

Alessandro Vescovi

What Dickens (and His Readers) Knew: An Experiment in Knowledge Criticism

1. Knowledge Criticism

Over the last thirty years or so, original Dickens criticism has sprung from two opposite critical attitudes: one that I would call intra-Dickensian and the other extra-Dickensian. The former, pursued by scholars philologically and biographically bent, consists in discovering as many details as possible about the author and his subject matters in order to elucidate his novels by means of a thorough knowledge of his times. The extra-Dickensian approach, on the other hand, consists in wandering away from Dickens as we know him, and his world as we know it, in order to find new insights, often relying on concepts and knowledge that have become available after the writer's death. The intra-Dickensian scholarship has recently seen the completion of Dickens's epistolary, Slater's and Drew's editions of his journalist work and a number of biographies – among which the latest again by Michael Slater is particularly outstanding. This approach is based on the notion that the writings of a novelist are best elucidated by the facts of his life and especially by his other writings, both private and public. Now we can read about Nancy knowing that her creator would later patronise the house for fallen women or about Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce knowing that the same had lost an incredible amount of money in a suit against someone who had published a pirate edition of *Christmas Carol*.

The extra-Dickensian approach has also proved very fecund. Basically it consists in looking at Dickens's texts through different perspectives, most of them unknown in Dickens's times. This is the case with structuralism, semiology, deconstructionism, readers' response, psychoanalysis, gender studies, post-colonial studies etc. Besides, one should also include a side branch within this approach, namely that of reception studies, which include translations, rewritings, and the media. Extra-Dickensian approaches often have the advantage of innovation, but run the risk of fetching their intuitions too far. On the contrary, intra-Dickensian approaches are by definition never far-fetched, but may prove more predictable. In other words, intra-Dickensian scholarship may fail to grasp what elements are in Dickens's fiction that Dickens would not have publicly acknowledged, or of which he may not have been totally conscious, while extra-Dickensian scholarship may ascribe to Dickens opinions or insights which he did not intend and never dreamed of. A classic example of extra-Dickensian approaches may be J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive criticism, which has paved a new way for critics in the late 20th century; another example is in comparative literature: although Dickens and Baudelaire did not know each other's work, Michael Hollington's work on their perception of the metropolis contains very perceptive insights that help us assess the relationship of his characters with the urban environment. Obviously there cannot be any serious speculative extra-Dickensian criticism without a sound knowledge of Dickens's macrotext and context, the difference between the two modes does not lie in the outcome of the critical labour. Intra-Dickensian critics work to improve knowledge about Dickens's milieu, while extra-Dickensian work to provide novel interpretations.

I will suggest what I call knowledge studies as a means to study Dickens at the same time both intra- and extra-Dickensian. The object of knowledge studies is the way knowledge is used and conveyed through texts from one character to another, or from narrator to narratee, or from author to reader.

Obviously enough, the author cannot convey knowledge he does not possess, but he can convey intuitions he is hardly aware of, or knowledge of things that he would not publicly endorse. Thus knowledge may be offered under three forms: information (e.g. historical facts in *Tale of Two Cities*), in the form of metaphor or allegory (e.g. the exploration of greed in *Christmas Carol*), or in the form of intuition, in the latter case it may, or more often may not, be conceptualised. By concept I mean the classic basic association of a word and an idea. So it can be said that concepts such as 'Podsnappery' or 'circumlocutional' (both of which have justly found space in the *OED*) are the result of the author's understanding of contemporary society, which he offers to his readers. Other intuitions are more difficult to conceptualise, like the absurdity of relying on a male heir, while one has a daughter in the case of Mr Dombey, or the fogginess of the chancery in *Bleak House*. In this case the raw intuition is offered to the reader as a form of ambiguous and therefore dynamic knowledge, which may take different shapes depending on the interpreter.

I am well aware that I am not proposing anything which is in its essentiality absolutely new. In fact I am simply advocating a certain degree of consciousness regarding epistemological aspects of textual exegesis and criticism.

In analogy with the concept of lexeme, I would like to propose the word 'gnozeme' to refer to instances of knowledge that may be possessed, inferred, and above all communicated. A gnozeme may be the result of an experience or of a deduction, so it does not necessarily need to be a concept. I will call the former 'experiential knowledge' and the latter 'deducted knowledge.' For example, Pythagoras knew out of experience what a triangle is, and deduced through reasoning that the sum of the areas of the two squares on the legs (a and b) equals the area of the square on the hypotenuse.

