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### The 2014 Dickens Universe

Global warming is not necessarily warming Santa Cruz; this was one of the coolest Dickens Universe weeks we can remember. But the 250 attendees at the 34th Dickens Universe at College Eight at UC Santa Cruz the week of August 3-8 were warmed by camaraderie, conversation, and the all-important exchange of ideas that is the conference's trademark.

This year marks the first year that John Jordan has presided at the Universe without being a member of the active UCSC faculty; he retired last year. He has agreed to stay on as director of the Dickens Project for five years from his retirement. In order to leave the Project with enough money to sustain it into the future, Jordan this summer announced an endowment drive that hopes to bring the Friends of the Dickens Project's endowment fund to \$1 million. Such a sum would make the Project, of which the yearly Universe is a part, a self-sustaining entity.

Faculty and graduate students arrived on campus Saturday; other attendees arrived Sunday afternoon. The book for the week was *Our Mutual Friend*, last treated 14 years ago. At Sunday's lecture, John Jordan opened the week by introducing Universe co-founders Ed Eigner, UC Riverside emeritus; and Murray Baumgarten, UCSC. He also introduced the Dickens Project staff, led by JoAnna Rottke, who has a new title as Assistant Director. Jordan also introduced co-director John Bowen of the University of York; associate director Jim Buzard of MIT, who was

not in attendance this summer; and Friends of the Dickens Project President Dan Atwell. “I don’t use this word lightly,” Jordan said in his introduction, “but I think [the Dickens Universe] is a unique event.” He went on to say that the week is a combination of “a scholarly conference, a festival, a book club, and summer camp.”

Jordan then introduced Sunday evening’s speaker, George Levine, Rutgers University emeritus, as “one of the most eminent Victorian scholars of his era.” The UCSC campus library lists 22 books authored by Levine, Jordan said; since his retirement from Rutgers in 2006, Levine has published a book almost every year. Levine opened his talk by saying, “I feel like a whippersnapper amongst such true Dickensians—this is only my second year.” His lecture, “Dickens, Death, and Money: *Our Mutual Friend*,” posited that Dickens, and other Victorian writers, “can’t imagine a world where money wasn’t of ultimate importance.” Yet the cost of money can be life itself; Dickens’s characters, he said, die both because they want it and because they don’t have it. When Dickens wrote *Our Mutual Friend*, many of his friends had recently died, and Levine ties these deaths to what he called “an aura of death” about the novel. It contains, he said, “Dickens’s darker vision of people in society.” Levine was the first of the week to refer to Henry James’ 1865 review of the novel, in which he called it “the poorest of Mr. Dickens’s works,” and said that it was devoid of what James called “exemplars of sound humanity.” Levine feels that the novel rather reveals the inhumanity of a culture built on wealth. Never does anyone consider giving up the fortune that lies at the heart of the plot. It is a culture “living on top of its own waste,” Levine said.

This year, the film shown after the evening lecture and again in the afternoon was the BBC's 1998 version of *Our Mutual Friend*, screened in four parts starting Sunday evening.

As always, Monday morning brought 8:30 discussion groups, and this writer was in a group led by Universe regular Gerhard Joseph of CUNY and Jolene Zigarovich of the University of Northern Iowa. These groups are always fascinating because of the people in them; this one, for example, contained a retired IRS agent, a retired goat herder, a veteran whose college career had been interrupted by his service, and a summer school student who was reading Dickens for the first time. "*Our Mutual Friend* is total believable, totally relevant," this 20-something stated. George Levine sat in the first day and took part in a continued discussion about money in the Victorian age.

The Monday morning lecture was given by Michael Cohen of UCLA, who spoke on "Silas Wegg's Legs." Cohen started by saying that the Universe represents "a community grounded in a shared piece of reading." But *Our Mutual Friend*, he said, questions what we know about reading. Characters in the novel are grouped by their reading ability, yet illiteracy is not presented as negative. There are a number of kinds of reading throughout the text, Cohen said, from Gaffer's "reading" of the posters on his walls to Wegg's misreading of the history of Rome. Paper also plays a big role in the novel but, Cohen said, the "handling of papers exceeds the reading of them." And the source of paper is prevalent also—Wegg's wooden legs, Boffin's walking stick, Jenny's crutches. As sawdust turns to paper, Wegg in a sense consumes himself by reading the book, Cohen posited.

