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- 1 Charles Dickens (1812-1870) bore witness to the very sudden emergence, circulation and gradual invasion of paper which transformed the role of documents in the field of communication in the nineteenth century. Before the Industrial Revolution, paper making was still a craft involving a lengthy manufacturing process: with the invention of the paper machines at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it became possible to make paper continuously, with fewer workers, faster, and to produce paper of better quality. Paper making was becoming an industry.¹ There was tremendous progress in the circulation of goods as well: thanks to the railway, which developed in the early nineteenth century, the postal system evolved and its network expanded throughout the country. It was thus possible for letters and newspapers to circulate regularly, faster, more cheaply and effectively.² It seemed that communication and the circulation of documents had never been easier. However, this is not what Charles Dickens shows in his novels, where official circuits cannot be relied on and messengers cannot be trusted, where documents get lost and destroyed in the mass of paper saturating public and private spaces. Paper seems to have lost its original purpose which is the conveying of a semantic meaning. These changes disrupt the relation of the author and the reader to documents, as well as the connection between author and reader. Throughout his career, Dickens conducted a reflection on the writing of texts, and on the transmission and reception of documents. His deep mistrust of paper comes across in his novels as he invests it with a negative power. This defiance may seem paradoxical for Charles Dickens, who entrusted his whole existence to paper: he was a prolific writer, the editor of two newspapers, an active correspondent. However, as a writer, Dickens never ceased to explore the world of signs to the full, searching new forms of writing, new media, and

new ways of reading and interpreting. This essay will discuss one of the alternatives to paper examined by Charles Dickens, focusing on his 1853 novel *Bleak House*: through sound and echoes, Dickens imagines an incorruptible written document forever conveying the message of its author.

The Victorian sound culture

- 2 The nineteenth century is usually characterised by visual culture: the Victorian period is the era of the advertising poster, of the photograph, of press illustrations, so that the Victorians lived in a world saturated with pictures.³ However, recent research has shown that the era simultaneously developed a scientific interest as well as a popular fascination for acoustics. As John Picker shows in *Victorian Soundscapes*:

[T]he era also experienced a rise in close listening. [...] To revive a term that they themselves first gave wide currency, theirs was an age of “auscultation”, not only in the medical sense initiated by the stethoscope (invented by Laennec in 1816) and perfected by the microphone, of amplifying the sounds of the heart, lungs, and other organs in order to diagnose illness more accurately, but also in the sense of careful listening to a world at large—and in flux. (Picker 6)

- 3 For John Picker, the starting point of this generalised aural sensitivity coincides with the invention of the microphone in 1827: in an article entitled “Experiments on audition” (1827), the English physician Charles Wheatstone sets out the results of his work on the conception of a sound amplifier. This invention formed the cornerstone of acoustics research in the nineteenth century; the scientific community gradually explored the possibilities of sound at its faintest, making the inaudible resound: fifty years after the invention of the microphone, the American David Hughes created a device which was said to detect the tramp of a fly’s footsteps (Picker 85).
- 4 Not only did nineteenth-century acoustics research focus on amplification, it concurrently investigated the recording and subsequent reproduction of sound, leading to Thomas Edison’s phonograph in 1877. Many mechanical musical instruments anticipated this invention with automatophones such as barrel organs, music boxes and mechanical pianos. However, if these instruments enable the reproduction of a pre-programmed melody, they cannot actually record sound and replay it identically. In 1860, seventeen years before the advent of Edison’s phonograph, the Frenchman Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville was the first one to record his own voice thanks to his invention (the “phonautographe”)⁴ which is able to store sound but cannot reproduce it: Scott de Martinville’s voice existed potentially but could not be made audible because of the boundaries of contemporary technology. In 2007 and 2008, the voice was eventually recalled to life thanks to a Californian team of researchers and sound historians from Stanford University. It was presented to the public on March 28th 2008 during a conference organised by the *Association for Recorded Sound Collections*.⁵
- 5 The possibility of recording and preserving sound was also examined by British mathematician Charles Babbage—both from a scientific and philosophic viewpoint—in his 1837 publication *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment*. In chapter 9, the scientist evokes the action of human voice as a form of writing, marking its environment permanently. Babbage states that the atmosphere can be defined as an eternal, incorruptible library which records and preserves human speech, archiving it as a written document:

