

## Reanimation, Regeneration, Re-evaluation: Rereading *Our Mutual Friend*\*

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Leona Toker's essay "Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*," published in a section under the somewhat ghoulish heading "Restored from Death," takes up the Jamesian disdain for Dickens's last novel as a product of an exhausted mine (though James seems to refer to a permanent exhaustion of *mind*), and suggests that the plot reveals an underlying trend of degeneration. This in a novel that has been taken as an exemplary tale of moral regeneration, beginning with John Harmon's rise from the dead in the river, a baptismal resurrection which slips out of one mystery that is never solved—the identity of the body fished out of the river,—into another—John Harmon's identity,—which becomes only too transparent, however much the author is at pains to conceal the secret. But not only James is dissatisfied with this "large loose baggy monster" (to borrow a phrase from the Preface to *The Tragic Muse* [*The Portable Henry James* 477]), and the feeble attempt at a Christian eschatology does not wash with many postmodern readers. As Toker points out, it is not John Harmon who changes his identity—he has been simply masquerading as someone else in order to submit Bella to the gold dust test (or, all that glitters is not love). Rather, Toker argues, it is Eugene Wrayburn who rises, like Lazarus, from his death-bed, transformed morally into a better person, worthy of marrying Lizzie Hexam.

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\*Reference: Leona Toker, "Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 47-59.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debtoker01613.htm>>.

Toker is not alone in shifting the weight of the plot to Eugene as an agent of regeneration. In her study of the “bioeconomics” of *Our Mutual Friend*, Catherine Gallagher has drawn attention to Eugene’s “suspended animation,” which, like John Harmon’s temporary “death,” involves being dumped, or “garbaged,” in the river, then restored to life which “allows the liberation of value” (109). Gallagher, too, prioritizes Eugene’s role in the parallel love plot, as he must be pulled from the river by a savior-lover, then “wound in cloth and placed in sepulchral darkness” (109). It is this return from death, this rescue from the body’s mere commodity value, which makes possible the “regenerative inversion” of the novel’s ghoulish opening scene (109), for Lizzie can now give value to the body rather than feeding off a cadaver that is her “meat and drink” (OMF 1.1: 15). This inversion puts Eugene in debt to Lizzie, rather than the other way round (as might have been expected in such a cross-class liaison), a debt he could have paid only in actually dying; in other words, as in Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, “illness unto death brings wealth” (Gallagher 110).

I would argue that Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, which Gallagher is reading as an interpretive key to Dickens’s novel, can give us the formulation which is missing from both new historicist and structuralist readings of *Our Mutual Friend*. In his unpopular series of essays, first published in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, a few years before Dickens wrote his novel, Ruskin insisted on Christian principles of benevolence in response to the cruelty of Political Economy, in which wealth was power and price was detached from value. In adopting the utilitarian analogy of physiological circulation, Ruskin was arguing that Political Economy encouraged unequal distribution of wealth at the expense of the poor, whereas the health of the nation depended on an equal flow throughout the body: “There is one quickness of the current which comes of cheerful emotion or wholesome exercise; and another which comes of shame or of fever. There is a flush of the body which is full of warmth and life; and another which will pass into putrefaction” (*Unto This Last* 183). *Our Mutual Friend* similarly reconstitutes the organic body through its revaluation of society’s waste,

the outcasts of the city, at the expense of the idle rich. Redemption effects a *personal* transfiguration, not necessarily a metaphysical global transformation. It can only be sought in the fallen city, in a transformation of the experience of suffering and death into salvation within the city. This sounds somewhat like the Christian parable of the seed which must first die, though without the dark Dostoyevskyan mysticism of descent into sin and expiation from crime as in *Crime and Punishment* (conceived in 1865, the year of publication of Dickens's novel, but first published only in 1866). The vision is radical not in the narrow political sense, but in its Carlylean rejection of the utilitarian model of the diseased body of the nation and in the argument for reformation of the nation into an organic body that ideally responds to all its parts with mutual benevolence.

Toker would doubtlessly not disagree with such a view of Dickens's post-Romantic humanism, which is rendered in her view not so much in a desentimentalized mode as in overdetermined poetic justice. The reference to Romans 6:3-4 may be ironic when Gaffer Hexam is said to be "baptized unto Death" (OMF 1.14: 175) and his emergence from the filthy water of the Thames is not exactly an awakening into eternal life, yet the Christian rhetoric is unmistakable, if playful (Smith 163-64). Rogue Riderhood is also reanimated but achieves no resurrection, perhaps because he does not deserve one as an out-and-out villain, and other characters also get their just deserts. Renewal is both literal, in the recycling of waste in the Dust Heaps (not to be confused with the human waste collected from houses by the Night-Soil Men), and metaphorical, in the spiritual renewal through love of Bella, in one pair of lovers, and Eugene, in the other pair. The mutual influence of Henry Mayhew and Dickens has been recycled by critics a number of times (for example, Nelson; Dunn), but it should be noticed that Mayhew had an ethnographic, as well as commercial, interest in showing the usefulness of London's "wild tribes," its street and river people, while Dickens was concerned with a larger discourse about the decay of the city, which hinged on the literal as well as metaphorical recycling of waste. Metz does not think the dust mounds will ever