The general public dispersed from the morning lecture to graduate-student workshops that focused on the text of the novel, and from those workshops to lunch at the College Eight dining hall.

On Monday afternoon, and on afternoons thereafter, graduate workshops, faculty seminars, undergraduate seminars, a high school workshop, and other activities were underway, and at 3:00 Monday through Thursday, everyone took a break for Victorian tea on the lawn, featuring hot tea, ginger tea punch, homemade cookies, and fresh strawberries, served from silver teapots on china cups. John Romano, the scheduled lecturer for 4:00 on Monday, was not able to attend, so the presentation was a screening of "Dickens: The Final Chapter," which included a series of interviews with Universe participants [from previous years] such as Philip Collins and Miriam Margolyes, and was happily included with the DVD of the movie being shown throughout the week.

Dinner was followed as always by post-prandial potations, during which Friends of the Dickens Project president Dan Atwell conducted silent auctions for items including books, Dickens-themed knick-knacks, and other items, which proved to be popular with the crowd and provided funds for the Friends treasury. PPP gatherings throughout the week also featured sales of sweatshirts, books from the Bay Tree Bookstore, and other items.

On Monday evening, John Jordan introduced the essay contest winners for the year. The California Community College scholarship recipient was Beth Hightower from DeAnza College; this scholarship is made possible by participant Tom Savignano. The high school essay contest winners this year elicited much interest.

Both 2014 winners are from the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI), a program affiliated with the University of Southern California. NAI is based in South Central Los Angeles and works with underserved students from barrios in the city from 6th to 12th grade to prepare them for college. Their school years include Saturday classes and other extracurricular requirements. If they stick with the program and are accepted to USC, they receive a full four-year scholarship. NAI has a 100% high school graduation rate and a 99% college entry rate, according to its website.

Students from the program have in the past participated in the Dickens Universe's high school essay contest, but their essays were not selected. This year, the two essays submitted by NAI students were the best the committee has seen. Karen Molina, author of "British Independence, Rather Perverted: The Problematic Independence of Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*"; Kenia Coyoy, author of "What Lies Beneath the Dust: The Duality of Deception in *Our Mutual Friend*"; and their teacher, Jacqueline Barrios, received a standing ovation from Universe attendees after they were introduced and a short video outlining the NAI program was screened. Jon Varese, the Dickens Project's Digital Initiatives Director, traveled to Los Angeles this year to work with Jacqueline and her students and create the video, which can be seen on YouTube (search for Dickens NAI). The Bay family of San Francisco and Rivka Yerushalmi of Silver Spring, MD, make the high school essay awards possible.

Following the presentation of the scholarship winners, Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, Linfield College, presented his lecture titled "Performance Anxiety." He began by saying that co-director John Bowen had asked him for a lecture/performance

hybrid. His lecture, he said, was what he calls a “lowbrid.” Theatrical role-playing is key in the novel, Pollack-Pelzner said in the first “Act” of his talk. Yet Dickens himself suffered from “performance anxiety” in all senses of the word. “Dickens has a restless energy that has to dispel itself in performance,” he said. The author “craved intimacy with his readers,” and his craving reveals itself in theatrics. In addition, writing was a form of performance for Dickens. Even though, Pollack-Pelzner pointed out, there is a “private” start to the novel as well as a “public” start at the Veneerings, “Dickens is always on speakerphone.” Yet Dickens had no public script for anything after *David Copperfield*. If he had, Pollack-Pelzner believes, it would have been the Boffin plot. He called particular attention to Boffin’s two “Bow wow wow,” scenes, emphasizing the second “wow” as evidence of Boffin’s, and Dickens’s sense of theatricality. As Boffin gives the account of his own performance in the second scene, Dickens indulges his own love of performance. Betty Higden, though, is the opposite of the showmen in the novel. Her death scene, Pollack-Pelzner said, is “the most intimate performance Dickens ever wrote,” employing the theatrical technique of the stage whisper.

