



LANGUAGE AND HUMOUR IN CHARLES DICKENS'S *LITTLE DORRIT*

LINGUAGEM E HUMOR EM *A PEQUENA DORRIT*, DE CHARLES DICKENS

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RESUMO: A linguagem de Charles Dickens evoluiu durante toda a sua carreira, caracteristicamente tornando-se mais sofisticada em seus romances posteriores tais como *Little Dorrit*. Considerados pela crítica e público como mais sérios e calculadamente mais sombrios do que sucessos anteriores, estes romances estão também cheios de humor e ironia. A diferença é que o humor também se tornou mais sofisticado e mordaz. Este ensaio discute – com suporte crítico de obras como *The Dark Effigy, a study of Dickens's imagination*, escrita pelo professor John Carey da Universidade de Oxford – a violência implicada pelo autor no humor de sua linguagem madura e como esse humor é produzido em acordo com as falhas de comunicação e os diálogos obstruídos dos personagens de *Little Dorrit*. A comunicação problemática atrofia o fluxo de energia que condiz com o tema de prisão do romance, impossibilitando os personagens de serem livres e felizes, e enfatizando as causas desse problema na também atrofiada sociedade Vitoriana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Charles Dickens; *Little Dorrit*; Literatura Vitoriana.

ABSTRACT: The language of Charles Dickens evolved throughout his career, characteristically becoming more sophisticated in his later novels such as *Little Dorrit*. Considered by the critic and the public more serious and calculatedly darker than previous successes those novels are as well full of humour and irony. The difference is that the humour also became more sophisticated and poignant. This essay discusses – supported by criticism such as *The Dark Effigy: a study of Dickens's Imagination* by professor John Carrey from Oxford University – the violence implied by the author in the humour of his mature language and how this humour is produced along with misunderstandings and blocked dialogue of characters in *Little Dorrit*. The problematic communication produces an atrophied flow of energy which matches the prison theme of the novel enabling those characters to be free and happy, and emphasising the causes for this problems in their also atrophied Victorian society.

KEYWORDS: Charles Dickens; *Little Dorrit*; Victorian Literature.

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of *Little Dorrit*, one of Charles Dickens's darkest novels, the first main character presented to the reader is the mysterious Monsieur Rigaud – caged like a bird in the “villainous” prison of Marseilles. He has a “theatrical air”, his moustache and nose move in a very sinister and cruel manner when he laughs and although he claims to be a gentleman, he is not quite one: “He had a certain air of being a handsome man – which he was not; and a certain air of being a well-bred man – which he was not. It was mere swagger and challenge; but in this particular, as in many others, blustering assertion goes for proof, half over the world.”¹

Rigaud's manners are sly and tricky and the ways they are presented exemplify many of the language devices used by Dickens in *Little Dorrit*. Things are not what they seem at a first glance and we are constantly invited to pay a closer attention to what the narrator implies by the careful use of his vocabulary. The dangerous Rigaud, for instance, is more than an evil version of Mr Jingle², but like his Pickwickian predecessor, he exposes the irony in a way that few other characters can. He sees beyond social hypocrisy and by following him we discover that the air of the novel is not only contaminated with disease, but is also thick with pretension.

It is often difficult to see the humour in Dickens's later novels, given their subtlety in comparison to the more innocent kind of humour present in earlier novels such as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Martin Chuzzlewit* and especially *The Pickwick Papers*. Novels like *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* tend to be regarded for their seriousness and mature social criticism. As modern conceptions tend to define him as a serious Victorian writer, his humour is often undervalued or simply ignored. However a few studies, noticeably the ones by James R. Kincaid and John Carey, respectively published in 1972 and 1973, define Dickens as an essentially comic author. John Forster, also identified back in 1847 humour as Dickens's leading quality.³ Once humour is admitted as a characteristic of his language from beginning to end of his work, we are finally free to acknowledge all of Dickens's ‘inimitable and inexhaustible linguistic exuberance’.⁴

Carey, in *The Violent Effigy*, argues that the effort to conceal the comic status of Dickens is due to the suspicion that comedy is light, artificial and escapist when compared to tragedy – a real interpretation of life, preserver of man's dignity and self-importance – while “comedy uncovers the absurd truth, which is why people are so afraid of being laughed at in real life”. The case is that when Dickens laughed, he had no limits and from Religion to dead babies,

1. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 10. Originally serialized between 1855-1857; published in book form in 1857.

