea, is the representative of this figure, as she is "inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something [...] for the sake of the rest" (I/7, 71). *Little Dorrit* is of course also the name book in which this sign-thing-person exists. The title suggests that the novel itself is to be seen as a "good little thing" which, hopefully, brings about understanding; a highly personal and individual form of expression which, like any great writer's idiom,²⁶ is essential for the life of a language as a whole.

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²⁵On Little Dorrit as the beginning and end (Arthur discovers the vanishing point in looking back) and as an idea or sign, see Bauer (1991, 310-312).

²⁶Cf. Humboldt (1963, 228): "Erst im Individuum erhält die Sprache ihre letzte Bestimmtheit, und dies erst vollendet den Begriff. [...] So wird niemand abläugnen, dass jeder bedeutende Schriftsteller seine eigene Sprache besitzt. [...] Wo aber von ihrem Einfluss die Rede ist, kommt es doch auf ihre wahre, wirkende Kraft an, und da muss sie in der ganzen Individualität ihrer Wirklichkeit genommen werden."

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Erratum:

p. 360 for: also the name book
read: also the name of the book