

## Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*

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The plot of Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* focuses on the presumed death and ultimate reappearance of the *jeune premier*, John Harmon. It had been Dickens's plan to write about "a man, young and perhaps eccentric, feigning to be dead, and *being* dead to all intents and purposes external to himself, and for years retaining the singular view of life and character so imparted" (Forster 2: 291), until, presumably, he could overcome his ghostly detachment. This, indeed, happens owing to the unhurried growth of mutual love between Harmon, posing as the impecunious John Rokesmith, and Bella Wilfer, the woman whose hand in marriage is the condition, according to his eccentric father's will, for his inheriting the vast property that has meantime gone to the old man's trusty steward Boffin. Thus Harmon, as well as the erstwhile willful and would-be "mercenary" Bella, are reclaimed, redeemed by love—in the best tradition of the religious humanism that suffuses Dickens's fiction.

As this précis of the plot may suggest, dying and being restored from death are both a metaphor for the literal events of the novel and a symbol of moral regeneration. As usual, Dickens partly desentimentalizes the up-beat poetic justice by limiting its applicability: Betty Higden's little grandson whom the Boffins wish to adopt and name John Harmon dies—his death symbolizes or, perhaps, replaces that of the protagonist; the traitor Charley Hexam is ready to march off, unpunished, treading (metaphorically) on corpses (including his father who had literally made a more or less honest living from salvaging corpses from the river). The symbolism is also deautomatized when another traitor, Rogue Riderhood is drowned and reanimated—

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no moral sea-change occurs in his case, no regeneration—and so the next time he is drowned when fighting with Bradley Headstone it is, as if to revive poetic justice, for good. The sea-change is reserved for battered and half-drowned Eugene Wrayburn, the decadent yet not depraved young gentleman<sup>1</sup> whom the working-class Lizzy Hexam and Jenny Wren restore to physical life and bring to moral conversion. The coherent structure into which the motifs of death, revival, and regeneration converge goes a long way towards compensating for the weaknesses of the virtue-rewarded type ending in the Lizzy-Eugene plot line (which recycles elements of *Pamela* along with those of *Jane Eyre*<sup>2</sup>) and the taming-of-the-shrew-into-the-angel-of-the-house ending of the plot line that involves Bella Wilfer and John Harmon.<sup>3</sup>

Henry James regarded *Our Mutual Friend* as a product of an exhausted mine, “dug out as with a spade and a pickaxe” (853). The aesthetics of this novel may, indeed, be less dependent on Dickens’s erstwhile imaginative vigor, yet I see James’s verdict as an unintentional metonymy: *Our Mutual Friend* is not a case of impoverishment but it deals extensively with deterioration, impoverishment, decadence. Its main exponent of the motif of decadence is Eugene Wrayburn, but this motif is also distributed among other characters and plot lines.<sup>4</sup> The book that Silas Wegg first reads to Boffin is *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose title is on one occasion, reflecting the post-Crimean War Russophobia, transformed into *The Decline and Fall of the Rooshian Empire*. Boffin himself pretends to degenerate into a miser. Jenny Wren’s alcoholic father has degenerated both physically and morally; Riderhood degenerates morally from a dredgerman for whom the money to be found on the corpses is a tacitly recognized perk to a thief, blackmailer, and murderer, a producer rather than a finder of corpses. Other characters exemplify a decline of fortunes but not a deterioration of character: Betty Higden has known better times but has retained her fiber; Bella’s father Reginald Wilfer is always a gentleman fallen on harder times, whether or not he is indeed a descendent of the “De Wilfers who came over with the Conqueror,” for, adds Dickens, “it is a remarkable fact in

genealogy that no De Any ones ever came over with Anybody else" (1.4: 32).

The latter remark exemplifies Dickens's own ironic reclamation of tired clichés (see Edgecombe), especially in his representation of middle-class conversation. The way in which Mortimer Lightwood speaks about the fate of John Harmon and his sister, both disowned by their father, suggests a detached, ironic, blasé attitude to the life of true feeling. Soon enough, however, Lightwood and Wrayburn find out that the life of passions is not such an old story. Miss Harmon managed to preserve her heart from being reduced to Dust by an arranged marriage; the smouldering in the wry Wrayburn will flare up at the sight of Lizzy (as does, belatedly, that of his namesake, Pushkin's Onegin); and John Harmon's heart will rise from its ashes when he and the Boffins reclaim the emotional and moral life of Bella Wilfer.

