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Thickening the Description: A Response to John R. Reed and Efraim Sicher[*1]

LEONA TOKER

It is with gratitude that I read John R. Reed's letter of response, which concludes by saying that the main concern of my article on *Our Mutual Friend* is the artistic achievement of the novel. Indeed, I see one of the constituents of the aesthetic merit of the novel in the mastery with which narrative details that pertain to what Benjamin Harshav has called "External Field of Reference" are transformed when they enter patterns of new significance in the "Internal Frame of Reference," turning, as it were, from issues into motifs, especially motifs of decline and regeneration. Reed's letter, as well as Efraim Sicher's informative response essay, have stimulated further thinking about the aesthetic feat accomplished in that novel. This can be seen as what in *The Company We Keep* Wayne Booth has described as *coduction* (72-73)—changing one's attitude or opinion under the influence of strongly held views of other readers. In the present case, *coduction* is not a matter of altering my reading of *Our Mutual Friend*; rather it is a matter of further developing the thought started in the 2006/2007 article upon the input of the ideas and observations of others.

Timely input has also come from the doctoral work-in-progress by Nurit Kerner, who studies Dickens's novels, especially *Little Dorrit*, in terms of what in *The Production of Presence* Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has called "meaning effects" and "presence effects" (104-11). To paraph-

[*]Reference: Leona Toker, "Decadence and Renewal in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 47-59; John R. Reed, "A Letter of Response to Leona Toker," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 34-35; Efraim Sicher, "Reanimation, Regeneration, Re-evaluation: Rereading *Our Mutual Friend*," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 36-44.

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

rase Gumbrecht's argument all too briefly, aesthetic effects of a work of art may be associated with our perceptual response to the features of the work's presence. This is, predominantly, the case with music and with visual arts. But the aesthetic effect of a work also extends to our intellectual response, a response to the meanings, and especially to the coherent patterns of meaning, to which the work gives rise. The literary work creates the conditions for our construction of meaning—as well as for our enjoyment of the process and, in particular, our joy at its success.[2] The aesthetic response to literary works is dominated by meaning effects,[3] but it also involves presence effects, such as enjoyment of the style, of the material texture of the work (especially when it is read out loud), as well as enjoyment of whatever the text elicits in our cooperative imagination—images, scenes and dialogues, portraits, ekphrastic landscapes, and, as is often the case with Dickens, the mysterious sense of the characters' presence. Whereas it is not possible to foresee or objectively assess the nature and intensity of such effects in each individual reading, it is possible to note the conditions that the text creates for these effects, irrespective of whether or not such conditions are actualized by every reader.

What seems to specifically characterize the aesthetic effect of *Our Mutual Friend* is that, while the effects of Dickens's style are here as infallible as those in his other major novels, *the imaginary-presence effects tend to be aversive* (a large proportion of the images conjured up are ugly, jarring, disgusting), *but their cumulative impact is either cancelled, redeemed, lightened, or compensated by meaning effects.*

Since Aristotle, it has been recognized that what is monstrous in nature can be beauteous in a work of art. In a work that belongs to what in *Laokoon* Lessing discussed as time-arts, the succession of images can prevent the gelling of an ugly moment in our minds. In *Our Mutual Friend*, however, long chains of images such as the river sequences, the sequences in Venus's shop, around the dust-mounds, in the Wilfers' dwelling, or at Wegg's stall, conjure up presences that, unless tempered by meaning effects, can hurt our senses, even if, following Dickens's own curiosity, we experience them in the mode of "the

attraction of repulsion" (Baumgarten 228-29).[4] *Our Mutual Friend* is a novel without a hero: the role of Eugene ("well-born") Wrayburn as a *jeune premier* is largely subverted by his wryness, and the ill-starred John Harmon is too deliberately self-effacing to constitute a strong and aesthetically appealing presence; though not repulsive themselves, these two characters do not suffice to offset the aversive potential of most other male characters, not even with the help of Mortimer Lightwood and Mrs. Boffin. Lizzie Hexam, one of the heroines, is consistently presented as a jewel amidst mud, but the mud often successfully competes with the jewel for our attention—as it also does in the case of the other beautiful heroine, Bella Wilfer. Broad generalizations are vulnerable to counterexamples, but in *Our Mutual Friend* one will be hard put to find a lengthy strand of images that would give pleasure unmixed with disgust. Moreover, repulsive presence is often merely implied—which may sometimes enhance rather than reduce its effect because it entails eliciting an even more active participation of the initiated reader in concretizing the import of the words on the page. As John Reed notes, "Dickens can convey to a knowing audience that he is including human and animal waste in the general term 'dust,' without having to say it" (34), linking the prototype of Betty Higden in Mayhew's pure-finder (see Nelson) to a foreign gentleman's reading horse-dung in Podsnap's remark about what can be found in London streets (Podsnap means prosperity). "Another sign," adds Reed, "is when Sloppy throws Wegg into the dust cart, creating a splash. Dust does not splash" (35). The reader is thus asked to cooperate with the text in conjuring up images whose presence effects tend to be aversive.

