Dangerous Similitude in Charles Dickens’ “To Be Read at Dusk”

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Charles Dickens’ ghost story “To Be Read at Dusk” was first published in 1852 in Heath’s Keepsake. Though it seldom appears in recent Dickens scholarship, the story is unique for its self-reflexivity, a quality not often as apparent in Dickens’ works. The text consists of two ghost stories inside a frame narrative whose occupants are observed by the narrator who, as I explain below, is interrupted by the author himself. While all of these layers of narration would be enough to call attention to the act of storytelling itself, there is an additional level of self-reflexivity in the content of the various tales; they are all concerned with figuration and representation. The focus of the frame narrative, and thus the motive force behind the telling of the two inner tales, is the simile and its properness – who voices it, to whom does it belong, to what does it refer, and does it do so convincingly? The two internal tales then serve to demonstrate how likeness, similitude, operates. This operation is, it seems, commonly uncommon; while one of the storytellers claims that the events narrated, instances of likeness, are “as common as cherries in the Black Forest,” they are nonetheless events that most would label supernatural – premonitions, phantoms, doppelgangers and the like (Dickens 235). These events, linked as they are, in Dickens’ tale, to the simile, call attention to the use of figuration itself as a commonly uncommon activity; while it can be performed easily and innocently enough, it conceals the violent initiatory act involved in every representation.

Described in various ways by contemporary theorists – separating something from its origin, splitting the experience from its meaning, murdering the thing in favor of its representation – the act of naming, of representing something in speech, initiates the violent process of subordinating the unique to the concept. Early nineteenth century philosophers, like G.W.F. Hegel, embraced this initiatory act as an essential part of human progress. Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit (a defining text for nineteenth century Europe’s understanding and justification of a structure of “progress” moving towards a universalization of meaning) begins with the act of naming as one of the first steps in the
dialectic. Friedrich Nietzsche, however, did not seek to naturalize the linguistic act, but saw it for the arbitrary and ultimately violent act it would later be characterized as. For Nietzsche, the simile is not one occurrence among others within language but rather, as he would argue only twenty years after the publication of Dickens’ story, as a type of metaphor (i.e., as a way of creating a connection or likeness between totally different registers), it is the linguistic act par excellence.

3 It is my contention here that Dickens illustrates something more akin to the latter’s view of language when he allows us a glimpse of the phantom nature of the simile in “To Be Read at Dusk.” In this short text, he has made a ghost story of language itself, one which disavows its own nature – “Ghosts! There are no ghosts here!” – even as it spins its macabre tales (Dickens 238).

4 The little criticism that does exist on this short story suggests that through it, Dickens was illustrating and perhaps working through episodes and concerns from his own life experience. As Ruth Glancy points out in her article on “To Be Read at Dusk,” the short story abounds with biographical references. Louise Henson, in “Investigations and Fictions: Charles Dickens and Ghosts,” takes us through Dickens’ ongoing fascination with and changing views on the nature of ghosts and their connection to such “physiological” phenomena as mesmerism and animal magnetism. She cites “To Be Read at Dusk” as one of the tales in which Dickens explores these possibilities. What I would like to suggest here is that in performing these explorations through literature, Dickens links these phenomena, whether physiological or spiritual, to language in a manner which highlights, even as it disavows, language’s own mysterious, dangerous, and destabilizing nature.

5 While Susan Gillman and Robert Patten, in their article titled “Dickens: Doubles: Twain: Twins,” argue that Dickens’ doubles emanate from a space of stable identity, “To Be Read at Dusk” questions this stability through both the author’s and narrator’s evident need to disavow the acts of figuration it contains. This structure of disavowal becomes apparent in the very first scene of the story. It begins: “One, two, three, four, five. There were five of them” (Dickens 235). The five couriers, two of which will narrate the internal stories, emerge in this way, one by one, onto the page before the reader. Observed by the narrator, they will soon begin a heated discussion on the nature of certain phenomena that are like ghosts, but are not ghosts. This discussion will lead to the telling of the two internal tales, which are supposed to verify that indeed such events do occur.

