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Dickens as a Reader

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1. Introduction

Angelika Zirker (Tübingen)

3.2 'To Be Taken with a Grain of Salt': Charles Dickens and the Ambiguous Ghost Story[1]

For the 1865 Christmas edition of *All the Year Round*, Dickens wrote a collection of altogether three stories entitled 'Doctor Marigold.' The narrator Doctor Marigold, in the frame to his stories, explains that he wrote them as "Prescriptions [...] for [the] amusement and interest" (p. 453) of his deaf and dumb adopted daughter. The "Prescriptions" are "To be taken immediately," "To be taken with a grain of salt," and "To be taken for life." The first and the third tales deal with his own and his daughter's life stories, ending with her marriage.[2] The second story is different in its being (allegedly) a ghost story, with a first person narrator relating several ghostly encounters that lead to the solution of a murder case.[3]

This story, "To be taken with a grain of salt," has received some critical attention for mainly two reasons: firstly, Dickens changed the title of the story from 'The Trial for Murder' to its current one and thus made use of a proverb which can be read as a "warning" to the reader to "accept the statement with a certain amount of reserve."[4] The second aspect that has attracted literary

1 I would like to thank Matthias Bauer for discussing this story with me and for giving me helpful advice with regard to the topic of 'ambiguity.'

2 It is to be noted that Doctor Marigold is not a medical doctor, as his "Prescriptions" might suggest but he was given the first name 'Doctor.' He is in fact a 'Cheap Jack': "I was born on the Queen's highway, but it was the King's at that time. A doctor was fetched to my own mother by my own father, when it took place on a common; and in consequence of his being a kind gentleman, and accepting no fee but a tea-tray, I was named Doctor, out of gratitude and compliment to him" (p. 435). – All references are, if not otherwise indicated, to the Oxford edition of Dickens's *Christmas Stories*, ed. Margaret Lane, London: Oxford UP.

3 On Dickens's interest in ghost stories see, e. g. Stone, Harry (1979), *Dickens and the Invisible World: Fairy Tales, Fantasy and Novel-Making*, Bloomington: Indiana UP as well as his own commentaries in 'Nurse's Stories,' 'A Christmas Tree,' and in *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, ed. Bernard Darwin, London: Oxford UP, p. 118.

4 Wilson, F.P. (1970), *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (*ODEP*), Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 330. For the meaning of the proverb, see also *OED* "grain, *n.*[1]": '2.d. with a grain of salt [= modern Latin *cum grano salis*] : (to accept a statement) with a certain amount of reserve. Also in similar phrases, now esp. with a pinch of salt."

scholars is the narrative voice in the story which has been described as 'unreliable' with regard to the ghostly encounters that are narrated.[5]

What has not been commented on so far is the fact that Dickens in his title indicates and produces an ambiguity that is sustained throughout the narrative and eventually leaves the reader puzzled as to the resolution of the story and its events.[6] In this story, it appears, Dickens outwardly followed the tradition of writing a ghost story for the Christmas edition of his magazine but at the same time modified the effect of the story by making it ambiguous. The proverbial title thus can be read as a meta-communicative comment rather than a description of what is to follow (and therefore very different from the titles of other ghost stories, e. g. 'The Haunted House,' 'The Signalman' etc.): the narrative is not to be taken too seriously but to be read with 'reserve.' Dickens's focus is not primarily on ghosts but on the creation of an overall ambiguous story.

1. The Ambiguity of the Title

The title of this story, 'To be taken with a grain of salt,' can be regarded as wordplay: the whole collection of 'Doctor' Marigold is likened to medicine, to pills that are to be 'taken immediately,' 'for life,' and 'with a grain of salt.' This instance of play is highlighted by the fact that 'Doctor' is in this case not a professional designation but the first name of the narrator. Moreover, the title can be read literally, i. e. in its medical sense, or metaphorically, as in the proverb. The first sense, the medical reading, goes back to Pliny's *Natural History*, where the expression appears in Book 23:

> After the defeat of that mighty monarch, Mithridates, Cneius Pompeius found in his private cabinet a recipe for an antidote in his own hand-writing; it was to the following effect: – Take two dried walnuts, two figs, and twenty leaves of rue; pound them all together, with the addition *of a grain of salt*; if a person takes this mixture fasting, he will be proof against all poisons for that day. Walnut kernels, chewed by a man fasting, and applied to the wound, effect an instantaneous cure, it is said, of bites inflicted by a mad dog. (my emphasis)[7]

5 See especially Greenman, David J. (1989), 'Dickens's Ultimate Achievement in the Ghost Story: "To Be Taken with a Grain of Salt" and "The Signalman"' *The Dickensian* 85, pp. 40–48. Neither Glancy, Ruth (1987), 'Dickens and Christmas' *The Dickensian* 83, p. 67, nor Valzania, Raffaella (1999), 'Dickens e la revisitazione della Ghost Story' *Il confronto letterario quaderni di letterature straniere moderne e comparate dell' Università di Pavia* 32, pp. 385–406 comment on this. Hardy, Barbara (2008), *Dickens and Creativity*, London: Continuum does not at all mention the ambiguity of the title (p. 45) nor comment on the narrative voice, although her chapter ('The Artist as Narrator in *Doctor Marigold*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*') suggests a more fulsome discussion of this Christmas story by Dickens.

6 On ambiguity in more general terms and on the ambiguity of texts in particular, see, e. g. Bauer, Matthias et al. (2010), 'Dimensionen der Ambiguität' *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 40, pp. 35–6.

The 'grain of salt' in its literal sense is here mentioned in a recipe for an antidote to poison. The metaphorical sense can be found in literary texts as early as 1599 and 1647, usually expressing a warning that the statement just made cannot be trusted.[8] This shows that both meanings of the proverbial expression have existed side by side over time.

