Also by Anny Sadrin

DICKENS OU LE ROMAN-THÉÂTRE

L'ÊTRE ET L'AVOIR DANS LES ROMANS DE CHARLES DICKENS

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

PARENTAGE AND INHERITANCE IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

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Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds

Edited by

Anny Sadrin
Professor of English
Université de Bourgogne

Foreword by
John O. Jordan and Murray Baumgarten

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connexions, to make others less 'other'. In this light, Dickens's nightly self-annihilation, generating the extraordinary dance of proliferating selves, parading in one person the full panorama of English society, may be seen as an extension of his mission as a novelist. And by all accounts he achieved it in the microcosmic setting of the auditorium. Listen to him reporting again on the *Frozen Deep* performances, in the same letter as he mentions the old Enchanters: 'I had a transitory satisfaction in rending the very heart out of my body by doing that Richard Wardour part. It was a good thing to have a couple of thousand people all rigid and frozen together in the palm of one's hand.' Obviously the exercise of power of this kind fascinated Dickens. But notice again the language: disintegration is practised so as to produce integration. After a reading of 'Little Dombey' he reported, 'I never saw a crowd so resolved into one creature before.'

Down around the fringes of a bohemian sub-culture, night after night, luxuriating in heteroglossia and monopolylogue, the Old Enchanter tears himself to pieces, in order to fuse thousands of strangers into one community.

Notes

1. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872–4) II, 181.
2. See Raymond Chapman, *Forms of Speech in Victorian Fiction* (Harlow: Longman, 1994) especially Chapter 3.
3. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): repr. in P.Rice and P.Waugh, eds, *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989) 200.
4. Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, III, 165.
5. Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 4.
6. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Islowsky (Indiana University Press, 1984) 10.
7. R.L. Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Wordsworth Classics, Hertfordshire, 1993) 42.
8. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in Oscar Wilde, *Plays, Prose Writings & Poems* (London: Dent, 1960) 187.
9. Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) Chapter 3.
10. Anon., *The Nation* (New York) (12 December 1867) 482.
11. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Pilgrim Edition, Volume 8, ed. G. Storey and K. Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995): Letters of 28 August and 7 December 1857, 421 and 488.

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Foreign Languages and Original Understanding in *Little Dorrit*[1]

Matthias Bauer

Foreign languages, in Dickens's novels, act as a foil to make us aware of certain qualities and dangers inherent in verbal exchange. They may even function as a paradigm of human communication in general, as they serve to point out that, whether 'foreign' or not, each one speaks differently from anybody else and attaches a meaning of his or her own to what another person says. An example from *Nicholas Nickleby* will show that Dickens, from the first, was attracted to the subject of foreign languages and, more specifically, to the fact that the response to a foreign idiom is not to be separated from thoughts, attitudes and expressions belonging to the listener's own sphere of life. In Mr Lillyvick's and Nicholas Nickleby's discussion about the French language, Dickens seems to point out that understanding means adapting what one hears to one's personal experience and familiar linguistic patterns. Nicholas is asked by Mr Lillyvick whether he considers French a 'cheerful language':

'Yes,' replied Nicholas, 'I should say it was, certainly.'

'It's very much changed since my time, then,' said the collector, 'very much.'

'Was it a dismal one in your time?' asked Nicholas, scarcely able to repress a smile.

'Very,' replied Mr Lillyvick, with some vehemence of manner. 'It's the war time that I speak of; the last war. It may be a cheerful language. I should be sorry to contradict anybody; but I can only say that I've heard the French prisoners, who were natives, and ought to know how to speak it, talking in such a dismal manner, that it made one miserable to hear them. Ay, that I have, fifty times, sir – fifty times!'

After a moment's silence, Mr Lillyvick adds:

> 'What's the water in French, sir?'
> 'L'Eau,' replied Nicholas.
> 'Ah!' said Mr Lillyvick, shaking his head mournfully, 'I thought as much. Lo, eh? I don't think anything of that language – nothing at all.'[2]

While in this example the personal way of responding to a foreign language mainly presents its comic side, in *Little Dorrit* its more serious implications for the process of understanding become visible as well. A case in point is the restless traveller Mr Meagles, who translates (or transforms) the words *allons* and *marchons* of the *Marseillaise* into his favourite formula 'allonging and marshonging'. (The English suffix quite literally shows that the French words present a special aspect to him.) Mr Meagles's resounding formula not only epitomizes the uproar of life abroad [3] but also seems to express what he will soon be longing for when he has come back to his cherished home so that he and his family will go along again and visit foreign parts.[4]