The plots of Dickens's novels unfold against the setting of specific professional activities with which they are thematically linked. In *Our Mutual Friend* such an activity is the reclamation of waste, what we now call "recycling" of what was then euphemistically called "dust." The plot and the setting have a common denominator: the slow and scrupulous work of returning the discarded back into the process of human life. The slowness of the reader's recognition of John Harmon in John Rokesmith is part and parcel of this motif. The centrality of the motif of Dust, for the thematic unity of this novel (with Dust serving as a metaphor for money since the seventeenth century), has been explored by H. M. Daleski (270-336). Later, the importance of the motif of recycling for the architectonics of the novel was discussed by Nancy Aycock Metz (1979), who classified the types reclamation represented in the novel into "analysis" (emblemized by the Veneerings' butler, referred to as the Analytical Chemist, or simply, the Analytical) and articulation, emblemized by Mr. Venus, the "articulator" of dry bones (Metz 67)—the pagan goddess of love presiding over Isaiah's prophesy of resurrection. Daleski and Metz demonstrate the coherence of the pattern which the motifs of dust and reclamation

deploy. This pattern belongs to what Benjamin Hrushovski (1984) called the “Internal Field of Reference”—aesthetic constructs shaped by the mutual co-positioning of units in the semantic network of the text. My remarks, taking off from these studies and another seminal study, Harland Nelson’s 1965 article on Dickens’s debt to Henry Mayhew, will focus on two examples of the way in which mimetic references, that is items that pertain to what Hrushovski calls the “External Field of Reference,” the historical and socio-economic realities of mid-nineteenth-century London, are *transformed* when they enter newly articulated inter-relationships in the text of the novel—transformed both in the direction of their mutual aesthetic adjustment in the Internal Field of Reference and for the sake of a judicious appeal to Dickens’s Victorian audience, mainly, but not exclusively, middle-class.

Dickens was personally acquainted with Henry Mayhew and, no doubt familiar with his sketches (see Sucksmith and Dunn). In his monumental book *London Labour and the London Poor*, Mayhew notes:

In London, where many, in order to live, struggle to extract a meal from the possession of an article which seems utterly worthless, nothing must be wasted. Many a thing which in a country town is kicked by the penniless out of their path even, if examined and left as meet only for the scavenger’s cart, will in London be snatched up as a prize; it is money’s worth. A crushed and torn bonnet, for instance, or, better still, an old hat, napless, shapeless, crownless, and brimless, will be picked up in the street, and carefully placed in a bag with similar things by one class of street-folk—the Street-Finders. And to tempt the well-to-do to *sell* their second-hand goods, the street-trader offers the barter of shapely china or shining glass vessels; or blooming fuchsias or fragrant geraniums for ‘the rubbish,’ or else, in the spirit of the hero of the fairy tale, he exchanges ‘new lamps for old’. (2: 6)

Recycling is nowadays mainly an ecological issue—and it may mean restoring the discarded, back into economy, into individual and communal homeostasis. As a metaphor, it can stand for the reabsorption of intellectual debris into ideological innovation and of the emotionally abject into spiritual self-renewal.

Yet in mid-nineteenth-century London, that “great (and dirty) city” (*Bleak House* 1.1: 5), recycling was, mainly, a source of precarious sustenance for thousands of the indigent—with earning sometimes below a sixpence a day. John Harmon’s father is supposed to have presided over much of this activity. He had made his fortune as a garbage-removal contractor: in addition to the funds received for having the dust carted off he also made money out of the huge dust-heaps themselves. The way to articulate dust back into gold was by having people process the dust mounds—that is, analyze them, sort the items into separate heaps that could be sold—“to brick-makers, soap boilers, paper manufacturers, road makers, dealers in metal and glass, concrete makers” (Johnson 2: 1030).