Why, then, does the novel please its audiences? "Attraction of repulsion" is only part of the answer; many readers are fascinated not *by* but *despite* the aversive presences in *Our Mutual Friend*. In a recent issue of *Partial Answers* different but complementary answers are suggested: Sally Ledger's, Angelika Zirker's, Jeffrey Wallen's, and Bernard Harrison's articles demonstrate, among other things, the inseparability of Dickens's sociopolitical and scientific interests from

the artistic felicity and philosophical seriousness of this novel. In reference to *Great Expectations*, Adina Ciugureanu suggests that some of the pleasures of reading stem from darker psychological sources. This may also be partly true of *Our Mutual Friend*—there might, for instance, be a touch of *Schadenfreude* in our response to the treacherous intriguer Wegg's being disposed of like a piece of garbage. This type of readerly pleasure is not, however, a presence effect. The aesthetic touch in it is limited to the appreciation of the aptness with which the metaphor of garbage removal is literalized; Wegg's downfall (literal and figurative) taking the shape of a "splash" in the garbage cart is in keeping with the dominant feature of the novel's city-scape, as well as with the macrometaphors clustering around the idea of what today we call recycling.

The meaning effects of *Our Mutual Friend* do not so much complement as compensate for this novel's problematic presence effects. They are particularly abundant and ample in this novel—no wonder its echoes reach as far as Joyce's *Ulysses*. What my article "Decadence and Renewal" was working up to (but stopped half-way) was a discussion of this novel with the help of the semiological triad: *semantics / syntactics / pragmatics* (see Morris: 217-20). In literary analysis (see also Toker, "The Semiological Model" and "Syntactics—Semantics—Pragmatics") *semantics* stands for the relationship of the constituents of the text with referents, specific or generalized, outside the text—the dictionary meanings of words and expressions, the import of historical and geographical references, the link of textual details with "External Fields of Reference" (EFR). *Syntactics* (not to be confused with "syntax") is a matter of the interrelationship among textual details within the text itself—their interconnections in "Internal Fields of Reference" (IFR). These interconnections often modify the meanings that words or narrative details trail in from the External Fields of Reference: if the knowledge of the EFR can enrich our understanding of IFR, the latter can affect our ideas about the extra-textual reality in unexpected ways. *Pragmatics* is a matter of the interface between the author and his/her target and "hurdle" audiences,[5] as well as of the

interface between the text and the different "interpretive communities" (cf. Fish), communities that may include new target audiences and unforeseen hurdle readerships.[6]

Scholarly as well as classroom reading of a literary text in accordance with this semiological model would be analogous to what, after Gilbert Ryle (482-83) and Clifford Geertz, has been called a "thick description," which would take into account the intersections of numerous planes of context. It would include supplying relevant information about extra-textual realities which textual details may trail in (and in the light of which the meaning of those details as understood by a century and a half after the composition of the novel may be modified), tracing the intratextual interconnections between those details and offering observations, usually hypothetical, about the way in which different features of the narrative enter a communication with the target and the hurdle audiences, as well as the general reader.

It is only in the most general way that the above scholarly operations pertain to the aesthetic effects of the text. The aesthetic meaning effects are mainly a matter of syntactics—the collocation and interplay of the novel's images, motifs, themes. However, watching how semantic details, such as dust mounds and dust carts from the EFR are transformed into building blocks of the IFR (with sanitation, for instance, turning from issue into theme), may also be a source of aesthetic pleasure. There may, of course, be a touch of self-congratulation in our finding a piece of historical information that suddenly enriches our understanding of the novel's setting. Nevertheless, sudden understanding of the way a narrative detail is illumined by external information, and sudden perception of its new links with other narrative details are part of the aesthetic response—a condition for an exhilarating moment of disinterested admiration.

John Reed's observations thicken the description of the syntactics of *Our Mutual Friend*, whether by the intratextual links of the "splash" or by supplementing the thematic patterns of decline, recycling, and renewal by the recurrent motif of paralyzing dependence (35). Efraim

Sicher's contribution mainly thickens the contexts, the EFR, by remarks about the urban sanitation and planning (and lack of the latter) as reflected in the novel and as elided in it,[7] by relevant motifs from Dickens's journalistic writings, and by the thoughts of his contemporaries such as John Ruskin. Sicher's remarks, belonging to the agenda of semantics rather than syntactics, do not lend support to Reed's reading of Wegg's "splash": he reminds us that human waste was mainly disposed of by Night-Soil Men (38). One could object that not all the citizens of London could afford the nocturnal visits of these sanitation workers; therefore part of the so-called Night Soil would, indeed, have ended up in Mr. Harmon's dust carts; and the provenance of the liquid substance might, in any case, be heterogeneous. However that may be, the intratextual congruence of the "splash" with the novel's other "dust" motifs can be a source of precisely the kind of meaning effects that reduce the negative-presence quality of the images that carry them.