2. Character from *The Pickwick Papers*, also by Charles Dickens, serialized between 1836-1837; published in book form in 1837.

3. FORSTER, John. *The life of Charles Dickens*. Vol. 3. p 308.

4. MILLER. *Others*. p. 58.

nothing was safe from his ironical view of the Victorian world.⁵ To Malcom Andrews, the Dickensian laughter is little discussed because humour is considered something very difficult both to do and to write about in any intensively analytical way; in short, difficult to explain what makes one laugh. And the difficulty leads to the dropping of the subject.⁶

The aim of this essay is to identify and discuss this comic side of Dickens in one of his later novels, *Little Dorrit*; how the irony works in such a pessimistic text, full of dead ends and where the very characters deny themselves hope and the ability to see the positive side of things. The comedy is there, but it is not the comedy of *Pickwick* anymore, and this was one of the reasons for the rejection of the dark phase novels by many of Dickens's top admirers by the time of their publication. Yet, the large public responded growing larger at each novel, and making of *Little Dorrit* by far more successful than all its predecessors.⁷

Firstly, considering the novel as a publication in serial form, there were advantages and disadvantages Dickens experienced by the period of *Little Dorrit*: the act of writing for the specific length of each number shaped every one of his novels, involving many language devices to keep both the rhythm and the public's curiosity for the next instalment. It is not possible to study Dickens's style ignoring this

format. Then moving to a closer analysis of the language and humour employed in *Little Dorrit*, let us see how humour is conveyed mainly through the narrator who emphasises characters' lack of communication skills, and understand how it reinforces the novel's negative mood. The Circumlocution Office certainly plays an important part here. Sarcasm is used to describe its constant obstruction of legal affairs caused by a bureaucratic system especially made *not* to work. The communication problems of the Circumlocution Office spread and contaminate even characters that are not directly related to it. Finally, the essay focuses on characters whose particular ways of communication influence in the comic effect they produce: Edmund Sparkler, John Babbit Cavalletto, Maggy, Mr F.'s aunt, and Mrs Merdle's parrot and others. Some are believed not to communicate at all, but there might be something in their idiosyncratic speech which can both make us laugh and think of that serious and complicated social net.

PUBLICATION OF *LITTLE DORRIT*

To begin with the serialization of *Little Dorrit*: The dates of publication were from December of 1855 to the double number in June of 1857. Charles Dickens started writing the first number in May of 1855 and for the five following months worked under the title of *Nobody's Fault* – meant as an ironic comment on the evasion or denial of responsibility

5. CAREY. *The Violent Effigy: a study of Dickens' imagination*. p. 7.

6. ANDREWS, Malcom. *Dickensian Laughter*. p. IX

7. SLATER. Charles Dickens. p. 425.

for national disgraces by Britain's ruling class. His working notes for the first number show that there was much uncertainty about the course the novel would take though. As the plot developed little by little it became clear that there was much more in his mind than the original satirical target. The prison plot gained force as biographical aspects were introduced and the forty-year-old hero, Arthur Clennam, acquired personal characteristics which resembled his creator. In November Dickens was writing the fourth number and, only a few weeks before the release of the first, convinced of the centrality of Amy's character in the story, changed the title to *Little Dorrit*.⁸ Going through Michael Slater's detailed reconstitution of the many months Dickens dedicated to the writing of *Little Dorrit*, we see that the process of creation, like for all his serials, developed throughout its publication. The reasons for this were actually less related to following the readers' response than to the amount of time and dedication each number demanded to be completed. Dickens could hardly afford during his career to write in great advance before the numbers came out (when *Dorrit*, instalment second, was published, he was only two numbers ahead of the printers) due to his constant multitasking life of magazine editor, amateur actor and director, philanthropist, public reader, among other activities. The pressure became a routine to him from very early in the serialization of *The Pickwick Papers*.

