My title is a shameless attempt to enter a large subject and to seem to do so by the way. The answer to the query is clearly that the language of Boz both survives and does not. For one thing the *Sketches* were trial balloons of the young Dickens, and with each reprinting he trimmed away words that were indelicate or too topical or too political (Butt and Tillotson 1957: 35-61). For another I am not concerned with that perennial concern of Boz language studies, its “realism,” or with what an early reviewer called the “tournure” of the language (Collins 1971: 37). I want rather to direct attention to the language of Dickens’s first work, to note its persistence in *Pickwick*, and to observe that what is going on at the level of language emerges into other aspects of the books. I am interested in textual meanings, in how they rise from discontinuous language that may seem irrelevant or, to put it another way, how language features in Dickens are congruent with larger elements of his work. As such, I believe, they not only provide clues to the nature of Dickens’s created world but are also functional to the elemental constituents of that world.

I shall then advance a method for looking further in Dickens to test the relation of words, that is the incidence of certain words, to a text’s meaning. How to proceed in the method, along with its dangers and possibilities, will be followed by specific examples of its working. But now, since I must begin somewhere, I shall restrict myself to a particular feature of the language of Boz and trace its effects in the *Sketches* and into *Pickwick*.

The language of Boz shimmers with surprises. Amusing and diverting, the language of the unexpected directs attention to itself and seems to be its own end, to be a surface matter. Looked at closely, the language appears always ready to drop from one plane to another and one mode of presentation frequently to betray the presence of a contrary mode. At times even our laughter carries seeds of suspicion. Such surprises suggest the co-presence of a deeper world, where another set of values and consequences prevails.
To begin with the first three sketches Dickens published – “Mr. Minns and His Cousin,” “Mrs. Joseph Porter,” and “Horatio Sparkins” –, we find their marked similarities of consequence. The three share a kindred subject, purpose, and tone; each deals with a version of middle-class pretension and brings it to a spirited and good-humored deflation. In each, the principals are convicted out of their own mouths; they employ a second-hand speech of presumed elegance, accomplishment, knowledge, and sentiment to none of which they have legitimate claim. It is a language that cannot hold up. Mr. Horatio Sparkins provides a fine example:

Man, whether he ranged the bright, gay, flowery plains of a second Eden, or the more sterile, barren, and I may say, commonplace regions, to which we are compelled to accustom ourselves, in times such as these; man, under any circumstances, or in any place – whether he were bending beneath the withering blasts of the frigid zone, or scorching under the rays of a vertical sun – man, without woman, would be – alone” (Boz: 365).

The speaker’s drop from vapidity into bathos is one way of writing into language the falls of many sort that lie in wait for the pretenders and the snobs. Though the tone of these early pieces is light, they leave dismay and disappointment in their wake. A confident amateur performance is scuttled by a neighbor, a selfish bachelor ends a family visit drenched and miserable, and a social climbing family discovers they have been patronizing a draper’s clerk. At the verbal level again, the narrator is always at hand as the sketches unfold to stick a verbal pin into the pneumatic discourse: “Miss Teresa, of course, was to be as amiable and interesting as ladies of eight-and-twenty on the look-out for a husband, usually are” (357). Mr. Sempronius, who is to act Othello, “had just appeared, looking something like a ringdove with a small circle round each eye” (425). Mr. Minns looks forward to a dinner at his cousin’s “with the feelings of a penniless poet to the weekly visit of his Scotch landlady” (316). The hopes of the social climbing Maldertons “melt away like the lemon ices at a Company’s dinner” (369).

Many of the similes achieve their falling off effect by juxtaposing the would-be grand with the banal and ordinary or by a sudden turn after an innocuous start. A young man’s countenance brightens “like an old hat in a shower of rain” (359); another looks “as happy as a cock on a drizzly morning” (359). Dumps speaks “in a voice like Desdemona with a pillow over her mouth” (478). “Minns [...] looked as merry as a farthing rushlight in a fog”1. These juxtapositions move almost by logical extension into the hugely comic but yet grotesque locution we come later to know as a

1 John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson: 52.
Wellerism: an occasion in the sketch “London Recreations” “‘certainly was ‘rayther warm’, as the child said when it fell into the fire.” and in “The Great Winglebury Duel” “ev’ry one to his liking, as the man said when he pisened himself.” (Butt and Tillotson 1957: 58).

