

Nonsense on the Margins

The Verbal Comedy of Sam Weller and Mrs Nickleby

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Abstract: The paper charts certain nuances of the diction of two minor characters in Dickens's early fiction, Sam Weller from The Pickwick Papers and Mrs Nickleby from Nicholas Nickleby. The paper focuses on what David Ellis calls Sam's "extended comic comparisons" and Mrs Nickleby's typical speech acts, called here, by analogy, extended comic recollections. After examining the role both characters' verbal comedy plays in the novels, the paper invites Jean-Jacques Lecercle's critical insight into a Victorian genre contemporary to Dickens: nonsense literature. I approach the underlying structural parallel between Sam's and Mrs Nickleby's comic verbal instances with the aid of the definitive trait of nonsense as established by Lecercle, the paradox of excess and lack on different levels of language. Though not arguing for the novels' inclusion in a nonsense literary canon, I show that Lecercle's conceptualisation of nonsense linguistics proves useful in making sense of the two characters' monologues. Their role in each novel may thus be grasped as functional nonsense.

In an extensive review of the critical literature produced in 2015, Sarah Gates speaks excitedly of the experience of reading through the different approaches to Charles Dickens as “a heck of a ride” (285), with intermediality studies, ethical readings, cultural-materialist approaches, aesthetics studies, not to mention surveys of postmodern re-writings and adaptations of, and intertextual tributes to, the author. Hardly anything related to Dickens and his works has been left uncovered. It can be the closest of readings, investigating sounds and words from a character's mouth, that gives access to a wider topic (practiced, for example, by Jeremy Tambling in *Dickens's Novels as Poetry: Allegory and Literature of the City*, qtd. in Gates 317) or a completely extrinsic set of background facts that deepens our

understanding of a text (as in Hugo Bowles's study of possible sources for Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers*, qtd. in Gates 299). All generate new points of entry to the collective appreciation of one or other aspect of the author's oeuvre. The present study intends to open yet another such entrance, focusing on the surprising connections between the idiosyncracies of Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers* and Mrs Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

That connection itself will be presented from a perspective that seems to have received little or no coverage in Dickens studies, not even among the critical output that Gates reviewed. I aim to widen the relevance of these characters' peculiarities to another field within Victorian studies, that of nonsense literature as conceptualised by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in *Philosophy of Nonsense* (1994). He abandons the central idea in Elizabeth Sewell's influential account of the genre in *The Field of Nonsense*, according to which nonsense is a self-sufficient play of language not interested in extrinsic reference like parody. Lecercle investigates the linguistics of nonsense literary works and how they anticipate twentieth-century currents in the philosophy of language. He claims that one of the definitive characteristics of Victorian nonsense is the dialectic of excess and lack on different levels of language. This "central paradox . . . of the genre" (Lecercle 31) is born of the juxtaposition of a playful avoidance of (common) sense-making (primarily on a semantic and pragmatic level) on the one hand, and a rigorous insistence on conventions in (especially syntactic and rhetorical) form, on the other. I argue that this juxtaposition is the central motif that captures the idiosyncrasies of Sam Weller and Mrs Nickleby, who equally display such a paradox in the most characteristic of their utterances. By simultaneously defying commonsensical expectations of pragmatics and adhering to strict and recurring syntactic or rhetorical patterns at the same time, these characters invoke nonsense as conceived by Lecercle. Without claiming that the novels should be treated as pieces of nonsense literature, I argue that these characters' speech acts do resemble the ones typical of nonsense and, thereby, infuse their respective contexts with that genre. The characters' speech acts thus create what may be termed functional nonsense; they display qualities of nonsense literary characters—like the protagonists of Edward Lear's limericks or the creatures in Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* world—and this informs their roles in the novels.

The paper will first explore what David Ellis calls Sam Weller's "extended comic comparisons" (8) and analyse their role in *The Pickwick Papers*. Sam presents a kind of comedy that is different from the one practiced by Mr Pickwick and his fellows,

in part by means of his comparisons, which also reflect the difference between him and the Pickwickians in social status. The comparisons reveal Sam's worldly knowledge and popular wisdom and underline the verbal nature of his comedy and a kind of literary existence that is emphatically oral (talking, as opposed to being talked about): it is characteristically his own direct speech acts that make him up, with little aid needed from the narrator's voice. I will then turn to Mrs Nickleby's monologues that we can label, by analogy, extended comic recollections to identify a logical structure that her frequent reminiscences all share. Her verbosity, especially in light of the way it is framed by the narrator, also exposes (like in Sam Weller's case) the character's existence in language—particularly in speech. Finally, I will try to explain the relevance of the two analyses to the critical concept of nonsense as conceived by Lecercle.