Serialization was a Victorian phenomenon, started around the 1830s. The instalments were attractive because they were cheap enough to be consumed by the poor and also because they were short and sparse enough to welcome readers who could not dedicated themselves to many hours of reading. The serial format was especially fit to contribute to the popularization of a recurrent feature of Victorian literature that was to highlight life's progress, telling stories of lives within its temporal sequence. The images of human life depicted in the nineteenth-century often stressed length more than shortness and explored more the options than life's limitations, say Lund and Hughes in 1991.⁹ During long months following the same heroes this sense was perfectly felt by the readers. Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy and others published novels in the format. Serializations allowed the public to assimilate each part before the next; talk and speculated about the plot until the arrival of next number. Hughes and Lund say that the response to such involvement was that readers had their own sense of lived experience and passing time entwined with such extended works.¹⁰ On the other hand, according to Coolidge, some disadvantages were credited to the format as well. The stories were often accused of being a collection of fragments that did not compose a unified whole; or were considered sensationalist because of the frequency instalments contained

8. SLATER. *Charles Dickens*. p. 391-392.

9. HUGHES; LUND. *The Victorian serial*. p. 1.

10. HUGHES; LUND. *The Victorian serial*. p. 8.

dramatic incidents or ended in a climax with a question left unanswered to keep the public's interest and therefore sales until the end.¹¹

Dickens specialized in creating plots that held readers for nineteen, twenty months in a row with his experience of writing in the serial form for his entire career. Each number was usually composed by a slow beginning, a middle building up to something arranged, and a climatic end.¹²

A good example is *Little Dorrit's* ninth number, chapters thirty to thirty-two: It starts with the arrival of the mysterious Blandois at Mrs Clennan's house. The smiling stranger introduces himself as a gentleman from Paris who came to have business with the house of Clennam and Co. The chapter is a preparation for future action, in which we have plenty of Rigaud-Bladois's gallantry towards Arthur's mother, Affery and Flintwinch; his constant study for future negotiations – which culminate in his diabolically silent laugh – and it ends with him leaving London without explanation. In chapter thirty-one we meet Mrs Plornish's father, Old Nandy, William Dorrit former collegian, whom he goes to visit the Marshalsea accompanied by Amy. The chapter reaches its climax when Fanny and Mr Dorrit severely reproach Amy for the humiliation she caused to the family by walking in public with a pauper. Arthur also visits the Marshalsea and finally manages to stay alone with Amy.

Chapter thirty-three Arthur confesses to Amy his love for Pet, but cannot realize how much Amy herself is in love with him. He keeps calling her his 'little child' and tells her about his felling to be getting old. The chapter ends with Arthur leaving the prison and meeting Mr Panks who has a great discovery related with the Father of the Marshalsea to tell him something readers will know only in the next number.

A common remark about Dickens's writing process is that he used to accept suggestions from his friends when he was not sure about some or other arrangement in the story. The most polemical case of all was when Bulwer Lytton, left what seems to be his only lasting contribution to the canon English literature: he persuaded Dickens to change the ending of *Great Expectations* to an apparently happier one.¹³ Usually, Dickens's most loyal contributor was John Forster, his long-time friend and biographer. Forster wrote that in the *Little Dorrit* process, some of Dickens's doubts were related to Mr Merdle's death, since the speculator Sadleir, in whom the character was inspired, had committed suicide while the book was already being written; and Miss Wade's controversial connection with the main plot. Dickens wrote to Forster defending the insertion of this woman and her self-tormented psychology because he had observed this in a real woman, although he never revealed

11. COOLIDGE. *Charles Dickens as serial novelist*. p. 56.

12. COOLIDGE. *Charles Dickens as serial novelist*. p. 57

13. SLATER. *Charles Dickens*. p. 494-495.

14. SLATER. *Charles Dickens*. p. 420 and p. 125.

15. KAPLAN. *Dickens: a biography*. p. 340-341.

16. KAPLAN. *Dickens: a biography*. p. 340.

17. DICKENS, Charles. *Little Dorrit*. p. 114.

who, and was fascinated by her paranoid which would fit the prison theme of the novel.¹⁴ In the overall, *Little Dorrit* reveals its author's usual writing rhythms, periods of uncertainty, depression, and intense restlessness, for which Dickens applied his also usual remedies: complaints, long walks, then return to his desk, walking around the house, sitting by the fire, looking through the windows, tearing his hair, sitting down to write again and writing nothing, getting up once more, and so on.¹⁵

The novel's reception provoked divided responses. Despite the high sales, Dickens had "strong opposition from those who felt that he should stick to comedy and domestic drama", being them critics or friends.¹⁶ Part of the negative reception changed when the political satire of the Circumlocution Office appeared. "The most important Department under Government", where "no public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time"¹⁷ was only introduced in the third number, leaving early reviewers to deal mostly with the introduction of the Marshalsea life – Amy, her sad family story – the return of Arthur Clennam to England and his personal conflicts. And this is another characteristic of the serialization: differently from reviewing a novel as a whole, nobody knows which aspects will be highlighted and which ones would be forgotten along the story's progression. As the tendency was to see Dickens'

in a darker mood of late, the drama called more attention than the satire because it came first. *Little Dorrit*, the most sprawling of Dickens's mature novels, demonstrates how artistically conscious Dickens had become.¹⁸ And if he disappointed many in his opposition to the episodic light manner of *Nickleby*,¹⁹ he nevertheless was aware of the evolution of his style and that another *Pickwick* at that point of his career would not work for him or his readers.