Where Sicher's suggestions conflict with mine is on a question that belongs to pragmatics. My essay suggested, among other things, that Dickens's representing Betty Hidgen as involved in laundry work rather than in pure-finding (the occupation of her prototype in Mayhew's book) is largely an audience-oriented euphemistic option, even though not unconnected to the novel's other motifs. By contrast, Sicher notes that "Victorian readers would not have been too prudish to explore the sewers in *London Labour and the London Poor*" (39). This, indeed, is true for large parts of Dickens's audience, but not for the part that Dickens emblematized by "the young person" whose tender ears have to be protected from whatever is deemed destabilizing or repulsive. Dickens's satire is aimed not so much at this "young person" herself as at her Podsnappian would-be protectors, his hurdle audience that objects to representations of anything that would "bring a blush into the cheek of the young person" (I.11.129). Yet, a joke usually contains a grain of truth, and in this case Mr. Podsnap may be a caricature of Dickens's own cautiousness. To thicken our account of Wegg's "splash," one may note that the word addresses different

parts of the audience at once: those who hear its referential implications and those who are genuinely not aware of them, or can pretend to be so, or who can be diverted from them by the meaning-effects of the text, or feel pleased by the emblematic removal of the abject from the field of their attention.

The interaction between semantics and syntactics may well involve theoretical works that were written even a long time after the novels on which they provide indirect retroactive comment. Such work can be seen as an External Field of *ex post-facto* Reference. Sicher's essay makes a very useful suggestion of one of such sources, Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*. Sicher's contribution to the syntactics of *Our Mutual Friend* is his application of Mumford's notion of *Abbau*, "a process of destruction necessary to urban development" (41), to the novel's motifs of decline, degeneration, and misguided accretions.[8] *Abbau* can, indeed, be seen as another macrometaphor of the novel, supplied through hindsight to connect value shifts and sea changes with renewal. Yet *Abbau*, partial demolition for the sake of renovation, is an uneasy value. Eugene Wrayburn must, like Charlotte Brontë's Rochester, endure bodily damage in order to understand (or make his family understand) that the social conventions which mattered once need not matter any more. But the bodily integrity that has been placed on the altar of spiritual renewal is a painful sacrifice. When the dilapidated, deteriorating, rotting, or ill-advised is demolished in order to erect a rational new setting for improved social relations, who knows what underappreciated meanings may be destroyed in the process—witness the cases of the modernizing Charley Hexam and Bradley Headstone, or that of the Veneerings whose leitmotif is "brand new." It is telling that the saintly Riah wears his anachronistic gabardines and that it is among the chaos of rooftops that Jenny Wren finds her paradise. The slow patient work of recycling and piecemeal renovation pursued throughout *Our Mutual Friend* may perhaps be pitted not only against the processes of degradation and decline but also against the option of a cavalier dismantling of the old for the sake

of the streamlined new. The latter dilemma is still with us, and may be one of the reasons for the continued resonance of *Our Mutual Friend*.

The Hebrew University
Jerusalem

NOTES

[1]Work on this rejoinder has been supported by a grant (1465/10) from the Israel Science Foundation.

[2]See also Toker, *Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction* 5, 42n14, 209.

[3]Meaning effects are difficult to distinguish from the suspense fed by the detective and romantic interests of the plot, but suspense, though part and parcel of aesthetic response, does not, in itself, grant genuine aesthetic experience. It entails the reader's power struggle with the text for the processing of information: wanting to know how things are going to work out is not disinterested. What is largely at stake in the cases of suspense is our expectations and the prospects of their being fulfilled or thwarted.

[4]On Dickens's use of the phrase see also Sicher's essay, esp. 54-56.

[5]"Hurdle audience" (see Toker, "Target Audience") is the part of the public that stands between the work and its target audience; it may be an official censorship agency, or the directors of a lending library, or heads of families who might not allow certain books into the house. Paradoxically, the hurdle audience is sometimes a part of the readership, one that rejects a work but not without examining it, rejects it despite—or because of—the pleasure received.

[6]Spanning all the three terms of this model is the intertextual dimension of a work—a matter of semantics (by way of meaning-enhancing allusion), of syntactics (by way of subversion), or of pragmatics (by way of the author's self-positioning in respect to a literary tradition).

[7]Cf. Sicher's remarks in his response (43) on Joseph Bazalgette's sewage reconstruction project.

[8]One of such accretions is the chaotic new neighbourhood where Headstone's school is located (cf. II.1.218—see Sicher's response (42).

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