On Tuesday morning, John Jordan opened the morning lecture by formally announcing the endowment drive. The effort to establish an endowment fund of \$1 million, he said, will ensure the future of the Dickens Universe. And, he announced, the Friends of the Dickens Project has already received pledges totaling almost half that amount. His announcement was met with enthusiastic applause. Helena Michie of Rice University lectured on the “Extra Man,” introducing Sir George Scharf, the first Director of the National Portrait Gallery in London. Scharf was, Michie said, “the

most boring man in the world,” but what is interesting about him is that he mirrors *Our Mutual Friend*’s “dinner furniture,” Twemlow, in that he was a bachelor as well as an eater- and diner-out—he was the “extra man” who was always available to balance a dinner table. Michie expanded the discussion of her research on Scharf to include an analysis of the dinner table itself. There are a number of definitions of the word table, but there is no adjective for it. Yet in *Our Mutual Friend* there is definitely an idea of “tableness”—at the Boffins’, at the Wilfers’, at the Veneerings’—as well as an idea of the arrangement of the food and the service on and at the table. In her research on Scharf, she said, she was reminded of another kind of table, the secretary—another example of the novel’s “ambitious reanimation project.”

On Tuesday afternoon, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst of Oxford gave a virtual talk titled “The Victorian Thames,” outlining the history of the river. On Tuesday evening, Renee Fox of the University of Miami presented “Coming to Life.” This was the Herb Furse Memorial Lecture, given in memory of the Chicago antiquarian bookseller who was the founder of the Friends of the Dickens Project. In his introduction, John Jordan expressed his pleasure and gratification that Renee Fox is just one of a number of what he calls “second generation” Universe participants—a former graduate student, she is now a faculty member. There are also what Jordan calls “third generation” participants—graduate students of former students, who are beginning to attend the event. Despite the title of her talk, Fox said, she was drawn in the novel to the potential of experimenting with being dead, as opposed to being brought back to life. Her lecture explored the concept of “galvanization,” which she explained as a nineteenth-century metaphor for life created by an electric

process—“not quite real life.” She took her audience through a number of visual images of Victorian experiments with various animals that tried to prove that dead bodies could, in fact, be reanimated. But was this a miracle, or was it quackery? She pitted Browning’s “Yet something dead may get to live again” from *The Ring and the Book* against Carlyle’s idea that we need to look to history to find what has disappeared in body and substance. “Galvanism makes for good poetry,” she said, but it makes for bad history. Dickens, however, seeks an alternative to these two ideas, using the word to refer to artificial vitality, as in “these galvanic books.” But is galvanism a metaphor for artificiality? A text, Fox said, “may seem to be full of life but is at best an imitation of life.” Yet the presence of galvanism “on [*Our Mutual Friend*’s] margins,” she said, “makes its fictions palpable. She came back to her question of “being dead” vs. “not being alive” in the third part of her talk. “Being dead,” she said, “allows characters to opt out of the system.” These characters can be what they want to be. Yet this is “a novel with galvanic instincts—to bring everything to life.”

Just prior to Wednesday morning’s lecture, Prof. Teresa Mangum (Univ. of Iowa) stood up to ask for an affirmation from the faculty in support of yesterday’s announcement of the Friends of the Dickens Project’s endowment drive, and a large body of faculty members stood in support, drawing applause. This was followed by a lecture by Talia Schaffer of Queens College at CUNY, titled “Disabling Marriage in *Our Mutual Friend*.” Prof. Schaffer said she would discuss the “romantic lover” and the “familiar lover,” which are recognizable characters in all of fiction. But, she said, what happens when the understanding of these two types doesn’t go as expected?



Headstone represents a “familiar” suitor to Lizzie. Wrayburn, on the other hand, is the “romantic” suitor—the handsome stranger who might be dangerous. But *Our Mutual Friend* reforms Wrayburn, changing him into the familiar. His convalescence allows him to become someone Lizzie can approach, rather than a stalker. “How does this dynamic work in the Victorian marriage plot?” Schaffer asked. She cited “relational ethics,” the idea that people are relational and interdependent. But in the Victorian novel, this “community of care” doesn’t work. Rather, disability creates relationships, as with Lizzie and Wrayburn. In the case of Jenny Wren, the “relationship of care” makes her a person. *Our Mutual Friend*, Schaffer said, treats marriage as “a socially shared event.”