The inherent ambiguity of the phrase was taken into account by Riley's *Dictionary of Latin Quotations* (1856), in which the author gives the following explanation:

> *Cum grano salis. Prov.*—'With a grain of salt.' With something which will help us to swallow it; with some latitude or allowance. Said of anything to which we are unable to give implicit credence.[9]

Both the medical and the proverbial meaning of the expression coincide here, as much as they do in Doctor Marigold's 'prescriptions' and the content of the story, which is ambiguous.[10]

7 The Latin original reads: "in sanctuariis Mithridatis maximi regis devicti Cn. Pompeius invenit in peculiari commentario ipsius manu conpositionem antidoti e duabus nucibus siccis, item ficis totidem et rutae foliis xx simul tritis, addito salis grano." The translation of Pliny by John Bostock and Henry Thomas Riley, a physician and a lawyer who took to translating Latin authors, was first published in 1855–57. Pliny (1855), *The Natural History*, London: Taylor and Francis, Cambridge / MA: Harvard UP, p. 23.77.149.

8 The *ODEP* gives 1599 as the first reference: "Rainolds *Overthrow Stage Plays* 79 Thinke you that you had spoken with any graine of salt?" (*ODEP*, p. 330); the *OED* lists the following as the first occurrence: "1647 J. Trapp *Comm. Epist. & Rev.* (Rev. vi. 11) This is to be taken with a grain of salt" (*OED*, 'grain, *n.*[1]2.d.).

9 Riley, Henry Thomas (1856), *Dictionary of Latin Quotations, Proverbs, Maxims, and Mottos, Classical and Mediaeval, Including Law Terms and Phrases: With a Selection of Greek Quotations*, London: Henry G. Bohn, p. 66. Unlike in other cases, Riley does not refer to the source of the proverb, but it is obvious that he knew it from his translation of Pliny.

10 A somewhat similar function can be found in Edward Lear's *Nonsense Cookery* and his recipe 'To Make an Amblongus Pie' where, at the end, he notes to "add a pinch of salt." Lear, Edward (2001), *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*, ed. Holbrook Jackson, London: Faber & Faber, pp. 123–4, which not only refers to the seasoning but also acts as a meta-commentary. On the ambiguity of Lear's wordplay in this recipe see Zirker, Angelika (2010), 'Don't Play With Your Food? Edward Lear's Nonsense Cookery and Limericks' *The Pleasures and Horrors of Eating: The Cultural History of Eating in Anglophone Literature*, ed. Marion Gymnich / Norbert Lennartz, Göttingen: Bonn UP, p. 238.

2. The Ambiguity of the Story

Even though Dickens changed the title of the story from 'The Trial for Murder' into 'To be taken with a grain of salt,' the content of the story, at least on one level, does indeed deal with a 'trial for murder.' It is told by a homodiegetic narrator who begins his narrative as follows:

> I have always noticed a prevalent want of courage, even among persons of superior intelligence and culture, as to imparting their own psychological experiences when those have been of a strange sort. Almost all men are afraid that what they could relate in such wise would find no parallel or response in a listener's internal life, and might be suspected or laughed at. A truthful traveller, who should have seen some extraordinary creature in the likeness of a sea-serpent, would have no fear of mentioning it; but the same traveller, having had some singular presentiment, impulse, vagary of thought, vision (so-called), dream, or some other remarkable *mental impression*, would hesitate considerably before he would own to it. (pp. 455–56; my emphasis)

This first paragraph is rather conspicuous, at least in retrospect, that is after one has read the whole story: it sounds like a justification of the narrative that is to come, but also like an attempt to dispel the reader's possible prejudice, i.e. his scepticism towards "mental impression[s]." This effect is underlined by the subsequent paragraph, in which the narrator refers to cases of "spectral illusion" in his "private circle of friends," and ends with this sentence: "It cannot be referred to my inheritance of any developed peculiarity, nor had I ever before any at all similar experience, nor have I ever had any at all similar experience since" (p. 456). It is as if he wanted to assure his readers of his sanity, which, in the course of the story, makes him all the more suspicious.

After these preliminary remarks begins the story proper, with the narrator reading about a murder in the newspaper. The murder was committed in the victim's bedroom, and while reading about this, the narrator "seems to see that bedroom passing through [his] room, like a picture impossibly painted on a running river" (p. 456). When he looks out of the window after this, he sees two men walking behind one another: "The foremost man often looked back over his shoulder. The second man followed him [...] with his right hand menacingly raised" (p. 457). The gesture is heeded by nobody in the street, which surprises the narrator. This is the first time he sees these men, one of whom turns out to be the "figure" of the murdered man reported on in the newspaper.

His first vision of the two men in the street is followed by a description of his own situation, which means that he now portrays his own person, before returning to the events of his story:

> I am a bachelor, and my valet and his wife constitute my whole establishment. My occupation is in a certain branch bank, and I wish that my duties as head of a department were as light as they are popularly supposed to be. They kept me in town that autumn, when I stood in need of change. I was not ill, but I was not well. My reader is to make the most that can be reasonably made of my feeling jaded, having a depressing sense upon me of a monotonous life, and being 'slightly dyspeptic.' I am assured by my renowned doctor that my real state of health at that time justifies no stronger description, and I quote his own from his written answer to my request for it. (p. 458)

As in the first paragraphs of the story, the narrator wants to establish himself as credible, as someone stating facts, and this seems to be the function of his detailed explanations. But his eagerness to establish psychological credibility also evokes "some scepticism about his psychological equilibrium,"[11] especially so as the narrator describes himself in terms that do not actually point towards a particularly stable mental state;[12] thus, while he apparently wants to create a certain image of himself, an objective one (see, e.g., the reference to his doctor), the reader may construe something different, especially when rereading the tale.