The question that arises from these examples is how the personal and individual character of language relates to its communicative functions. In *Little Dorrit* it may conduce to deceit or a struggle for power (as when Jeremiah Flintwinch forces Mrs Clennam 'to adopt his phrase', 1.15.174) or it may have a quite different effect. The fact that two characters speak different languages may even contribute to their mutual understanding as it may reveal their original or child-like humanity. The question thus taken up in *Little Dorrit* is how the curse of Babel may be overcome.

At the beginning of the novel, the people who 'come to trade at Marseilles' do not merely represent many different nationalities but are expressly called 'descendants from all the builders of Babel' (I.1.1). The curse of Babel is referred to again in Book I, Chapter 5, when Mrs Clennam's devotion to the revengeful god she has made for herself is called an 'impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven' (45). Dickens thus *draws attention to the two main features of the Babel story: human desire for unlimited power (not only over others but also over God) and, as a consequence, the confusion of tongues. (At the end of the novel, when Arthur Clennam and Little Dorrit have come to understand each other, the confused and confusing uproar of voices still rages in the streets into which they go 'down'.) In the opening chapter both features

are stressed, the wish for domination as well as the division of languages. The first words that are exchanged between the murderer Rigaud-Blandois and the harmless contraband trader John Baptist Cavalletto, who are locked up together in a prison cell, are 'Get up, pig' and 'It's all one, master' (I.1.5). Rigaud tries to assert his superiority over the little Italian, maintaining that it is his character to govern (I.1.11).

While John Baptist just speaks Italian and some French (cf. I.13.155, 164), Rigaud calls himself a 'citizen of the world', a 'cosmopolitan gentleman' (I.1.10) of mixed Swiss, French, English and Belgian descent who is 'an excellent master in English or French' (I.30.347). But Rigaud, as becomes clear very soon, is the devil of the story and, accordingly, his command of several languages does not seem to be a recommendation in itself. Moreover, moving from one language to another, he alters the meaning of words. When he proudly calls himself a 'Knight of Industry' (II.30.747), for example, he apparently feels sure that his listeners do not exactly know what this literal translation of *chevalier d'industrie* ('swindler') means, or he himself does not know its meaning.[5] A similarly questionable case is Mr Dorrit, whose reputation of being skilled in foreign languages contributes to his almost mythical position in the Marshalsea: 'As to languages – speaks anything. We've had a Frenchman here in his time, and it's my opinion he knowed more French than the Frenchman did. We've had an Italian here in his time, and he shut *him* up in about half a minute' (I.6.64). This is only hearsay, however, and, moreover, to shut somebody up in half a minute is not exactly a mark of proficiency in speaking the language. The doubtful nature of foreign language skills seems confirmed in the person of Mr Meagles who 'never by any accident acquired any knowledge whatever of the language of any country into which he travelled' (I.2.22).[6] The narrator stresses that Mr Meagles would no longer be himself if he tried to speak somebody else's language, while 'in his own tongue' he is 'a clear, shrewd, persevering man' (II.33.783). These limits do not apply to his daughter Pet, who speaks 'three foreign languages beautifully' (II.9.511) or to Arthur Clennam, a man of 40 who has lived for more than 20 years in China. Clennam not only learns from Flora Finching that he must speak Chinese 'like a Native if not better' (I.13.145) but actually speaks Italian and French fluently and even musically (cf. 156). His command of languages links him with Rigaud (who claims his fellowship with a Latin 'Salve', II.28.721), but in him it is a sign of his power to sympathise, as can be seen when he acts as good Samaritan to Cavalletto after his street accident in London. Rigaud, who is as ubiquitous as he is multilingual, rather fits Defoe's statement in *The History of the Devil* that the Evil One 'learned to speak all the languages' used after Babel.[7]

The material fact, then, that a character speaks several languages, doesn't tell much about his or her communicative skills. Nevertheless, foreign languages are used to point out qualities which are necessary for verbal exchange to become fruitful. This can first be seen in the exchange between Rigaud and Cavalletto in the Marseilles prison cell. Rigaud, trying to assert his status as a gentleman bullies Cavalletto into acknowledging his superiority:

> '. . . You knew from the first moment when you saw me here, that I was a gentleman?'
>
> 'ALTRO!' returned John Baptist, closing his eyes and giving his head a most vehement toss. The word being, according to its Genoese emphasis, a confirmation, a contradiction, an assertion, a denial, a taunt, a compliment, a joke, and fifty other things, became in the present instance, with a significance beyond all power of written expression, our familiar English 'I believe you!'
>
> (I.1.9–10)

'Altro' is an interjection 'beyond all power of written expression'. Its meaning is ambiguous, making the word quite apt for slave language (or Aesopian, as it was called by communists). The self-absorbed Rigaud of course believes that it means 'I believe you' (or that 'I believe you' means that Cavalletto believes him) while in fact it allows John Baptist to speak his mind.[8] The interjection becomes so much of a *leitmotiv* for Cavalletto that he is even named 'Altro' by Mr Pancks, who calls him 'that lively Altro chap' (II.13.557) and (in a striking parallel to Amy Dorrit's name) 'little Altro' (563). John Baptist's expression often goes together with a gesture also belonging to his native language: 'that particular back-handed shake of the right forefinger which is the most expressive negative in the Italian language' (I.1.9). His 'significant forefinger' is mentioned again several times (II.28.726, 729).

This combination of interjection and sign-language in the figure of Cavalletto alludes to certain linguistic tenets which were much debated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They concern the perennial question of the origin of language, which was, in Dickens's time, at least as much a matter of belief or ideology as of linguistic and anthropological research.[9] In empiricist concepts concerning the origin of language, as they were put forth by Locke and, to name just two others, Warburton and Condillac, both interjections and the language of gesture assume a prominent place. Warburton, for example, had stressed that 'in the first ages of the world, mutual converse was upheld by a mixed discourse of words and ACTIONS', [10] a view which was taken up by Condillac's

concept of primitive language being based on vocal gestures, '*cris naturels*' or interjections which 'gave expression to some inward passion'.[11] At the turn of the nineteenth century, Horne Tooke, in his influential *Diversions of Purley* (1786–1805, reprinted in 1829, 1840, 1857, and 1860)[12] regarded interjections not only as very similar to the sounds made by animals but also as characteristic of men in 'their natural state'; '[w]here speech can be employed', he says, 'they are totally useless', and accordingly are never used for 'laws, or in books of civil institutions' but only in such works as 'poetry . . . novels, plays and romances'.[13] What to Horne Tooke seemed rather negligible had been regarded as essential for the understanding of human society by Giambattista Vico in his *Principles of New Science . . . Concerning the Common Nature of the Nations*.[14] To Vico, 'articulate language began to develop by way of onomatopoeia' followed by 'interjections, which are sounds articulated under the impetus of violent passions'.[15] This imitative as well as emotional origin of speech is indicative of the fact 'that the world in its infancy was composed of poetic nations'[16] and, accordingly, 'all the first people were poets'.[17]

The Giambattista of *Little Dorrit*, John Baptist Cavalletto, seems like a representative of Vico's 'children . . . of the human race' who 'had a natural need to create poetic characters' and in whom, accordingly, imagination was 'excessively vivid'.[18] He is imaginative, cutting his prison food of dry bread like a melon or like an omelette, and so on, in order to make it palatable. Furthermore, he is repeatedly connected with a 'natural state' and presented as a man whose utterances, however ambiguously, betray his inner emotions. We remember that Rigaud calls him 'pig', and while this is mainly a sign of Rigaud's contempt for him, it is the narrator himself who compares him to 'a lower animal' (I.1.14). Of course, this describes his degraded state in the prison cell but his instinctive knowledge 'of what the hour is' (5) and where he is at any given moment, as well as his capacity 'to sleep when he would' (14) also indicate his closeness to nature and a rather 'instinctive' kind of human existence. Cavalletto can be *reduced* to an animal state but he also, in a Platonic or Wordsworthian sense, has *retained* a 'natural' spontaneity.