In a chapter about comedy and satire in the Victorian age, John Bowen contends that “Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* properly begins the history of Victorian comic writing” (270). Among the novelties this era brings to the history of English literature, he mentions “the hegemony of prose over poetry . . . , of verbal over visual comedy, and—in the increasingly sympathetic treatment of its main character—of the humorous over the satirical” (270). Verbal comedy is indeed very much characteristic of *The Pickwick Papers*, so much so that it was with the introduction of the verbose and outspoken Sam Weller that the novel's monthly instalments became bestsellers of their time. However, it should be noted that Dickens's comedy was not without any precursors: it carries forward the legacy of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. It indeed begins “with an exercise in the mock-heroic” (Ellis 7), with anecdotal accounts of the company's journeys in the picaresque fashion.

Although the book abounds in amusing facetiousness from the start, it is especially with the introduction of Sam Weller, who soon becomes Mr Pickwick's faithful page, that consciously provoked humour and sparkling wit (not unlike that of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) enter the novel. Indeed, “[t]he great stir” with contemporary audiences, as one literary historian puts it, “began with the appearance of the September number [of 1836] introducing Sam Weller,” soon raising sales from an initial 400 to 40,000 (Adams 56). Part of this popularity was clearly derived from Sam's “Wellerisms,” a “form of proverbial expression that characterized his speech” (Baer 173). Jeremy Tambling recognises this idiom as urban poetry of “image clusters” with an “instantaneity [that] belongs to those people Dickens is most interested

in, living by their wits [now not in the Sternian sense] because they have nothing else to live on” (qtd. in Gates 317). David Ellis calls these idiosyncratic utterances “extended comic comparisons,” a term I will also take up in what follows. They consist in quoting mostly fictional characters in reaction to an actual setting that is put in parallel with the context the invented quote comes from.

The first example is in the very first scene where we meet Sam in the Borough, London. He is occupied with cleaning the various footwear of the White Hart Inn’s guests when the chambermaid urges him to finish first with the boots of the gentleman in room number 22. To this he replies with some malice: “Who’s number twenty-two that’s to put all the others out? No, no; reg’lar rotation, as Jack Ketch said, wen he tied the men up” (*The Pickwick Papers* 120, ch. X). The professional killing of criminals (Jack Ketch was, as Ellis tells the reader in the notes to the Wordsworth Classics edition, a well-known hangman in the seventeenth century) and the cleaning of footwear are brought into comparison here for no small comic effect, evoking a historical figure in an imaginary scene parallel to the actual context. Here and in most other cases this is coupled with a macabre sense of humour, with which Sam “[disarms] aggression, in part by making it comically explicit” (Adams 61).

His “trademark fondness” (Ellis 8) for comic comparisons like the above are among the most characteristic features of his humour, and he delivers altogether 36 such comparisons in the course of the narrative. A source of pure entertainment, these comparisons also display a surprisingly strict grammatical structure, the calculated repetition of which contributes in great part to their comic effect. The references they entail to the various trades, folklore, and satirical convictions merge into a panoramic view of early Victorian society, imparting cultural importance to them as well. I am here concerned with what they can reveal about the nonsense that this kind of humour is infused with.

When the husband of Mrs Leo Hunter, a lady renowned for throwing eccentric parties for people of importance, calls on Mr Pickwick in Chapter XV to ask whether he would accept an invitation, and he is given the lady’s card, Sam confirms the fact of the call in the following manner: “He wants you particklar; and no one else’ll do, as the Devil’s private secretary said ven he fetched away Doctor Faustus” (*The Pickwick Papers* 187, ch. XV). Besides the hyperbolic dramatisation of the setting, the fun also springs from the comparison’s dark tone. The structural pattern of this piece perfectly mirrors the one quoted above—a statement, followed by the word *as* and the main clause with the verb *said*, which is complemented with

a subordinate clause describing details of the contrived setting. “The form is readily recognisable,” argues Baer in his account of Wellerisms: “‘_____,’ as _____ said, when (as, and) (s)he _____. I.e., a quotation, speaker named or otherwise identified, and a clause or phrase which puts the quotation in a new light or an incongruous setting, the total effect being ironic” (Baer 173). We may formalise this syntactic pattern even further as

{A}, as {B} said, when {C}

where {A} stands for the quoted statement applied to the situation at hand, {B} for the subject in the main clause (whom Sam quotes), and {C} for the setting described in the subordinate clause.

