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Dickens's London

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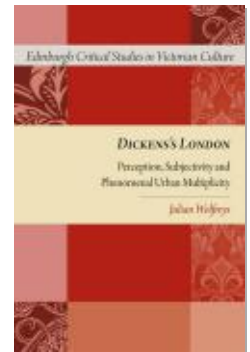
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Preface

Everybody thinks that they know Dickens's London or, if you prefer, 'Dickensian London'. The distinction is worth making at the outset, even though I will not have explicit recourse to the differentiation again. 'Dickensian London' is a fiction, a constellated matrix of images, tropes and other rhetorical or visual keys, which, occasionally synonymous with 'Victorian London' (it has become this, at least), is neither more nor less 'true', as far as representations go, than any other. 'Dickensian London' is a fictional topography doubling as a stage, on which appear eager and hopeful young persons, middle-aged or cynical men of business, lawyers, criminals, dependent women, people who are perpetually disappointed, those who daily expect something to turn up, children, adolescents, the homeless, street-wise characters and so forth. Such a London is a fixed and fictive place, the setting of which allows for incongruous or chance meetings, life-changing events and unexpected reversals of fortune.

Such a London – *Dickensian* London – is that simulacrum produced in the words of Josiah Bounderby, of Coketown, who, after a fashion, claims that London made him what he is, first in Chapter 4 and then, from the seventh chapter, in a rejoinder to Mrs Sparsit:

'Josiah Bounderby of Coketown learnt his letters from the outsides of the shops, Mrs. Gradgrind, and was first able to tell the time upon a dial-plate, from studying the steeple clock of St. Giles's Church, London, under the direction of a drunken cripple, who was a convicted thief, and an incorrigible vagrant.' (*HT* 21)

'People like you, ma'am, accustomed from infancy to lie on Down feathers, have no idea how hard a paving-stone is, without trying it. No, no, it's of no use my talking to you about tumblers. I should speak of foreign dancers, and the West End of London, and May Fair, and lords and ladies and honourables.' (*HT* 60)

A ‘big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh’ (*HT* 18), a ‘man made out of coarse material’ (*HT* 18) and, moreover, a ‘man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man’ and who ‘was always proclaiming’, as a result, his ‘old ignorance and his old poverty’ (*HT* 18), Josiah Bounderby is also a self-perjuring fictionaliser. He invents himself, creating the image of his being and his identity as having sprung from the very paving stones of the capital. Having triumphed over homelessness and illiteracy, Josiah Bounderby is ‘self-made’ but only to the extent that his autobiography is an invention of a few of the stereotypes and clichés that come, so often today, to stand in for the idea of ‘Dickensian London’ in the minds of many readers. In just these two quotations, the reader is confronted with not only the pavements, but also the outsides of stores, as well as a clock on a church steeple, which introduces sound to the visual image. London’s demi-monde is signalled synecdochally here through the West End and Mayfair, and a sense of place is evoked through the figures of tumblers and ‘foreign dancers’ (a neat economy of conflation is to be noted). Such figures belong, it might be suggested in passing, to Wordsworth’s confused and often anxious lists of simulacra, which, refusing any representational order or control, distress both the subject during his ‘Residence in London’ (1995, 250–96) and the subject of urban representation itself. Whether or not such a resonance is to be read, returning to Bounderby there is, inevitably one feels, a cripple who also happens to be an alcoholic *and* thief, as well as a vagrant. This tutelary and anonymous phantasm of Bounderby’s imagination is a virtual portmanteau character, so replete is he with ‘types’, and having sprung not so much from the streets of London as from the pages of Newgate novels and penny-dreadfuls. Here, in Bounderby’s imagination, is captured, as if from a magic lantern show or a BBC period drama of the early twenty-first century, *Dickensian London*. All human life is here – or near enough.

Everything in the two self-advertising and defensive, bombastic expositions relies on polarisation, extremes of the urban figure in the popular imagination. There is criminal life *and* a world of opulence, one of poverty *and* also one of the social elite. There is entertainment *and* suffering. Bounderby’s affirmations of the self refigure, in extracted and condensed form, material not that far removed from some of the detail to be read in certain of the *Sketches by Boz*. There are differences, however, not least in the fact that Boz, as the titular narrator, hardly ever speaks of himself, save as a medium or conduit for whatever is gathered in the proper name ‘London’, its scenes, events, places, architecture and people, and the subjective experience of these translated as perception, memory, observation and transcription. Bounderby, on

the other hand, speaks only of himself through the stock rhetoric, as is clear. In the *Sketches* there is to be read humour, compassion, sorrow and amusement. In *Hard Times* Bounderby's narrative of individualistic triumphalism lacks any of those qualities, unless it be that, through his words, the reader is afforded entertainment at what turns out to be perfidy and mendacity. That the self-making man lies to such an extent might be apprehended in the coarseness of the representations, at least indirectly.