Again, of course, it is the figure of the “amateur vagrant,” as Dickens called his Boz narrator, whom readers most remember. Detached, whimsical, ready to take pleasure in everything from strolling young dandies to a street row, to a good-natured drunken man, to a working-class foursome at a tea garden, he is charmed by what he sees and charms us in turn. But however much he holds himself airily aloof and inclines to the whimsical, a surprisingly large number of his sketches, thirteen of the fifty-six by my count, range from somber to Stygian. Four of the darkest, “A Visit to Newgate,” “The Black Veil,” “The Hospital Patient,” and “The Drunkard’s Death,” were published just as, or after, Dickens began work on Pickwick. Others, scattered through the volumes – “The Pawn Shop,” “Mr. Bung’s Narrative,” “The Prisoners’ Van,” “Criminal Courts” – are grim places unlit by any glint of humor.

Throughout the Sketches, whatever the initial tone, there is nagging insistence on failure and disappointment, on expectations raised and dashed, on things going wrong. A young milliner takes vocal lessons and is hooted off the stage at her debut. A young man about town arranges a river excursion for friends; it storms heavily and all is ruined. Mr. Dumps, godfather of the Kitterbell baby, makes such a mordant speech at the christening party that he throws Mrs. Kitterbell into hysterics and leaves her husband “in almost as bad a condition” (482). Mr. Watkins Tottle, a mild-mannered old bachelor with romantic pretensions, proposes to a lady, is refused and drowns himself in the Regent’s canal. The story had been facetious; the sudden sourness makes us cringe.

Dickens retained the name of Boz as the editor (in fact author) of the Pickwick Papers, and there what I have been stressing as the dark underside of the Sketches expresses itself memorably both in the interpolated tales and the scenes in the Fleet prison. The disposition of the interpolated tales within the full work mirrors the interlarding of light and dark sketches as they were published in volume form. As told by a series of secondary narrators, six of the tales, including all the gloomy ones, surface in the first half of the novel, each is listened to in turn and leaves no traces of itself behind. Pickwick himself manifests no reactions. The light and shadows of Pickwick rarely coalesce; there is almost no tonal chiaroscuro.

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2 See particularly the excerpt, later omitted, from “The Prisoners’ Van” quoted in Butt and Tillotson, p. 44.

3 As part of a social argument Angus Wilson calls attention to these wrong turnings. See his The World of Charles Dickens: 99.
Even as the novel reaches toward more order and consequence, a certain deafness, a refusal or inability to hear, occurs. Time and again Sam Weller’s black wit, for example, fails to elicit responses from the people who hear him. Standing at Mrs. Bardell’s door, he says, “Wery sorry to ‘casion any personal inconwenience, Ma’am, as the housebreaker said to the old lady when he put her on the fire” (444). Without comment she lets him in. Like others, she appears to be insulated from his wit. One might say that the Wellerisms are carefully contained and ask not to be taken seriously. Even so, they insinuate terrible things into the larky, madcap, inconsequential world of the Pickwickians—just as in the early interpolated tales we had been exposed to madmen, revengers, and self-destroyers, and been encouraged to forget about them.

Pickwick’s incarceration in the Fleet dredges up from the bottom of Dickens’s imaginary world all the sobering fears and terrors earlier contained in interpolated tales and Wellerian images and expresses them at the level of narrative. The Fleet sequence has effects on the working out of the novel that have often been rehearsed in criticism. There has been a discovery, as Hillis Miller (1965: 29-35) says, and the novel never quite recovers from it.

In time Pickwick retires to the country, Sam’s talk loses its edge, Jingle and Trotter are changed, changed utterly, and a terrible boredom is born.

My contention at this point, and what I have been trying to show, is that what breaks through the comic surface has been present all along in the Boz sketches and Pickwick, present but largely passed over since it mostly appears at the level of discontinuous language. The Dickens world embraces a congeries of elements—those of danger, incarceration, and death are the ones I have been emphasizing—that may or may not reach the level of central narrative. We need only look down the line of the novels to mark those in which such terrors are also a principal subject: Oliver Twist, Old Curiosity Shop, Barnaby Rudge, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, Tale of Two Cities, Our Mutual Friend (to a lesser extent), and Mystery of Edwin Drood.

Of these novels, two interesting questions arise. To what degree does each of them share these concerns? Is that degree ascertainable through consideration of the incidence of these concerns in language? And, presuming it is, to what degree do other Dickens novels share them? Would we find at the level of language that the under-structure of his novels remains the same or might it perhaps change with time? Would we find, in novels in which the dark things become leading narrative presences, odd or explainable variations?

Once such questions are registered, others appear. What other elements, for example, exist at the verbal level which form part of the Dickensian imaginative world, and where are they most in evidence? And further down
the line, can comparisons be drawn with Dickens’s world and those of other nineteenth-century authors, say, Austen, Trollope, or Eliot, and others somewhat nearer our own time like James, Hardy, and Joyce?