The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered. There, in their mutable but unerring characters, mixed with the earliest, as well as with the latest sighs of mortality, stand for ever recorded, vows unredeemed, promises unfulfilled, perpetuating in the united movements of each particle, the testimony of man's changeful will. (Babbage 112)

- 6 Babbage formulates this hypothesis on the permanence of sound based on the theory of acoustic waves according to which sound acts as a mechanical vibration as it propagates through air (considered to be a fluid). According to him, speech emitted by voice and carried by breath always remains in the atmosphere: "The pulsations of the air, once set in motion by the human voice, cease not to exist with the sounds to which they gave rise". Even though these acoustic traces cannot actually be heard anymore (by human ears at any rate), they print their mark forever on the atmosphere which can be defined as the eternal repository of all human voices. Later in the twentieth century, Walter Ong's statement on the irreversibility of speech constitutes an echo of Babbage's theory:

With writing, words once "uttered", outered, put down on the surface, can be eliminated, erased, changed. There is no equivalent for this in an oral performance, no way to erase a spoken word: corrections do not remove an infelicity or an error, they merely supplement it with denial and patchwork. [...] Corrections in oral performance tend to be counterproductive, to render the speaker unconvincing. So you keep them to a minimum or avoid them altogether. (Ong 104)

- 7 Roland Barthes defended the same observation in his 1984 essay "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers": "Speech is irreversible: a word cannot be *retracted*, except precisely by saying that one retracts it. To cross out is here to add: if I want to erase what I have just said, I cannot do it without showing the eraser itself (I must say: 'or rather...' 'I expressed myself badly...'); paradoxically, it is ephemeral speech which is indelible, not monumental writing" (Barthes 190).
- 8 By the 1850s, the European public and scientific community of the nineteenth century had therefore shifted their focus from the eye to the ear. According to Gillian Beer: "The authenticity of the eye's insight was put in question [...]. [T]he ear became the chosen arbiter of refined discriminations" (Beer 85, 91). With the publication in 1855 of German physicist Hermann Helmholtz's essays "Accommodation" and "On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music" (dealing with the perception of sound), the preeminence of the eye was questioned as the ear was considered a more complex and sophisticated mechanism (Beer 85, 90-91). In "The Dickens Tape", Jay Clayton also evokes this paradigmatic shift, qualifying the theories of Friedrich Kittler and N. Katherine Hayles on the role of vision and the visual in the passage to modernity (Clayton 2012, 20-21).
- 9 As a writer seeking to preserve and transmit written texts to an audience, Charles Dickens was strongly influenced by these crucial changes in acoustics, all the more so as he personally knew the great figures of acoustic research and was familiar with their work. He had met Charles Wheatstone at the beginning of the 1840s during a dinner organised by actor William Macready, one of the writer's closest companions. They had other mutual friends, such as Angela Burdett-Coutts (with whom Dickens co-founded Urania Cottage, a home for former prostitutes, at the beginning of the 1850s) and George Cruikshank, who illustrated Dickens's first novels (Clayton 2012, 29). In the same way, Charles Dickens also maintained an active correspondence with Charles Babbage and frequently attended the scientific conferences organised at his house (Douglas-Fairhurst 96-100). John Picker thus considers it essential to take acoustic science into

account when examining Dickens's works: "[It is a] framework for understanding Dickens's development as an author, performer, and publishing innovator" (Picker 17). In Dickens's novels, acoustic waves are a means of recording, protecting and communicating written documents, as they are supposed to act as writing on the air: the writer explores all of the new discoveries mentioned previously in order to conceive new ways for written texts to be transcribed on a medium other than paper. This preoccupation can be observed quite early in his career: in *Dombey and Son*, one of his first novels, Dickens paraphrases Babbage's treatise (of which he possessed a first edition). In this novel, Sir Barnet Skittles is compared to "a sound in air, the vibration of which, according to the speculation of an ingenious modern philosopher, may go travelling for ever through the interminable fields of space" (375; Picker 16). The treatise constituted an important source of influence for Dickens until the end of his life; in 1869, more than thirty years after its first publication, he quoted it in a speech: "It was suggested by Mr. Babbage, in his Ninth Bridgewater Treatise, that a mere spoken word—a mere syllable thrown into the air—may go on reverberating through illimitable space for ever and for ever, seeing that there is no rim against which it can strike: no boundary at which it can possibly arrive" (Picker 16-17). Dickens drew inspiration from the scientific research of his time, especially from Babbage's works on acoustics and their relation to air and the atmosphere, in order to imagine how sound documents could be recorded and preserved in *Bleak House*. Thanks to the motif of the echo, it is possible to transmit a written message to the future generations of listeners. In the Dickensian text, the environment preserves the sounds of the past and replays them long after they were first emitted.