This abstract pattern is usually complicated with minor additions or a few elements left out. Sometimes it is complemented with an indirect object, headed by *to*, that the quoted person addresses with the statement in the fictional situation. When Mr Pickwick, after some verbal detour on Sam’s part upon their second meeting, attempts to drive the conversation politely back to why he had sent for Sam in the first place, Sam expresses his approval of Mr Pickwick’s intention this way: “‘That’s the pint, sir,’ interposed Sam; ‘out vith it, as the father said *to the child*, wen he swallowed a farden’” (*The Pickwick Papers* 153, ch. XII, emphasis added). Other variations include having different verbs instead of *said* (most commonly *remarked*)¹ and qualifying the main verb.

Despite these variations, almost half of all the comic comparisons found in the novel (14 out of the 36) perfectly adhere to the formula presented above, most of the deviations arising from the presence of the statement’s addressee,² and the use of alternative main verbs.³

How does Sam’s light-hearted yet rigorously structured verbosity contribute to the ambience of Dickens’s first novel in general? The most apparent function of his comic comparisons is creating a kind of comedy that differs from the source of humour in the rest of the novel. *The Pickwick Papers* attracts and amuses its readers

1 See pp. 572, ch. XLIV; 587, ch. XLV; 615, ch. XLVII; and 663, ch. LI.

2 Seven explicit instances on pp. 153, ch. XII; 241 and 242, ch. XIX; 330, ch. XXV; 506–507, ch. XXXVIII; 559, ch. XLII; and 616, ch. XLVII.

3 Besides *remarked*, Sam also uses *did*, *observed*, and *says*—with a plural subject—instead of *said*, one time each on pp. 426, ch. XXXIII; 484, ch. XXXVII; and 298, ch. XXIII, respectively.

from its first pages with the Pickwickians as figures of daffy aspirations, preposterous plights and mock-adventures. Mr Pickwick's owlish scientific ambitions culminate in a paper entitled "Speculations on the Source of the Hampstead Ponds, with some Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats." The poetry of "the poetic Snodgrass" (8, ch. I) remains completely hidden all through the book, and the "sporting Winkle" (8, ch. I) almost kills himself in a hunting adventure in Chapter VII. Mr Tupman, "a once romantic form" expanded by time and feeding with "the enthusiasms and ardour of a boy" (8, ch. I), is thoroughly disappointed in love in Chapter VIII, being beaten by Mr Jingle, the party's devious antagonist. Though these characters' clumsiness is already comic, a different kind of comedy is introduced with the brightness and buoyancy of Sam Weller, a character of boundless energy and unfailing judgment. It is through him that the reader is invited to laugh *with* a main character, too, besides laughing *at* the novel's protagonists. There is a wisdom behind his ad-hoc quasi-anecdotes that suggests a sense of superiority over a world of childish pretence and struggles that frequently appear miserable at face value.

A related difference between him and the members of the Pickwick Club is social status. There is reason to suggest that the existence of at least Mr Pickwick himself, a creature "suspended between fiction and reality" like a "sympathetic minor local [god]" (Bonadei 74), defies "social or historical context" (Auden qtd. in Bonadei 74). However, one of the most palpable sources of humour in the Sam Weller scenes, marked also by Sam's cockney accent, is the difference in social class between him and his master. While the Pickwickians are all gentlemen in the sense that financial needs are practically alien to them, we find Sam at work in the very first scene where they meet him. His previous experience with odd jobs and the ways of the world in general grants him a sort of popular wisdom that serves as the key to others' survival, too.