The narrator's (subjective) descriptions continue: shortly after a second vision of the murdered man, the narrator is made a member of the jury that tries the man he saw with the phantom; that man is charged with the murder of the other man, who followed him on Piccadilly. On the day of his summoning for the jury, the narrator sees this man again. While the narrator is in his own bed-room – and he gives us the very details of his apartment's setup when describing the incident[13] – he sees a man open the door to his dressing-room who beckons to the narrator and then closes the door again. His servant had stood with his back

11 Greenman (1989), p. 41. "The reader must be careful not to be misled by the narrator into granting him perfect reliability. The opening paragraphs of the story, ostensibly designed to establish his credibility, may instead be read as clues to his psychological imbalance. He is too rational, too careful to rule out anything abnormal in his own psyche." Greenman (1989), p. 42. The narrator's attitude is reminiscent of the homodiegetic narrator in Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' but with a twist as here, in Dickens, the reader cannot be entirely sure what is happening. This is also the reason why the mere label of 'unreliability' does not do justice to the complexity of the narrative situation in this story. On reliability in narrative texts see, e.g., Booth, Wayne C. (1961), *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, esp. 158–9; Diengott, Nilli (1995), 'Narration and Focalization – The Implications for the Issue of Reliability in Narrative' *Journal of Literary Semantics* 24, pp. 42–9; Yacobi, Tamar (1981), 'Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem' *Poetics Today* 2, p. 121.

12 His physical state may be indicative of psychological problems, as, for instance, in the case of Mr. Merdle in *Little Dorrit*, who is likewise described as being "dyspeptic:" "'You are well, I hope, Mr. Merdle?' 'I am as well as I – yes, I am as well as I usually am,' said Mr Merdle. 'Your occupations must be immense.' 'Tolerably so. But – Oh dear, no, there's much the matter with me,' said Mr Merdle, looking round the room. 'A little dyspeptic?' Mr Dorrit hinted.'Very likely. [...]'" Dickens, Charles (1968), *Little Dorrit*, ed. John Holloway, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 674. See also chapter 21 'Mr Merdle's Complaint' in volume I of *Little Dorrit*, when he is first introduced (p. 299).

13 This is a typical strategy of the narrator: he mixes detailed and realistic descriptions with 'supernatural' events, i.e. the ghostly encounters are set in an everyday and fully inconspicuous environment.

towards the door, but upon the narrator laying his "hand upon his breast," he exclaims: "Oh Lord, yes, sir! A dead man beckoning!" (p. 459). The servant cannot possibly have seen the man, and the narrator explains the supernatural occurrence in terms of yet other supernatural, "occult" means: "The change in him was so startling, when I touched him, that I fully believe he derived his impression in some occult manner from me at that instant" (p. 459). However, it actually remains wholly unresolved how his servant came to know about what was literally going on behind his back.

This incident illustrates in how far the events that are described by the narrator are ambiguous: the reader cannot be sure if the "impression" was at that moment indeed derived from the narrator to his servant "in some occult manner," which would suggest that some nonverbal transmission of impressions is possible (which might imply the real existence of ghosts) – or whether he even is so obsessed by his own belief in the events that he ends up being convinced of something that is in reality not true, or whether the narrator has made up the incident and his servant's reaction. This generates three readings of the story so far: either the appearance of the phantom is real and therefore perceptible – and this perception can be transmitted to someone else; or the narrator is mad and obsessed by the idea of the phantom appearing to him; or, and this has only very implicitly been suggested so far, he is trying to make us believe that the phantom does appear, for whichever reason. In each case, the text acquires a different function: it is either a ghost story that wants to show that there are, to speak in Hamlet's words, 'more things between heaven and earth' than we might be aware of; or Dickens wants to give his readers access to the psyche of a madman; or the narrator wants to set his reader on the wrong track, for instance, in order to obfuscate the truth.

The narrator now goes on to present the development of the case.[14] When he describes his first day at court, the subjectivity of his impressions is brought to the foreground, together with a great amount of uncertainty on the narrator's behalf:

> I *think* that, until I was conducted by officers into the old court and saw its crowded state, I did not know that the murderer was to be tried that day. I *think* that, until I was so helped into the old court with considerable difficulty, I did not know into which of the two courts sitting my summons would take me. But this must not be received as a positive assertion, for I am not completely satisfied in my mind on either point. (p. 460)[15]

14 He tells the reader that the suspected murderer "had been committed to Newgate for trial" (p. 458) and that the Sessions had been postponed (p. 458). The remainder of the tale deals with court proceedings and further visions of the murdered man.

15 He begins his account of the first day at court with the description of the rather gothic surroundings: "The appointed morning was a raw morning in the month of November. There was a dense brown fog in Piccadilly, and it became positively black and in the last degree oppressive east of Temple Bar" (p. 460), thereby catering to the generic demands and conventions of the ghost story. On Gothic elements combined with realistic ones in Dickens's ghost stories, see, e.g., Vescovi, Alessandro (2000), 'The Bagman, the Signalman and Dickens's Ghost Story' *Dickens: The Craft of Fiction and the Challenge of Reading. Proceedings of the Milan Symposium, Gargnano 1998*, ed. Rossana Bonadei, Milan: Unicopli, p. 119.

The highlighted repetition of "think" (emphasis in original) not only points towards the subjectivity of his impressions but also to the fact that he is not sure as to the reality of the events he describes, especially so as each is followed by the declaration that he "did not know." At the end of the passage, he himself qualifies his account in explaining that what he says cannot "be received as a positive assertion," underlining again that, although his statement as such is true, the events may not, which results in a certain degree of ambiguity with regard to the events and his narrative: he may either be trying to suggest that he had some supernatural premonition without wanting to be held responsible for it, or he wants to insinuate that he might have known the facts (or not), which would be part of a certain strategy of obfuscation that he pursues.