The Internal Field of Reference in *Our Mutual Friend* combines the source of the Harmon riches with an array of other kinds of reprocessing, indeed, a strand of motifs that connects most of the novel’s plot-lines. Here we find Jenny Wren, who makes doll’s dresses out of waste, and recycles the waste of her own art into pincushions and pen-wipers; for Jenny even the cemetery is connected with a renewal: the funeral of her father gives her an inspiration for the clothing of a minister-doll, one that would not bury other dolls but would unite two of Jenny’s “young friends in matrimony” (4.9; see also Stewart 125). Here also is Sloppy who makes children’s toys “out of nothing” (2.14)—creation *ex nihilo* reinterpreted as a reprocessing of cosmic waste. Here are Gaffer Hexam and the other dredgermen who fish the lost things out of the river for reward. The pawnshop operations in Fledgeby’s firm are also associated with recycling—it is there, for instance, that Jenny buys unredeemed items to be used in her own artistic projects. On the metaphorical level the sorting and articulating of information is also the job of the police Inspector (1.3: 24; 1.12: 159), of Rokesmith the Secretary (1.15: 179-80) in Boffin’s employ, who works to reduce the entropy in his proliferating papers, and of young Blight, the clerk in Lightwood’s employ, who is trying to stave off the chaos caused by the lack rather than by the abundance of business, alphabetizing the names of non-existent callers. This young man’s

own name reminds us that all these are efforts to bring back to life not what has died the natural death of old age wear-and-tear but what has been prematurely blighted.

The recurrent reprise of the theme of entropy and its containment in *Our Mutual Friend* does not merely reflect the facts of waste and reclamation in Dickens's London. Waste and reclamation are important issues in the External Field of Reference, issues whose literary processing, before Dickens, seems to have lagged behind the size of the socio-economic problems that they represented. Yet when such issues make their way into Dickens's novel, they turn into *motifs*, that is, building blocks of an artistic structure whose recurrence sets the rhythms of the narrative and connects subplots, separate narrative details, and features of character portrayal into a unified semantic structure—motifs that, moreover, often acquire metaphoric and symbolic force. The mechanics of this transformation may be affected by the pragmatics of addressing Dickens's immediate audience.<sup>5</sup>

As Harland S. Nelson has helpfully observed, the character of Betty Higden may well have been inspired by one of Mayhew's informants: an indigent old woman who had lost her family—husband, children, grandchildren all dead—but who steadfastly refuses to go to the workhouse. In Mayhew's book, however, this woman makes her living as a pure-finder, that is, a gatherer of dog dung from the streets. A bucket of this dung was sold for about 6d to tanners who took advantage of its alkaline content to "purify" the skins that they were processing; hence the substance got its paradoxical name "pure." The occupation granted the weakest and the poorest of the unemployed a means of honest sustenance. While helping the ecology of the streets, it exposed the finders to a great deal of filth—a particular that Dickens chose to spare his readers. One may surmise that one of the reasons of his choice would be the need to preempt the conventional metonymic associations between the roughness of the occupation and the character of the worker employed in it<sup>6</sup>: coarse tools and disgusting materials were liable to extend to the hands that wielded them in the imagination of the public. Mainly, however, Dickens had reason to fear the

potential hurdle audience of his book (see Toker 282-87), the unofficial censors that stood between the novel and its target audiences. One of the characters of the novel, the self-confident Mr. Podsnap, actually represents such a hurdle audience: for him "Literature, large print" must be "respectfully descriptive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven"; whereas "Painting and Sculpture" must supply "models and portraits representing Professors of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past," etc. (1.11: 128). For this philistine audience the question about every work of art is "would it bring a blush into the cheek of the young person?" and the young person "seemed always liable to burst into blushes" (1.11: 129). Pure-finding would hardly pass through the eye of this needle.

Hence Dickens transforms Mayhew's prototype for Betty Higden from a pure-finder to an artisan, child-minder, and laundress (or at least, as a mangle-operator, a laundry adjunct). In the latter capacity, she retains the motif of purifying what is soiled but escapes the idea of personal contamination: ablutions connoted by laundry elicit a considerably sanitized complex of visual, tactile, and olfactory images. But apparently the memories of the pure-finder were not easily erased from the imaginative background of that character—they might partly account for the name of her faithful apprentice Sloppy, associated with the slop-pail. Sloppy turns the mangle for her, that is, operates the nineteenth-century drying-and-flattening contraption. And once the mangle has come into play, it harks back to the motif of the workhouse treadmill, tucking up a potentially loose end. For Sloppy, Betty's house is a welcome alternative to the workhouse; as a child-minder she also takes over and partly improves on one of the functions of that notorious institution (Stokes 723-24).