Echoing testaments

- 10 In *Bleak House*, one place in particular is conducive to this recording and reemission of sound. Chesney Wold, Sir Leicester Dedlock's estate, is defined as "[an] old echoing place" (97) where echoes relate the stories of the past. In the same way Krook's shop preserves the judicial paper archive of Chancery, Chesney Wold acts as an archive room conserving the sounds of previous centuries. Throughout the novel, the "halting step" (103) of the former Lady Dedlock on the Ghost's Walk resonates in the air as a message from beyond the grave, haunting the living. Indeed, there are two Lady Dedlocks in the novel: the living Lady Dedlock of flesh and blood, and the ghost of the former mistress whose step can still be heard in the mansion. The spectral echo on the Ghost's Walk constitutes a reminder of the physical suffering inflicted on the latter by her husband. If we follow Babbage's theories on the nature of atmosphere as a medium on which sound acts as writing, the air in *Bleak House* constitutes a document which records, preserves and transmits her message for the future generations.
- 11 The message carried by the echo is transmitted to us for the first time in chapter 7, when Rosa shows the mansion to two other characters. At first, the two visitors feel frustrated by the young maid's strictly factual speech, as it does not quench their curiosity regarding the Ghost's Walk. At that precise moment, the ghost's steps resound as if it were responding to their request. Mrs. Rouncewell, the housekeeper, then proceeds to relate the matrimonial drama:

Sir Morbury and his Lady led a troubled life. [...] After her favourite brother, a young gentleman, was killed in the civil wars [by Sir Morbury's near kinsman], her feeling was so violent that she hated the race into which she had married. [...] [S]he is supposed to have more than once stolen down into the stables in the dead of

night and lamed their horses [...]. There he seized her by the wrist, and [...] she was lamed in the hip and from that hour began to pine away. [...] [D]ay by day she tried to walk upon the terrace, and with the help of the stone balustrade, went up and down, up and down, up and down, in sun and shadow, with greater difficulty every day. (103)

- 12 The echo of the former Lady Dedlock's steps acts as a testament in the etymological meaning of the term (from the latin *testari*, "testify") in the sense that it is testimony to the assault she was a victim of. Lady Dedlock's ghost continues to denounce Sir Morbury's crime from beyond the grave, and the echo appears an adequate emissary indeed: as ghosts exist in the liminal space between the living and the dead, the echo is a spectral message, existing in the ontological interval between being and non-being. The echo is all the more ghostly as it seems emancipated from the original emission of sound: instead of replicating and following it immediately as it is supposed to, the echo resonates several centuries later, demultiplying throughout the novel. The echo is not a simple repetition, it is the actual message. The echo in *Bleak House* therefore differs from the "proximity double" that Clément Rosset defines in *Impressions fugitives*. In this essay, the philosopher explains that shadows, reflections and echoes are supposed to stick to their original objects; if they do not, both the object and its double acquire a ghostly quality (Rosset 10). Echoes in *Bleak House* give a voice to the past, enabling it to continually haunt the living so that memory can be preserved and transmitted.
- 13 If the echo of the Ghost's Walk brings back the past, it also has an oracular, prophetic dimension as it announces the inevitable fall of Chesney Wold: "I will walk here until the pride of this house is humbled. And when calamity or when disgrace is coming to it, let the Dedlocks listen for my step!" (104). By making her steps resound on the Ghost's Walk, the former Lady Dedlock actually drafts her testament in the classic sense of the term, making formal arrangements for the time following her death. Through this sound testament, she programs the exact moment the echo will deliver its fateful prediction. The echo is the "proximity double" of the fall and not of the original resounding of the steps. Paradoxically, the echo anticipates and announces the event instead of following it. Contrary to the other paper wills and testaments in Dickens's novels (such as *Bleak House*'s elusive Jarndyce testament, the deviated codicille from *Little Dorrit* and the buried testament in *Our Mutual Friend*), the former Lady Dedlock's testament is not delayed by its materiality and its dispositions are actually carried out: the echo appears at the expected moment right before the fall as it was preordained. Moreover, the echo does not elude the characters such as the documents mentioned above, for the listeners have no choice but to take it into account as it urges itself on their ear: "What is to be noticed in it is that it MUST BE HEARD. My Lady, who is afraid of nothing, admits that when it is there, it must be heard. You cannot shut it out" (104). As R. Murray Schafer explains in his study on acoustics, "the sense of hearing cannot be closed off at will. There are no earlids. When we go to sleep, our perception of sound is the last door to close and it is also the first to open when we awaken" (11). The capital letters in the quotation reproduce the sonorous quality of the message which silences the rest of the environment. Finally, the (female) characters are very much aware of the contents of the message. Not only do they personally understand and comment on its implications, but they also communicate its meaning to the other characters and the reader, unlike Jarndyce's testament, the terms of which are never made known publicly. Quite uniquely in Dickens's novels where paper documents tend to disappear and dissolve into heaps of rubbish, the former Lady Dedlock's sound testament actually respects the intention of its author, giving her a