COMMUNICATION AND PRISON

The kind of language employed in serial could not be very different from the one present in daily life of the readers. Because of the interruption between instalments, authors worked with the primary mode of the Victorian age to keep people's attention: realism. It allowed the public to shift easily from their routines to the story and back to their routines with "much the same set of critical faculties".²⁰ The accessibility of Dickens's texts contributed to the success from the start; earlier works like *Oliver Twist* and *Old Curiosity Shop* gained readers and became popular due to their familiar language. With time, he remodels some of his language, "his verbal irony gains confidence and his stylistic comedy becomes both darker and more targeted"²¹; yet he remained accessible to the common public, and at the same time offered more elaborated symbolism to the more sophisticated reader.

18. FORD. *Dickens and his readers*. p. 124-125.

19. *Nicholas Nickleby* by Dickens was serialized between 1838-1839; published in book form in 1838.

20. HUGHES; LUND. *The Victorian serial*. p. 11.

21. STEWART. *Dickens and language*. p. 137.

In his book *Dickens and the Trials of Imagination*, Garret Stewart describes Dickens's favourite linguistic devices that became so characteristic of his style. Among metaphors, alliterations, ambiguities, animism, all the wealth of synonyms and adjective combinations at his command "Dickens never loses sight of the possible excess, the ready comedy of circumlocution and variation". He says in *Pickwick* things do not amuse, they afford amusement, and people do not agree, instead they express their concurrence.²² The excessive elaboration of simple scenes creates the comic effect. For instance, when Mr Pickwick runs after his hat in chapter four, his feelings about it become very complex: "There are very few moments in a man's existence when he experiences so much ludicrous distress, or meets with so little charitable commiseration, as when he is in pursuit of his own hat".²³ Passages like this are easily found in the earlier novels. Irony is strongly present in *Nicholas Nickleby* when Miss Petowker, missing the appropriate word to describe Nicholas, asks what people called when lords broke off door-knockers, beat policeman and played at coaches with other people's money. Mr Lillyvick answers 'aristocratic' and she says that that was the very word she was looking for.²⁴ In *Old Curiosity Shop*, Dick Swiveller tells the single gentleman that the man of the house is a lawyer and the woman of the house is a dragon. "The single gentleman, perhaps because he had met with such things in

22. STEWART. *Dickens and the trials of imagination*. p. 7.

23. DICKENS. *The Pickwick papers*. p. 62.

24. DICKENS. *Nicholas Nickleby*. p. 184.

his travels, or perhaps because he *was* a single gentleman, evinced no surprise".²⁵

Now *Little Dorrit* is a novel obsessed with the prison theme and with the negative point of view that does not suggest humour in the first place. The Dorrits live in prison, both in the physical – the Marshalsea – and psychological; characters in general live imprisoned in cells, in houses, in social rules. It is a world dominated by the negative mode, where dark always predominates over light. When Arthur arrives in London he sees everything that could by possibility furnish relief to an overworked people is bolted and barred, as if the Plague were in the city. The negative description continues emphasizing what is not there, in contrast with what he left in China:

No pictures, no unfamiliar animals, no rare plants or flowers, no natural or artificial wonders of the ancient world. [...] Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up. Nothing for the spent toiler to do, but to compare the monotony of his seventh day with the monotony of his sixth days, think what a weary life he led, and make the best of it – or the worse, according to the probabilities.²⁶

Interestingly, after twenty years in China, Arthur still feels that English animals and plants are the familiar ones.

25. DICKENS. *Old curiosity shop*. p. 266.

26. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 28.