In a work of fiction, gnozemes there are of two basic kinds, namely those that only pertain to the fictional world, which we may call intradiegetic and those that hold true in the actual

world, or at least in a given society of the actual world, which we may call extradiegetic. A reader of fiction is often attracted by the former, and instructed or edified by the latter, but things may also work the other way round. For instance one may be attracted by a novel that describes the Gordon Riots before being interested in the fate of Barnaby.

Although knowledge criticism may be applied to any text, I believe it is particularly suited to Dickens studies for three reasons: Dickens was an omnivorous spirit, interested in every realm of human knowledge from literature to technology to Mesmerism; secondly Dickens was a moralist, extremely conscious of his responsibility toward his readers (he firmly believed that his talent should be used to contribute to the improvement of society as well as to his readers' spiritual advancement); thirdly, the enormous amount of Dickens criticism makes it possible to know what Dickens knew and to use such knowledge as a benchmark to evaluate extra-Dickensian critical insights, which are also very numerous.

Thus a number of questions about the use of knowledge in any given Dickensian text may not be idly asked: what did Dickens know about his subject? What gnozemes did he expect his readers to share with him? What gnozemes did he want to convey? And, at an intradiegetic level, what gnozemes do his characters possess about the subject? How do they share them? How do they learn things?

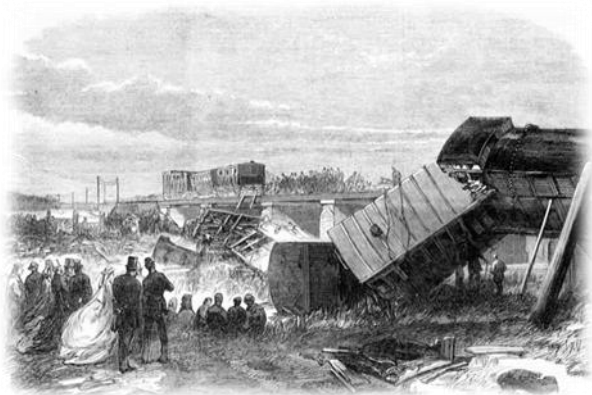
Simple as these questions may look, they entail an enormous amount of work to be answered fully. I shall exemplify how these basic questions work heuristically through a very popular short story, namely "The Signalman." I have chosen this text because it is rather short, fairly well known and because it has been widely investigated by many scholars both through the intra-Dickensian and extra-Dickensian approaches.

The story touches upon four main fields of knowledge usually unrelated, namely railway technology, its impact on sociology, psychopathology and the ghost story tradition. The text elaborates on each of these realms without any quotable definite

conclusion (what we called conceptualisation), which must necessarily rest with the reader. Hereafter I shall consider each of these realms in turn.

2. Railway System

What did Dickens and his readers know about railways? The answer is “much more than most of us would know nowadays about the subject” because of the interest and the press coverage the subject would enjoy in those early days of the rail. Besides, it is well known that the story came out 18 months after the disastrous Staplehurst crash, in which Dickens was personally involved and nearly lost his life – and certainly his peace of mind.



The Staplehurst Crash from the *Illustrated London News*, vol 46, June 1865.

The crash was actually caused by the negligence of a supervisor who failed to take the necessary measures to stop oncoming trains before a disruption. The works supervisor failed to interpret the timetable and moreover underestimated by half the distance at which a security flagman should have stood to warn unscheduled trains before the disruption – the signalman was put at 550 instead of 1000 yards as prescribed. When the drivers of Dickens’s tidal train – i.e. a train that left at no given time but on the arrival of Calais’s ferry – from Folkestone saw the man,

it was running full steam at 50 mph and hit the disruption at about 30 mph according to the reconstruction of the authorities.

¹ The derailed train fell from a bridge causing the death of a number of passengers. According to his biographers, Dickens thereafter suffered from what we now call post-traumatic syndrome:² after the incident and to the day of his death, which occurred five years later on the very same day, the novelist experienced a general nervousness and he would suddenly be prey to panic attacks.

Four years before the accident and five before the publication of *Mugby Junction*, the worst railway accident to date in England had occurred. Two trains collided within a tunnel near Brighton following a misunderstanding between two signalmen. In the three months including the Staplehurst crash, the *Times* published as many as forty-eight articles and notes concerning railways accidents, and we can believe that Dickens read most of them, if not all. Following the two crashes, many leading articles in the *Times* and other papers, including *All the Year Round*, addressed security issues on British Rails demanding safer lines and companies' liability. *All the Year Round* also published an article entitled "The Hole in the Wall" (13 October 1866), which minutely describes the workings of a railway employee who spends his day responding to signals and pulling levers to route trains on the right track. Thus, we may infer, the average reader then must have been aware of what the work of a signalman consisted of, at least to the same extent an average reader nowadays knows what an air traffic controller is supposed to do and what his basic tools consist of. Indeed, railway accidents would cause the same sensation in Victorian times as plane crashes do in ours.

