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## Dickens's London

Wolfreys, Julian

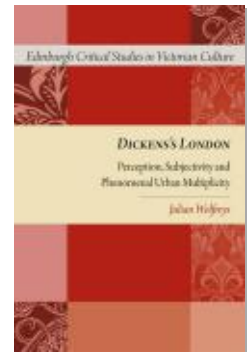
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## Dismal • Little Britain, Smithfield, Saint Paul's Cathedral

### *Great Expectations*

Mr Jaggers's room was lighted by a skylight only, and was a most dismal place; the skylight, eccentrically patched like a broken head, and the distorted adjoining houses looking as if they had twisted themselves to peep down at me through it. There were not so many papers about, as I should have expected to see; and there were some rusty old objects about, that I should not have expected to see—such as an old rusty pistol, a sword in a scabbard, several strange-looking boxes and packages, and two dreadful casts on a shelf, of faces peculiarly swollen, and twitchy about the nose. Mr Jaggers's own high-backed chair was of deadly black horsehair, with rows of brass nails round it, like a coffin; and I fancied I could see how he leaned back in it, and bit his forefinger at the clients. The room was but small, and the clients seemed to have had a habit of backing up against the wall: the wall, especially opposite to Mr Jaggers's chair, being greasy with shoulders . . .

I sat down in the cliental chair placed over against Mr Jaggers's chair, and became fascinated by the dismal atmosphere of the place. I called to mind that the clerk had the same air of knowing something to everybody else's disadvantage, as his master had. I wondered whether the two swollen faces were of Mr Jaggers's family, and, if he were so unfortunate as to have had a pair of ill-looking relations, why he stuck them on that dusty perch for the blacks and flies to settle on, instead of giving them a place at home. Of course I had no experience of a London summer day, and my spirits may have been oppressed by the hot exhausted air, and by the dust and grit that lay thick on everything. But I sat wondering and waiting in Mr Jaggers's close room, until I really could not bear the two casts on the shelf above Mr Jaggers's chair, and got up and went out.

. . . I came into Smithfield; and the shameful place, being all asmeared with filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of Saint Paul's bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate Prison. (*GE* 164–5)

Pip's imagination, which appears with his coming into being for the reader, and which manifests itself with '[m]y first and most vivid impression of the identity of things, [which] seems to me to have been gained

on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening' (*GE* 3), is given great exercise when confronted by the office of Mr Jaggers. However, while this is Pip's somewhat singular impression of the lawyer's office, and fully in keeping with the grotesque, if not Gothic, turn of representation, where imagination overleaps mimetic fidelity, it begs the question as to what extent the imagination is solely Pip's. On the one hand, imminent and insistent are the traces of those literary fictions read by Pip, those which, in effect, serve in the early constitution of his subjectivity. On the other hand, there are the signs here of the city: there is, in the manifestation of London for the subject in the early nineteenth century, a monstrous power determining the modalities of representation by which in afterthought the urban spaces, exteriors and interiors are re-presented. There is recognisable a narrative motion, taken up in and put into play by the various tropes and images, which signifies the discourse of the city impressing itself on the subject, with a degree of force, not to say imminent violence, which is not a little remarkable.

The room is lit from above; the lawyer's chambers present themselves through that single means of illumination, the skylight. We are inside the skull of Jaggers, as it were, the window 'patched like a broken head', and a head, moreover that finds its corollary in those death masks, the two 'dreadful casts' of 'swollen faces'. This is a dismal place, with a dismal atmosphere. All is dismal, dreadful, distorted, dusty, deadly, this last quality perceived in the colour of the horsehair covering of Jaggers's high-backed chair. Even the tacks holding the horsehair cover in place are coffin-like. In the 'blacks and flies', and the deposits of grease left upon the chair from years of habitual use, the interior suggests the exterior, that hitherto unexperienced 'London summer day', with its exhausted air, its dust and grit, the smear of filth and fat and blood and foam, all tending towards the dome of St Paul's – which is great and black – that bulges from behind the grim stone of Newgate Prison.