He quickly sinks in the gloomy atmosphere of London that shapes the novel. In the mood he finds himself in, it is much more probable that rather than the best, the worst will be made of the monotony. This is only how pessimistically the novel starts. The negative mode is the natural form of everything: the government – the Circumlocution Office refuses to work for the people; human relations – Miss Wade is not legitimate, Mrs Clennam is not Arthur's mother, Mr Casby is not benevolent; and Arthur himself who is a nobody.²⁷ James Kincaid draws a very interesting parallel between the plots of *Little Dorrit* and *David Copperfield* showing the many aspects in which the later novel negates the hope and happiness of the earlier. Both Arthur Clennam and David Copperfield suffer violence in childhood: Arthur is rejected by his mother and David by his father-in-law. But while David grows and overcomes the bad times Arthur never finds a way to reconcile neither with his mother nor with his own frustrated youth. David feels insecure about his relationship with silly Dora and finally finds true happiness with the mature Agnes. Arthur feels attracted to Pet, who is also girlish and silly, but does not even try to conquer her, not even to fulfil the frustrating relationship before finding true love with the mature Amy. Other characters also allow comparisons, like Mr Dick and Maggy. While Mr Dick from *Copperfield* in his fool's innocence helps restore the peace between Dr Strong and his wife, Maggy with her

nonsensical talk only wanders around Amy in the first half, is left aside when the Dorrits come to their fortune and never attains or gains anything. She is a crudely realistic character with mental problems that demonstrates that in *Little Dorrit* things do not necessarily improve in the end.²⁸

DARK HUMOUR

Comedy in *Little Dorrit* is very different from what it was in *Pickwick*. Although Sam Weller's sense of humour was basically sarcastic, it referred to hypothetical violence. In *Dorrit* violence is real and related with serious issues involving money, integrity, self-consciousness. The humour here may lead us to laugh at characters' suffering, as we can exemplify with the way Affery is treated. The old servant to the Clennam's house suffers both physical and psychological abuse, but still her situation ends up provoking more laughter than sympathy.

Mistress Affery, whose fear of thunder and lightning was only to be equalled by her dread of the haunted house with a premature and preternatural darkness in it, stood undecided whether to go in or not, until the question was settled for her by the door blowing upon her in a violent gust of wind and shutting her out.²⁹

27. INGHAM. Nobody's fault: the scope of the negative in *Little Dorrit*. p. 98-100.

28. KINCAID. Dickens and the rhetoric of laughter: the attack on comedy. *The Victorian web*.

29. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 343-344.

Even the door abuses Affery, and even though her pain is real she never provokes any sense of indignation from the narrator nor other characters. Nobody tries to help her. Dickens plays with alliteration using the words “premature and preternatural”, which allied with her childish fears of thunder, lightning and the haunted house, makes a ridiculous picture of Affery.

Laughter is the most intimate reaction we can give. It implies not only our understanding, but also our complicity with the joke. Laughter can “express hostility, aggression, vestiges of the jungle, whoop of triumph after murder, and other unpleasant impulses”.³⁰ Among its many possible meanings, Kincaid says that a hearty laughter, pure and filled only with sympathy, if exists, is a rare thing. There are plenty of such examples in *Little Dorrit*; Dickens created the comedy in this novel by mixing “the humorous with the vicious, the sad, the terrifying and the disgusting”.³¹ The humorous tone does not predominate in the whole novel, though. The Marshalsea parts involving Mr Dorrit, his colleagues, Amy and her trials are quite serious, taken by the pessimistic tone which does not allow the humour in. It has to do with the fact that Amy’s character represents hope in that dark world. She is a positive catalyst in the novel, free from the sarcasm used to denounce falsehood and greed, purifying the air and bringing honesty, unselfishness and devotion.

The heart of the negative humour in *Little Dorrit* is surely the Circumlocution Office. It was the idea of satirizing public institutions like this that first came into Dickens’s mind when he planned the novel. He had a profound scorn for the structure of government upon which civilized society depended and thought that “humankind’s attempts to surround its puny concerns with gravity and decorum seemed hilarious”.³² We are introduced to the Circumlocution Office only in chapter ten, when Arthur is trying to help with Mr Dorrit’s case.

This glorious establishment had been early in the field, when the one sublime principle involving the difficult art of governing a country, was first distinctly revealed to statesmen. It had been foremost to study that bright revelation, and to carry its shining influence through the whole of the official proceedings. Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving – HOW NOT TO DO IT.³³

Dickens applies irony to demonstrate everything the Office does NOT do and how it ends by punishing anyone who needs to depend on it. He uses lists to name all the people who did not get any assistance from it: mechanics, natural philosophers, soldiers, sailors, petitioners,

30. KINCAID. Dickens and the rhetoric of laughter: the nature of laughter. *The Victorian web*.

31. KINCAID. Dickens and the rhetoric of laughter: attack on comedy. *The Victorian web*.

32. CAREY. *The violent effigy: a study of dickens’ imagination*. p. 8.

33. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 104.

memorialists; the main business of the Office is to obstruct whatever form of change of the *status quo*. Arthur has his request denied as well as everybody else who want to know, to reward, to punish, etc. The absurdity tends to make the reader as nervous as Arthur while he goes from department to department, finding dead ends after dead ends.