Though Dickens must have read Mayhew's research to supplement his own observations, the "young persons" in his audience did not possess information about such low matters as the "pure" and "pure-finders." However, the handling of Gaffer Hexam and his daughter Lizzy may be rooted in information more readily accessible to broad

readership, information that Dickens may have held in common with his audience as part of the cultural code which the present-day reader needs help with reconstructing. The work of dredgermen is as closely connected to the motif of resurrection as the work of grave robbers in *A Tale of Two Cities* (these suppliers of corpses for anatomy theatres were, indeed, called “resurrectionists”)—with an essential point of difference: the work of dredgermen was not only legal but of much value to the police. This work, paid for by the sale of recovered items, by rewards, and by inquest-money, required much skill and informed observation, a fair amount of intelligence as well as physical strength. Rogue Riderhood envies Hexam his luck with finding corpses, but the luck is actually a matter of semiotic proficiency, knowledge of the way the river signals the presence of the dead-by-water.

Mayhew notes that, in comparison with other “finders,” dredgermen were morally and financially capable of maintaining a relatively fair domesticity (148). This, indeed, goes a long way to explain how a naturally refined Lizzy could be found in this social stratum. It also explains the physical strength that stands her in good stead when she has to rescue Wrayburn: dredgermen often employed their children as their helpmates—in the first scene of the novel we do, indeed, find Lizzy rowing her father’s boat with the ease of strength and practice (1.1: 1). Lizzy’s aversion to her father’s occupation is caused by his being not an ordinary dredgerman but one who specializes in body-finding (the body that he finds in the first chapter is the one to be misidentified as the corpse of John Harmon). This specialization, moreover, accounts for the absence of the regular dredgermen’s bulky and complicated gear in Gaffer’s boat—we do not see any nets with stones used to raze the bottom of the river and trap smaller items. This, in its turn, is a convincing background of Charley’s absences; in the usual course of affairs, a regular dredgerman would have his son, or an apprentice, guard the boat with all the equipment, instead of running off to school. Hexam himself is intelligent but illiterate and fully determined to let his son’s mental capacities be wasted like his own. Charley is reclaimed from this waste by his sister’s efforts, but

the type of education that he scrambles himself into under Bradley Headstone for the sake of social advancement does nothing to keep him from degenerating into a callous careerist.

Lizzie attempts to impede her father's agenda of reclaiming bodies and wasting minds as much as filial duty allows, mainly by sending Charley to school and keeping him off the river (Mayhew suggests that the water may be addictive; boys who went to work on the river tended to drift away from learning irreversibly). After Gaffer's death and her escape from London, Lizzy finds work in a factory warehouse—which likewise involves sorting and arrangement. A metaphoric negative version of the warehouse motif is carried by Bradley Headstone, who stores facts as in a “mental warehouse” (2.1: 217), not letting the cultivation trickle down to his affective self. It is Bradley Headstone, the headstrong new man, who blights the life of the well-born (eugenic) Eugene Wrayburn, wasting his own life in the process.

As noted above, Eugene will be granted a recovery—a slow, laborious, and emotion-fraught reclamation. In the novel, the diligent work of reclamation done by some is contrasted with the predaceous wastefulness of others, such as the *nouveau rich* Veneerings who live “in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London” with everything “spick and span new”:

All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new [...] they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting [...] without a scratch upon him, French—polished to the crown of his head. (1.2: 6).

In England even these days one of the worst things one can say about a person is that he has had to buy all of his own furniture. In the artificial little world of the appropriately named Veneerings much must have been discarded, and nothing seems to have been carried over from the past.