More than merely suggesting, the interior bleeds into its surrounding streets and buildings, even as, reciprocally, they suffuse Jaggers's office. There is no absolute exterior or interior here, only the phenomena of the hideous city, which leave their marks on the mind of the subject as much as they appear to do, in the reader's eye, on furnishings and walls. That bulging dome of the cathedral completes the impression of distortion, intimated first by the appearance of the 'distorted adjoining houses' glimpsed through the skylight, and subsequently in the distortion of the death masks. This particular London, which exceeds Pip's imagination, presenting him with a Gothic vision in excess of anything he has previously imagined, is a charnel house, the locus of atrocities and the site of slaughter, whether in the name of sustenance or justice; it is also a place

of decay and oppression, one where engines of destruction in the form of anachronistic weapons present themselves as much as the casts as uncanny *memento mori*.

That extension of the image, from room to the outside world, but first illuminated from without, with its relation to the mind of the subject and the singularity of the force of impression, invites us to question both the relation between the text and its images, and the source of the referents, whether they are 'real' or imagined, and so forth. This is not to say that phenomena are illusory, but that the power by which they become transformed, or with which they are informed, and so deformed, suggests not only this intimate text / image relation but also the inaccessibility of any simple object before the image. At work is an ekphrastic modality, which serves through the intimation of a Gothic or pre-modern register for the pictorial world, to offer up a distortion of the modern that *is* modern in that very distortedness and its phenomenal effects. In this image, the world of exhaustion and deformation are all there is. Language strives to figure the visual image as graphically as possible, generating or projecting an iconotext through its hybrid modalities. The image, taking as its inaugural departure point the illumination from without, and which is followed shortly thereafter by Pip's half-comprehending mental 'enlightenment' (he does not fully realise what he sees, even though he apprehends all too clearly the resonance of this world through its alignment with his memory of earlier perceptions and interpretations), functions as both mediation of and opening on to a 'shameful' city, a city that remains *there* but which remains at the same moment invisible, unless the subject cannot avoid being confronted with it. The 'narrative functions of the image in the text may' be apprehended, therefore, 'along the lines of a supplement', whereby that which composes the image, the various mementos of the city's oppressive energies – in which atmospheric conditions serve as a supplement to human activities – establish a sequence of visual spaces that import 'their orientations and capacities for disruption'. In this manner, room and street, furnishing and architecture, constitute a 'contending site', the image(s) maintaining 'an epistemology and phenomenology' (Louvel 2011, 7) of confinement, unease, claustrophobia, destruction and death: in short, this *other* London.

Pip is *there* doubly, remembering, re-presenting, and in the event, before the very experience with an apparent immediacy, a proximity, which mediates the sensory apprehension and revenance of the image for the reader. The subject, more than merely being present, becomes the place wherein a dialogue between text and image are given, taking place, and so becoming available after the event. Simply seeing what is

there is insufficient. It is necessary that the subject read what is there, reading the image and so writing the text, translating from the materiality of the world into the materiality of the text, as that first, initially pre-phenomenal materiality gives itself to the subject as translatable phenomena. The world is thus seen, read and known, through a subjective schematisation of experience ‘of the legible and the visible in a chiasmic mode’ figured in the ‘common ground’ (Louvel 2011, 39) that is subjectivity. The subject is, we might say, revealed as the site of a deconstructive phenomenology, whereby the authenticity and historicity of place may come to be figured as the supplement of experience, and so made available in iterable revenance, as if the experience were, phantasmally, my own. That we are meant to see the larger world in the smaller, to take Jagers’s room as visual figure for that larger world of death-dealing London cannot be in doubt, if we remember that the particular location is ‘Little Britain’, the neighbourhood and street in the City, which runs from St Martin’s Le Grand to Smithfield. Pip’s vision is thus one of the unseen everyday, the hidden within the visible; there is, in this, the formulation of what Markus Poetzsch has called ‘visionary dreariness’ (2006), an inheritance of Romantic apprehension at the level of the quotidian.



Blackfriars, Fleet Street, Fleet Prison, St Paul's Cathedral