get carted away and sees no end to the entropy in which the characters are trapped, yet the novel does not end on a note of depression or resignation, but with vindication of Eugene's moral conversion and love over society gossips and *parvenus*, and it points to moral salvation in the salvage of the city's refuse (incidentally, Victorian readers would not have been too prudish to explore the sewers in *London Labour and London Poor* and would have got Dickens's crude joke at Mr. Podsnap's expense about the marks of the British constitution found in the horse dung on London's streets). However, the conclusion which Toker apparently reaches is quite the contrary, namely that *Our Mutual Friend* is a dark novel of deterioration, degeneration and decay, which is one reason why it had such a powerful effect upon T. S. Eliot when he was writing *The Waste Land*. Apart from reclaiming the marginalized laborers and other social outcasts, Toker concludes, *Our Mutual Friend* makes no space for the head-on confrontation with social problems and the flow of real life we find in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, or even *Bleak House*. In the end, John Harmon is triumphant, comes into money, and retreats into bourgeois success. We are left with teasing intellectual puzzles, with aesthetic effects felt more in meaning than in a powerful experience of the real.

It is, indeed, a novel suffering from an epidemic of deaths. It will be remembered that Ruskin (in "Fiction, Fair and Foul," 1880) blamed the mortality rate in *Bleak House* on the author's diseased city mind and his eagerness to cater for unhealthy urban tastes. On the other hand, the insistence on the certainty of death and the meting out of reward and punishment within the novelistic universe point to a belief in an otherworldly accountability that lends unseen meaning to the city's financial and moral economy. Dickens, declared Ruskin in *Modern Painters*, was one of those popular authors who had little patience for religious form, but pleaded for "simple truth and benevolence" (*Modern Painters* 259); if this is dressed up as the duty to do good which privileges the poor and meek, it is no less subversive of the dead Mammon-worship of the necropolis of ashes and dust.

I would suggest that the inversion in the novel of the hierarchy of social and economic value determined by class and gender achieves a carnivalesque effect of exposing the uselessness of the wasteful upper classes and the *nouveaux riches*, on the one hand, and the moral dignity as well as economic usefulness of London's diligent outcasts, on the other. The reversal of savagery and civilization is confirmed by the anatomist who, like Mr. Venus, scalps and scrapes the civilized body and finds it artificial. Mrs. Podsnap is described as an extinct animal whose bone structure would be a fine specimen for Professor Owen (OMF 1.2). Sir Richard Owen (1804-92) was the comparative anatomist and paleontologist famous for his articulation of an extinct giant ostrich from New Zealand. Owen's disagreement with Darwin over his theory of evolution and unwillingness to accept the doctrine of the descent of man from apes drew him into bitter disputes and public controversy. Dickens had known Owen, head of the Natural History Section at the British Museum and formerly professor of comparative anatomy and physiology at the Royal College of Surgeons, since the 1840s. The articulation by Venus of specimens is analytical as well as verbal, but applied to contemporary, non-extinct species in an effort to make coherent the whole body of the city (cf. Metz 63-64). Dickens's own satirical conclusion is that humans were not progressing in their natural evolution to some higher level of existence but regressing to a primeval swamp. It was Owen who coined the term dinosaur, and the sight of London's intellectual elite dining inside a dinosaur skeleton at the Crystal Palace during the 1851 Great Exhibition must have seemed an eloquent statement of irony about science and progress. Dickens seems to suggest in *Bleak House* and in *Our Mutual Friend* that modern London is submerged in a primeval "Dismal Swamp" (the title of the chapter describing the greedy mass descent on the newly rich Boffins). The imaginary Megalosaurus waddling up Holborn Hill in *Bleak House* neatly reverses the progressive timescale of Victorian ideology and natural history, and the departure from social Darwinism is met again in "On an Amateur Beat," when the Uncommercial Traveller points to the mud-prints that will show future paleontologists "the

public savagery of neglected children in the streets of [the] capital" (*Uncommercial Traveller* 347).<sup>1</sup>