6 The description of the setting comes next. It is a ghastly landscape “on the summit of the Great St. Bernard in Switzerland,” with “remote heights, stained by the setting sun, as if a mighty quantity of red wine had been broached upon the mountain top, and had not yet had time to sink into the snow.” But, “This is not my simile.” This is the only sentence up to this point in the narrative spoken in the present tense. It is as if another voice comes in here, one not part of the scene, to disclaim ownership of the simile (and perhaps the narrative itself), to disavow the likeness. This present tense voice, speaking as it does from outside the time of the narrative, could only be the author’s. While this particular simile seems harmless enough - the likeness between the setting sun on the snow and spilt wine - it thinly veils a much more sinister one, in which the setting sun is like spilt blood. The author disavows the likeness that is explicitly stated in order to shield himself from the implicit one. If the implied simile does not immediately strike the reader, a more obvious clue follows: “looking at the reddened snow, and at the lonely shed hard by, where the bodies of belated travelers, dug out of it, slowly wither away, knowing no
corruption in that cold region.” So whether the sun on the snow looks like wine or not, at this point the reader knows that under the snow most certainly is blood. The danger in the figure lies in the fact that the seemingly innocent simile (sun like wine) hides within it the more sinister one (wine like blood), like the snow hides dead bodies, and we begin to sense that the story itself is built on just such a surface.

Neither author nor narrator will take credit for the simile; instead, the narrator asserts that “it was made for the occasion by the stoutest courier, who was a German.” A game of “passing the buck” has taken place, through which the blame for the simile moves from the outside in – from the author (Dickens) to the external narrator (who remains unidentified) to the internal narrator (the German courier) – buffering the author and, perhaps, the outside world in which the use of similes is also “as common as macaroni in Naples.” While the author and his world may be protected from what lies hidden in the simile, the narrator, in spite of his own disavowal, is not. He is, in fact, aligned with precisely the most feared quality of the simile: its ability to pass unnoticed. The narrator states, “none of the others took any more notice of it than they took of me” (235). “It” refers to the simile, and “me” refers to the narrator, the two related in that neither is noticed. Oftentimes we do not notice the narrator of a tale, and there is nothing sinister in this. The difference here is that far from remaining unnoticed, the narrator’s presence and hiddenness are highlighted. He is neither a character within the story nor entirely outside it (since he exists within its temporality). He is, rather, himself a simile, as are the five couriers he observes.

The relationship between the external and internal narrators is thus itself one of similitude. While the five couriers sit on one bench, smoking and watching the sunset, the narrator is “sitting on another bench on the other side of the convent door, smoking my cigar, like them, and – also like them - looking at the reddened snow” [emphasis added]. So while the wine on the snow might not be the narrator’s simile, the narrator himself not only employs but also is a simile of the couriers – he is like them. Again, the direction of the simile points inward. The couriers are the origin of the simile; it is their emergence that sets the tale in motion and begins this series of ghastly substitutions. As if to assure the reader of the couriers’ “guilt” in this regard, the disavowed simile is repeated: “The wine upon the mountain top soaked in as we looked.” The fact that both types of narrator participate in the very structure of similitude that has been disavowed for the ghastly secret it hides suggests that all that will be spoken by them holds such things within it, like the dead bodies under the snow.

Indeed, there is a moment of silence for that which is hidden in the simile: “The mountain in the sunset had stopped the five couriers in a conversation. It is a sublime sight, likely to stop conversation. The mountain being now out of the sunset, they resumed” (235). The mountain in the sunset, this point of the simile, “dusk,” is also the point at which conversation stops. Again there is the insertion of the present tense voice, interrupting the already-interrupted conversation to tell us that this particular sight at this particular time of day is “likely to stop conversation.” Not that it will necessarily stop conversation, but that it is “likely” to do so. Again, it is a relation of “like” that moves the narrative.

