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THE BAGMAN, THE SIGNALMAN  
AND DICKENS'S SHORT STORY

When we talk of the evolution of a great writer like Dickens we immediately think of comparing his first novel with the novelistic production of his late years. What I propose in this article is a survey of the evolution of Dickens's narrative technique with regard to the short story. To this effect I shall proceed to compare two ghost stories published in *Pickwick Papers* and in the Christmas 1866 number of *All Year Round*, entitled *Mugby Junction*. The two narratives, "The Story of the Bagman's Uncle" (hereafter "Bagman's Uncle") and "The Signalman",<sup>1</sup> share the theme of the uncanny, very popular with Victorian readers, but present major differences as to narrative techniques and awareness of the short story genre. Another difference which constitutes a novelty in the Victorian short story is the social engagement shown in "The Signalman".

Dickens never in fact makes use of the traditional Gothic setting of the ghost story, but rather introduces ghosts for three different purposes, namely comic effects (Bagman's Uncle), conversion from evil to good ("A Christmas Carol", "The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton"), and exploration of altered states of mind by which he was fascinated in the last part of his life, when the writer himself conducted experiments in mesmerism with M.me de la Rue ("To Be Read at Dusk", "The Signalman"). Even when present in Dickens's narrative, Gothic effects, horror and terror are undermined by irony. In "A Christmas Carol", for instance, Scrooge is actually startled by the sudden apparition, but the reader is not supposed to share his fear:

At this, the spirit raised a frightful cry, and shook his chain with such a dismal and appalling noise, that Scrooge held on tight to his chair, to save himself from falling in a swoon. But how much greater was his horror, when the

<sup>1</sup> In modern reprints the story always bears this title, but originally it was "Branch Line no.1: the Signalman".

phantom taking off the bandage round its head, as if it were too warm to wear indoors, its lower jaw dropped down upon its breast! (*Christmas Books*: 21).

In “A Christmas Tree” the narrator comments on traditional ghost stories showing what seems to be the position of Dickens himself:

There is no end to the old houses, with resounding galleries and dismal state-bed chambers, and haunted wings shut up for many years, through which we may ramble, with an agreeable creeping up and back, and encounter any number of ghosts but (it is worthy to remark perhaps) reducible to a very few general types and classes, for ghosts have little originality, and walk in a beaten track (13).

The existence of ghosts was, in Dickens’s time, debated in extremely serious terms, and even intellectuals were divided on this point. Dickens took a clear stance in an anonymous<sup>2</sup> review appearing in *The Examiner* in 1848 entitled “The Night Side of Nature; or Ghost and Ghost Seers by Catherine Crowe”. Dickens acknowledges the sincerity of those who claim to have witnessed preternatural phenomena, but denies their reliability:

They [the ghosts] always elude us. Doubtful and scant of proof at first, doubtful and scant of proof still, all mankind’s experience of them is, that their alleged appearances have been, in all ages, marvellous, exceptional and resting on imperfect grades of proof; that in vast numbers of cases they are known to be delusions superinduced by a well understood, and by no means uncommon disease.

Apart from the unreliability of the sources, Dickens supports his thesis with an interesting narratological proof: when dealing with a true story one can take out any detail and the story is still acceptable. Even if Nelson did not die as it is told, exemplifies Dickens, still the Battle of Trafalgar still took place on that very day with the very same historical consequences. But if one takes out a detail from a ghost story the whole edifice collapses.

Given these assumptions it is no wonder that Dickens often has his stories told by narrators whose reliability is severely compromised. Both “The Signalman” and “The Bagman’s Uncle” are full of details to avoid the accusation of being implausible on account of their elusiveness. In both cases the narrators (not the witnesses) are comparably reliable and those who have actually witnessed the supernatural events are in earnest, though

<sup>2</sup> The Attribution to Dickens is nevertheless beyond doubt since the author himself sent a copy of it to M. de la Rue accompanied by a letter in which he called the Swiss friend’s attention on the article and hinted to his wife. See Philip Collins, “Dickens on Ghosts: An Uncollected Article”, *The Dickensian*, 49:1, 1963, pp. 5-14.

not very credible, the one being drunk and the other psychologically under stress.