On Wednesday afternoon, Teresa Mangum of the University of Iowa spoke on “Victorian Taxidermy.” Surrounded by examples of this art, Mangum took her audience through a presentation of images of ads, displays, and other evidence of the Victorians’ fascination with preserving things as though they were alive. Even Dickens, she said, preserved the paw of a favorite cat, Bob, who used to put out the candle when Dickens was writing. When Bob died in 1862, Dickens had his paw stuffed and made into a letter opener; he would calm himself by touching the paw of his old friend, Mangum said. On Wednesday evening at 6:30, an event was added to the week’s calendar: Christian Lehmann presented Henry James’ review of *Our Mutual Friend*, which was mentioned several times throughout the week.

Thursday morning’s lecture was presented by Ian Duncan of UC Berkeley and was titled “Archives of *Our Mutual Friend*,” touching on the antiquarian, anthropological, and mythical “archives” of the novel. The “imaginative tissue” of the

novel, Duncan said, is full of the idea of waste and value: what is saved, what is dumped, what is retrieved. Silas Wegg, as a seller of broadsides, is the custodian of the antiquarian archive in the novel, even though it is revealed to be rubbish. The anthropological archive spans mythology, fairy tales, and romance, as evidenced in Jenny Wren, who doesn't just preserve this archive; she *is* the archive. "This archive spills itself across the text," Duncan said. The mythical archive includes allusions to myth and history; *Our Mutual Friend*, he said, presents "belief as a crutch—for readers and characters."

On Thursday afternoon, Murray Baumgarten of UCSC gave a talk on "The Other Woman: Eliza Davis and Charles Dickens." Eliza Davis was, of course, the Jewish woman whose husband bought Tavistock House in 1860. Eliza Davis wrote to Dickens about his negative portrayal of Jews in *Oliver Twist*. Biographer Edgar Johnson posits that Riah is an apology for Fagin.

Adam Abraham, currently of Oxford University, ably stepped in for the absent John Glavin of Georgetown to present a farce on Thursday evening titled "OMFG: A Dickensian Travesty." Abraham, who has taught at NYU and has contributed to a number of film and television projects, delighted the audience with his hodgepodge of a number of Dickensian stories and situations, ably enacted by Universe participants who had had only brief practice during the week. After the farce, the annual Grand Party was held. Food and drink are plentiful through the week, but this event, hosted by the Friends of the Dickens Project, is always special, featuring homemade cakes and breads, fruit, a variety of cheeses and other finger food, and an

impressive wine, beer, and soft drink bar. As always, the event was well attended and appreciated.

On Friday morning, James Eli Adams of Columbia University presented “Men in Love” as the last lecture of the week. *Our Mutual Friend*, he said, is “a novel of social ambition and mobility,” yet Bradley Headstone is incapable of taking part in this mobility. It’s an important structure of the novel, Adams said, that we never see into Headstone’s thoughts; we are presented only with his statements to Lizzie that he has a right to her. He pointed out Dickens’s own note about the character: “Selfish schoolmaster.” Headstone, Adams said, is more compelling than the other characters, yet he is the prime example of what Adams called “the failures of self-mastery by men in love throughout the novel.” Headstone’s “weak, imitative nature” is transformed by love to passion and rage.” This rage has the added effect of facilitating Wrayburn’s marriage to Lizzie Hexam and leading to his own destruction.

On Friday afternoon, the 2013 film “The Invisible Woman” with Ralph Fiennes was shown, and after post-prandial potations, the end-of-week festivities began. The lively auction netted \$5,500 for the Friends of the Dickens Project coffers, and John Jordan announced that 2015’s reading choices are *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *American Notes*. The group was then treated to a Victorian Dance, with the Brassworks Band and Alan Winston. Attendees departed on Saturday morning, already looking forward to next year.