Evidently, then, this is a story which is not to be told at dusk, since conversation stops here. It is to be read at dusk. Does the title indicate futurity, that it will be read at dusk? Or is it a limitation, only to be read at dusk? It is neither of these, but rather to be read at dusk, it is passive and infinitive. It is to be, infinitely, read, passively, as if oneself were being read, at dusk, only at this time of the disavowal of the simile, only at this time of the
interrupted conversation. This passive infinitive has implications for both the narrators and the reader. For the narrators, who are supposed to be actively telling the stories, the fact of their being simultaneously read (as part of the story themselves) is highlighted. For the reader, who expects only metaphorically to enter the story she is reading, she finds the story gazing back at her. She encounters a tale interrupted at a crucial moment of self-reflexivity, a point at which the telling of the tale folds back upon its reading and vice-versa. Thus the prescription of the time of the reading ensures that when the story is read, the reader too will be read, will become part and parcel of the haunting simile, will become herself a likeness of the processes at work in the narrative. The disavowal that seems to buffer the outside of the story from the violence of the simile appears now as a distraction put in place by the author to fill the space of silence at this dusky moment when the reader’s world is mirrored in the story.

After this interruption, and perhaps as a way of coming to terms with what it portends, the five couriers embark on a verbal mission to complete the simile, to draw out and name the hidden element they are attempting to describe. To do this they must find a name for these phenomena that are like ghosts, but are not ghosts. “‘if you talk of ghosts -’” “But I don’t talk of ghosts,” said the German.” (235) The German employs the following example to explain the type of phenomenon they are attempting to name:

When you walk along a crowded street . . . and think that a passing stranger is like your friend Heinrich, and then that another passing stranger is like your friend Heinrich, and so begin to have a strange foreknowledge that presently you’ll meet your friend Heinrich . . . [emphasis added].

This example serves as a preface to the two tales that follow, one about an English bride who dreams of the likeness of a dark man who eventually materializes and carries her away, and the other about a set of twins, one of which sends his phantom to warn the other of his impending death. All describe phenomena of likeness, repeated likenesses which lead to some fateful meeting with the subject of the likeness. In each of the two tales, as in the very first simile (sun like wine), the likeness contains the palpable presence of death and serves as further evidence of the violence involved in this commonly uncommon linguistic act.

The tale of the English bride is told by the Genoese courier, who claims that he worked for her husband and witnessed the events. The English bride, Clara, has a dream about a dark man three times before her wedding and becomes convinced that she will find the “likeness” of the man and something terrible will happen. The simile is apparently an awful thing for the English bride, a horror that she fears, but she has only encountered half of it. First, there is only the dream, with no corresponding simile: “Not a face she ever saw, or at all like a face she ever saw” (236). Then, the bride and her party arrive at the old Genoese palace that her husband has rented for the summer. The palace, too, as Glancy notes, is a reference to the outside of the story, to the author himself, who wanted to rent such a castle, but it was rejected by the servant he sent to investigate it for being too old and rundown. It could be said that Dickens’ disappointment at not being able to stay in the palace appears in his story as a form of wish-fulfillment, but the description of the place within the courier’s tale suggests otherwise. The courier describes it as being “like a tomb.” The entombing nature of the simile is once again revealed, and thus the palace becomes a harbinger of a dark duplicity.

The bride knows enough to be frightened of the palace and what it might contain: “Mistress secretly had great fear of meeting with the likeness of that face - we all had; but
there was no such thing” (237). Eventually, the likeness presents itself as a guest at the palace. The dark man’s name is Dellombra (of/from the shadow), and indeed he is a shadow of the bride, whose name, appropriately, is Clara. She is the light part of the simile, while he is the dark and deadly implicit side. When faced with this materialization, “her face changed,” she “was nearly terrified to death,” and “wandered in her mind about her dream, all night.” Her husband dismisses her fears and tells her “that it rested with herself to be herself.” The problem is, of course, not the dark man, not the simile, but rather the implicit simile, that she cannot be herself, that the shadow represents her own dark side, one whose power over her is overwhelming: “She would cast down her eyes and droop her head, before the Signor Dellombra, or would look at him with a terrified and fascinated glance, as if his presence had some evil influence or power over her” (238).