His description of the trial begins with his recognition of the suspect as "the first of the two men who had gone down Piccadilly" (p. 460). At the same time, the man becomes "violently agitated" on seeing the narrator and asks his attorney to challenge him as member of the jury, which is, however, unsuccessful.[16] The narrator then even becomes foreman of the jury.

The reader does not learn a lot about the defendant; one might even argue that the narrator tries to distract his reader's attention from him:

> Both on the ground already explained, that I wish to avoid reviving the unwholesome memory of that murderer, and also because a detailed account of his long trial is by no means indispensable to my narrative, I shall confine myself to such incidents in the ten days and nights during which we, the jury, were kept together, as directly bear on my own curious personal experience. It is in that, and not in the murderer, that I seek to interest my reader. It is to that, and not to a page of the Newgate Calendar, that I beg attention. (p. 461)

He neither wants to fully focus on the events of the trial nor on the person who presumably committed the crime, and he gives two kinds of reasons for this: the objective reason being that the man should not be recognisable;[17] the narratological one that he wants to restrict his narrative to his "own curious personal experience." However, the question remains for whom the memory of this trial would be "unwholesome" and why.

16 The reason for this request is only revealed to the reader at the end of the story.

17 "It does not signify how many years ago, or how few, a certain murder was committed in England which attracted great attention. [...] I purposely abstain from giving any direct clue to the criminal's individuality" (p. 456).

The status of the narrator remains ambiguous. He openly comments on his uncertainty with regard to facts at several points in the narrative, then gives many particulars and details on apparent marginalia to illustrate his exactitude and refrains from giving an explanation for appearances and events, e.g. when the phantom appears in his bedroom. This way of narrating continues to leave open a spectrum of how to interpret the events: there is still the possibility that the narrator reports actual supernatural occurrences; or that he believes himself to be reporting actual supernatural incidents, while he is in fact mad or obsessed with an idea; or that the narrator is lying. And these three possibilities are sustained throughout the narrative and are left unresolved even when the story ends.

On the second day of the trial, some strange events take place: the narrator is unable to count his fellow jurymen, and when he asks one of them to try, he cannot do it either; at the same time, however, the narrator is perfectly able to count the strokes of the church clock.[18] The strangeness of this inability to count leads to his "inward foreshadowing of that figure that was surely coming" (p. 461).[19] This speaks for the second possible reading of the story: he is possessed by the thought that he sees these visions and interprets everything that happens in light of this belief. But then the figure does indeed appear, and his "inward foreshadowing" proves to have been correct.

In the evening, after the retirement of the jurymen to the London Tavern, where they all sleep in one large room, the narrator joins Mr. Harker, the officer who holds them "in safe-keeping" (p. 462), for some snuff and a chat before going to sleep. All other jurymen are already in their beds. Suddenly, Mr. Harker cries out "Who is this?"

> Following Mr. Harker's eyes, and looking along the room, I saw again the figure I expected – the second of the two men who had gone down Piccadilly. I rose, and advanced a few steps; then stopped, and looked round at Mr. Harker. He was quite unconcerned, laughed, and said in a pleasant way, 'I thought for a moment we had a thirteenth juryman, without a bed. But I see it is the moonlight.' (p. 462)

While, for a moment, the reader is led to believe that the apparition is now finally seen by someone else, this belief is shattered when Mr. Harker actually comments on his 'thinking' that there was one juryman too many, but then explains his vision away by attributing what he saw to the moonlight. Again, this leads to

18 "On the second morning of the trial, after evidence had been taken for two hours (I heard the church clocks strike), happening to cast my eyes over my brother jurymen, I found an inexplicable difficulty in counting them. [...] In short, I made them one too many" (p. 461).

19 He stresses his "inward" premonitions throughout, e.g. earlier, after the short appearance of the figure in his bedroom, he states that he had "no inward expectation of seeing the figure in the dressing-room, and I did not see it there" (p. 459).

ambiguity: does Mr. Harker in fact see a thirteenth juryman – as does the narrator – and say "it is the moonlight" only because he does not believe in visions of any kind? But then he would probably not be "unconcerned" and laughing. Or does the narrator also merely see the moonlight but thinks it is the man he saw go down Piccadilly because he *wants* to think so? This is likewise improbable as the narrator then goes on to describe what the figure does; he "proves" its existence by describing the effect of this nightly visit: the figure goes to every juryman's bed and looks "down pensively at each recumbent figure" (p. 462). The next morning all jurymen say that they "had dreamed of the murdered man last night" (p. 462), Mr. Harker and the narrator excepted. He concludes the account of this incident with the following statement: "I now felt as convinced that the second man who had gone down Piccadilly was the murdered man (so to speak), as if it had been borne into my comprehension by his immediate testimony. But even this took place, and in a manner for which I was not at all prepared" (p. 462). He stresses his *conviction* at this point – "I felt convinced" – and thus apparently wants to steer the reader towards an unequivocal reading of the events.

The description of this incident hence illustrates how the narrator tries to make his statement credible. But just before the incident, in his introduction of Mr. Harker, he had stressed an, at first seemingly inconspicuous, detail about the officer:[20] "He was intelligent, highly polite and obliging, and (I was glad to hear) much respected in the City. He had an agreeable presence, *good eyes*, enviable black whiskers and a fine sonorous voice" (p. 461; my emphasis). This not only shows that the accuracy when it comes to detail is mingled with highly subjective comments; but the added value judgement of Mr. Harker's eyes also helps stress an aspect that is relevant to the narrative: he has *good* eyes.[21] If this really is the case, why would he then have mistaken the moonlight for a thirteenth juryman? Or does his identifying what he saw as produced by moonlight prove that it was nothing but moonlight, because he has such good eyes? The overall ambiguity of the story stays intact, even despite – or because of – the added evidence, mainly because it leaves the vision with the narrator.