“The Bagman’s Uncle” tells the story of an adventure that occurred one night to the narrator’s uncle. After a jolly evening spent drinking with friends, the protagonist sat by an old mail coaches cemetery and was invited by some ghosts to take a trip with them in one of the coaches. Among the passengers the bagman’s uncle finds two suspicious men who have just kidnapped a young lady; the protagonist heroically defeats the kidnappers by stabbing them with a sword, thus causing the young lady to fall in love with him. He falls in love too and promises never to marry anyone else. Eventually the uncle wakes up in the morning, sitting on an old mail coach in the coaches cemetery and decides to keep faith with his promise never to marry anyone else.

The story of the Signalman is of quite another tenor: a railway employee works all the time in a “deep trench” by the mouth of a tunnel, where the sun never shines. His task consists in keeping a logbook, making signals to the passing trains and sending messages by telegraph from time to time. The narrator in this story has quite an active part; he gains the confidence of the railwayman who eventually tells him that he has twice seen a ghost, always in connection with a fatal accident on the line. In those days the ghost has resumed his apparitions and the signalman asks himself with anguish what is going to happen this time. As the narrator comes back for the third time to talk with the signalman, he finds him dead, knocked out by a locomotive. What is the more remarkable is that the engineer had shouted the same words and behaved in exactly the same way as the ghost.

Although both tales can now be found published separately, they first appeared within narrative frames, in the extremely wide and complicated one of *Pickwick Papers* and in the rather succinct one of *Mugby Junction*. In the first case there is no discontinuity (unless typographical) between the main narration and the bagman’s story, which is a direct discourse, with frequent hints to the gentlemen who form his fictitious audience. “The Signalman” on the other hand presents a writing narrator – according to the intentions declared in the frame story – who demands a reader rather than a listener.

The bagman’s narrative is rather chaotic, though it follows a classic scheme of presentation of the main character, followed by his adventures. Often during the story, the narrator offers his own remarks:

Gentlemen, there is an old story – none the worse for being true – regarding a fine young Irish gentleman, who being asked if he could play the fiddle, replied he had no doubt he could, but he couldn’t exactly say, for certain, because he had never tried. This is not inapplicable to my uncle and his fencing... (*Pickwick*: 695).

The telling is thus much longer than the story, whose interpretation is guided by the narrator's style. As often happens in oral cultures the story, the diegesis, loses importance compared with the narration, *mimesis*. Rapid narrative passages, Genette's summaries<sup>3</sup>, are absent (which is not rare in the short story) and the diegesis is made of scenes, where the time taken by the story and the time taken by the narration remain comparable. Oral style is rendered through an imitation of colloquial syntax and pronunciation and the frequent use of pauses and digressions. Though we are dealing with a short story, we find no ellipses, which will be the standard in modern short fiction and are extensively used in "The Signalman". No particular effort is required on the part of the reader (or rather listener) in making the text signify: nothing is given for granted, even the common places on which the comprehension depends are fully stated. It is interesting to note how, at the end of the long introduction, the narrator tells his audience what use they are supposed to make of the information just received:

I am particular in describing how my uncle walked up in the middle of the street, with his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, gentlemen, because, as he often used to say (and with great reason too) there is nothing at all extraordinary in this story, unless you understand at the beginning that he was not by any means of a marvellous or romantic turn (*Pickwick*: 686).

As for the use of space in this story it should be noted that it is not used to create a particular atmosphere, but is rather described only as far as necessary to allow the action to take place. The Gothic elements lose all their evocative force as they are dealt with in a rather humorous way. The description of bleak streets is far from being frightening.