The Barnacles are a family large enough to be dispersed all over the public offices and they control the Circumlocution Office. The most memorable member of them is Barnacle Junior who receives Arthur. The contrast between the ways both characters speak is what makes their interaction amusing. Arthur has a polite, respectful speech, even though he is being treated as a nobody, while Barnacle is inflated and speaks arrogantly repeating his catch line “Look here!”. His eye glass keeps falling all the time which denounces his false air of respectability. He just wants to get rid of Arthur giving him piles of forms and confusing instructions, knowing by experience that people give up in the middle of it anyway. To tire people out is the main tactics of the Circumlocution Office to avoid trouble – which means, work.

Obstructed communication is not an exclusive feature of the Circumlocution Office. The world of *Little Dorrit* is full of people who cannot communicate properly or avoid communication, contributing for their isolation and the

psychological prisons. Miss Wade, Rigaud, Mrs Clennam, Flintwinch, Mr Casby – they all refuse to disclose their secrets and thus block the flowing of information. Blocked communication is also a characteristic of the love attempts: Amy does not want to hear John Chivery; Fanny evades from Sparkler; Arthur does not tell Pet about his love and later refuses to understand that Amy was in love with him all the time.³⁴

But humour goes beyond the Barnacles. By the time Mrs Merdle is trying to prevent her son, Edmund Sparkler, to fall in the claws of Fanny Dorrit, she asks Mr Merdle to get a public job for his son-in law. The young Sparkler is a monomaniac (he offers marriage to all manner of undesirable young ladies) of limited talents “who might have been a clog upon another man”.³⁵ Of course he finds his place nowhere else but at the Circumlocution Office. And as if the narrator’s description of Sparkler was not enough to make an amusing picture of him, he himself also speaks. When asked by his mother what people said about Mr Merdle he says: “Fellers referring to my Governor – Expression not my own – occasionally compliment my Governor in a very handsome way on being immensely rich and knowing – perfect phenomenon of Buyer and Banker and that – but say the shop sits heavily on him”.³⁶ His omission of some articles and auxiliary verbs remind of Mr Jingle’s language

34. INGHAM. Nobody’s fault: the scope of the negative in *Little Dorrit*. p. 101-102.

35. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 248.

36. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 398.

too. However, G. L. Brook says that Edmund Sparkler, like Fascination Fladgeby in *Our Mutual Friend*, is not funny, but a bore because he speaks too little. He stresses that Dickens was also familiar with the bores that speak too much. Mrs Nickleby from *Nicholas Nickleby* and Mrs Skewton from *Dombey and Son* speak faster than they think and often wander far away and off from their original subject.³⁷ If they are really bores to readers is questionable because they provide much more fun than their serious friends: Nicholas and Kate, Edith and Mr Dombey.

In *Little Dorrit* we have the uncontrollable talker in the breathless Flora Finching. She is clumsy and has taken to drink and eat too much in the last few years, but her acting and her speech make of Flora a special comic character. She appears in the fourth instalment and from then on stumbles in her fast unpunctuated talk until the end. Yet, behind all the talk, giggles and sherry, Flora is sadly conscious of the romantic past that will never be recovered with Arthur. Again, if in *David Copperfield* David is happy to find Agnes waiting for him after many years, Arthur is disappointed to see how his former fiancée got fat and behaves ridiculously. In the end Flora understands Arthur's embarrassment and leaves the way for Amy. Flora is aware of her present appearance and even her uncontrollable talking, of which she

often apologises, still manages to move on in good spirits. Yet her legacy, Mr F.'s Aunt, has nothing to hide.