For some time I have been engaged with these questions in an effort first of all to identify and isolate individual features of Dickens’s imaginative world. What attracted me is the sense one gets in his fiction of energy, of deep, roiling forces — some terrifying, some benignant —, that may surface at the level of plot and characterization but also manifest themselves in the language at large — not just in images but across the wide spectrum of word usage. Once identified, it would be useful to chart the elements in each novel, first by making lists or clusters of words for each element, and counting the incidence of each list for each novel to determine which elements change or vary in power over the years. Thereafter, it might also be useful to test how the energies of these elements combine in individual works and inflect meanings. One might even get closer to the pitch and pith of each novel than has been possible in the past.

The hazards of such a proceeding loom fearsomely. One could claim only so much for each charting, and one would need several chartings to come near a fair representation of Dickens’s world and the emphases of each novel. That major critics can differ widely on a novel’s equations of meaning suggests the presence of multiple meanings and sub-texts and the difficulties of achieving a balance among them.4

A further difficulty is that a cluster of words referring to a particular energy cannot hope to be fully representational. Idioms and nuances escape nets devised for single words. And — a hazard of equal weight — matters of tone simply cannot be caught by clusters of single words. Individual passages may too easily slip toward one or other side of meaning. No, such measurements to be useful at all must be made in the large, over wide areas of text, covering a multitude of subjects and attitudes.

That Dickens texts can be put in electronic form for computer searches has been both an enabler and a threat to the integrity of such work. Computers can isolate words and clusters of words and allow measuring and juxtaposing in ways not possible to earlier generations of Dickens readers. But these so-easily-evinced statistics have been wrenched from the contexts that give the words life. The language of Dickens is often so

4 G. K. Chesterton trumpets his vision of the Pickwickians walking the earth as gods “in a perpetual summer of being themselves,” he evokes what all of us have felt, but only to a degree. His characterizing phrase for the novel, “an eternity of joy,” does not describe the book we read. On the other hand W. H. Auden’s fascinating reading of the work as a parable of post-lapsarian man, a work for sinners, one that has no appeal for the very young, overstates in the other direction from Chesterton’s. See 70, 72 and “Dingley Dell and the Fleet,” The Dyer’s Hand (New York, 1962; orig. 1948) 407-428.
The Language of Boz: Does it Survive?

carefully, even delicately, worked and pitched that measuring its meaning by counting its words is seriously to blunt or miss its point.

One could not do better than to keep in mind such a passage as the conversation of Dr. Manette and Charles Darnay about Lucie’s hand in *Tale of Two Cities*.

Their talk moves with so elegant a grace that it would be fatally easy to shatter its fragile components by measuring its warp and woof. And yet, after all these caveats, though keeping them in mind, I have ventured on these perilous waters.

My choice of topics on which I have formed clusters of words derives from what I read as salient, constitutive features of Dickens’s imagined universe. There two opposing forces engage in endless battle, the will to self-expression and the will to repress. We think of “the eternal and alluring taint of the Manichee, with its simple and terrible explanation of our plight” in which good and evil are engaged in an eternal standoff.

So limitless and imbued with energy are the forces that the plenum is packed; islands of emptiness do not exist. Everything from the murky Thames to a hawker’s cry, all institutions and individuals, all orders of being—animal, vegetable, and mineral—in all their variety, particularities and abstractions contend until their share of energy is overtaken by others or burned out.

This said, matters become somewhat interlaced and difficult. While unaccountable Evil threatens to overwhelm a similarly unaccountable Good, the energy of the one may be more attractive than the weakness of the other. Energy of itself may achieve almost a moral dimension. It may win out unless a contrary energy, often non-violent, is found. Moreover, the system officially devised to handle a world of mixed good and evil usually itself becomes corrupted. The system may punish unjustly to maintain itself; it instills guilt feelings in the innocent and powerless as a means of assuring conformity to its order. Of all institutions, the only approved one in Dickens is marriage although in many if not most instances it also is corrupt.

Even so, sociability wins out over isolation, joy gives sorrow a fair tussle for mastery, gusto wins out over fastidiousness, mobility and curiosity in the young yield in time to snugness and comfort in the mature. Selfishness and egotism are the capital personal sins, and generosity and benevolence the major virtues, although good persons do not so lose themselves over the needs of others that they forget themselves.