On either side of him, there shot up against the dark sky, tall gaunt straggling houses, with time stained fronts, and windows that seemed to have shared the lot of eyes in mortals, and to have grown dim and sunken with age. Six, seven, eight storeys high, were the houses; storey piled upon storey, as children build with cards – throwing their dark shadows over the roughly paved road, and making the dark night darker. [...] Glancing at all these things with the air of a man who had seen them too often before, to think them worthy of much notice now, my uncle walked up the middle of the street, with a thumb in each waistcoat pocket, indulging from time to time in various snatches of song, chanted forth with such good will and spirit that the quiet honest folk started from their first sleep and lay trembling in bed till the sound died away in the distance (*Pickwick*: 685-686).

<sup>3</sup> I follow Genette (1972), who distinguishes three different kinds of narrative pace, that he calls (from the slowest) pause, scene, summary.

The image of cardboards castles deflates the tension of bleak atmosphere, which definitely ceases to be frightening when the narrator adds that the protagonist was singing with a thumb in each waistcoat pocket. After this, insistence on the darkness becomes an ironic device, which produces a sort of mock ghost story, which is coherent with the character of the bagman, as described in *Pickwick Papers*.

The very ghostly image *par excellence*, the cemetery, is here radically transformed, becoming a cemetery of old coaches; the typical bleak haunted house at which they arrive in the dead of night is described as “the most ruinous and desolate place my uncle had ever beheld”, but it provokes an unusual comment:

A mail travelling at the rate of six miles and a half an hour, and stopping for an indefinite time at such a hole as this, is rather an irregular sort of proceeding I fancy. This shall be made known. I'll write to the papers (*Pickwick*: 694-695).

The structure of “The Signalman” is much more complex. To begin with, there is none of the oral discourse which characterised the early Dickens; on the contrary the structure is perfected like a clockwork mechanism and offers us a cyclical structure repeated three times with slight differences:

Narrator's arrival to the trench.

Identification/recognising

Descent

Discussion about the work of the signalman and the uncanny

Description of the place

Farewell ascent

Narrators comment

This cyclical structure (see Bonheim 1988) is extremely interesting because it interweaves the two main themes of the story in an inextricable way, and at the same time it makes the signalman and the narrator reliable. In the third part of the story, when the narrator recognises the corpse of the signalman, there are no explicit references to the preternatural, the dialogue with the dead man's colleagues is extremely realistic, but the cyclical structure forces the reader to read the scene as an analepsis, thinking back to the two previous visits and therefore adding the missing uncanny element. Thus, in this third part the credibility of the story does not depend on the reliability of one character, but rather on the reader's ability to fill in the narrative gaps.

In order to obtain this effect, to train the reader to read the third part analeptically, the first two visits are characterized by a number of prolepses, whose ultimate meaning varies slightly at each occurrence and can only be

fully grasped at a second reading. Such prolepses can be found on three narrative levels:

In direct speech (discursive prolepses)

In actions (proairethic prolepses)

In the descriptions of places and in the narrator's reactions to such descriptions (descriptive prolepses).

Instances of the three kinds can be found in the very first paragraph, which opens the tale with the greetings of the narrator-character: "Halloa. Below there". Such words, as we shall learn after a few pages, are attributed to the ghost and actually spoken by the engineer whose train kills the signalman, as is also the case of the warning: "For God's sake, clear the way!".

As for proairethic prolepses, in the first paragraph we find the act of covering one's face with one arm, an act performed twice more, once by the ghost and once by the engineer. Furthermore, death is mentioned in coincidence with this gesture (beside the memory of past incidents) as the narrator thinks of stone figures on tombs. Another prolepsis, partly descriptive and partly proairethic, consists in looking toward the tunnel instead of looking upwards when the signalman first hears the narrator's call.

The third prolepses chain, dedicated to description, is less objective, since it is filtered by the narrator's consciousness. Nevertheless, the narrator seems to be aware of his own implausibility, thus enhancing his reliability, as the narrating-I is scrupulous in recording what the narrated-I perceived. In the first paragraph we find the comment "There was something remarkable in his manner of doing so", later supported by the "monstrous thought" that the signalman is no real man:

The monstrous thought came into my mind, as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face, that this was a spirit and not a man (490).