The decay of the "Great Wen" was commonly acknowledged, not least in Carlyle's and Ruskin's resistance to the triumphalist confidence in progress and social amelioration at mid-century. The question is how is the city to be regenerated? Here, I would like to introduce Lewis Mumford's application of "Abbau" as a process of destruction necessary to urban development. As Lynda Nead has shown, at the time *Our Mutual Friend* was being written, London was being demolished, excavated, and dug up, as the Victoria Embankment and the first underground railway were being constructed, exposing the underside of the city and disrupting urban space. "Abbau" is the process of demolition, erosion, destruction, and loss of meaning of and in the city, and thus well describes the upheaval of the city in a chaotic and constant rebuilding, revealing London to be a sprawling metropolis with various Georgian and Regency accretions, not a planned architectural whole. The rebuilding, or "improvements," dictated by the construction of railways or road-widening were often destructive, sometimes displacing lower-class populations. In Paris, where Haussman's plans were somewhat more violent transformations of social and political space, to read the city was also to read its illegibility— "délire" in Flaubert's definition of reading the city in a delirium (qtd. in Hamon 2). The modern city was not a thing of beauty or a coherent whole, but divorced from the meaningful cultural forms of living handed down through the ages. Whether meaning or value could be adduced from the city experience did not, ultimately, depend on the mere aesthetic effect of the attraction of repulsion, but on whether in the higgledy-piggledy result of Abbau a redeeming vision of the city could be sustained. Like the chaotic upheaval of the uprooting of Stagg's Gardens resulting from the building of the railway in *Dombey and Son*, the stop-go "checks and balances" of Victorian progress is reflected in the unplanned flux of new suburban expansion described in *Our Mutual Friend*:

a toy neighbourhood taken in blocks out of a box by a child of particularly incoherent mind, and set up anyhow; here, one side of a new street; there, a large solitary public-house facing nowhere; here, another unfinished street already in ruins; there, a church; here, an immense new warehouse; there, a dilapidated old country villa; then, a medley of black ditch, sparkling cucumber-frame, rank field, richly cultivated kitchen-garden, brick viaduct, arch-spanned canal, and disorder of frowsiness and fog. As if the child had given the table a kick and gone to sleep. (2.1: 219)

Yet the view of “such a black shrill city [...] such a gritty city; such a hopeless city, with no rent in the leaden canopy of its sky” (OMF 1.12: 147), is that of the cynical Wildean wits Lightwood and Wrayburn, those two legal dust contractors (in Boffin’s joking expression), and the larger vision of the novel reveals a moral renewal of *vision*. The weak apocalypse implicit in Dickens’s ambivalent glimpses of a New Jerusalem, which Karl Ashley Smith perceives in the renovation of human relations in *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Great Expectations*, (Smith 217-18; cf. Welsh), is never fully developed in *Our Mutual Friend*, yet Jenny Wren’s other-worldly vision of neo-Wordsworthian innocence on Riah’s rooftop suggests a spirituality beyond the city’s corrupting commodity culture and serves warning on those, like Fascination Fledgeby, who are blind to the moral consequences of their actions.

“[...] And you see the clouds rushing on above the narrow streets, not minding them, and you see the golden arrows pointing at the mountains in the sky from which the wind comes, and you feel as if you were dead.” (OMF 2.5: 279)

Jenny calls the Good Samaritan Riah to come back up and be dead in his garden on the rooftops, and he sees her “looking down out of a Glory of her long bright radiant hair, and musically repeating to him, like a vision: ‘Come up and be dead! Come up and be dead!’” (OMF 2.5: 280). This rooftop vision of the heavenly city, of the peaceful tranquility of eternity, admittedly, merely hints in its scriptural references (John 3; Revelation 11, 12) at the possibility of a spiritual transcendence. Nevertheless, the vision offers the sole alternative to the dead life of the city.

Major improvements were under way at the close of Dickens's life, chief among them Joseph Bazalgette's monumental sewage construction which modernized the city by constructing a *system* of waste disposal and treatment, replacing the poorly regulated medieval sewers and cleaning up the Thames (see Halliday; Williams 70-73). But the city in *Our Mutual Friend* has not changed physically. The only perceptible transformation of its deadening money-economy appears to lie in the minimalist possibility of conceptualizing moral agency in the prison wasteland of Harmon's house and the muddy, polluted river, or the littered Sahara of suburbia, through which Wilfer makes his way home. The putative pastoral in the arbor atop Boffin's dust mound is pleasant but facetious. Eugene, it seems to me, is an ambivalent Abel assailed by a seething Cain (Bradley Headstone) associated with the dead and mechanical universe of utilitarianism (like Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*, cf. Qualls 214), and too hesitant to be sure of mending himself or the world. Indeed, no one character, not even the prophetic Riah or the genial Boffin, seems to carry the weight of a redeeming role. It is, nevertheless, in the city's quasi-apocalyptic self-destruction ("Abbau") that Dickens seeks moral redemption and social renewal.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>In *Hard Times* each of the little Gradgrinds has "dissected the Great Bear like a Professor Owen" (1.3: 9)—an example of how Science has banished nursery rhymes and the Fancy of childhood. See "Owen's Museum," *All the Year Round*, 27 Sept. 1862, among other popular presentations of Owen's ideas in Dickens's journal. See also Sage 219-20. For the Darwinian context of *Our Mutual Friend* see Morris 180-82; Fulweiler believes *Our Mutual Friend* follows the pattern of the "mutual relations" of species in Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), but far from applauding the success of natural selection, Dickens opposes both Malthusian and Darwinian theories of evolution to project a moral community of individuals. Yet Darwin was equally reading Dickens's anatomy of the bleak competitive chaos of Victorian society at the mercy of rapacious beasts of prey (55-56).



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