The combination of objective and realistic detail and subjective perception (or even value judgement) goes on for the remainder of the narrative and makes the ambiguity of the narrator pending: at times he seems to be almost omnis-

20 There are plenty of examples of these details; for instance, it is striking how precise his descriptions are, e.g., "Mr Harker's bed was drawn across the door" (p. 462), which is inconspicuous in itself but is a means to create credibility – and, of course, to prevent an alternative explanation, i.e. that someone might have been in the room for a moment.

21 The name is almost a telling one, cf. the meaning of "hark, *v.*" in the *OED:* "1. *trans.* To give ear or listen to; to hearken to, hear with active attention." This means that his senses and his perceptive abilities are emphasised through his name and his appearance.

cient, for instance, when he refers to Harker's "good eyes," at times he seems to be highly subjective and restricted in his perception and then gives "evidence" for his premonitions, thus trying to objectify them: he expects the appearance of the figure – and it appears; he is convinced of its identity – and the evidence is delivered to him. On the fifth day of the trial, "a miniature of the murdered man [...] was put in evidence" (p. 462). When it is handed to the Jury for inspection,

> the figure of the second man who had gone down Piccadilly impetuously started from the crowd, caught the miniature from the officer, and gave it to me with his own hands, at the same time saying, in a low and hollow tone, – before I saw the miniature, which was in a locket – '*I was younger then, and my face was not then drained of blood.*' It also came between me and the brother juryman to whom I would have given the miniature, and between him and the brother juryman to whom he would have given it, and so passed it on through the whole of our number [...]. Not one of them, however, detected this. (p. 463)

It remains wholly unexplained how it could be that the officer would not notice the miniature being taken away from him, and how the jurymen would not realise this either; how the voice of the figure remains unheard by everybody but the narrator; and how nobody "detected" anything, not even felt the appearance of the phantom, while later, when he makes his appearance among people, they faint and collapse.[22] What is more, this miniature does not really resemble the man the narrator has seen. The figure even comments on this and thus establishes a connection between the portrait and himself which, apparently, would not be obvious through the portrait alone.

After this incident, the figure continues to appear several times throughout the trial. At the end, when it comes to considering the verdict, there is some disagreement among the jurymen. It takes them almost two and a half hours to find the defendant guilty, and the narrator seems to be quite upset at this delay. It is mainly caused by three fellow jurymen that were introduced earlier in the tale, after the fifth day of the trial:

> a vestryman – the *densest* idiot I have ever seen at large – who met the *plainest* evidence with the *most preposterous* objections, and who was sided with by two *flabby parochial parasites*; all the three impanelled from a district so delivered over to fever that they ought to have been upon their own trial for five hundred murders. When these *mischievous blockheads* were at their *loudest* [...] (p. 463; my emphases)

22 "I saw it bending forward, and leaning over a very decent woman, as if to assure itself whether the Judges had resumed their seats or not. Immediately afterwards that woman screamed, fainted, and was carried out. So with the venerable, sagacious, and patient Judge who conducted the trial. When the case was over, and he settled himself and his papers to sum up, the murdered man, entering by the Judges' door, advanced to his Lordship's desk, and looked eagerly over his shoulder at the pages of his notes which he was turning. A change came over his Lordship's face; his hand stopped; the peculiar shiver, that I knew so well, passed over him [...]; and did not recover until he had drunk a glass of water" (pp. 464–5). The use of adjectives to describe these people – "decent woman," "venerable, sagacious, and patient Judge" – is quite striking, especially when it comes to his portrayal of characters that are not of his opinion or go against the grain of his perception (see below).

What is really noteworthy in this passage is how he disparages these sceptical fellow jurymen, for example by calling one "the densest idiot," and how he uses superlatives to describe his denigration. This somehow deceives the reader over the fact that, except for a miniature of the murdered man that is being handed around in court, no evidence whatsoever seems to have been provided. And when a witness appears who speaks in favour of the accused, the narrator comments on this as follows: "a witness to character, a woman, deposed to the prisoner's being the most amiable of mankind. The figure in that instant stood on the floor before her, looking her full in the face, and pointing out the prisoner's evil countenance with an extended arm and an outstretched finger" (p. 464). It is the narrator who describes the suspect's countenance as an "evil" one,[23] and the figure has to appear in this instance to "prove" the contrary of what is said by the witness.[24]

Moreover, the narrator refers to the "monotony of six of those interminable ten days" and the sameness of the experience throughout: "the same Judges and others on the bench, the same Murderer [...], the same lawyers [...], the same tones [...], the same scratching of the Judge's pen, the same ushers [...], the same lights [...], the same [...]" (p. 465).[25] He imitates the "wearisome monotony" even stylistically and refers to his perception, mostly visual and auditive. At the same time, he stresses his awareness of the events around him and the reliability of his perception as "the murdered man never lost one trace of his distinctness in my eyes, nor was he at any moment less distinct than anybody else" (p. 465).[26]

23 On Dickens's play with countenance and physiognomy, see Zirker, Angelika (2011), 'Physiognomy and the Reading of Character in *Our Mutual Friend*' *Partial Answers* 9, pp. 379–90.

24 The narrator, towards the ending of the story, refers to this incident again and writes about the figure's presence in court: "It seemed to me as if it were prevented, by laws to which I was not amenable, from fully revealing itself to others, and yet as if it could invisibly, dumbly and darkly overshadow their minds. [...] When the witness to character was confronted by the appearance, her eyes most certainly did follow the direction of its pointed finger, and rest in great hesitation and trouble upon the prisoner's face" (p. 464). He thus makes a causal connection of her movement with that of the finger.