Later on, in Bleeding Heart Yard, John Baptist soon rids the inhabitants of all the national prejudices in which they have long been trained by the leading families of the country, the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings (I.25.295). They begin 'to accommodate themselves to his level, calling him "Mr. Baptist", but treating him like a baby and laughing immoderately at his lively gestures and his childish English' (296). Again a more 'natural' state of humanity is implied when the verbal exchange between Mr Baptist and the 'Bleeding Hearts' is compared to the communication between the

savages and Captain Cook or Friday and Robinson Crusoe. It is not Mr Baptist, however, who is compared to Friday or the savages, but the Bleeding Hearts: 'They constructed sentences, by way of teaching him the language in its purity, such as were addressed by the savages to Captain Cook, or by Friday to Robinson Crusoe' (296). It is as if Mr Baptist were the colonist and representative of civilisation. And in a paradoxical way this is actually the case. He is being taught but he also teaches; however ridiculous their sentences may sound, they are the true sign of the best in these Londoners, their compassionate hearts, brought out by Cavalletto.

The Bleeding Hearts speak indeed the language in its purity, that is to say, they use it for its true purpose of achieving mutual understanding. This stands out even more clearly when seen against the background of the Circumlocution Office, where heaps of 'ungrammatical correspondence' (I.10.100) are produced for no purpose whatsoever – except for keeping the Barnacle and Stiltstalking families in control. Their chief, Lord Decimus, is described as 'trotting, with the complacency of an idiotic elephant, among howling labyrinths of sentences which he seemed to take for high roads and never so much as wanted to get out of' (I.34.397, cf. II.24.672: 'those elephantine trots of his through a jungle of overgrown sentences'). The image of language as a kind of primaeval forest in which Lord Decimus gets quite wilfully lost shows that civilisation may be closer to savagery than its representatives would admit. Thus, upon one occasion (II.15.589), the civilised Britons are expressly called 'Island Savages' and those who prostrate themselves before Mr Merdle's supposed riches do so 'more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage' who propitiates his deity (II.12.539). The latent savagery of civilisation is confirmed in the person of Mrs Merdle, who regrets being unable to go back to a 'natural state' (I.20.235) or 'primitive state of society' (237) only to testify to her refinement by taking an Opera dancer's corruptibility for granted.[19] The parrot, Mrs Merdle's constant companion, ironically confirms the imitative instinct of its kind when it does *not* speak but rather shrieks in a savage manner.[20]

To Dickens, the original human nature which makes possible the spontaneous communication between people who speak different languages is not dependent on the development of the human species or society as a whole. His novels evince neither the belief in a continuous refinement nor a continuous decline of human civilisation. While the savagery into which civilisation may collapse appears archaic and preternatural,[21] the child-like spontaneity of understanding appears original or archetypal in an ideal sense. Whether there once was a golden age (to be recaptured in everyone's childhood) or whether ancient

savagery had to be civilised is, in *Little Dorrit*, a question not to be answered generally but individually by looking at the way in which two persons communicate with each other. By becoming like a child,[22] each individual who interacts and communicates with other individuals has the chance to strike upon a natural form of understanding and thus rediscover a state before the division of tongues. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt, successful communication depends on the common humanity of speaker and listener, for the power of speech is an essential part of human nature; conversely, there must be a common human nature since people can understand one another.[23] Cavalletto's 'childish English' strikes a chord in Mrs Plornish's heart and mind; he awakens in her, so to speak, the slumbering genius of a similarly childlike form of 'Italian'.

The suspension of the curse of Babel is not achieved by language skills in a rationalist sense but by means of 'accommodating' oneself to the person one talks to and by being sensitive to extra-semantic levels of speech. 'The language in its purity', as Dickens points out in this scene, is not just English any longer but becomes Italian as well:

> Mrs. Plornish was particularly ingenious in this art; and attained so much celebrity for saying 'Me ope you leg well soon,' that it was considered in the Yard, but a very short remove indeed from speaking Italian.
>
> (I.25.296)

Mrs Plornish's home-bred tendency to drop her aitches felicitously coincides with the muteness of the same sound in the Romance languages and her uninflected grammar is a symbol of unbent, unperverted communication. The poor people in Bleeding Heart Yard can teach a pure language to John Baptist, the servant, because they are puerile in the sense of being childlike. To Giambattista Vico, languages were called vernacular because they were spoken by the *vernae* or *famuli*.[24] Vernacular languages are characterised by natural significations 'because of their natural origins'. Accordingly, as different climates lead to the acquisition of different natures, different languages arose. They only express different points of view, however, upon 'the same utilities or necessaries of human life'.[25] This is what Mrs Plornish and the other ladies of Bleeding Heart Yard seem to know when they teach Mr Baptist English:

> 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-biggin!' At the same time exhibiting those articles, and penetrating him with a sense of the appalling difficulties of the Anglo-Saxon tongue.
>
> (296)

The ladies not only employ a language of things reminiscent of *Gulliver's Travels* [26] but instinctively apply a method of language learning which in the mid-nineteenth century became known as the 'direct' or 'natural' method. As it is described in a review article by J.S. Blackie for the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1845,[27] one of its characteristic features is the 'direct relation . . . between the sound and the thing signified' (176–7). Just as if the method was expressly designed for a student called 'Mr. Baptist', Blackie recommends the teacher to 'commence by presenting to the pupils a series of distinct and familiar objects and baptising them audibly with their several designations in the language to be acquired' (180). The expression 'baptising' seems quite appropriate to a method that imitates the progress 'of a child learning its mother tongue'.[28]

The language school of Bleeding Heart Yard is characterised by a kind of dialectical movement between the home-rooted natures of its participants and their openness to foreign modes of speech and life. This is similar to Mr Meagles's love for his home, which goes together with his being drawn away from it. The narrator mildly ridicules Mr Meagles's 'unshaken confidence that the English tongue was somehow the mother tongue of the whole world' (II.33.783), but he also has him point out that, accordingly, he 'can't be put to any inconvenience' (II.33.789) by ill-willed interlocutors whom he does not understand. Mr Meagles's proverbial motto, 'Home is Home though it's never so Homely' (with its counterpart, 'Rome is Rome though it's never so Romely') coincides with his 'perfect conviction' that foreigners are 'bound to understand' his idiom somehow (I.2.22). To Vico, the fundamental unity of all nations is evinced by the fact that 'proverbs, which are the maxims of human life' are 'a mental language common to all nations',[29] a view which is confirmed in the person of Mr Meagles: home itself, as expressed in the proverb he uses, is a value shared by all good-willed people who consequently cannot fail to understand one another. This is corroborated throughout the novel. Cavalletto has left his own home far behind but his construction of English becomes not unlike Mrs Plornish's whenever his memory goes 'nearer home' (II.22.656). Rigaud-Blandois, who speaks several languages, is, as he says of himself 'of no country' (I.30.348). To him language is mainly a power game; to be a 'master of languages' is a means of 'success' (II.30.747). While his mother was 'French by blood,

English by birth' he seems proud of the fact that he neither has a home nor a mother tongue. The speechless Mr Merdle is 'never at home' (I, 33, 390). It is people like Mrs Plornish and Cavalletto, 'homely' (rather than 'Romely') persons, who can understand each other. In *Little Dorrit*, it seems, you have to have a home or long for one (like Arthur Clennam, whose home is neither home nor homely)[30] or take it with you (like Little Dorrit) in order to understand foreigners.

The importance of the 'home' for the success of the Italo-English communication in Bleeding Heart Yard leads us back to the question of the personal, home-bound response to a foreign idiom. The Bleeding Heart Yard scenes are marked by an interplay between personal (or local and subjective) features of language and more general (or ubiquitous and objective) ones. On the one hand, 'objective' features seem to be emphasised, not only because of the household 'objects' which are used but also because of the Bleeding Hearts teaching Cavalletto not to speak anyhow but making him aware of 'the appalling difficulties of the Anglo-Saxon tongue' (I.25.296). On the other hand, however, this awe-inspiring structure assumes a highly individual shape in Mrs Plornish's attempts at using it in its pure, unalloyed, objective form.

According to Humboldt, language must be 'Subject und abhängig', dependent on the personality of the speaker, in order to become 'Object und selbständig'.[31] Language cannot be understood by considering it as an abstract system but only by listening to it as a means of expression which is formed anew by every speaker. Humboldt emphasises that the individual use of language is the condition for its becoming an 'objective' means of verbal exchange: 'Language arrives at its final determination only in the individual, and only this makes the notion complete. A nation as a whole of course has the same language, but not every member of it . . . and if one advances further in order to be most precise, every man truly has a language of his own.'[32]

This view of the communicative process is a two-sided one: on the one hand, it makes clear that even within the same language two speakers will never share the same idiom. This may be due to social or regional differences of grammar and vocabulary but it may also be a consequence of individual attitudes and intentions. Even when the form of the words is familiar, their meaning may not be shared. When Frederick Dorrit stands up and protests, in plain English, against the treatment of Little Dorrit by her family, he is as little understood as if 'he had made a proclamation in an unknown tongue' (II.5.469). On the

other hand, only a personal form of language (as opposed, for example, to a clichéd one) is truly communicative. Humboldt's case in point is the great writer who creates his or her own language while contributing to the objective side of language and its communicative force.