Mr F.'s Aunt seems like an avengeful alter ego of Flora, yelling angrily at Arthur: "Give him a meal of chaff, I tell you", said Mr F.'s Aunt, glaring round Flora on her enemy. "It's the only thing for a prod stomach. Let him eat up every morsel. Drat him, give him a meal of chaff!".³⁸ She also wants to throw him out of the window. But if on one hand Mr F.'s Aunt as the personification of Flora's rejected feelings, on the other she is a living demonstration of Flora's good heart and patience because of the care Aunt receives. Flora does not even bother her aggressive behaviour and deals with Aunt as kindly as possible. The pair Flora and Mr F.'s Aunt can be seen as one of what Brian Rosenberg calls "pairs of dissimilar" or "antagonistic" characters: They are many in the novel: Rigaud and Cavalletto, Casby and Panks, William and Frederick Dorrit, Miss Wade, Tattycoram and Pet Meagles, Maggy and Amy Dorrit. One displays the conflicts concealed beneath the apparent identity of the other, exploring different responses from the same individual;³⁹ an appropriate device in a story of imprisoned selves.

More than Flora's or Aunt's alone, it is the articulation of both personalities that results in the most comic and complex match.

37. BROOK. *The language of Dickens*. p. 175.

38. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 537.

39. ROSENBERG. *Little Dorrit's shadows: character and contradiction in Dickens*. p. 137.

Flora's rambling strings of free association are almost impenetrable because she in fact speaks both parts of a dialogue. This means that she can assume total comprehension of her presuppositions because there is no need of a response from the actual interlocutor whom she uses as a prop. In the case of Mr F.'s Aunt this tendency to hermeticism becomes complete. This lady has a propensity to offer remarks in a deep warning voice, which, being totally uncalled for by anything said by anybody, and traceable to no association of ideas, confounded and terrified the mind.⁴⁰

In a novel where very few characters are able to break free from their prisons, like Mr Panks cutting Mr Casby's hair in the end, fools like Mr F's Aunt and Maggy have a certain liberty of mind denied to others, but because they seem incoherent, they are called mad. Their mind prisons work differently from Miss Wade's bitterness. They do not choose to conceal or disclose, but naturally release the suffering and distress of the world around them. But while Maggy is rather calm, Mr. F's Aunt is evil and rebellious. She is the most powerful and singular expression of all the pain contained in the universe of *Little Dorrit*. She is both the vehicle and the victim of the evil force that is abroad in the world. The same force that drives her to swear and yell is the agent that dehumanizes her, turning her into a deformed doll that does not even have a name.⁴¹ She makes

us laugh, no doubt, with her "liveliness", as Flora would call it. Dickens's uses his favourite combinations of animism and the grotesque to produce such figure as the little lady.

Maggy is not a doll, but an adult who believes to be a child, cared by the adult who looks like a child. Maggy's first appearance is descriptive, however very little objective. With contradictory clauses and vague intransitive verbs such as "seems" or "appears" Dickens leaves the reader without a clear image of her.⁴² Maggy *seems* to be blind, *but* she is not; her face was not *exceedingly* ugly, *though* it was only redeemed from being so by a smile, etc. As we get more used to Maggy her looks are not very important, but the way she behaves. When Amy refuses to see Arthur, Maggy understands her Little Mother is crying and asks permission to cry as well because she loves Amy sincerely. Yet, she uses her foolishness to manage a partial scape. Maggy is selfish and often cares of her own needs over Amy's. When both spend the night in the street "she became querulous about the cold, and shivered and whimpered".⁴³ Maggy often reminds people that she is only ten years old, asking for protection and love, maybe like a less self-denying Amy would do. The humour provoked by her is dark because she often seems too realistic, from beginning to end. She will never do anything like the noble Mr Dick, product of

40. FROW. Voice and register in *Little Dorrit*. p. 269.

41. WILDE. Mr. F's aunt and the analogical structure of *Little Dorrit*. p. 36.

42. ROSENBERG. *Little Dorrit's shadows: character and contradiction in Dickens*. p. 55.

43. MCNIGHT. *Idiots, madmen, and other prisoners in Dickens*. p. 174.

a more optimistic and hopeful Dickens. Maggy will pick her potatoes from the floor, say nonsense and that is all.