25 'his *ennui* is limitless' Greenman (1989), p. 43.

26 The enormity of his boredom leads to Greenman's suggestion that "he was so bored that he invented or believed he really saw a ghost." Greenman's is one of the few articles that actually deals with this story. His focus is on the (lack of) reliability of the narrator, which he explains in terms of his psychological imbalance that is indicated at the beginning of the story. He concludes with deeming the narrator to be a "spectre" himself and the statement: "Of the sober documentations [...] the reader must be wary." Greenman (1989), p. 43, which he

But this monotony of the narrative as well as of the narrated events is eventually disrupted, once he comes to the ending of his story and the conclusion of the trial, when the prisoner is found guilty:

> The murderer, being asked by the judge, according to usage, whether he had anything to say before sentence of death should be passed upon him, indistinctly muttered something which was described in the leading newspapers of the following day as 'a few rambling, incoherent and half-audible words, in which he was understood to complain that he had not had a fair trial, because the foreman of the jury was prepossessed against him.' The remarkable declaration that he really made was this: '*My Lord, I knew I was a doomed man, when the foreman of my jury came into the box. My Lord, I knew he would never let me off, because before I was taken, he somehow got to my bedside in the night, woke me, and put a rope round my neck.*' (p. 466)

The ambiguity of the text is strengthened by the statement of the defendant.[27] Either the alleged murderer is able to see ghosts as well and thus was able to perceive the "apparition" of the narrator by his bedside; this reading suggests that there is a higher justice, working by supernatural means, which sees to it that the murder gets his deserved punishment, in spite of witnesses; but this supernatural justice might just as well be part of the narrator's obsession and his idea of the defendant being a murderer, which would mean that the narrator is mad; or, a third possibility, he is indeed trying to conceal his own guilt, that he is a murderer himself, which is further suggested by the fact that he puts a rope around the defendant's neck.[28]

relates to the frame of 'Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions.' What he presents in his article is a range of examples from the text that support this connection of psychological imbalance with unreliability. This at times leads to a reductive approach to the text, e.g., when he suggests that Dickens, "in his late stories, he presents the reader with events that are solidly positioned in the real, everyday world, characterized by fascination with *and* incredulity about the reality of uncanny, reappearing figures and recurring events." Greenman (1989), p. 41; for a similar view of the relation between the realistic setting and the mysterious events with regard to 'The Signalman,' see Day, Gary (1998), 'Figuring out the Signalman: Dickens and the Ghost Story' *Nineteenth Century Suspense*, ed. Clive Bloom, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 28; and Mengel, Ewald (1983), 'The Structure and Meaning of "The Signalman,"' *Studies in Short Fiction* 20, pp. 271–328. See also Henson, Louise (2005), 'Investigations and Fictions: Charles Dickens and Ghosts' *The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. Nicola Bown et al., Cambridge: Cambridge UP, p. 57. The confusion that the text evokes reflects that experienced by many contemporaries who attempted to define the boundary between madness and sanity in questions of the uncanny and the marvellous. For Dickens's interest in madness and mental phenomena, see, e.g. Kaplan, Fred (1975), *Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction*, Princeton: Princeton UP and MacKnight, Natalie (1993), *Idiots, Madmen and Other Prisoners in Dickens*, New York: St. Martin's P. What the present paper is trying to show goes beyond the mere statement of "unreliability" and "incredulity," and rather attempts to flesh out the inherent ambiguities within the story. On Dickens's treatment and use of ambiguity in more general terms, see Bauer, Matthias and Angelika Zirker (forthcoming), 'Dickens and Ambiguity: The Case of *A Tale of Two Cities*' *Dickens, Modernism, Modernity*, ed. Christine Huguet and Nathalie Vanfasse, Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire.

27 This ending has been described as providing "an amazing gothic surprise." Greenman (1989), p.41. The passage recalls an earlier explanation by the narrator: "When the murder was first discovered, no suspicion fell – or I ought rather to say, for I cannot be too precise in my facts, it was nowhere publicly hinted that any suspicion fell – on the man who was afterwards brought to trial" (p. 456). Here he only mentions – and he is indeed "precise in [his] facts" – that the suspicion of the man was "nowhere publicly hinted" at. He goes on to explain: "As no reference was at that time made to him in the newspapers, it is obviously impossible that any description of him can at that time have been given in the newspapers. It is essential that this fact be remembered" (pp. 456–7). But this explanation leaves open the possibility that he actually went to see the man and did stand at his bedside – it is a gap in his narrative, and the statement "[i]t is essential that this fact be remembered" becomes ambiguous: it can either refer to the reader, who has to remember this fact in order to find the narrator reliable; or it refers to the status of the narrator, who has kept his knowledge from his reader and is not reliable, because the man was only not hinted at "publicly," which does not exclude the narrator's knowledge of him, i. e. the narrator has merely not mentioned that he had seen the suspect before the actual trial and the encounter on Piccadilly.

3. Why Ambiguity? Or: Against 'Weakening the Terror'

The question remains to be asked why Dickens would not simply write a ghost story like *The Chimes* and *A Christmas Carol* in which ghosts appear and bring about a change in the main character or deliver a moral message. Part of the answer certainly lies in the fact that Dickens was not only a writer but also a reader of ghost stories, and his reading of one story by Gaskell gives some evidence that helps explain, or at least contextualises, the ambiguity of his own narrative.