Clara’s dark man corresponds with that of a real lady, Madame de la Rue, with whom Dickens’ spent many hours, from 1844-5, mesmerizing her in an attempt to rid her of her haunting shadow (Glancy 41-4). It is not surprising that such an internal demon would manifest itself as a character all its own in Dickens’ fictional representation of it. One need only think of Frankenstein’s monster or the later Edward Hyde. Indeed, Dellombra is very much like Frankenstein’s monster, as he, too, is the male demon of a female character, like the monster is ultimately to Mary Shelley.

Madame de la Rue was more fortunate than our heroine, however, as Dellombra eventually steals Clara away, never to be heard from again. Like Frankenstein and his monster, “she vanished into infamous oblivion, with the dreaded face beside her that she had seen in her dream” (Dickens 238). The completion of the simile, for Clara, led to her own disappearance. The author, whose solicitude saved Madame de la Rue, seems to have unleashed her demon into his story. Perhaps it was a form of exorcism, but more likely, it seems, it was an exploration into the full extent of the awful power wielded by this ultimately linguistic operation. Further, this operation does not take place in a closed space but rather, as the title suggests, in the in-between time of dusk in which reader and text are likenesses, both “to be read.”

The second tale, told by the German courier, is quite appropriately about twin brothers, each the likeness of the other. Named James and John, the pair is also an intertextual reference to the two brothers in Dickens’ earlier novel *Dombey and Son*. In *Dombey and Son*, the brothers are different ages and the younger one has overtaken the older in the business, but in “To Be Read at Dusk,” the brothers are apparently equals in everything, for “[b]etween these brothers there was a great affection” (238). The moral polarity obviously present in the two brothers of *Dombey and Son* is only hinted at in “To Be Read at Dusk,” while the separate identities of the two brothers are radically called into question, not simply by their identical looks, but also by the ghostly appearance and death of one of the pair.

Before the one, James, is to leave for a trip the other, John, comes to visit, but is taken sick. So he says: “If I get quite better, I’ll come back and see you before you go. If I don’t feel well enough to resume my visit where I leave it off, why you will come and see me before you go.” The emphasis on the second pair of pronouns deserves some attention. It reads as accusatory, as if John cannot count on his brother’s reciprocation. Strangely, both options come about. While John does not resume his visit in person, John’s phantom visits James in the night: “it came into my room, in a white dress, and regarding me earnestly, passed up to the end of the room, glanced at some papers on my writing-desk,
turned, and, still looking earnestly at me as it passed the bed, went out at the door” (239). After this, John’s servant comes to tell James that John is on his deathbed, so James goes to see him. “He was in white, like the figure – necessarily so, because he had his nightdress on. He looked like the figure – necessarily so because he looked earnestly at his brother when he saw him come into the room . . . ‘James, you have seen me before, tonight – and you know it!’ And so died!” Again, the likeness precedes its subject, but more important, it seems, is this second accusation against James. John’s insistence on his presence in James’ room that night is a direct rebuttal of John’s earlier assertion to his servant: “Now, I am not in the least mad, and am not in the least disposed to invest that phantom with any external existence outside of myself.” While John’s “earnest” looks at his brother after glancing at the papers on his desk indicate that James’ guilt might reside in his handling of the business (as in *Dombey and Son*), in the end the more pointed accusation involves the disavowal of the likeness. James must admit that he has seen the phantom, which is the likeness not only of his brother but also, of course, of himself. James’ fear of possible madness is nothing compared to this violent double severance: on the one hand, from his twin, and on the other, from his own image mirrored in his twin’s phantom.