voice which was otherwise socially silenced, preserving her memory and carrying it through the centuries. The connection between the character as author and her audience is intangible and yet unbreakable.

Writing at a distance: the echo as telegraph

- 14 With the former Lady Dedlock's testament, Dickens explores new means of communicating written messages which do not involve paper, drawing his inspiration from the developing technologies of the era. If the echo on the Ghost's Walk refers to the ancient myth of the nymph whose body, such as Lady Dedlock's, is torn apart leaving only her voice intact,⁶ Dickens goes beyond the myth and inscribes the motif in the modernity of the nineteenth century. The former Lady Dedlock's message is reminiscent of the telegraphic system as it presents itself as a series of sonorous steps resounding on the pavement: in both cases, the receivers are delivered a message written from a distance by an invisible source, corresponding to the etymology of the word telegraph (from the greek *tele* meaning "distance" and *graphie*, "writing"). When Dickens wrote *Bleak House*, the telegraph was a telecommunications device which had developed very suddenly: in the 1840s, all the major cities of Great Britain were connected through the electric lines of the telegraph. Strikingly enough, the device was created by the same scientists concerned with the recording and preservation of sound, including Charles Wheatstone. In the nineteenth century, the transmission and recording of sound formed two sides of the same coin, which *Bleak House* brings together through the motif of the echo. The echo and the telegraph have much in common indeed; in his book *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace*, Jay Clayton shows that the telegraph stands out among other telecommunications devices precisely because of the sound it produces:

The role of sound in telegraphic communications was regarded by contemporary observers as one of the most startling features of this new technology. [...] Every nineteenth-century book on the telegraph contains sections on the wonders of reading by sound. One characteristic author exclaims: "Of all the mysterious agencies of the electric telegraph, there is nothing else so marvelous as the receiving intelligence by sound." (Clayton 2003, 65)

- 15 Morse code was a new form of communication, and like the echo, formed a text that could be read and heard. However, for all its modernity, the messages produced by the telegraph were perceived as mysterious, beyond the reach of ordinary people. A sense of strangeness came to be associated with this new technology, as exemplified by the words chosen by Dickens's contemporaries to describe it: Charles Briggs speaks of a "spiritual force" and Augustus Maverick evokes the "new realizations of human powers and possibilities" (Menke 977). As a consequence, the telegraph caused fear and distrust: "Religious leaders in Baltimore expressed their doubts about the new technology, which was too much like black magic for their liking" (Standage 52). Consequently, for all its technological prowess, the telegraph could not become part of actual social exchanges and was limited to financial transactions, as Jay Clayton explains: "A new social formation did not, in fact, emerge from this discrepant experience. Despite its importance in the nineteenth century, the voice in the machine remains odd, a discordant experience, not comfortable to the regime of modernity. [...] This oddity is registered in the literature of the period" (Clayton 2003, 52-53). In his elaboration of Lady Dedlock's ghostly footsteps, Dickens may have drawn inspiration from the telegraph as it was developing in the mid-nineteenth century : though it constituted a modern form of communication, the

telegraph was nevertheless associated with the supernatural and characterised by its uncanniness.