In December 1852, Dickens wrote a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell to discuss a ghost story she had submitted for the Christmas edition of *Household Words*, 'The Old Nurse's Story.' He especially commented on the ending of the story:

> I have no doubt, according to every principle of art that is known to me from Shakspeare [sic] downwards, that you weaken the terror of the story by making them all see the phantoms at the end. And I feel a perfect conviction that the best readers will be the most certain to make this discovery. Nous verrons.[29]

The story by Gaskell is told by an old nurse about events in her youth when she moved to a house in the Fells with her young charge, the girl Rosamond – her listeners are Rosamond's daughters. The house, Furnivall Manor, is inhabited by an elderly woman, Miss Furnivall, her friend and several servants. After a few weeks at the house, the nurse, Hester, hears the organ in the main hall played,

28 This reading suggests an anticipation of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

29 Dickens, Charles (1988), *The Letters of Charles Dickens: The Pilgrim Edition*, ed. Madeline House et al., Oxford: Clarendon P, vol. 6, p. 815.

but, as she finds out, there is no player. Then, the child Rosamond meets another child outside, is lured away by her, and, when found, is almost frozen to death. The child appears again, always trying to lure Rosamond outside, into the cold winter weather.[30] The background to these events is finally revealed to Hester by an old servant: the old Lord had two daughters, Maude and Grace, both very proud and both in love with a musician who was their father's guest. The elder daughter secretly married him, had a child, and when her father found out about this,[31] struck the child on the shoulder with his crutch, expelled his daughter and her child from his house, and sent them out into the cold, where they died. At the end of the story, the ghost of the elder sister of Miss Furnivall appears to the household with her child and her father, who re-enacts the striking of his grandchild with his crutch. Next to them stands the phantom of Grace Furnivall – a young woman – who watches the scene "with a look of relentless hate and triumphant scorn,"[32] while the aged Miss Furnivall likewise watches the scene, cries out and begs for mercy. On seeing the scene from the past re-enacted by the spectres,[33] Miss Furnivall eventually breaks down, uttering the words: 'What is done in youth can never be undone in age!"[34] Gaskell's story is thus one of guilt and pride – and it concludes with the moral that those sins are neither forgotten nor forgiven in the course of time and cannot be 'undone.'[35]

Dickens's criticism of the ending of Gaskell's story refers to the fact that all members of the household can see the ghosts, and not just the child. His argument is an aesthetic one, referring to both tradition ("from Shakspeare [sic.] downwards")[36] and to current readership ("the best readers"). On December 17,

30 This is at least remotely similar to one of the stock features mentioned in Dickens's 'A Christmas Tree' – the Orphan Boy.

31 We are not told how the old Lord learnt about this; but it is implied that Grace gave away her elder sister's secret: "And all the while, Miss Grace stood by him, white and still as any stony; and, when he had ended, she heaved a great sigh, as much as to say her work was done, and her end was accomplished." Gaskell, Elizabeth (2004),'The Old Nurse's Story' *Gothic Tales*, ed. Laura Kranzler, London: Penguin, pp. 11 – 32, p. 28.

32 Ibid., p. 32.

33 The scene has a similar effect as when Scrooge sees the phantoms of the past in *A Christmas Carol.* I would like to thank Matthias Bauer for pointing out this similarity to me.

34 This is further evidence speaking for her giving away her sister's secret, as, otherwise, there would be less need for her to feel guilty; cf. above, n31.

35 Gaskell (2004), p. 32;'The Old Nurse's Story' was Gaskell's first ghost story. Cf. Sharps, John Geoffrey (1970), *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Work*, Fontwell: Linden P, p. 141. Sharps, argues in favour of Gaskell's ending, p. 144. For more readings of Gaskell's ghost story, see, e.g., Marroni, Francesco (2010), *A Reconsideration of Nineteenth Century English Fiction*, Rome: The John Cabot UP, pp. 120 – 136; Martin, Carol A. (1989), 'Gaskell's Ghosts Truths in Disguise' *Studies in the Novel* 21, pp. 27 – 39; and Uglow, Jenny (1995), 'Introduction. Elizabeth Gaskell' *Curios, If True Strange Tales*, ed. Jenny Uglow, London: Virago P, pp. vii – xiii.

36 He probably has *Macbeth* in mind here as well as *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar.* In *Hamlet*, the ghost is seen by different guards at the beginning but remains invisible to Gertrude. In his earlier ghost stories, for instance, in *A Christmas Carol* (1841), *The Chimes* (1844), and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* (1848), Dickens also has only the protagonists see ghosts.

however, he finally gives in: "I don't claim for my ending of the Nurse's Story that it would have made it a bit better. All I can urge in its behalf, is, that it is what I should have done myself."[37]

In referring to Shakespeare when it comes to avoiding any weakening of the terror evoked by the ghost's appearance, Dickens implicitly takes up an argument famously put forward by Ann Radcliffe when she reflects on the creation of 'terror' in opposition to 'horror' in her prologue to *Gaston de Blondeville*, later to be published as 'On the Supernatural in Poetry':

> 'How happens it then,' said Mr. S___, 'that objects of terror sometimes strike us very forcibly, when introduced into scenes of gaiety and splendour, as, for instance, in the Banquet scene in Macbeth?'
>
> 'They strike, then, chiefly by the force of contrast,' said W___; 'but the effect, though sudden and strong, is also transient; it is the thrill of horror and surprise, which they then communicate, rather than the deep and solemn feelings exited under more accordant circumstances, and left long upon the mind. Who ever suffered for the ghost of Banquo, the gloomy and sublime kind of terror, which that of Hamlet calls forth? though the appearance of Banquo, at the high festival of Macbeth, not only tells us that he is murdered, but recalls to our minds the fate of the gracious Duncan, laid in silence and death by those who, in this very scene, are reveling in his spoils. There, though deep pity mingles with our surprise and horror, we experience a far less degree of interest, and that interest too of an inferior kind. The union of grandeur and obscurity, which Mr. Burke describes as a sort of tranquillity [sic] tinged with terror, and which causes the sublime, is to be found only in Hamlet; or in scenes where circumstances of the same kind prevail.'[38]

The two travellers in this scene argue about the nature and creation of horror in opposition to terror. Horror is "transient," and it is achieved by a paralysing certitude, while terror is based on "uncertainty and obscurity" and is "left long upon the mind."[39]

37 Dickens (1988), *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 6, pp. 822 – 3. It is not the first time he asked her to change a story – Hopkins provides an overview of all requested changes, e.g., in the denouement of 'Lizzie Leigh' and 'The Heart of John Middleton.' See Hopkins, Annette B. (1946), 'Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 9, pp. 361 – 2. See also Nayder, Lilian (2002), *Unequal Partners: Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Victorian Authorship*, Ithaka / NY: Cornell UP on Gaskell's feeling "controlled" by Dickens when submitting stories to his periodical.