¹ Norris Pope, "Dickens's 'The Signalman' and Information Problems in the Railway Age," *Technology and Culture* 42 (2001), pp. 436-61 and Peter R. Lewis, "Dickens and the Staplehurst Rail Crash, 9 June 1865," *The Dickensian* 104 (2008), pp. 197-203.

² Jill L. Matus, "Trauma, Memory, and Railway Disaster: The Dickensian Connection," *Victorian Studies* 43 (2001), pp. 413-36.

As one of the main editorial lines of Dickens's journalism was to show the backstage of modern society, many articles in *Household Words* and later in *All the Year Round* dealt with subjects like nightly police shifts, the city by night, production of goods, import of coal into the city, the working of a post office, and, predictably, the railways works. Pope points out that both *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* published a variety of articles on railways whose very titles are quite revealing: "Need Railway Travellers Be Smashed?" (29 November 1851, pp. 217-21); "Self-Acting Railway Signals" (12 March 1853, pp. 43-45) and "Signals and Engine Drivers" (6 September 1856, pp. 179-80).³ Dickens's interest in railway information systems was not in fact confined to signalling. His periodicals carried detailed descriptions of railway Post-Office cars, of railways' internal accounting systems (for example, what happens to tickets once they are collected), and of the Railway Clearing House. Tim Cribb suggests that these articles underlie a sort of practical Marxian attitude which consists in de-alienating the production process, by making it known.⁴ In fact the production of goods in the capitalistic economies (and even more so nowadays) takes place underwater and the final product, which the consumer sees, is only the tip of the iceberg. The same holds true also for services and not only for material goods. The rail service is a complex system which involves a variety of skills, mostly unknown to the ordinary passenger. Dickens was clearly ill at ease with the idea of a system, where profits are made but no responsibility is ever taken, as in the case of the above quoted accidents. In *Bleak House*, Dickens targeted the law system, while the economic capitalistic system was criticised in *Little Dorrit*, especially through Merdle's case – besides it should be remembered that one of the intended titles for the novel was 'Nobody's Fault.'

³ See Pope.

⁴ Tim Cribb, "Travelling through Time: Transformations of Narrative from Early to Late Dickens," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996), pp. 73-88.

In a letter to Bulwer-Lytton following the Staplehurst accident, Dickens was exasperated by the unaccountability of the railway managers and officials: England's "enormous Railway No-System," had "grown up without guidance." "Its abuses," he went on, "are so represented in Parliament by Directors, Contractors, Scrip Jobbers, and so forth, that no Minister dare touch it."⁵

The notion of accountability is particularly important for Dickens who complained about it in private letters⁶ and publicly defended the petty rail workers who were blamed for any malfunctioning. In an article entitled "Rather Interested in Railways," which appeared in 1861 – four years before Dickens experienced the Staplehurst accident –, the paper advocated the company's liability and defended the signalmen who had been held responsible for the crash:

In the two cases that have lately fixed attention, no jury could lay the whole blame on the signalmen immediately concerned. In the Brighton accident three trains had been hurled quickly one after another from a main terminus, not one true to its time. In the Kentish-town accident the disaster befell an excursion train which had no fixed time for running, and for which, by people who were not expecting it, the way had to be cleared as it ran. The breakdown also arose from the failure of a boy of nineteen, at fourteen shillings a week wages, working, under no proper oversight, fifteen hours and a half and ten hours on alternate days, to perform the duties of a too responsible position. In either case the responsibility for shameful laxity of management is not to be got rid of by a censure of some humble servant of the company. And when has it been otherwise? (*All the Year Round*, 12 September 1861, p.18)

Therefore it comes as no big surprise that a whole Christmas number, *Mugby Junction*, was devoted to the railway system in 1866. The narrator of "The Signalman" in particular shows a more than average degree of knowledge of the working of the railway system. On describing the signalman's box, he says that

⁵ Quoted in Pope, 449.