In *Our Mutual Friend* the social target of Dickens's criticism has partly shifted from the corruptly ruling upper classes to the callous new middle class. The society presided over by self-satisfied bourgeois Podsnaps and the climbing Veneerings is wasteful of people and their creative potentialities: from the vacuous Mr. Twemlow, caught in the net of his aristocratic cousin's "vicarious leisure" (Veblen 59), through the repressed Miss Podsnap (the embodiment of the "young person" kept in cotton-wool), to victims of lower-class child mortality such as Betty's grandson. The conspicuous waste of beautiful human beings as an effect of the leisure-class's invidious emulation will be explored in a more focused way about half a century later, in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, whose Long Island valley of ashes would compete for symbolmaking power with the dust mounds of Dickens's London. *Our Mutual Friend* reclaims the marginalized—the deserving handicapped, the decent poor, the Jew—while allowing its hedged-in poetic justice to dispense with the predators, sending the Veneerings into bankruptcy and exile and Silas Wegg into a dustman's cart.

While *Our Mutual Friend* attaches value to the process of a laborious conversion of the blighted back to life, it has practically no place for the main thrust of the creative *élan vital*, the head-on confrontation with the flow of reality evident in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, and partly even *Bleak House*. Even John Harmon's experiment in creating a progressive modest yuppie household upon marrying Bella is canceled when he comes into his patrimony in the end. Neither John Harmon nor Eugene Wrayburn is a Stephen Dedalus, even though Eugene seems to find the Word that Stephen is still seeking at the close of *Ulysses* (and this word is "Wife"). *Our Mutual Friend* is a novel without a hero, yet it distributes the heroism of daily labor and daily endurance among several of its male and female characters. This is the kind of heroism that harks back to Wordsworth's leech-gatherer and anticipates the twentieth-century ideas of the heroism of survival.<sup>7</sup> One may say that the novel itself, for all its minor flaws, is a product of the *élan vital*, the creative impulse, whose waste I have been proc-

essing with the help of Mayhew while also celebrating the aesthetic effect of its semantic coherence. My reading can point to one of the facets of this novel's connection with a poem on whose composition, as is well known, it exerted a considerable influence—T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, where it is for the reader to play the role of the knight who must ask the right question, that is, engage in the kind of intellectual activity that can articulate fragments and restore fertility to the fallow. Perhaps the reason why *Our Mutual Friend* strikes many readers as a less powerful source of aesthetic experience than Dickens's earlier novels is that the aesthetic effects produced by this labor or articulation are predominantly the effects of meaning rather than what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (104-11) calls presence effects.<sup>8</sup> Presence effects are not absent from this novel, but they are mainly achieved by recurrent verbal and physical gestures that give us a strong sense of characters' bodily selves, while only partly offsetting the reduction in the gusto, the sense of depth, and the festive wit that quickened characters in Dickens's earlier novels.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>As Vincent Newey points out, Eugene is presented as always capable of critical self-scrutiny and compunction; his development is "by and large the history of the enhancement of this faculty" (76).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Magnet on the *jeune premiers* of *Barnaby Rudge*: "Readers of the English novel, with examples like Squire B in *Pamela* or Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* before him, are familiar with the idea that becoming a true gentleman involves a diminution of free, aggressive, masculine potency, sometimes even to the point of mutilation" (68).

<sup>3</sup>See Surridge for a different view of the function of the sensationalist elements of the novel: Surridge associates the novel's use of the mysteries, of the slightly decadent lawyer/hero type, and the *mort vivant*—ingredients of Victorian proto-detective fiction, with the contemporary anxieties concerning the potential disruptiveness of female willfulness.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. James Phelan's discussion of the thematic model of character construction, 287-92.

<sup>5</sup>If Hrushovski's Internal and External Fields of Reference roughly correspond to two of the three major divisions of semiotics—Syntactics and Semantics, respectively—the gearing up of the material to the needs of a particular audience belongs to the third division—Pragmatics (see, for instance, Morris 217-20).

<sup>6</sup>See Spector on Dickens's consistently refraining from such a metonymy.

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, Terrence Des Pres and Todorov.

<sup>8</sup>In a literary work, "presence effects" are associated with style, varieties of emotional appeal, and effects of *hypotyposis* (Fontanier 390-92)—the illusion of the characters' presence and the unfolding of the events in front of the reader's eyes.

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