The more positive aspects of the process are prevalent in the Bleeding Heart Yard scenes. Mrs Plornish, the prototypical mother, who treats Cavalletto 'like a baby', never speaks anything but a mother('s) tongue, be it English or the delightful pidgin with which this 'linguist' (II.27.713) tries to make Mr Baptist feel at home. Hers is a language of emotion, which is the reason why it surmounts linguistic barriers: '. . . Mrs. Plornish, not being philosophical, wept. It further happened that Mrs. Plornish, not being philosophical, was intelligible' (712). Her being 'intelligible' does not preclude such remarkable statements as the one in which she expresses her surprise at Mr Baptist's perseverance, 'winding up in the Italian manner . . . Mooshattonisha padrona' (713). This is indeed a private or 'home' language, not unlike baby talk, which, however un-Italian, is perfectly understood by Cavalletto.[33]

Of course Mrs Plornish's 'Tuscan sentence[s]' (713) are a far cry from being Italian. They are products of her motherly imagination and seem derived from the 'one little golden grain of poetry' (I.12.130) sparkling in Bleeding Heart Yard. This is why they are true in spite of being incorrect. They are a paradigm of the common language of mankind just as the Plornish family's 'Happy Cottage' or Old Nandy's songs are paradigms of the way in which the pastoral world or the Garden of Eden or Vico's age of poets may be (re-) created in the fallen world. We have already seen that John Baptist is a similarly imaginative man. In Bleeding Heart Yard he begins to earn his living by carving flowers. This artistic impulse, I think, can also be seen in the use of 'his' word *altro*. 'Altro' (the word is derived from Latin *alius*, 'other') may have different, even contradictory meanings, but they are, like Mr Baptist himself, *all true*. Mrs Plornish, the self-appointed interpreter, explains:

> 'What's Altro?' said Pancks.
> 'Hem! It's a sort of a general kind of a expression, sir,' said Mrs. Plornish.
>
> (298)

As a consequence Mr Pancks and Mr Baptist get along splendidly by exchanging nothing but 'altros':

> 'Hallo, old chap! Altro!' To which Mr. Baptist would reply, with innumerable bright nods and smiles, 'Altro, signore, altro, altro, altro!' After this highly condensed conversation, Mr. Pancks would go his way; with an appearance of being lightened and refreshed.
>
> (298)

The foreign word becomes a magic word, representative of quite a range of possibilities for verbal exchange. In Cavalletto's reply to Rigaud it has a conciliatory as well as protective function; in Bleeding Heart Yard, on the other hand, it serves to create harmony and mutual understanding. The word is an example of how subjective and objective features of a language depend on each other: it is determined by local usage ('according to its Genoese emphasis', I.1.9) and so characteristic of John Baptist Cavalletto that it becomes like another name. At the same time, it is 'a sort of a general kind of a expression', an excellent tool for conversation between persons from the most different backgrounds. In German, popular etymology derives the word for poet, *Dichter*, from the word for 'to condense,' *dichten* or *verdichten*. John Baptist's 'highly condensed' conversation, then, truly shows him to belong to the real masters of language, who keep it alive as a means of original understanding by putting their own stamp on it.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay has been published in *The European English Messenger*, 6.2 (1997). It is supplemented by an article in which I have been concerned with the use of material things as means of communication in this novel: *'Little Dorrit*: Dickens and the Language of Things', *Anglistentag 1996: Dresden Proceedings*, ed. Uwe Böker and Hans Sauer (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1997). I am grateful to Professor Inge Leimberg for a number of critical suggestions.
2. *Nicholas Nickleby*, intro. Sybil Thorndike (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950, 1987) ch. 16, 203–4.
3. 'As to Marseilles . . . It couldn't exist without allonging or marshonging to something or other – victory or death, or blazes, or something' (I.2.15); later on, it becomes clear that the 'Allongers and Marshongers' inhabit at least both France and Italy (II.9.510). *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979). Further references to this edition appear in brackets in the text, including book and chapter numbers.
4. Cf. I.16.192: 'This was Mr. Meagles's invariable habit. Always to object to everything when he was travelling, and always to want to

get back to it when he was not travelling . . . . "Something like a look out, *that* was, wasn't it? I don't want a military government, but I shouldn't mind a little allonging and marshonging – just a dash of it – in this neighbourhood sometimes. It's Devilish still."'