- 16 In the novel, the message of the echo as a telegraphic device is not understood by all for only the female characters are able to decipher it. When the echo resonates, the male characters remain deaf to its message. In chapter 7, during the guided tour of the mansion, the characters respond to the echo differently depending on their gender:

"Do you hear a sound like a footstep passing along the terrace, Watt?"

Rosa draws nearer to the housekeeper.

"I hear the rain-drip on the stones," replies the young man, "and I hear a curious echo—I suppose an echo—which is very like a halting step."

The housekeeper gravely nods and continues. (103)

In the passage, Rosa displays an immediate receptivity to the message: as she "draws nearer to the housekeeper", she demonstrates fear as well as feminine connivance as silent response to the ghost's echo. On the contrary, Watt translates what he hears in very factual terms before the housekeeper relates the story to the audience. In another passage, Sir Leicester shows the same insensitivity as Watt to the ghost's message, perceiving it but unable to understand its message:

Sir Leicester is fidgety down at Chesney Wold, with no better company than the gout; he complains to Mrs. Rouncewell that the rain makes such a monotonous pattering on the terrace that he can't read the paper even by the fireside in his own snug dressing-room.

"Sir Leicester would have done better to try the other side of the house, my dear," says Mrs. Rouncewell to Rosa. "His dressing-room is on my Lady's side. And in all these years I never heard the step upon the Ghost's Walk more distinct than it is to-night!" (244)

- 17 The female characters comment on the sound annoying Sir Leicester, excluding him from their exchange; in the extract, this gendered separation is materially represented by the typographic blank on the page. Here the echo as a telecommunications device again recalls the telegraph, where communication operates on a narrowly channeled one-to-one basis and where transmitters and receivers use a code which the non-initiate cannot comprehend. In the novel, the telegraphic echo seem to concern only women, even when the male characters are affected by the sound it produces. Therefore, in *Bleak House*, women are the only ones to understand the message and the threats looming over the house. This gendered distinction stems from the Victorian ideology of the separate spheres according to which the female domestic environment was to be kept apart from the public sphere reserved for men. While the male characters are on the side of urban and official life, with the production of judicial, commercial and financial paper documents in the heart of Chancery, Chesney Wold's echo belongs to the sphere of domesticity as it comments on marital relationships: it seems to be issued by and addressed to women specifically. Concurrently, this gendered characteristic may also ensue from the historical role of women in the development of the telegraph in the nineteenth century:

More than one cultural critic has suggested that nineteenth century communications technologies such as the type-writer, telephone, and telegraph played a decisive role in moving women into the office. Thus Trollope, in his story "The Telegraph Girl," describes his heroine at her labors with "eight hundred female companions, all congregated together in one vast room." (Clayton 2003, 74)

The following passage from *Bleak House* combines both the domestic female ideal and the role of women in the history of the telegraph:

"[C]ome hither," says the housekeeper. "Hither, child, towards my Lady's pillow. I am not sure that it is dark enough yet, but listen! Can you hear the sound upon the terrace, through the music, and the beat, and everything?"

"I certainly can!"

"So my Lady says." (105)