⁶ *Ibid.*

it contains “a fire, a desk for an official book in which he had to make certain entries, a telegraphic instrument with its dial, face, and needles, and the little bell of which I had spoken.”⁷ Outside there are the signal lamps and the danger/clear signal. The narrator, though “interested in these great works,” hardly enquires about the usage of those instruments let alone explain what they are. In particular the dial telegraph was a machine that should have attracted attention and that people should not be so familiar with. Still it is mentioned along with other furniture as if the reader should be perfectly aware of its semblance and purpose. Later the signalman in distress says that it would be no use to telegraph “on either side of the line,” assuming that both his interlocutor and the reading public behind him would know how the system was organised – that is by blocks, each guarded by a signalman in communication with the proceeding and following block. After the passage of a train the block would be closed (and the sign put to danger) until the train had entered the following block, thus liberating the previous one. In order to know when a train had actually cleared one block and entered the following one, each signalman was supposed to telegraph the other two before and after him. It goes without saying that the work demanded “exactness and precision.” This piece of information is taken for granted by the author of the story.

Twice the signalman mentions the fact that the train takes a while before it can come to a halt; the driver “shut off, and put his brake on,” the signalman recounts, “but the train drifted past here a hundred and fifty yards or more” (TS 532). It may seem an idle comment, but bad braking systems were also an issue often brought up by papers in those days and the Staplehurst accident would not have happened if the braking system had been more efficient (only every second car was equipped with screw brakes that were operated at the whistle of the locomotive).

Thus the text hints at extradiegetic gnozemes pertaining to the railway works of the time that were already known to the

⁷ Charles Dickens, “The Signalman,” *Christmas Stories*, ed. Margaret Lane, London, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 527. All references to this edition.

reader; while fictional facts (or intradiegetic gnozemes) are obviously new. Interestingly enough intradiegetic gnozemes are not conceptualised, on the contrary, it seems that the narrator tries to avoid conceptualisation in order to prevent any ultimate interpretation.

As if to prepare the readers for the forthcoming Christmas number, at the end of October of that same year 1866, Dickens himself, or one of his staff, had actually gone to interview a signalman at Victoria and reported the encounter in *All the Year Round*, in an article entitled “The Hole in the Wall.”⁸ The article is rather longish, and it purports to describe the work of a lonely signalman who regulates the traffic of in- and out-bound trains at Victoria station. His shift is “only” eight hours long, and therefore rather lighter than the average Victorian work shift, but the exactness required of him and his responsibility are enormous and the journalist suggests that the man should be on duty for a shorter time. The box of the signalman at Victoria is very similar to that of the Signalman at Mugby, though the latter is simpler, given the smaller number of lines to control. In fact the signalman at Victoria works in tandem with a telegraphman who sends and receives dispatches, while the signalman at Mugby Junction is notoriously alone, discharging both tasks. However their instruments are the same: a telegraph with needles, a logbook, and some levers, to which the signalman at Mugby must add flags and lights, which the man in the box does not need. However those who have read the article will be very familiar with the whole paraphernalia.

Though the tone of “A Hole in the Wall” is rather light, the columnist develops his story within three different discourses: railway system (highlighting security issues), ghost story (as metaphor), stress and mental disorders. The first discourse implies a knowledge of train systems as travellers and adds information of the submerged part of the iceberg, so for instance we read:

⁸ “The Hole in the Wall,” *All the Year Round*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1866. All further references to this edition given as THW.

No train leaves or enters the station until signalled to do so from here, and the safety and life of every man, woman, and child leaving Victoria depends upon [this signalman]. (THW 325)

On the right-hand wall of the box, and on a level with the eye, are fastened four cases, which communicate telegraphically with the platforms of the station, with Battersea Park, and with Stewart's-lane junction...

Beyond them is a small wooden desk and an open book, in which from time to time [the telegraphs'] utterances are recorded. (THW 326)

Battersea-bridge signals Waller, who decides whether the coast is clear and it may come in. It is necessary to remember the space we have traversed, and the number of lines of rails it represented, to appreciate the delicacy and care required. (THW 326)

The ghost story imagery is present throughout the article and always associated with technology, mostly by way of metaphors, but not exclusively and certainly paves the way for the oncoming Christmas story. Here is the first glance at the inside of the box:

A nervous jump back again, a vivid experience of the sensation known as 'pins and needles,' a half involuntary guarding of the face as if to ward off an impending blow, are the first results of the experiment. For the mechanist's properties are of the most impulsively practicable kind, and bells ring, whistles shriek, hands move, and huge iron bars creak and groan apparently of their own accord, and certainly by agencies which are invisible. (THW 325)

Apart from the idea of a ghost in the machine, which is one of the main motives in "The Signalman," one should also notice the reference to 'the mechanics,' which recalls the signalman's past education, as he used to be a student of natural philosophy.