5. In fact, the expression is used in a derogatory sense when the narrator informs us that 'the police were called in to receive denunciations of Mr. Meagles as a Knight of Industry, a good-for-nothing, and a thief' (II.33.783). *Little Dorrit* thus postdates the *OED* entry ('knight' *n.* 12.c.) in which it is regarded as obsolete and a phrase from Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* is given as the last example. In an article for *Household Words* ('Wisdom in Words', 4 [22 November 1851]: 208–9) Henry Morley denounced the expression as characteristically un-English: 'A black-leg is called in France, *chevalier d'industrie*, and the phrase shows that in France vice is too lightly regarded' (209). On Gallicisms in *Little Dorrit*, see G. L. Brook, *The Language of Dickens* (London: Deutsch, 1970) 70–1.
6. Brook remarks that 'Mr Meagles followed the example of Dr Johnson in firmly refusing to speak French when in France' (69). This shows that Mr Meagles's attitude is not necessarily a sign of linguistic incompetence.
7. Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Devil Ancient & Modern*, intro. Richard G. Landon, reprint of the 1818, ed. T. Kelly (East Ardsley: EP Publishing, 1972) 161.
8. I agree with Carlo Pagetti that Cavalletto's 'altro' is opposed to the false language of pretension spoken by many characters in the novel. At the same time, I doubt that Cavalletto can be regarded as imprisoned by language. "*Little Dorrit*: Dickens e il labirinto del linguaggio', *Studi inglesi* 2 (1975) 155–78, see 172–3.
9. See, for instance, the relevant passages in Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), especially ch. 6, and Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), especially ch. 2. Cf. also Barry Thatcher, 'Dickens' Bow to the Language Theory Debate', *Dickens Studies Annual* 23 (1994) 17–47.
10. William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (1765), vol. 3 (New York: Garland, 1978) Book IV, Section 4, 108; the phrase is quoted in Aarsleff, 21.
11. Aarsleff, 22, referring to Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* (II, i, i, par. 6) as reprinted in *Oeuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. Georges Le Roy (Paris: PUF, 1947); examples of 'inward passion' are 'desire, want, hunger, fear', which also characterise the prison scene in ch. 1 of *Little Dorrit*.
12. Aarsleff, 44–5.
13. John Horne Tooke, EIIEA IITEPOENTA *or The Diversions of Purley* (1798), 2 vols (Menston: Scolar Press, 1968) 1: 63–4.
14. This is the title of the third edition (1744) translated into English. Cf. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968, 1984), xv.
15. Vico, sections 447, 448: 150.
16. Section 216: 75. Vico adds, 'for poetry is nothing but imitation'; correspondingly, 'poetic sentences are formed by feelings of passion and emotion' (section 219, 75).
17. Section 470: 158.
18. Sections 209, 211: 75–6.
19. In his essay on 'The Noble Savage', which first appeared in *Household Words* 7 (11 June 1853, repr. in *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces*, intro. Leslie C. Staples [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958] 467–73), Dickens stresses that he has 'not the least belief in the Noble Savage' and attacks him as a humbug (to praise him is as hypocritical as Mrs Merdle's wish for a more primitive state of society); Dickens also makes clear that so-called civilisation is by no means free from ignoble savagery. Cf. his ironical remark that 'we have assuredly nothing of the Zulu Kaffer left' (472).
20. For the shrieking parrot both as an image and a judge of Mrs Merdle, see I.33.390–1 ('the parrot . . . watching her . . . as if he took her for another splendid parrot of a larger species'; 'the parrot . . . presiding over the conference as if he were a Judge').
21. Cf. the 'preternatural darkness' (I.29.337) in Mrs Clennam's house, which collapses with Mrs Clennam and her archaic, savage religion.
22. Cf. the narrator's ironical view in *Nicholas Nickleby*: 'It is a pleasant thing to reflect upon, and furnishes a complete answer to those who contend for the general degeneration of the human species, that every baby born into the world is a finer one than the last' (ch. 36, 460).
23. Wihelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheiten des menschlichen Sprachbaus, Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel, vol. 3 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963, 1988) 220: 'Was für mich am überzeugendsten für die Einheit der menschlichen Natur in der Verschiedenheit der Individuen spricht, ist . . . : dass auch das Verstehen ganz auf der innern Selbstthätigkeit beruht, und das Sprechen mit einander nur ein gegenseitiges Wecken des Vermögens des Hörenden ist' [To me the most persuasive argument for the unity of human nature is . . . that understanding also wholly rests on the inner activity of the self, and speaking with one another only means awakening the listener's capacity] (220). Humboldt's treatise (written between 1827 and 1829) could not have been known to Dickens; it nevertheless provides a valuable intellectual foil.
24. Vico, section 443: 147.
25. Sections 444–5: 147–8.
26. On Dickens's allusion to the universal language promoted by the academy in Lagado see Bauer, '*Little Dorrit*: Dickens and the Language of Things'.
27. J.S. Blackie, 'On the Teaching of Languages', *Foreign Quarterly Review* 35 (1845) 170–87; on Blackie's article and the context of