- 18 In order to perceive the message, the receiver must place her ear next to the pillow which, directly linked as it is to the ear, is transformed into a telegraphic post placed at the other end of a line connecting the lady of the house to Chesney Wold's ghost. This strategic location makes Lady Dedlock the privileged receiver of these messages from beyond the grave. These two subversive characters are therefore linked by this strange telecommunications system which is fundamentally deviant and therefore expressive of female deviance. Jay Clayton showed that when telegraphic messages intervene in the private sphere in literature, they reveal a form of deviance regarding sexuality (Clayton 2003, 53). His analysis—based on Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Thomas Hardy's *A Laodicean* (1881), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Henry James's *In The Cage* (1898)—proves its relevance in *Bleak House* where this unusual means of telegraphic communication is a way to convey the deviant behaviour—both past and present—at stake in the novel: it relates the former Lady Dedlock's matrimonial betrayal on the one hand, and the past illegitimate affair of the present mistress of the house on the other hand.
- 19 A very brief passage from chapter 28 obliquely narrates Lady Dedlock's secret affair: as she listens to the echo on the terrace, in her mind the steps are revealed to be not her ancestor's ghost's, but her vanished lover and their natural child's: "Does she listen to the Ghost's Walk and think what step does it most resemble? A man's? A woman's? The pattering of a little child's feet, ever coming on—on—on?" (421). This very personal interpretation by the present Lady Dedlock constitutes an echo of the echo by imitating its telegraphic style. First of all, the words "on—on—on" recall the Morse code with its succession of dots and dashes. What is more, the secret story seems to be embedded in these three words for the dashes can be seen as being both a link and a separation between the three entities—the man, the woman and the child—conjured by the present Lady Dedlock. In this reading of the text, the dash also appears as the missing letter to the word "one," standing for the dream of a family unity irremediably lost. What was supposed to be one is forever mutilated. By these dots and dashes, reminiscent of the typically feminine activity of sewing, Lady Dedlock stitches a coded text narrating a story that was silenced by society. The secret story is therefore both unveiled as it is kept hidden from us: "on" appears as the mirror of "no" and the dashes seem to stand for the blanks of the story, never to be made explicit. Feminine deviance is expressed through a liminal mode of writing, so that the secret past of Lady Dedlock is partially revealed in this succession of dots and dashes which contain the novel John Carey dreamed of:

Bleak House consists of two novels, neither of which Dickens could write. One novel is about illicit love—the guilty secret and murky past of Lady Dedlock. Dickens could not write this novel because the proprieties of his day would not allow him to. Extramarital sex, and sexual sin, were subjects which the Victorian middle-class reading public would tolerate only if they were treated with a high degree of inexplicitness. Though the plot of the whole book turns on Lady Dedlock's past, we are never given anything but the most meagre and guarded information about what that past actually consisted of. In so far as Lady Dedlock is concerned, the novel remains unwritten. (Carey 174-175)

The Dickensian text does lift the veil on this other novel by introducing another, paradigmatically different writing of sounds and silences, which partially fills in the blanks of the novel.

- 20 The present Lady Dedlock is not the only character to express a personal interpretation of the echo. Her unknowing illegitimate daughter, Esther Summerson, also provides us with her own reading of the echo resounding in Chesney Wold's grounds. While she walks in the garden at dusk, her sight diminishes while her hearing becomes quite acute, reaching a superior level of sensitivity. She becomes able to precisely identify the origin and nature of the sounds she perceives all around her: "Thence the path wound underneath a gateway, and [...] by the stables where none but deep voices seemed to be, whether in the murmuring of the wind through the strong mass of ivy holding to a high red wall, or in the low complaining of the weathercock, or in the barking of the dogs, or in the slow striking of a clock" (540). As Esther walks on the garden's path, her hearing gains the same accuracy as a microphone, able to pick up and amplify the faintest sounds. This extreme receptivity enables her to hear the movement of a clock's hand, marking the passage of the character to a transtemporal universe unbound by spatial limits. Esther is therefore able to hear the sounds from the past to which she was previously deaf:

The way was paved here, like the terrace overhead, and my footsteps from being noiseless made an echoing sound upon the flags. [...] My echoing footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost's Walk, that it was I who was to bring calamity upon the stately house and that my warning feet were haunting it even then. Seized with an augmented terror of myself which turned me cold, I ran from myself and everything. (540)