Near the entrance door stands "an apparatus which I can only describe as terrifying, composed of a strong and massive cranks [...] resembling one of those weird instrument of torture which raked the limbs of schismatics in the bad old times"

(THW 325). This is the ancestor of a computer, a machine which signals what trains are waiting to enter the station by putting up – rather suddenly – flashboards. The signalman’s work is to respond to these signals. The machine appears within a typically industrial gothic frame:

A rapid jerk: upwards or downwards of one of the iron handles, another angry flap from the instrument of torture, substituting the red disc, ‘Crystal Palace’ or... Brighton’ ‘In’ for ‘Out,’ a slight change of position in Waller, and an equally slight movement from the telegraph clerk, are the only signs within the prison-house. (THW 326)

Besides the locomotives are “noisy monsters” (THW 328) and look more human than the very drivers that are supposed to control them: “[the locomotives] certainly seemed to have more will and power than the poor puppet heads grinning and gesticulating in the cells forming a portion of their flexible tail” (THW 327).

The very work of the signalman is torture, so that the only chair in the room seems to be there to taunt him. Everything in this place from the “maniacal working” of the signalling machine to the drudge that is conducted there seem to be maddening, the reporter adds that “the longer we remained, and the more he endeavoured to explain the signals, the more maddening was the confusion” (THW 328).

Later the reporter speaks of the “maddening signals,” but the most interesting instance of psychiatric insanity lies with the observer who bluntly confesses:

It is humiliating enough to acknowledge it, but it is certain that a morbid and an increasing longing to try the experiment of turning a wrong handle and bringing two full trains into collision was the first warning given me of the strain on the nerves the nerves produced by the noises and signals described. (THW 327)

Eventually the article closes on a similar safety note: what if the signalman goes mad or simply collapses when he should

act? “What if the system broke down one minute out the several hundreds of minutes each man is consecutively employed?”

Since *Mugby Junction* appeared only a few weeks after this piece, it is undeniable that a strong link between the concerns of the columnist and those of the somewhat similar nameless narrator must be perceived as one and the same. The story can then be read as a dramatisation of the issues highlighted by the press and the ongoing debate on railways. How does it add any gnazeme to what the article had already stated with the authority of the eye witness? Technically speaking the story does not add any extradiegetic knowledge, in fact it relies on such a shared knowledge of the readers in order to introduce intradiegetic gnazeme (i.e. in order to tell the ghost story). Still it adds to extradiegetic knowledge by adding emotions to the somewhat dry knowledge that it takes for granted; while the paper article explained what something is, the story may venture to state what something feels like. However the most interesting extradiegetic knowledge offered by the story lies in the links it creates between different fields. We must therefore proceed to explore how the text relates to Victorian psychopathology.

3. Psychopathology

It is well known how Dickens was interested in Mesmerism and practiced it himself. Dickens was also interested in mental disorders, so much so that he is credited with the description of a number of syndromes long before they were recognised as such by official psychiatry. The most famous instance is probably the so-called obesity hypoventilation syndrome, better known among practitioners as “Pickwick syndrome” due to the Fat Boy in *Pickwick Papers*. Following his journey to the States, where he had occasion to visit psychiatric hospitals, Dickens advocated more modern treatments for the mentally ill. In his novels, the writer described other mental disorders which had not been catalogued in his own times, including schizo-

phrenia, mood disorders and behavioural syndromes.⁹ As for the signalman himself, the man may be suffering from what the Victorians called monomania or ‘partial insanity,’ a syndrome that included hallucination.¹⁰

Dickens had visited asylums in the United States, and in *American Notes* he commented on the condition of the patients and their different treatments. In 1851, he published an article in *Household Words* recounting a visit to Bedlam, in which Dickens freely accuses psychiatrists of being extravagant in their treatments and indeed monomaniacal in their obsessions.¹¹ In 1861, Dickens’s friend John Forster was appointed member of the Lunacy Committee,¹² and another piece devoted to psychiatric disorders is in chapter four of Dickens’s and Collins’s *Lazy Tour*. Dickens’s approach to the mentally ill is very modern and rather open. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was able to see human suffering behind the shroud of lunacy. This is yet another point which must be kept in mind discussing “The Signalman,” especially if the lunacy reading is to be accepted.

Zooming in on the year 1866, *All the Year Round* mentioned monomania at least twice, and both times the writer seems to assume that the word is perfectly intelligible to the readers.

⁹ B.C. Douglas, “Dickens’s Characters on the Couch: An Example of Teaching Psychiatry Using Literature,” *Medical Humanities* 34 (2008), pp. 64-69.