The cyclical structure and the repetition of certain motives with different meanings recalls what Derrida calls *différance*; that is difference and deferring of meaning and comprehension. The above mentioned prolepses take on different meanings, as the opening sentence does, but each meaning has a wider range than the immediate context would lead us to think, thanks to repetition, that creates a sort of resonance.

Thus the nearest literary antecedent to this short story is not, from a formalistic point of view, the oral tale, but rather the ballad. In fact there are two characteristics of the ballad which we find here: reiteration and reproducibility. The first refers to the repetition of textual elements, whose meaning becomes clearer as the story goes on, the second refers to the fact that the ballad is usually learnt by heart and, though there are dozens of

different variants, it is repeated without variations each time. Such variants are quite negligible if compared with those of an oral tale. Another characteristic of the ballad is that it is not supposed to be “told” only once, but several times. Thus the text is not comprehended during the performance, but, synchronically, outside of it, after the end, and the accretion of meaning implied by repetition works for the ballad exactly as it does for “The Signalman”.

Let us consider one of the most famous English ballads, *Lord Randal*, known all over Europe in different translations:

‘O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?  
And where ha you been, my handsome young man?’  
‘I ha been at the greenwood; mother mak my bed soon,  
For I’m wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down’

‘An wha met ye there, Lord Randal, my son?  
An wha met you there, my handsome young man?’  
‘O I met wi my true-love; mother, mak my bed soon,  
For I’m wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down.’

The basic scheme is the classic dialogue between mother and son, and the story told is about murder; by asking question the mother will find out that the youth had been poisoned by the fiancée and consequently questions him about his last will. The last two lines of each stanza are the same throughout the text, but change their meaning as we understand that the young man has been poisoned by his fiancée. In the version quoted here in the last stanza the man says “I am sick at the heart and fain wad lie down” instead of repeating the hunting refrain, thus correcting his first impression of tiredness. The epithet “true-love” appears twice in the text, but it has a radically different meaning: the first time it is romantic, the second sarcastic. Both *Lord Randal* and “The Signalman” share the scheme of the detective story, in which the truth comes out through a number of details – the ghost’s words, the meal in the wood – which can be fully grasped only at the end of the text. Thus only repetition allows the reader/listener to grasp the hints to the final murder.

Such a complicated structure allows the story to *mean* on different levels and to mingle different themes. Thus the ghost tradition is here mingled with a sort of protest for the working conditions of the signalman, a protest that can be described in the Marxian terms of estrangement and alienation. According to the German philosopher the worker in the capitalist economy is alienated because he becomes a commodity and his work (meant both as process and product) no longer belongs to him.

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labour?

First, the fact that labour is *external* to the worker – i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself, but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his mental and physical energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working. His labour is, therefore, not voluntary but forced, it is *forced labour*.<sup>4</sup>

The signalman seems to fall into this category, since he works alone in a bleak place communicating with other people only through the telegraph and receiving orders by an electric bell. What seems to distress the poor man most is that he is not master of his work: he can do nothing to prevent the incident foretold by the spectre:

‘If I telegraph Danger on either side of me, or on both, I can give no reason for it, he went on, wiping the palms of his hands. I should get into trouble, and do no good. They would think I was mad. This is the way it would work, – Message: “Danger! Take care!” Answer: “What Danger? Where?” Message: “Don’t know. But for God’s sake, take care!” They would displace me. What else could they do?’ (497).

It has been said that the signalman might be suffering from monomania, a mental disease that Dickens could have known about from his acquaintance with a psychiatrist, Dr. John Conolly (1794-1866) (see Tytler 1994). It is also probable that the writer was influenced by the railway accident in which he himself was involved in 1865 and that was provoked by the carelessness of a signalman. Dickens died five years later on the same day of his accident: as he says in “The Signalman”, “remarkable coincidences do continually occur”.