- 21 Esther interprets the echo of the steps on the Ghost's Walk as having always been hers, as if the sound of her own steps resounded in the past. The echo of Esther's steps appear as a response to the former Lady Dedlock's and vice versa. The Ghost's Walk forms an echo chamber where the different messages from the past, the present and the future echo one another, travelling through time without being limited by any form of physical materiality.
- 22 In this constant call and response pattern, the origin of the echo gets lost: is it the former Lady Dedlock, the Ghost or Esther Summerson? It is impossible to determine who the original emitter of the sound is, all the more so as a fourth emitter contributes to this palimpsest of transtemporal echoes: in chapter 41, the present Lady Dedlock can be seen anxiously walking up and down her own rooms while the ghostly echo seems to follow her steps: "The woman [was] pacing her own rooms with her hair wildly thrown from her flung-back face, her hands clasped behind her head, her figure twisted as if by pain. [...] [T]he woman was hurrying up and down for hours, without fatigue, without intermission, followed by the faithful step upon the Ghost's Walk" (610). Earlier in the novel, Mrs. Rouncewell uses the same terms to describe the relentless walk of the former Lady Dedlock on the mansion's terrace: "She [...] went up and down, up and down, up and down" (104). All four emitters—the former and present Lady Dedlocks, Esther Summerson and Chesney Wold's ghost—seem to mutually and indefinitely echo one another in the echo chambers formed by the whole mansion.
- 23 In this respect, Chesney Wold's echo evokes a major theory by Jacques Derrida which is developed in *De la grammatologie*, that is to say the notion of trace structurally belonging to writing. According to Derrida, there is no absolute origin: all writing is a trace of something else that can be recognised afterward. In the same way, the sonorous piece of

writing formed by the echo has no origin: it always echoes another echo, be it past, present or future. If there is no absolute origin, chronology makes no sense: it is therefore possible to go from one temporal strata to another through the passageway formed by the Ghost's Walk, the name of which implies the idea of circulation, of movement, as if constituting a corridor between two spaces.

- 24 The emitters of the echo all merge into the symbolic figure of the ghost, crossing temporal boundaries, coming and going between the strata of time. The novel implies that Chesney Wold's Ghost is really the former Lady Dedlock come back to haunt her family's mansion, but both Esther Summerson and the present Lady Dedlock also possess spectral qualities. In a passage mentioned earlier, Esther sees herself as haunting the terrace as if she had always been its ghost; and indeed, her presence on the grounds will bring about the fall of the Dedlock household. Consequently, her own self-perceived strangeness provokes a feeling of terror directed toward herself, what Hegel calls "Fremd" (the feeling of self-alienation) in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Her mother, the present Lady Dedlock, is also explicitly identified by Esther with Chesney Wold's ghost:

I [Esther] had been looking at the Ghost's Walk lying in a deep shade of masonry afar off and picturing to myself the female shape that was said to haunt it when I became aware of a figure approaching through the wood. The perspective was so long and so darkened by leaves, and the shadows of the branches on the ground made it so much more intricate to the eye, that at first I could not discern what figure it was. By little and little it revealed itself to be a woman's—a lady's—Lady Dedlock's. (532)

- 25 Esther mentally visualises the ghost's outline which materialises under the guise of Lady Dedlock coming to her to confess her secret. Through the echo as a ghostly communications device, the three female characters reach a form of immateriality which enables them to be connected together; a line of communication is opened, bringing out deviant stories buried by society. As ghosts come back to reveal the secrets of the past, the echo represents the return of the repressed, giving a voice to women who were wronged but were forced into silence.
- 26 In the whole domain of Chesney Wold, the characters' tread creates traces in the "vast library [of the air]" and "stand for ever recorded" (Babbage 112) ever relevant. These intangible documents are not threatened by the corruption of matter looming over paper: on the contrary, they transcend the limits of the material world and offer to the text the possibility of persistence. This reflection on the nature of the medium and its reliability comes across Dickens's personal relation to his writings: the last years of his life, from 1858 to his death, are marked by the relentless public readings of his novels, by the shift of his written work from paper to sound waves, eventually transmitting it to the memory of his audience. By multiplying the media to which he entrusts his novels—paper, air and memory—Dickens communes with his readers as he contemplates the possibility of eternal writing.

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NOTES

1. For further information, see the following books: Dard Hunter, *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft*, New York: A.A. Knopf, 1947; D.C. Coleman, *The British Paper Industry, 1495-1860, a Study in Industrial Growth*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958; Alfred Henry Shorter, *Paper Making in the British Isles: An Historical and Geographical Study*, Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971; Richard Leslie Hills, *Papermaking in Britain, 1488-1988: A Short History*, London and Atlantic Highlands (N.J.): The Athlone Press, 1988.