An example for the latter comes in the scene when, soon after Mr Pickwick, with a gentlemanly zeal to hold on to his principles, chooses to move to the Fleet Street prison of debtors instead of paying off his dues in the lost legal case against Mrs Bardell. He dismisses the protesting Sam from duty for his sake. Nevertheless, Sam devises a way to get back by his master's side in the prison. His father agrees that the feeble and meek Mr Pickwick does not stand a chance on his own in such a place. "Wy, they'll eat him up alive, Sammy" (*The Pickwick Papers* 566, ch. XLIII), he says when he learns about what has happened. It is also up to Sam's cunning to make the decisive interview happen between Ms Arabella Allen and her

suitor Mr Snodgrass in Chapter XXXIX (under the supervision of the virtuous Mr Pickwick, of course), which will enable the lovers to learn about each other's sentiments and pursue their happy ending.

The popular wisdom Sam possesses, gained through a low social standing, is illustrated by a wide variety of characters and settings invoked in his comic comparisons. These either come from folklore and historical legend, or allude to quotidian, especially lower-class, reality. Allusion to Dr Faustus and the devil's imaginary private secretary (187, ch. XV) and Blue Beard's domestic chaplain (260, ch. XX) evoke well-known fictional figures and stories, while references to Jack Ketch (120, ch. X), Richard the Third (320, ch. XXV), and James the First (626, ch. XLVIII, implicit allusion) likewise summon characters renowned in English history and contemporary popular culture. In other instances, Sam's comic comparisons feature common people most often identified only by their profession or family status. The father (153, ch. XII), the servant-girl (204, ch. XVI), the money-lender (458, ch. XXXV), the Lord Mayor (513, ch. XXXIX), the schoolmaster (547–548, ch. XLII), the mail-coach man (559, ch. XLII), and the (virtuous) clergyman (572, ch. XLIV) all represent society on a scale similar to the menagerie of *The Canterbury Tales*. Sam also very often invokes the plain stock character of “the gentleman,” perhaps “the young gentleman” (484, ch. XXXVII) or “the nobleman” (506–507, ch. XXXVIII; 663, ch. LI), sometimes “the (young or old) lady.” Child characters and animals also appear, albeit very rarely. This general subject, only identified by gender and/or age, features in eleven instances out of the twenty-six where the main character in the comparison is not a figure known from history or fiction. Sam delivers a typical example when he unexpectedly meets his adversary, Job Trotter, in prison: “This is rayther a change for the worse, Mr Trotter, as the gen'l'm'n said, wen he got two doubtful shillin's and six-penn'orth o' pocket pieces for a good half-crown” (343, ch. XXVII).

Ellis observes that *The Pickwick Papers* gradually changes tone as more serious themes come to dominate the story than the light-hearted picaresque would accommodate. More complicated topics preoccupy the author toward the end of the novel, like character development and social concerns, which applies to the later Dickens in general, too (Ellis 10–15). His third novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, indeed represents this tendency, in spite of some resurgence of the whimsical after the remarkably grim atmosphere of *Oliver Twist*. While any meaningful change in Mr Pickwick's personality after the carefree joviality of the Pickwickians' adventures becomes apparent only well into the second half of the novel (from Chapter XLI onward, the last

chapter being LVII), it is clear from early on in *Nicholas Nickleby* that the work will be concerned mainly with the fate and fortunes of young Nicholas and his consequent *Bildung*. As Bowen contends, *Nicholas Nickleby*'s is a typical "self-inventive" protagonist entangled in complex social relations (272), one who, unlike either Sam Weller or Mr Pickwick and his company, is always treated seriously by the narrator as he struggles through the vicissitudes of life.

Nevertheless, that novel also entertains its readers with a similar kind of comedy in Nicholas's mother, Mrs Nickleby. Though she plays only a minor role in the story, her very identity is formed in and by her verbal utterances that never fail to incite laughter in her readership. She entertains the readers (and frustrates her audience in the novel) especially with soliloquies or extended comic recollections (exploiting David Ellis's phrase), which are analogous with Sam Weller's comic comparisons. While certain situations trigger a remark and a corresponding joke-like micronarrative in Sam, Mrs Nickleby is induced to tell stories loosely connected to the topic at hand. As Tim Cook comments, "[w]e have little idea of her physical appearance, but we know what to expect when she opens her mouth: a series of rambling reminiscences of the past, often anecdotes about acquaintances, which help to support her optimism about the future of her children" (xx).