The hope then was to choose a number of areas where one might try to assess degrees of interest and possibly—though I thought this less likely—

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5 See Chapter ten.
6 Graham Greene is quoted by Dennis Walder 1981: 43.
7 Delineators of a Dickens world are many but see Geoffrey Thurley 1976 for a summary view and Martin Price, 1967: 2.
interior lines of development in Dickens’s interests and concerns. The matter for the investigation would again be language and in particular how verbal uses and choices either change or remain the same from one novel to another. Which elements of his world most engage the Dickensian imagination as it opens itself to each fictional work? And does language at this elemental level provide us with materials by which such questions may be addressed? Or, more practically, does the information gleaned by such a project afford us another way, a minor one perhaps, to look at the fictions and aid us in seeing them in an altered light?

It is time for a few examples. I have suggested that notions of imprisonment or containment at differing levels of emphasis inflect the language of *Sketches by Boz* and *Pickwick Papers*. Now with the reminder that nothing lies quite like statistics, let us look at the incidence of words suggesting restraint or confinement for these two works and compare them to others of the corpus. I shall use as test base a cluster of 271 words, count them in each novel, and adjust the count for the size of each novel. (All through my computations, by the way, I use the *Sketches by Boz* as a baseline, with the number of its usages registered as 100%)

Together, then, *Sketches by Boz* and *Pickwick Papers* are 5% below the average of prison references for the full corpus. In considering the figure, we note that the two novels of insurrection, *Barnaby Rudge* and *Tale of Two Cities*, do much to raise the average since they ring in at 145% and 196% of the Boz figure, 100%. Also well above the average is *Oliver Twist* at 141%, while the difference between the two quasi-autobiographical works, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* – the latter being 27% higher than the former – will strike us as about right. The figure for *Pickwick*, be it noted, virtually matches that for *Great Expectations*. *Pickwick*, we say again, is not entirely a laughing matter.

For another brief example, we may look at the incidence of word clusters on death in the three novels. Philip Collins (1989: 113) has noticed that there are ten deaths in *Pickwick Papers*, and we recall them as belonging to the interpolated tales and the Fleet scenes. Does the deadliness of these events seep therefore into a wide range of words suggesting decay and mortality so that the novel is unusually deadly for Dickens? No, it does not. We see as much when we hold *Pickwick* up against the death-haunted *Old Curiosity Shop* and (I believe surprisingly) *Oliver Twist* which outdo it by three and three and a half to two (136 and 118% versus 80). Of the later novels only *Tale of Two Cities*, running with blood as it does, belongs with *Old Curiosity Shop* and *Oliver Twist*. In this

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8 I have compiled statistics for some twenty areas and found them a useful adjunct in my essays and talks on Dickens. A book based on these materials is in an advanced state of preparation.
regard *Pickwick* matches most closely *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, all of which are 15 to 17% below the average for all sixteen fictions I count. The relation of the *Boz Sketches* to this average and to the novels cited does argue for the pervasiveness of Dickens’s sense of death, even in a work so generally thought of as comic. For the *Boz* is some 3% above the average, not a statistically meaningful figure. Statistical lies or no, there is a discernible ambit of Dickensian usage in this regard. The Dickens world is deadly but not more notably so as its creator advanced in age.

As a third and last example, let me glance at a word group which stresses the importance of social intercourse and the values of society seen from a conservative point of view. Sample words are behavior, decorum, propriety, order, and harmony. Stuart Tave’s work on Austen has been a principal source of the list. A high count in such words affirms that importance and a low count its contrary, which we may call individuality, although that word is not wholly accurate.

With the *Sketches by Boz* providing the baseline of 100%, it would only be after we know the calculation that we would agree that the novels least concerned with such values are *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Great Expectations*, and *Oliver Twist*. (The numbers are 70, 70, and 84% of *Boz*.) The one most concerned is *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but that is only marginally different from the main body of the other novels which register as a group less than 1% above *Boz*. All told, apart from the exceptions I have noted, Dickens’s concern with such social values remains fairly consistent through the body of his work. But there is one peak and at least three dips.

Looking outside Dickens to the novels of Jane Austen gives us an idea of the relative position of Dickens in this regard. In her six novels, Jane Austen’s interest in the subject – as this time we may fully expect – is half again as great as Dickens’s. (The number is 158% as against the full Dickens average of 95%). And what of Hardy? I was able to consider four novels: *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*. The count for all of them, after I had learned it, came not as a complete surprise. His interest registers about half of Dickens’s and thus about a third of Austen’s. Hardy’s characters, while not thoroughly de-socialized, live in a world more inward than Dickens’s and far more inward than Austen’s.

**Calculations for the Three Areas Considered Here**

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Average: 1563/16 = 97.69%

C. Details for *Social Values*

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Average: 1530/16 = 95.62%

Social Values in *Austen* Social Values in *Hardy*

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Averages: 947/6 = 157.83% 220/4 = 55%

Works Cited