The ghost seen by the signalman could be his own creation, a projection of his fears, a sort of *alter ego* which appears as a ghost because the signalman himself is de-humanised. His work giving him no self realisation, the signalman seeks some kind of interest in other activities:

He had taught himself a language down here, – if only to know it by sight, and to have formed his own crude ideas of its pronunciation, could be called learning it. He had also worked at fractions and decimals, and tried a little algebra... (491).

<sup>4</sup> From *Economic And Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, edited with an introduction by Dirk J. Struik, translated by M. Milligan, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1970, p. 110-111.



The alienation of his work is the ultimate reason for his death. It is curious that no critic has ever tried to answer the question why the railwayman doesn't clear the way. In fact "no man in England knew his work better", according to the train driver who had killed him and he was "one of the safest men to be employed in that capacity", according to the narrator. It is impossible that the signalman did not hear the approaching train because, apart from his experience and the engineer's shouts, the train is very loud, as described at the beginning of the story:

Just then there came a vague vibration in the earth and air, quickly changing into a violent pulsation, and an oncoming rush that caused me to start back, as though it had force to draw me down (489).

Last, it is not possible that the signalman did not have time to clear the way, because the engineer had had all the time to see the danger and shout out several times. The signalman's death, therefore, can be no mere accident; the mysterious apparition must be somehow connected with it. We can make two hypotheses: the signalman let himself be killed by the train in order not to witness powerlessly somebody else's death. The second, more likely, possibility is that the signalman mistook the engineer for the ghost and deliberately decided to ignore him. In any case, alienating work is the ultimate cause of the man's death. There is a sort of bitter irony in the fact that the man who worked as interpreter of signals could not use his competence to see the human sign that would have saved his life. Such is the distance, Marx would say, between the man and the worker.

Given the double reading offered by this story (the uncanny and social engagement) it is interesting to note how the use of space fits them both. On the one hand the description of the cutting and the tunnel recall a Gothic setting, on the other the precision in details and the choice of the railway (the symbol of progress *par excellence*) put the story on an extremely realistic level.

At the beginning of the story there is a distinction between high and low, clearly established by the initial words "Halloa. Below there!". The world of the signalman is confined and shrunk to the bottom of the cutting, whereas the narrator is the *trait d'union* between the world of the signalman and ours. To get to the signalman's it is necessary to walk down a winding path, which represents the threshold between the two separated worlds. Dickens's insistence on the above/below relationship is a way to underline the desolation of the workplace. In the very first page of the story there are nine spatial hints at the signalman's location:

below there	raising his eyes
looking up to where I stood on the top	high above him
down into the deep trench	I looked down
high above him	I called down to him
halloa below	

It has been suggested that this polarisation between high and low is a symbol of the social fall of the signalman who had once been a student (Tytler 1994). This is not impossible, but seems rather far fetched if we consider how simply mimetic the description can be.

Some details of the trench seem to be taken from Gothic literature:

The cutting was extremely deep, and unusually precipitate. It was made through a clammy stone, that became oozier and wetter as I went down (489).

On either side, a dripping-wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way only a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon; the shorter perspective in the other direction terminating in a gloomy red light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel, in whose massive architecture there was a barbarous, depressing, and forbidding air. So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy, deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world (490).

The setting seems to be a sort of objective correlative of the signalman's mental health. How can a man who lives most of his time down there be completely healthy? On the other hand the space outside the cutting is never described. When the narrator reports his thoughts outside the trench, he fails to give the slightest detail of the surroundings. In fact reference to, say, a sunny and windy place might have deflated the narrative tension.

The narrative time is also much more modern than in "Bagman's uncle"; here there is never a descriptive pause, the narrative concentrates on the cyclical scenes, with an ellipsis of what happens between two scenes, that is for instance what the signalman does when not on duty. Such ellipses, though, call for the reader's co-operation, giving the text greater unity. The story is longer than the telling, the opposite of what happens in "The Bagman's Uncle". Another interesting point is the order in which the events are presented: we must first of all understand that this story is about two people, the signalman and the narrator. The story begins when an apparition has already taken place, but the reader only learns about it when the narrator does. This is exactly the same pattern as in the detective story where the narrator plays the part of the detective.