What makes these recollections even more comical is a continuous self-impugning gesture of hesitation—Mrs Nickleby expresses doubt most of the time as to details of her own story, a characteristic discursive element I will term "digressive uncertainty." Though the frequent interruption of her "ramblings" does not influence events in any way, Mrs Nickleby's recollections have been shown to form "an integral part of the structure of the novel" (Thompson 222). In line with contemporary optimism and high hopes for progress in general, Mrs Nickleby's monologues (not only the doubtful reminiscences but also her visions of a prosperous future) also counterpoint the novel's otherwise often "bleak pictures" (222) and may thus mirror the author's own initial "vacillation between hope and pessimism" (223). A few examples will illustrate these comic recollections and inform the ensuing analysis.

Mrs Nickleby delivers her first recollection (she has altogether twenty in the novel) when Ralph, her brother-in-law, expresses his intention to have Kate work for her living at a milliner's shop, and she is quick to recount the advantages of the plan:

"What your uncle says is very true, Kate, my dear," said Mrs Nickleby.

"I recollect when your poor papa and I came to town after we were

married, that a young lady brought me home a chip cottage-bonnet, with white and green trimming, and green persian lining, in her own carriage, which drove up to the door full gallop;—at least, I am not quite certain whether it was her own carriage or a hackney chariot, but I remember very well that the horse dropped down dead as he was turning round, and that your poor papa said he hadn't had any corn for a fortnight." (*Nicholas Nickleby* 119, ch. X)

The narrator's mild irony comes forth in the succeeding paragraph to frame Mrs Nickleby's speech and demonstrate its effect (in line with its relevance): "This anecdote, so strikingly illustrative of the opulence of milliners, was not received with any great demonstration of feeling, inasmuch as Kate hung down her head while it was relating, and Ralph manifested very intelligible symptoms of extreme impatience" (119, ch. X). Recounting these hazy memories is intended to kindle optimism regarding the course of action being discussed (especially in Mrs Nickleby herself). However, the actual effect of the recollections generally proves to be just the reverse—they further discourage her children as well as the reader from laying trust in the proceedings.

Interestingly, at times we can hear Mrs Nickleby's recollections only indirectly, through the narrator's account, like when we are told how she is foretelling a bright future for Kate:

If her mother's consolations could have restored her to a pleasanter and more enviable state of mind, there were abundance of them to produce the effect. By the time Kate reached home, the good lady had called to mind two authentic cases of milliners who had been possessed of considerable property, though whether they had acquired it all in business, or had had a capital to start with, or had been lucky and married to advantage, she could not exactly remember. However, as she very logically remarked, there must have been some young person in that way of business who had made a fortune without having anything to begin with, and that being taken for granted, why should not Kate do the same? Miss La Creevy, who was a member of the little council, ventured to insinuate some doubts relative to the probability of Miss Nickleby's arriving in this happy consummation

in the compass of an ordinary lifetime; but the good lady set that question entirely at rest, by informing them that she had a presentiment on the subject—a species of second-sight with which she had been in the habit of clenching every argument with the deceased Mr Nickleby, and in nine cases and three-quarters out of every ten, determining it the wrong way. (Nicholas Nickleby 126, ch. XI)

Sometimes another character disturbs or complements Mrs Nickleby's monologue, rendering the whole recollection a dialogue, like in the above example. Not much after the scene quoted just now, still fancying a promising career for her daughter in the milliners' way of business, Mrs Nickleby's position is challenged again by the family's friend, Miss La Creevy, a single lady who paints portraits. However, the structure of the scene is palpably the same:

"I am afraid it is an unhealthy occupation," said Miss La Creevy.

"I recollect getting three young milliners to sit to me, when I first began to paint, and I remember that they were all very pale and sickly."

"Oh! that's not a general rule by any means," observed Mrs Nickleby; "for I remember, as well as if it was only yesterday, employing one that I was particularly recommended to, to make me a scarlet cloak at the time when scarlet cloaks were fashionable, and she had a very red face—a very red face, indeed."

"Perhaps she drank," suggested Miss La Creevy.