¹⁰ Graeme Tytler, “Charles Dickens’s ‘The Signalman’: A Case of Partial Insanity?” *History of Psychiatry* 8 (1997), pp. 421-32. *All the Year Round* in November 1866 mentions monomaniacs as a word perfectly understandable by the readers. Telling the story of a banker turned thief, the reporter writes: “It might be that Fauntleroy (with that strange confusion of feeling and aberration of judgment that raises some thieves almost to the dignity of monomaniacs) wished to leave ample and clear testimony of the revenge he had taken...” (474). The word was very common indeed in Dickens’s papers; a search on the online version published by DJO generates as much as 30 “monomania” and 18 “monomaniac” occurrences.

¹¹ Charles Dickens, “A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree,” *Uncollected Writings from Household Words, 1850-1859*, 2 vols, ed. Harry Stone. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1968, I, pp. 3-5.

¹² Douglas, p. 65.

Rather ironically, the first time, it is used to describe Thomas Gray (1788-1848), an early advocate of the railway system in the UK, whose idea of building a railway network is called a “monomania;” indeed his opponents accused him of “sheer lunacy” and wrote in the *Edinburgh Review* that he should be “put in a strait-jacket.”¹³ The word is then deployed a few other times, though never in a medical context.

This validates Tytler’s insight that the signalman may have been ill, though he does not say what may have provoked the illness. The answer is rather clear for a regular reader of *All the Year Round*, who had read the mentioned “The Hole in the Wall,” where the reporter mentioned the insane idea of pulling a wrong lever.

It is not only the maddening effect of the environment that drives one crazy. It is also the stress of the responsibility and the knowledge that sooner or later an accident will occur. Especially after the Staplehurst disaster, the press of the time stressed the lack of safety procedures in the railway system. Everyone was under the impression that accidents were bound to occur and it was only a matter of when. This knowledge was haunting the well-educated signalman like a ghost, or a curse. The ghost story therefore is merely an objective correlative of the actual predicament of many conscientious railway workers.

4. The Ghost Story

Knowledge of the literary tradition is paramount to the understanding of a literary work, as reception theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss have pointed out. The literary tradition and the genre actually guide the reader to the encounter with the text and help him/her to fill the narrative gaps. Thus, as for the Ghost story tradition, the ghost announcing an impending disaster is nothing new, nor are bells that ring spontaneously or sudden deaths. Silvana Caporaletti, in her perceptive extra-Dickensian reading of the story, points out that “The

¹³ Anon., “Not Quite a Man for the Strait Jacket,” *All The Year Round*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1866, pp. 62-65, p. 62.

Signalman” falls into that genre which Todorov calls “the fantastic,” as its subject is neither marvellous nor explainable.¹⁴ Many different readings are authorised by the text, so that the reader is left in doubt whether he should or should not believe in a supernatural explanation. However Dickens’s readers know very well that all his ghosts usually turn out to be natural phenomena misinterpreted, or allegories, like those in *Christmas Carol*. In other words, readers expect to either find out what natural cause may have produced the vision or how the ghost may serve as an allegory for something else. In the latter case the ghost should bring about some kind of change of heart. In the present case it is impossible to decide whether there is a rational explanation for the signalman’s hallucination or whether the ghost must be taken at face value and/or interpreted as a symbol. Yet when it comes down to the gnozeme, it hardly makes a difference. The signalman dies because he is haunted by a ghost announcing an impending disaster – no matter whether that ghost may be the product of a hallucinatory mind or even a metaphor for something else (like statistics which foretell a disaster). It also makes little difference whether the signalman was ironically the victim of the announced disaster or whether he chose to commit suicide to call the disaster on himself: in either case, he remains a victim of the system.¹⁵ The only reading that we must reject is the simplistic traditional ghost story, whereby a supernatural story that has no likely explanation is told, as Dickens always regarded those kinds of stories with irony.¹⁶

¹⁴ Silvana Caporaletti, “Metamorfosi di un testo narrativo: ‘The Signalman’ di Charles Dickens,” *Strumenti Critici: Rivista Quadrimestrale di Cultura e Critica Letteraria* 12 (1997), pp. 33-60.

¹⁵ Alessandro Vescovi, “‘The Bagman’, ‘The Signalman’ and Dickens’s Short Story,” *Dickens: The Craft of Fiction and the Challenges of Reading*, ed. Rossana Bonadei, Clotilde De Stasio, Carlo Pagetti, Alessandro Vescovi. Milano, Unicopli, 2000, pp. 111-122.