This double narrator has induced some critics to consider the signalman a *Doppelgänger* of the narrator, a secret sharer, since the two possess some common traits such as the fact of having been shut “within narrow limits” for a long time. In fact, if we think of the signalman as a kind of detective story in which one character is both the murderer and the victim, it is no wonder that the detective sympathises with the victim and thinks like the murderer.

We have seen that there is a considerable evolution between the extremes of “The Story of the Bagman’s Uncle” and “The Signalman”. The first is linear and relatively simple as an oral tale can be. The second is much more complex, both in themes and narrative techniques. What is relevant to our discourse is that the technical complexity makes the thematic complexity possible: the bagman as a narrator would not be able to mingle social issues and the uncanny in one single story. The narrator in “The Signalman” is able to do it because he relies on the reader’s capacity to read different melodies at the same time. In particular at the end, when the story becomes merely descriptive and thus realistic, it is the reader who adds the ghostly element, by means of the technical device of cyclicity.

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Dickens: The Craft of Fiction and the Challenges of Reading by Rosanna Bonadei, Clotilde de Stasio, Carlo Pagetti, Alessandro Vescovi. Dickens: The Craft of Fiction and the Challenges of Reading by Rosanna Bonadei, Clotilde de Stasio, Carlo Pagetti, Alessandro Vescovi (pp. 37-40). Review by: Michael Hollington. Pen Photographs of Charles Dickens's Readings: Taken from Life by Kate Field, Carolyn J. Moss; American Episodes Involving Charles Dickens by P. Sidney, Carolyn J. Moss. Pen Photographs of Charles Dickens's Readings: Taken from Life by Kate Field, Carolyn J. Moss; American Episodes Involving Charles Dickens by P. Sidney, Carolyn J. Moss (pp. 40-41). Review by: Timothy A. Spurgin. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45291852>. Dickens married Catherine Hogarth in 1836, and the couple had nine children before separating in 1858 when he began a long affair with Ellen Ternan, a young actress. Despite the scandal, Dickens remained a public figure, appearing often to read his fiction. He died in 1870, leaving his final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, unfinished. From Rosanna Bonadei, Clotilde de Stasio, Carlo Pagetti, Alessandro Vescovi (eds), *Dickens: The Craft of Fiction and the Challenges of Reading*, Proceedings of the Milan Symposium, Gargnano September 1998, Milano, Unicopli, 2000. Reprinted in *Carlo Dickens* by kind permission of the publisher. Alessandro Vescovi. The bagman, the signalman. And Dickens's short story. When we talk of the evolution of a great writer like Dickens we immediately think of comparing his first novel with the novelistic production of his late years. What I propose in this article is a survey of the evolution of Dickens's R. Bonadei, C. De Stasio, C. Pagetti, A. Vescovi, Milano, Unicopli, 1999. Research Interests: Charles Dickens. Il laboratorio di letteratura inglese. Esperienze, riflessioni, proposte more. by Clotilde de Stasio. and Alessandro Vescovi. More Info: Curato con C. de Stasio. The Victorians and Italy more. by Alessandro Vescovi. Writing recently on Dickens and the Italian cultural scene, Carlo Pagetti has listed a number of novelists, from Edmondo de Amicis to Italo Calvino, who owe something to Dickens (in Bonadei and de Stasio 2000: 13-30). Ed received several of these letters each week, all in many ways the same, all from self-proclaimed Fitzgerald buffs and experts, and even from the occasional true scholar. In the previous calendar year, Ed had cleared and logged in 190 of these people through the library. They came from all over the world and arrived wide-eyed and humbled, like pilgrims before a shrine. In his thirty-four years at the same desk, Ed had processed all of them. And, they were not going away. F. Scott Fitzgerald continued to fascinate. The traffic was as heavy now as it had been three decades earlier. He and the imposter knew immediately that Ed had responded.