2. See J.C. Hemmeon, *The History of the British Post Office*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard UP, 1912.
3. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the "Arcades Project"*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1989; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1991; Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (eds), *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1995; Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (eds), *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, New York: Routledge, 1996; Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, Cambridge: CUP, 2000.
4. See Arthur A. Reblitz and Q. David Bowers (eds), *Treasures of Mechanical Music*, New York: The Vestal Press, 1981; Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 2008.
5. For further information, the press release on the Académie des Sciences website is available for consultation on the following web page: http://www.academie-sciences.fr/pdf/communiquer/archives_270308.pdf (last accessed 29 September 2018).
6. In both classical renditions of Echo's myth by Ovid and Longus, nothing remains of the nymph but her voice. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, she wastes away after Narcissus's death, consumed by her love for the youth and gradually turning to stone. In Greek author Longus's tale of *Daphnis and Chloe*, Echo is punished by the god Pan for not giving up her virginity: angry at her resistance, Pan drives a group of men to tear her body apart and scatter the fragments of her flesh across the land. In both stories, only her voice's integrity is preserved.

ABSTRACTS

Dickens's novels act as echo chambers which retain the sonorous traces of the past. In *Bleak House*, echoes resonate in the estate of Chesney Wold and can be heard telling the family's past secrets. Throughout the novel, one sound in particular haunts the air and the living; the former Lady Dedlock's footsteps continue to resonate on the Ghost's Walk centuries after their first emission. The air acts as a medium which records, preserves and reproduces these resonating signs: as she prints her sonorous trace on the atmosphere, the former mistress of the house transforms the echo of her steps into a testament. The echoes in *Bleak House* therefore enable a form of communication between the characters, beyond the human boundaries of space, time and matter. The present article draws its inspiration from the acoustic theories of British mathematician Charles Babbage on the preservation of sound, a key influence for Charles Dickens and his reflection on the persistence of documents since the beginning of his writing career. For Babbage, sound acts as a form of writing on the atmosphere and prints itself on the air permanently. The mathematician considered that the air could be characterised as an eternal and incorruptible library which records and preserves human speech as a sound document. This article shows how Dickens draws away from paper and explores new media for writing, finding an answer on the immense page formed by the atmosphere.

L'environnement dickensien est une caisse de résonance qui conserve la trace sonore du passé par le biais de l'écho. Dans *Bleak House*, les échos retentissent dans le domaine de Chesney Wold pour raconter les histoires du passé. Tout au long du roman, un son en particulier résonne dans l'air tel un message d'outre-tombe séculaire qui vient hanter les vivants, le bruit de pas de la précédente Lady Dedlock sur la promenade hantée. L'air agit ainsi comme un substrat qui

enregistre, préserve et reproduit ces signaux sonores : en y laissant sa trace, l'ancienne maîtresse des lieux fait de son écho un testament. L'écho dans *Bleak House* constitue ainsi une forme de communication entre les personnages, par-delà les frontières humaines de l'espace, du temps et du sensible. Nous nous appuyons sur les théories du mathématicien britannique Charles Babbage sur la possibilité de préservation du son, pour lesquelles Dickens manifeste un intérêt dès le début de sa carrière dans le cadre de sa réflexion sur la persistance du document. Pour Babbage, le son agit comme une écriture sur son environnement et le marque durablement ; le mathématicien affirme que l'air peut être défini comme une bibliothèque éternelle et incorruptible, qui enregistre et conserve les paroles des hommes comme autant de documents archivés. Cet article vise donc à montrer la manière dont Dickens explore un autre support pour l'inscription de l'écriture que la feuille de papier, trouvant une voie dans la page immense qu'est l'atmosphère.

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Mots-clés: écho, écriture, fantastique, télégraphe, trace

Keywords: echo, telegraph, trace, uncanny, writing

oeuvre citée *Bleak House*

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Céline Prest a soutenu en novembre 2016, à l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle (Paris III), une thèse de doctorat intitulée « Le Spectre de l'écriture : supports, signes et sens dans l'œuvre romanesque de Charles Dickens », dirigée par Jean-Pierre Naugrette. Elle enseigne actuellement en CPGE littéraire.