contemporary methodology, see the chapter 'Natural Methods of Language Teaching from Montaigne to Berlitz' in A.P.R. Howatt, A *History of English Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 192–208. I am grateful to Professor Lienhard Legenhausen for bibliographical information concerning the history of language teaching.

28. Blackie, 176. In fact, Blackie closely links the child's acquisition of a language to the adult's 'learning a foreign language by residence in the country where the language is spoken' (176).
29. Vico, sections 445: 148, and 161: 67.
30. On the absence or negative influence of Arthur's home, see Frances Armstrong, *Dickens and the Concept of Home* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990) 108–13.s
31. Humboldt, 225.
32. Humboldt, 228; my translation ('Erst im Individuum erhält die Sprache ihre letzte Bestimmtheit, und dies erst vollendet den Begriff. Eine Nation hat freilich im Ganzen dieselbe Sprache, allein schon nicht alle Einzelnen in ihr . . . und geht man noch weiter in das Feinste über, so besitzt wirklich jeder Mensch seine eigene').
33. In this respect I do not fully share the views of J.G. Schippers who includes Mrs Plornish in a group of speakers whose language is 'emptied of meaning and made useless for the purposes of communication': 'So Many Characters, So Many Words: Some Aspects of the Language of *Little Dorrit*', *Dutch Quarterly Review* 8 (1978) 242–56; here 254–5.

14

Foreign Bodies: Acceptance and Rejection of the Alien in the Dickensian Text

Sara Thornton

The study of the notion of foreignness in the Dickensian text seemed to me to require a novel in which references to the foreign are rare and whose effects are isolated and therefore discernible. I was therefore attracted to a text that seems to deny the influence, or even the existence, of the cultural Other, a hermetically sealed universe, closed in upon London with only brief trips to another quintessentially English country house. The bleak circularity and insularity of *Bleak House* was my choice. We see foreign worlds only in controlled spaces and as brief interludes in the otherwise relentless pursuits of the narrow, choked streets of London. London is the first word and sentence of the novel. The jarring full stop immediately after the word indicates a *huis clos*: one word, one world into which we are abruptly pushed but from which we are not released, for movement, let alone travel is difficult, and visibility is poor. We are taken as far as Greenwich and even onto the ships and barges in the Thames estuary, but the fog affords no view of the Channel, let alone the continent, and we are quickly turned back inland to the 'spongey fields',[1] which like everything else in the novel are saturated, overfull, unhealthy.

Secondly, the text itself constitutes a prison-house of language, which is incestuous and turned in upon itself. This occurs not only in relationships between characters (Esther, Jarndyce and the new Bleak House, for example) but in the circulatory economy of the text. It is a board-game, which we as readers are invited to play. We piece together the 'signs and tokens' offered in the text to find a way out of the hellish labyrinth of London by means of a 'judgement' or some hope of salvation. Esther's last, unfinished sentence seems to imply that although we 'connect' we cannot 'collect' but must go back to the start, which is of course back into the heart of London. As Hillis Miller has pointed out,