¹⁶ As early as 1848, Dickens authored a review entitled “The Night Side of Nature; or Ghost and Ghost Seers by Catherine Crowe.” Dickens acknowl-

5. Intradiegetic Knowledge

So far we have tried to review what knowledge Dickens and his reader possessed of the themes with which the story deals. This is, so to say, the preliminary part of the work; a farther step consists in investigating what knowledge each character possesses and is passing to the other and what knowledge the author is offering to the reader. As for the characters, we know very little of the narrator, who calls himself Barbox Brothers, from the tag on his portmanteau, except that he belongs to the educated Victorian upper class, is probably retired and writes very elegantly. He is however a curious man, who actually searches for knowledge, which, he surmises, the signalman will give him. In fact the narrator is interested in the railway workings, and their procedures, more than in the man himself, at least at the beginning of the story. Does his interest shift? Or does he learn about the railway more than he expected? At the end he appears to be a sadder and wiser man.

The signalman himself is a man educated in natural sciences, who misused his opportunities and could find nothing better than this work for the railway. Still, having long lonely hours of inactivity, he tried to gain new knowledge in the field of languages and mathematics. Strangely enough he does not seem to have tried to get any insight into his supernatural problem, which he is not tackling scientifically. Yet the signalman's understanding and report about the apparitions is clear and never contradictory. The two men have therefore much in common; the narrator had lived most of his life "within narrow limits" and is now free and therefore in search of new knowledge; the signalman does live within narrow limits and seeks knowledge. Beside, both appear to have studied and can describe a problem logically and detachedly. Both speak the same variety of standard English, (unlike the other railway workers who appear at the end of the story, and in other texts from *Mugby Junction*,

edges the sincerity of those who claim to have witnessed preternatural phenomena, but denies their reliability. Vescovi, p. 112.

and unlike the signalman in “A Hole in the Wall”). These similarities are certainly one of the reasons why they both develop an attachment to each other; the narrator keeps returning to the box and the signalman decides to entrust his problem to him. The very first bits of information the two exchange and communicate to the reader relate to their frame of mind and position toward knowledge. This creates a bond not only between the two, but also between them and the reader, who is probably curious about technology as well as about the ghosts, and certainly can read, if not always speak, standard English.

This proximity with the reader is often used by Dickens to create pathetic effects, but quite rarely in his ghost stories, where the reader may be akin to the sceptical narrator, but rather detached from the scared victims. Another unusual thing is that neither man is given a name, as if they were some kind of Everyman.

Later in the story, it is the signalman who conveys a number of intradiegetic gnozemes concerning the apparitions, which the narrator is at a loss how to arrange. The narrator tells two stories: one about himself getting cold shivers in the back, and one about the signalman. The latter has already decided on the interpretation he must give to the supernatural apparitions, while the narrator, though sympathetic, tries to be detached and logical in his approach. Still the agitation of the narrator, and his careful choice of gothic imagery to describe the setting, are a sort of validation of the signalman’s interpretation. Besides, the signalman’s story mingles with reality, when he refers to Clayton Tunnel’s crash, which is the first accident foretold by the ghost.

The interplay between extradiegetic and intradiegetic knowledge will eventually take the interpreter one step farther; that is to say to a kind of knowledge that is actually extradiegetical, but can only be achieved through diegesis, in that it is a substitute for direct *erlebnis*. I am referring to two farther levels, which I would like to call emotional knowledge and intuitive knowledge. While knowledge as information can be

passed to the reader simply by means of any text, emotional and intuitive knowledge require some kind of literary touch; it does not have to be necessarily fictional, but it has to be artistic in a way. This is the knowledge of something plus an appreciation of its emotional side – what it is plus what it feels like. The difference between information and emotional knowledge is similar to the difference between denotation and connotation; the former is a kind of raw datum which may be subscribed to by anyone, but which is not bound to affect the reader. Dickens clearly distinguishes between the two forms of knowledge in the famous scene about facts in *Hard Times*, when Sissy Jupe is asked to consider some information as factual and she cannot help turning it into emotional knowledge.

“And I find (Mr. M’Choakumchild said) that in a given time a hundred thousand persons went to sea on long voyages, and only five hundred of them were drowned or burnt to death. What is the percentage? And I said, Miss;” here Sissy fairly sobbed as confessing with extreme contrition to her greatest error; “I said it was nothing”.

“Nothing, Sissy?”

“Nothing, Miss—to the relations and friends of the people who were killed. I shall never learn,” said Sissy. “And the worst of all is, that although my poor father wished me so much to learn, and although I am so anxious to learn, because he wished me to, I am afraid I don’t like it.”¹⁷

It should be noted that emotional knowledge stems from yet another faculty which is praised by the author of *Hard Times*, namely imagination. One has to be able to imagine things in order to explore their emotional connotation, while the denotation does not need any special effort. Emotional knowledge is more subjective than informational knowledge, but it is also more humane; any machine may contain data, but it takes a human being to imagine their emotional connotation. Another characteristic of emotional knowledge is that it is more complex than simple information.

¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod, New York, Norton, 1966, p. 44.

Next to emotional knowledge stands intuitive knowledge, which is even more unstable than emotional knowledge, to the extent of being still unconceptualised in a given language. This is the knowledge of an intuition which stems from the connection of a number of diverse bits of information (hence its complexity). This is something akin to C.S. Peirce's abduction, with one important difference: a logical abduction can be expressed in the form of a concept, while creative intuition is expressed in the form of a literary work. Incidentally the role of literary criticism has often been that of translating these intuitions into concepts. Intuitions are not scientific, not falsifiable, and usually they cannot be reduced to a single statement: it takes the whole *Heart of Darkness* to explain what "The horror!" means when cried out by dying Kurtz, and it takes the whole *Bleak House* to illuminate Dickens's intuitions about the interconnectedness of the whole Victorian society. Certainly intuitive knowledge is not synthetic, but rather analytic and inclusive; it often includes moral judgment and emotional knowledge.

A story can be a way to express emotional and intuitive knowledge about something, without conceptualising it, but leaving the reader to draw conclusions. It can be even more than that; it can be a sort of lab where different elements are made to react in order to observe what happens. "The Signalman," for instance, can be turned into a moral dilemma: what should a man do if he found himself in such a situation, being it that of the signalman himself or that of the narrator.

6. Conclusion

"The Signalman" relies heavily on a shared knowledge of extradiegetic gnozemes; taking them for granted, the narrator does not linger on these gnozemes, but rather concentrates his message on intradiegetic ones. Nonetheless he eschews an interpretation of the story he himself is telling and deliberately leaves it vague. This compels the reader to consider those extradiegetic gnozemes that are evoked in the course of the narration and see which may be coherent with the narrative. The re-

sult is an intricate net of relationships between fiction and reality and, more interestingly still, also between different fields of human knowledge that are not usually considered as kindred. This relationship is Dickens's insight into the mechanisms of modern, capitalistic railway systems and their bearing on human beings. Unlike Marx and Engels, Dickens does not try to conceptualise the gnozemes that come out of his insights. He offers no interpretation and no definition. He hints that there may be a connection between railway systems, capitalism, alienation, accidents, lunacy, safety issues and the ghost story tradition, but he does not explain what it is exactly. Instead of giving a round number, like $8/4=2$ he simply points to a relationship and its odd elements like π or $5/7$, which is impossible to write in a linear way. The reader is therefore invited to play with these odd, mismatched numbers, like the signalman would do in his idle hours, and try to draw his own conclusions. At the end the reader, too, might be a bit wiser, albeit sadder.

Works Cited

- Caporaletti, Silvana, "Metamorfosi di un testo narrativo: The Signalman di Charles Dickens," *Strumenti Critici: Rivista Quadrimestrale di Cultura e Critica Letteraria* 12 (1997), pp. 33-60.
- Cribb, Tim, "Travelling through Time: Transformations of Narrative from Early to Late Dickens," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996), pp. 73-88.
- Dickens, Charles, "The Signalman," *Christmas Stories. The Oxford Illustrated Dickens*, vol. 18, ed. Margaret Lane, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 524-36.
- _____, *Uncollected Writings from Household Words, 1850-1859*, 2 vols, ed. Harry Stone, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1968.

- _____, *Hard Times*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod, New York, Norton, 1966.
- Douglas, B.C., "Dickens' Characters on the Couch: an Example of Teaching Psychiatry Using Literature," *Medical Humanities* 34 (2008), pp. 64-69.
- Lewis, Peter R., "Dickens and the Staplehurst Rail Crash, 9 June 1865," *The Dickensian* 104 (2008), pp. 197-203.
- Matus, Jill L., "Trauma, Memory, and Railway Disaster: The Dickensian Connection," *Victorian Studies: A Journal of the Humanities, Arts and Sciences* 43 (2001), pp. 413-436.
- Pope, Norris, "Dickens's 'The Signalman' and Information Problems in the Railway Age," *Technology and Culture* 42 (2001), pp. 436-461.
- Tytler, Graeme, "Charles Dickens's 'The Signalman': A Case of Partial Insanity?" *History of Psychiatry* 8 (1997), pp. 421-432.
- Vescovi, Alessandro, "'The Bagman', 'The Signalman' and Dickens's Short Story," *Dickens: The Craft of Fiction and the Challenges of Reading*, ed. Rossana Bonadei, Clotilde De Stasio, Carlo Pagetti, Alessandro Vescovi, Milano, Unicopli, 2000, pp. 111-122.