"I don't know how that may have been," returned Mrs Nickleby; "but I know she had a very red face, so your argument goes for nothing." (126–127, ch. XI)

We can identify the following logical pattern in virtually all of Mrs Nickleby's recollections, be they in the form of direct or indirect speech, monologue or dialogue. A given situation ($\{A\}$) triggers the telling of an anecdote to buttress Mrs Nickleby's optimistic position ($\{B\}$). In a digressive manner, some detail of the anecdote ($\{C\}$) is called into question, suggesting Mrs Nickleby's position may not hold after all ($\{-B?\}$). Nevertheless, the uncertainty is quickly resolved with a forced conclusion that Mrs Nickleby's initially held position *must* be right, regardless of any doubt. The pattern can be expressed with the following formula:

{A} → ({B} — [{C?} ⇒ {-B?}] — {B})

The subformula after the first arrow, between round brackets, encapsulates the anecdote itself. Mrs Nickleby's conviction is of course significantly weakened in the reader's perception thanks to the looseness of the anecdote's relevance, the uncertainty expressed within the anecdote, and the narrator's ironic remarks framing the recollection.

A few of Mrs Nickleby's anecdotes lack the digressive uncertainty part (only five out of the 20),⁴ but they still retain a digressive quality either because they come out of context or are conspicuously inconclusive and apparently imaginary. An example for this comes when Ralph presents his scheme to have Kate around for dinner with his business partners (he hopes to use Kate's womanly presence to gain Sir Mulberry and his company's willingness to continue doing business with him). Mrs Nickleby first laments having had to sell a large part of her jewellery she could now use to prop her daughter up for the evening (219, ch. XIX). She then launches "out into sundry anecdotes of young ladies, who had had thousand-pound notes given them in reticules, by eccentric uncles; and of young ladies who had accidentally met amiable gentlemen of enormous wealth at their uncle's houses, and married them, after short but ardent courtships" (221, ch. XIX). The unspecified anecdotes in the latter instance, although apparently not weakened by uncertainties, are still tainted with doubt arising from their all-too-obvious correspondence with the mother's hopes for the upcoming event.

The narrator's occasional remark on how she ends her usual soliloquy refines her personality:

"... but it was always the way, and was just the way with your poor dear father. Unless I thought of everything—" This was Mrs Nickleby's usual commencement of a general lamentation, running through a dozen or so of complicated sentences addressed to nobody in particular, and into which she now launched *until her breath was exhausted*. (129, ch. XI, emphasis added)

Talking stopped only by the exhaustion of breath is developed into a motif recurring two additional times in the narrative. Recollecting a scene from Kate's childhood

4 See pp. 219, 221, ch. XIX; 544, 545–546, ch. XLV; and 672, ch. LV.

in praise of her daughter's capabilities comes to a halt for the same reason: "Having quoted this extraordinary and most disinterested testimony to her daughter's excellence, Mrs Nickleby stopped to breathe" (211, ch. XVIII). Her monologue similarly ends in exhaustion at meeting Sir Mulberry, Kate's heinous suitor: "Having pretty well run herself out by this time, Mrs Nickleby stopped as suddenly as she had started off" (318, ch. XXVI). In all these instances (and we may well imagine the rest ending the same way), Mrs Nickleby appears to talk as long as she possibly can, never ending her speech consciously, on purpose, but rather extending it until her physical limits.

Mrs Nickleby's extended comic recollections constitute a significant part of her very existence in the novel—it is especially her remembrances that effectively constitute her being. The repeated explicit association on the narrator's part of exhaustion (exhaling, followed by a momentary stop of breathing) and the end of talking—and, conversely, of breathing (the most palpable sign of being alive) and talking—imbues these instances with characterological significance. Talking is her most prominent characteristic and role in the novel (a counterpoint to Newman Noggs, Ralph's clerk, whom we know by what he does rather than what he says). It is her spirit, her *pneuma*, which her speaking represents, and her speech is most typically recollection; her essence, therefore, is constituted by reminiscence. But it is of a past whose reality and relevance is ironically called into question—it is always mock-reminiscence. *The Pickwick Papers's* Sam Weller, albeit a more fully elaborate character who significantly influences the main plot through his actions, is also identified most commonly by his discourse patterns. Therefore, his "being" in the novel is likewise constituted most prominently by emanations of verbal comedy (in contrast to "neutral" instances of speech).

The differences between Sam and Mrs Nickleby are obvious. The one is a bright young man of relatively low social standing, who ironically comes to play a role of chief importance in the storyline, while the other is an old widow preoccupied mostly with unreliable accounts of her past through which she would compulsively reclaim distinguished social status, but who effectively has little influence over the fate of the main characters (or indeed her own). Even though Sam seems to deliver his remarks in a light-hearted manner, on the spur of the moment, the wit and popular wisdom of the Wellerisms can also appear as intended, consciously provoking laughter on the speaker's part, while poor Mrs Nickleby seems to fall victim of automation when verbally (re)producing memories of her past, unconsciously generating

comedy at her own expense. In short, while Sam seems fully capable of intentionally making his audience laugh, the same can hardly be imagined of Mrs Nickleby.