That Josiah Bounderby is able to generate himself through storytelling by recourse to what were already overly familiar elements of urban narrative, fictional or real, by the 1850s suggests the power that London had over the imagination. Bounderby's fiction of the self relies on the *locus classicus* of the capitalist individual, in which London is a place where the streets are paved with gold for those who can drag themselves out of the mire – literally as well as metaphorically, this being mid-nineteenth-century London (see the opening pages of *Bleak House*). He is a fictional testament to the equally fictional urban myth of surviving the city's 'hard times', so to speak. Bounderby cannot make as much of himself as he does, and cannot invent his fictive image quite so convincingly, without the fictions of the city: those, on the one hand, which he reiterates and which are given form by numerous novelists, and those, on the other, which the city itself engenders, out of its complex quotidian existence and the need on the part of some to reduce, make manageable and so control the material of London in the imagination. Regardless of the crudity of Bounderby's London images, and regardless of the shamelessness of his 'literary plagiarism' in drawing on the clichéd urban narrative, its poetics and rhetoric, thereby smelting and recasting what is already, by the mid-Victorian moment, stale and adulterated material, one thing becomes clear: as soon as there is London, as soon as London is *there*, in the imagination, in the memory, or before one, *there is* 'more than one voice in a voice' (Derrida 2002, 166). And this 'implicit multiplicity of the authorizing source', or 'polyology' (Miller 1998, 149), *forges* the image, even as any origin becomes dispersed so as to make available to our comprehension a sense 'at the unfathomable depths of an abyssal staging' (Derrida 2002, 166) that occurs every time London is written or writes itself through the momentary gathering of its traces in any narrative of place, fictional or real; so here we get a sense, we receive, 'the beating heart of what is blithely called literary fiction' (Derrida 2002, 166). To put this differently, as soon as there is London, fiction, narrative, storytelling take place.

A difficulty thus arises in this abyssal complication of the presumption of a boundary (that Bounderby, I fancy, seems partly to name, in

passing) between the fictional and the real, and the difficulty is there in the name, the narration, the memory, the very idea of London. London displaces itself from itself and from within itself, giving us to apprehend how there is no final identity or meaning, no *there* there, not as a discrete, complete ontological phenomenon or object. Dickens appears to comprehend this, or at least he receives it in this spirit, in his efforts to reiterate, trace and translate 'London' from the materiality of the world to that of the letter. For Dickens, there is no ultimately justifiable distinction between the fictive and the real, the imaginary and the material. There is no absolute separation between lie and truth (hence the doubleness *and* duplicity implicit in my choice of the word *forge*, above), only the trace and play of a third term, and this is the pulse, the rhythm and flow we call 'literary', which serves to deconstruct the boundary. In this, Bounderby thus comes to be figured as the most typical narrator of the city. For Bounderby exists as a 'state of mind' predicated on a fiction, a state of mind, like any other, 'made or altered by language'; and this 'possibility appears in all those forms of language pervasive in novels, that cannot be made to correspond to any single unified consciousness' (Miller 1998, 152). The Dickensian narrator of the city reads what he is given, that which is also the matter by which he is written, that which the city writes on him, writing him as its subject, inscribing his subjectivity as a reading / writing of the always already 'more than one voice in a voice'. He gives us a clue to reading London, therefore, as well as to the ways in which London writes the subject, and so makes it possible to begin a reading without ever to have done with that act of reading, but to remain with a reading of London to come, even as London remains – and remains other to any reading in which are marked, desired or implied, finite limits. Dickens knows this, apprehending also that the enigma called the 'literary' is nothing other than the 'task' of responding and being open to this other, and of 'interpret[ing] the given sensations as signs of so many laws and ideas' (Proust 1996, 232).

A Note on the Text

The contents page is divided. There are the principal contents, and then a list of the *enargia*, the scenes and images to which I refer throughout the present volume. In the majority of cases, a discussion and reading follow each sketch; with a very small number of examples, though, I have presented an extract simply for the purpose of illustration, and for the reader to reflect on the image of London in the light of the other considerations throughout the book. If the reader expects there to be

an entry under Z, however, he or she will be disappointed. If London is a city where someone may walk for hours on end, without reaching the beginning of an ending, to paraphrase Friedrich Engels, then it seems inappropriate to include a 'final' entry under the last letter of the alphabet. Dickens's London, like the list of entries one can only begin to imagine under such a title, never reaches an end, any more than Engels's imagined pedestrian. The other thing the reader may wish to note is the absence of an introduction. If there is no conclusion to London, equally there can be no 'introduction' if by this one intends or suggests an overview or model by which the eye can take in everything at once, so as to gain a perspective. London proves repeatedly that such a wish is idle, the very idea impossible. One can only arrive in, or return to, the city and reflect on what is before one. In lieu of an introduction, however, I would refer the reader to the chapter that stands alone after the alphabetical entries, under the heading, 'Dickens, our Contemporary'.