38 Radcliffe, Ann (1826), 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' *New Monthly Magazine* 16, pp. 146 – 52. *The Literary Gothic*, 23 July 2002 www.litgothic.com (accessed 18 March 2013).

39 When Radcliffe, Ann (1826), 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' refers to Burke, she probably thinks of the following passages that he writes about terror: "To make any thing very terrible,

Dickens's story likewise is based on obscurity, but he also goes beyond it in that the ambiguities he creates in his story remain unresolved;[40] rather, he gives us at least three distinct possibilities how to read the story, thus leaving the story "long upon the mind,"[41] and leaving his readers with a feeling of terror. The narrator is the only character who sees the phantom, and the subjectivity of perception creates ambiguity and allows for different readings. This is the effect that Dickens wanted to achieve and that he found lacking in Gaskell's story because she left no doubt as to the existence of ghosts.

obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds [...] It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it *affecting* to the imagination." Burke, Edmund (1958), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton, London: U of Notre Dame P, pp. 58–60. Burke here gives obscurity as the source of terror, and he stresses the fact that one cannot "form clear ideas" of "ghosts." Dickens, however, seems to take up this notion of 'clear ideas' to offer the reader distinct notions of what might be going on in the story, thus creating terror.

40 Burke attributes the creation of terror to the effects of words: "It may be observed that very polished languages, and such as are praised for their superior clearness and perspicuity, are generally deficient in strength" (p. 176). He thus juxtaposes perspicuity and "weakness" in effect with strength in effect that is implicitly based on obscurity. See his whole chapter on 'Words' in Part 5 of his *Enquiry* (pp. 161–77). – On the history of obscurity in rhetoric and literature, see, e.g. Walde, C. / Brandt, R. et al. (2003), 'Obscuritas: II. Mittelalter – VII Moderne' *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. Gert Ueding, 10 vols., Tübingen: Niemeyer, 6, pp. 358–68, pp. 368–83.

41 Henry James in *The Turn of a Screw* creates terror in a similar way, namely also based on ambiguity: does the narrator invent the ghosts, is she mad? Or is she a ghost herself? On the ambiguity in *Turn of a Screw* see Wilson, Edmund (1934), 'The Ambiguity of Henry James' *Hound & Horn* 7, pp. 385–406. See also Greenman: "What are we to think? All at once the ghost of the murdered man seems trivial; the living narrator himself has been an even more spectacular spectre! If a man is as bored with his daily routines as this narrator clearly is, might he not want to liven things up a bit with a bizarre tale that challenges his audience's skepticism, leaving them in awe of him. Henry James would have recognized the dodge, since his *The Turn of the Screw* is the ne plus ultra of this kind of tale." Greenman (1989), p. 43.

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3.3 A "comrade and friend": The Cultural Work of Charles Dickens's Periodicals

1. Conducting Cultural Work

Not only was Charles Dickens an avid reader, but he also cared intensely about what people read. At a time when the Victorian print market increasingly provided affordable reading matter for the masses, Dickens – like other literati of the day – was concerned about the quality of much of that reading matter. In the 'Preliminary Word' to the first issue of *Household Words* (1850), Dickens castigated cheap periodicals that published escapist fiction and sensational journalism whose existence he identified as a "national reproach."[1] Indeed, the blooming periodicals market of the day[2] provided a considerable amount of reading that Dickens considered cheap not only in price but also in quality –

1 Dickens, Charles (1850), 'Preliminary Word' *Household Words*, no. 1 (30 March 1850), pp. 1–2. All references are taken from *Dickens Journals Online*. The University of Buckingham. www.djo.org.uk

2 By the 1850s the periodicals market in Britain had begun to expand rapidly in proportion to growing literacy and the development of cost-efficient means of producing print. As Richard Altick notes in his landmark study of the *English Common Reader:* "Great as was the increase in book production between 1800 and 1900, the expansion of the periodical industry was greater still." Altick, Richard D. (1998), *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public*, Columbus / OH: Ohio State UP, p. 318. This was only natural, for of all forms of reading matter, periodicals – including newspapers – are best adapted for the needs of a mass audience. "[…] They appeal to the millions of men and women who consider the reading of a whole book too formidable a task even to be attempted" (p. 318). In 1859, the critic E.S. Dallas noted in his article 'Popular Literature – the Periodical Press' (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 85, January/February): "The rise of the periodical press is the great event of modern history. […] A periodical differs from a book in being calculated for rapid sale and for immediate effect. […] It is necessary, therefore, to the success of a periodical, that it should attain an instant popularity – in other words, that it should be calculated for the appreciation, not of a few, but of the many. Periodical literature is essentially a popular literature." King, Andrew and John Plunkett eds. (2004), *Popular Print Media 1820–1900*, 3 vols., London: Routledge, pp. 418–9. For further information on Victorian periodicals and their audiences cf. also Vann, Jerry Don and Rosemary T. van Arsdel eds. (1994), *Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society*, Toronto, U of Toronto P.