Despite all their differences, however, the close reading of their most prominent locutions suggests that these speech acts share at least one important characteristic: a double structure. On the one hand, each instance of Sam's and Mrs Nickleby's extended comic speech is triggered by somebody else's words (it is always dialogical). On the other hand, although it does have some relevance to the given context, it is always self-sufficient: it retains its own internal structure and content that lives its own life, as it were. These monologues lend themselves easily to be quoted without any reference to their context. Whatever the scene, it only serves as a catalyst for Sam's comic comparisons and Mrs Nickleby's recollections; once they have emerged, they do not need their context any more to be enjoyed.

Analysing Victorian nonsense poetry and prose, Jean-Jacques Lecercle identifies the characteristic principle of nonsense in the following paradox: "The lack of structure at one level [of language] . . . is amply compensated by excess or proliferation of sense [at another]" (31). This is, according to Lecercle, "the central paradox, or contradiction, of the genre" (31). Though in nonsense the contradiction holds mainly between syntax and semantics, pedantically correct grammar (cf. the narrator's reproach in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for Alice's surprised exclamation, "curiouser and curiouser" [Carroll 20, ch. 2]) and semantic void (cf. the dubious semantics of the poem "Jabberwocky" in *Through the Looking-Glass* [Carroll 155–156, ch. 1]), a similar contradiction appears in the instances of Dickens's early fiction discussed above. Here we have well-formed (from the perspective of generative linguistics, Sam's cockney English is perfectly correct) and mechanically repeated syntactic—or, in Mrs Nickleby's case, rhetorical—structures counterbalancing impropriety on the level of pragmatics, which is another point that Lecercle sees as central to nonsense literature.

At one point in his analysis (in the chapter "The Pragmatics of Conversation"), Lecercle reads texts such as Lewis Carroll's Alice tales in the context of Herbert Paul Grice's theory of implicature, which holds, in essence, that the participants of polite conversation intend to cooperate and make themselves understandable to each other, even if they sometimes say things which would seem inadequate for that purpose at face value.⁵ Grice expresses this intention in the concept of the Cooperation

5 Grice's example is an imaginary conversation between two speakers about a mutual friend who has started a job in a bank. To the first speaker's question about how their friend progresses in the new

Principle (CP) that holds for normal conversation, and establishes certain maxims with which the participants intuitively comply. The CP tells you that you should “[m]ake your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 26). The Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner all specify what a speaker’s contribution should be like (not shorter or longer than necessary, true, relevant, and succinct). This theory is intended to provide the necessary background for describing instances of everyday conversation by means of the devices used in formal logic (many practitioners of which, Grice contends, used to have difficulty accounting for utterances not to be taken literally). According to Lecerle, twentieth-century theories of language, including Grice’s, treat communication as an essentially irenic, well-meaning joint venture, where even the flouting of maxims is to be regarded as ironically conforming to the CP. But conversation in nonsense works turns out to be mostly agonistic, a verbal battle between the participants—“an anti-Gricean sight” (77). Thus, nonsense pragmatics is best described as conforming to a “Principle of Struggle” (79), flouting Grice’s maxims on purpose. The best example for this is Humpty-Dumpty’s rebukes to Alice in Chapter 6 of *Through the Looking-Glass*, a scene which “entertains a fantasy of total control over [the speakers’] exchange” (Lecerle 81).⁶

I do not claim that Sam or Mrs Nickleby would consciously provoke hostility with their locutions the way Humpty-Dumpty does (although both characters are always aware of the other participants’ disapproval). While unlikely to conform to a Principle of Struggle, their extended comparisons and reminiscences do violate the Gricean maxims with no apparent implicature. Sam’s verbosely delivered and striking analogies surely defy the Maxims of Relation and Manner (deserving

job, the second speaker replies, “Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn’t been to prison yet” (Grice 24). Accounting for why and how the last remark may make sense in the face of its being seemingly out of context is possible with reference to implicature.

6 Perhaps the best-known and most oft-quoted passage from this chapter is Humpty Dumpty’s insistence that names should have some meaning:

“. . . tell me your name and business.”

