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Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens

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'The French Play in London': Performing, Translating,
and Adapting from the French in Victorian Britain

Christine Huguet and Paul Vita, eds. *Unsettling Dickens: Process, Progress and Change*

Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 2016, 259 p. ISBN 978-2-917202-32-6

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- 1 This fine collection of essays has been carefully and skilfully put together by Christine Huguet and Paul Vita. It is published by the Éditions du Sagittaire whose prestigious history, in connection with famous French avant-garde literature and then with resistance literature during the first half of the twentieth century, cannot but resonate across the volumes it releases today. The present essays derive from contributions to a travelling conference organized to celebrate the bicentenary of Dickens's birth in 2012. The conference went from Paris to London via Boulogne, Chatham and Rochester. The essays collected here all revolve around the idea of travelling understood in a literal and in a metaphorical sense. The purpose is, as the title of the volume suggests, to unsettle Dickens, by highlighting process, progress and change within his work and in subsequent adaptations of his work. This idea of unsettling Dickens is true to Dickens's very character and style, as Christine Huguet and Paul Vita point out in their preface. Huguet and Vita remind us how much Dickens's creative process already suggested movement, so much so that Dickens described himself as being unable to write until he had 'got his steam up' (20), thus reaching a state of agitation which differed from the powerful emotions recollected in tranquillity that epitomized romantic writing. Dickens's working notes bear testimony to this creative energy that was in keeping with the radical social, political, cultural and economic changes of the Victorian period. A foreword by Michael

Hollington, at the opening of the collection, reinforces these ideas by arguing that all Dickens's novels remain 'on the road' (13) and that travel and movement are at the core of his writing and his creativity.

- 2 The first part of the collection of essays focuses on 'Dickensian Processes: Displacing Narrative Paradigms'. Simon James examines mental time-travelling in Dickens's novels but also in the writer's autobiographical fragment. The workings of memory are highlighted in this contribution which opens up new vistas for the analysis of Dickens's work through memory studies but also 'trauma, identity and the body' (49). In this same section, Gilbert Pham-Thanh's essay explores gender issues in *Great Expectations* in a new light, that of the shaping of Pip's masculinity. This detailed close reading yields a new understanding of Dickens's novel. Jacqueline Fromonot picks up on this close-reading strategy to offer an elaborate analysis of Dickens's 'gushing style' (79) which, she argues, is carefully controlled. Through judiciously chosen examples, Fromonot's essay shows how Dickens's rhetoric was conditioned by two opposing principles, that of keeping the story flowing to meet the requirement of serial publication and that of not deviating from the main subject for fear of wearying or confusing the reader.
- 3 The second part of the volume, entitled 'Progress in Dickens: Signifying Across Space', opens with a fascinating contribution by Michael Hollington which forcefully demonstrates that 'Dickens's writing presents a world where the urge to be forever on the move is cardinal' (101). Dickens's work conveys the experience of time and motion that epitomizes modernity. It also reveals 'an acute responsiveness to the psychology of modernity' (102). Hollington goes on to examine 'timetable anxiety' related to travel and its psychological effects on identity (103). In the next essay of this section, Isabelle Hervouet-Farrar looks at two key journeys from England to France in *A Tale of Two Cities*, that of Mr. Lorry at the beginning of the novel and, later, that of Charles Darnay. Hervouet-Farrar argues that Lorry's journey to Dover fits into Christine Berthin's definition of 'haunted writing' (115), while Darnay's subsequent journey appears as a form of literalization in which the symbolism that pervaded the first part of the novel literally comes to life in the second, so that France becomes a dream-like or fantastic place (120). In this section of the collection, *Great Expectations* crops up again, this time in Ray Crosby's essay which focuses on the idea of pilgrimage, drawing from Bunyan's text but also from contemporary anthropology. This enables Crosby to define pilgrimage as a 'liminoid phenomenon' close to 'Arnold Van Gennep's conception of the liminal rite of passage' (134). In the last essay featured in this section, Francesca Orestano masterfully explores the figure of the tramp in Dickens's work and its impact beyond Dickens's work. As Orestano points out, the tramp is the perfect embodiment of the 'categories of motion, transience and change of place' (157) explored in the collection of essays. This specific essay concentrates on Dickens's depiction of these figures reminiscent, in many respects, of Dickens's own restlessness. It builds upon Dickens's portraits or even typology of tramps encapsulated in *The Uncommercial Traveller* to highlight their 'carnavalesque capability of transvestism and transgression' (170) as well as their acting skills. It then shows the influence of Dickens's sympathy for tramps on fin-de-siècle culture and on late Victorian children's literature, a lineage that brings us up to modernity and the twentieth century.
- 4 The last section of this collection of essays is devoted to 'Changing the Dickensian: Texts in Becoming'. In this section Michael Slater examines the transformation of Shakespeare's work through Dickens's imagination. Shakespeare, Slater argues, is

connected to some extent with travel in Dickens's life and work. This, Slater demonstrates by referring to *The Uncommercial Traveller* as well as to Dickens's visits to America and to Italy. Transformations, this time of the Dickensian, are tackled by Clémence Folléa in the following essay that purports to reveal the Dickensian in the recent television series, *The Wire*. This connection, Folléa shows, is an aesthetic one and it concerns one Dickensian novel in particular, namely *Oliver Twist*, whose urban underworld and slang have similar aesthetic qualities to those of *The Wire*. The third essay in this section explores two neo-Victorian rewritings of *Great Expectations*, namely *Jack Maggs* by Peter Carey and *Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones. Louisa Hadley has chosen to look at the idea of the gentleman in these two adaptations and how they not only transpose Dickens's novel in time and space but also re-examine one of the key notions that the novel develops, namely the gentlemanly ideal.

- 5 This volume thus successfully provides new insights into Dickens's work seen in the light of literal and metaphorical travel. This is not just another theme to be explored in Dickens's writing. As Michael Hollington stresses in his foreword and Christine Huguet and Paul Vita emphasize in their introduction, motion was at the core of Dickens's life and writing.

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Mots-clés: Dickens (Charles), mouvement

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