Thus in both of the internal tales, as in the frame narrative, it is a question of disproving the denial of a violent similitude. In between the two tales, the German courier reinforces this structure of assertion and denial: “‘What do you call *that*?’ said the German courier, triumphantly. ‘‘Ghosts! There are no ghosts *there!* What do you call this, that I am going to tell you? Ghosts! There are no ghosts *here!*’” (238). There is a strange parallel between the repeated exclamations of the German courier, and another German, Friedrich Nietzsche, who would not write for several years, but who claimed to have quoted Aristotle in writing, “O my friends, there is no friend.” What I mean to suggest by providing this parallel is that the German’s lines in Dickens’ story need not be read as first, “Ghosts!,” an exclamation of disgust, followed by “there are no ghosts,” the denial of the existence of ghosts. The way one could read it is as one reads the Aristotle-Nietzsche quote, as first an address to those present, “friends” or “ghosts.” For the way that the five couriers *emerge*, one by one, in the beginning, and then the way, in the end, they disappear, suggests that they are, perhaps, ghosts themselves: “I waited, when the German courier ceased, to hear something said of this strange story. The silence was unbroken. I looked round, and the five couriers were gone: so noiselessly that that ghostly mountain might have absorbed them into its eternal snows” (239). The ghosts’ calling attention to, and simultaneous denial of, their ghostly character, parallels the present voice’s denial of ownership of the simile in the beginning of the story, as well as all those that follow. Our internal narrators are themselves phantoms of the bodies buried in the snow, voices that speak from underneath the figure.

But even that is not the end of what lies hidden or unvoiced in the story. Through the series of exchanges between the five couriers, four couriers are introduced: German, Swiss, Neapolitan, and Genoese. What about the fifth? If he exists, he never speaks. Is this a mistake on the part of the author, or the narrator, or is it an integral part of the tale? “There were five of them.” And yet there are only four who are identified as some particular nationality, only four who are identified at all, only four who speak. The fifth courier, like the implicit simile (wine like blood), never speaks, but is present nonetheless, and these voiceless and unvoiced presences lend an air of danger and secrecy to the story.
The ghostly nature of the couriers thus turns out to be another of these instances of similitude which hide a silenced, implied element within. While a ghost appears after its subject's death, and usually emerges, in literature, to realign a “time out of joint,” the types of similitude narrated by the couriers indicate the splitting of the subject from its likeness prior to death. Not only prior to death, but prior to the encounter with the subject of the likeness itself, the simile is a dangerous presence that contains an awful prescience. The fact that the narrators themselves are victims of this same operation highlights the self-reflexivity of the text. As the title suggests, the couriers are as much passively narrated by their own tales as they are actively telling them. They themselves are instances of what they narrate. What actually speaks through the couriers, as well as the narrator, who is also a simile, and the author himself, whose life experiences, narrated in this way, escape his authority with or without his actual disavowal of them, is the act of enunciation itself. The fact that this act has become self-conscious is what gives the story its haunted feel. Whether it speaks about ghosts or not, the haunted nature of language speaks through it. The message is simple. What wants to be heard in this tale is, simply, simile, emerging in the beginning, remaining only long enough to tell tales about crises of likeness. What makes itself felt every time there is a likeness is a third term that is always silenced in each likeness, the presence of the simile itself, announcing itself even in its disavowal, haunting its own narrative, hiding in the shadows of its own enunciation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. For the history of its publication, see Ruth Glancy’s “To Be Read at Dusk,” The Dickensian 83.1 (1987): 40-7.
2. Since the elaboration of structural linguistics by Ferdinand Saussure, the relations between event and enunciation, between the "thing-in itself" and representation, between the Real and the Symbolic have been variously elaborated by structuralists, poststructuralists, and psychoanalysts, but always the relation is one of violence, trauma, loss, etc.


4. According to Gillman and Patten, Twain's twins, in contrast, do not spring from such a stable source, but rather from an instability in Twain's/Clemens own existence.


ABSTRACTS

Pour être lu à la nuit tombante (1852) est une nouvelle de Charles Dickens qui raconte une histoire de fantômes. Le présent article émet l'hypothèse que cette nouvelle, atypique par sa structure autoréflexive, explore la nature "spectrale" du langage figuré. L'étude s'appuie sur les phénomènes d'autoréflexivité pour mettre en rapport les narrateurs, des récits enchâssés, les personnages et leurs histoires par le biais des figures de style. Dickens écrit cette nouvelle pour montrer que si le recours à un langage figuré constitue une opération courante, il n'en est pas moins vrai que ce recours repose sur la mort.

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