“My *name* is Alice, but—”

“It’s a stupid name enough!” Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. “What does it mean?”

“*Must* a name mean something?” Alice asked doubtfully.

“Of course it must,” Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: “*my* name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.” (Carroll 219, ch. 6)

Mr Pickwick's disapproval more than once), while Mrs Nickleby's anecdotes cause annoyance to her conversational partners (reduced to a mere audience) by breaching the Maxims of Manner, Quantity, and Quality, too. (Although Relation also comes close, we may point out that the gist of each anecdote is motivated by the context—cf. the initial part of the formula describing her reminiscences, {A} →). Not only is she loquacious in delivering her micro-narratives, which disregards the third submaxim of Manner, “[b]e brief” (Grice 27), she also packs them with much more detail than would be necessary for the listeners (breaching the Manner of Quantity). The supermaxim of Quality, “[t]ry to make your contribution one that is true” (Grice 27), is also flouted by the digressive uncertainties in Mrs Nickleby's reminiscences.

Lecerclé himself quotes Dickens's early works in his study of nonsense literature when treating its fusion of “high” and “low” genres (the literary application of certain phenomena derived from folk literature or the speech of mental patients, for instance). He shows “nonsense at work in a mimetic text” (Lecerclé 186) in *Little Dorrit*, particularly in the speech of Flora, a character “afflicted with a kind of logor-rhea in which we easily recognise the best of Victorian nonsense” (Lecerclé 186) and the rare words of her chaperone, “who usually sits silent, but sometimes breaks into incoherent aggressiveness, addressed to no one in particular, but uttered in a tone of mingled earnestness and malevolence” (187). In the examples he quotes, Lecerclé is interested mainly in Dickens's use of elongated and seemingly incoherent speech where syntactic excess coexists with semantic lack. A similar tension is felt in both Sam's and Mrs Nickleby's abuse of the opportunity to verbalise their ideas in a conspicuously regular form and the lack, if not of semantic content, of consideration for achieving a common communicative goal with the participants. If not (consciously) agonistic, Sam's and Mrs Nickleby's obtrusive comments display lack on the level of pragmatics by flouting the Gricean maxims, which is contrasted with excess on the level of either syntax or logical structure, delivering extended comic comparisons and reminiscences in mostly uniform ways. To this paradox, of the kind that Lecerclé identifies as characteristic of Victorian nonsense literature, we should add the two characters' attitude with which they deliver the verbal instances so typical of them, the natural flow of their words in each speech situation where their instances, pragmatically speaking, are anything but fitting. This latter attitude is also a benchmark of the speech patterns of characters well known from nonsense.

Yet I will refrain from claiming that Sam and Mrs Nickleby belong in the company of Lewis Carroll's creatures like the Cheshire Cat or the characters of Edward

Lear's limericks. *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* are not pieces of nonsense literature *per se*, nor are the two characters taken from them actors of the nonsense *agon* Lecercle describes in his analysis. They do, however, bear traces of nonsense, a fact that offers us valuable critical insight to complement the analysis of Sam's and Mrs Nickleby's extended comic monologues as functional nonsense in Dickens's two novels. The nonsense of their respective comic monologues plays an important role both in creating comedy (which may be especially important in counterpointing tense scenes in *Nicholas Nickleby*) and in signalling Sam and Mrs Nickleby's difference from the rest of the characters, who are either mostly not meant to make the reader laugh (in *Nicholas Nickleby*) or are assigned a different kind of comic role (in *The Pickwick Papers*). Nonsense has a bearing on the aforementioned double structure as well: while the consistent syntactic or rhetorical form stresses the self-sufficient quality of the monologues, the attendant disregard for the norms of polite conversation (a mark of Lecercle's *agon*) paradoxically reflects their embeddedness in dialogue.

The true qualities of nonsense championed later by Carroll and Lear include a centripetal perlocutionary force, an intellectual attraction, from which it would be hard for any reader to escape. Fun for its own sake, of the kind described above, has a potential to captivate the audience and steal the show from whatever else it ought to pave the way for. Though Dickens self-consciously went on from the carefree jollities of *The Pickwick Papers* to treat chiefly social matters already in *Nicholas Nickleby*, one of the most recognisably Dickensian traits still remained, the kind of entertainment that finds its roots in the merry wonders of Lecercle's nonsense paradox.

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