Communication is a problem to other characters as well. To Mr Baptist Cavalletto, the fact that he does not speak English when he first arrives at Bleeding Heart Yard helps him remain incognito for a while, unnoticed by Rigaud, but it is nevertheless a difficulty. There are very funny moments involving his relation with the Plornishes, and Mrs Plornish's attempts to teach him English. "They spoke very loud to him, as if he were stone deaf. 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".⁴⁴ Dickens makes fun of the way Bleeding Heart Yarders treat Baptist – kindly, but almost as if he were a retard – only because he cannot speak the language. In the end the foreigner eventually learns how to speak English very well, despite Mrs Plornish's insistence in making it more difficult by trying to make it easier for him. Foreigners' difficulties with the language are a comic construction Dickens used frequently. In *Our Mutual Friend* Mr Podsnap is less patient than the Plornishes when he teaches English to the foreign gentleman in the middle of a dinner: "Enormously Rich, We say [...] Our English verbs do not terminate in *mong* and we pronounce the *ch* as if there were a *t* before it".⁴⁵ In *Little Dorrit* to Mr Meagles, foreign languages are an inconvenience as well, especially

when he does not have Pet as a translator. He complains about French and refuses to learn it, which has a touch of Dickens's own feelings towards the language he never mastered.⁴⁶

Animals cannot speak, but sometimes seem to be more intelligent than people, for comic effect. Mrs Merdle's parrot always has something to convey. Imagining that the power of the universe wanted to manifest itself in the Merdles residence, it could not be through Mr F's Aunt because she does not have access to this group of people. The Merdles' parrot is the one here who constantly interrupts conversations with shrieks, every time Mrs Merdle pronounces the word "society", and expressively finishes the sentence for her when she talks too much about Mr Merdle's wealth and influence. The bird laughs, mocks dancing without moving his feet, watches with his head on one side and presides conferences from the top of his cage. The parrot's behaviour is actually presented as aggressive, like Mr F's Aunt, considering that parrots are expected to shriek, differently from people. "He trails himself all over the outside of his golden cage, with the aid of his cruel beak and his black tongue".⁴⁷ It exposes the falsity of the snobbish Mrs Merdle and bites the stupid Mr. Merdle.

Mr Merdle is a victim of his family. He is treated disrespectfully by his wife and even by the butler; he cannot

44. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 303.

45. DICKENS. *Our Mutual friend*. p. 132.

46. BROOK. *The language of Dickens*. p. 69.

47. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 242.

express himself in public or make friends, despite being so successful in business. In his final scene, when he borrows Fanny's penknife (to commit suicide) the economical conversation, full of ambiguity, between him and her, seems the last efforts to control despair. In the end of the scene, Merdle leaves the house and walks down the road to "waltz and gyrate as if he were possessed by several devils", but we never actually know how he feels.⁴⁸ This "marvellously laconic" scene, as John Carey calls it, closes the Merdle circle followed by the ruin of thousands of investors who will *not* learn a great lesson after that. The airy Ferdinand Barnacle affirms when he visits Arthur in the Marshalsea that "the next man who has as large a capacity and as genuine a taste for swindling, will succeed as well".⁴⁹ Definitely, the end does not bring the promise of a brighter future, free of corruption.

CONCLUSION

Fools, foreigners, mad or not, they always try to convey something. The problem is when their language is so nonsensical that communication does not happen and so they are excluded. When Arthur can finally speak with Amy with nobody by, Maggy is there too, but Maggy counted as nobody. Mr F's Aunt speaks so angrily out of context that Alan Wilde says that "she is possessed by the universal parrot that makes of her its most powerful medium", which

means she does not make any sense for the ones around her and does not count.⁵⁰ Their ignorance, madness and sadness often provoke a humorous effect due to their lack of communicative skills. The Circumlocution Office is the symbol of obstructed communication as an institution that does not work for society but to take advantage of it; the humour comes from Dickens's own indignation and wish to satirize institutions like that.

In *The Pickwick Papers* Sam Weller said that "when a man bleeds inwardly, it is a dangerous thing for himself; but when he laughs inwardly, it bodes no good to other people".⁵¹ Along with Rigaud and his many silent diabolical laughs, the reader is invited to see in *Little Dorrit* people who are desperate to be taken seriously, desperate to impose themselves, desperate for power, as if these were the cure for the universal pains, but who are often just ridiculous. Dickens invites the reader to do as Rigaud: see beyond appearances and laugh at it. Sometimes it will be a laugh of sympathy, but most of the times it will be of scorn and mockery. His imagination used humour to criticize from government to the human behaviour, and it asked for very intimate and sometimes revealing responses from his readers, even if they laugh only inwardly.

48. CAREY. *The violent effigy: a study of Dickens' imagination*. p. 198-199.

49. DICKENS. *Little Dorrit*. p. 738.

50. WILDE. Mr. F's aunt and the analogical structure of *Little Dorrit*. p. 40.

51. DICKENS. *The Pickwick papers*. p. 411.

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