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Dickens's London

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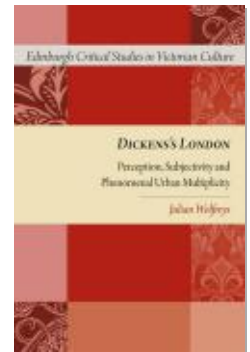
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Faded Gentility • Camden Town

David Copperfield

It may have been . . . for no better reason than because there was a certain similarity in the sound of the words skittles and Traddles, that it came into my head, next day, to go and look after Traddles. The time he had mentioned was more than out, and he lived in a little street, near the Veterinary College at Camden Town, which was principally tenanted, as one of our clerks who lived in that direction informed me, by gentlemen students, who bought live donkeys, and made experiments on those quadrupeds in their private apartments. Having obtained from this clerk a direction to the academic grove in question, I set out, the same afternoon, to visit my old schoolfellow.

I found that the street was not as desirable a one as I could have wished it to be, for the sake of Traddles. The inhabitants appeared to have a propensity to throw any little trifles they were not in want of, into the road: which not only made it rank and sloppy, but untidy too, on account of the cabbage-leaves. The refuse was not wholly vegetable either, for I myself saw a shoe, a doubled-up saucepan, a black bonnet, and an umbrella, in various stages of decomposition, as I was looking out for the number I wanted.

The general air of the place reminded me forcibly of the days when I lived with Mr and Mrs Micawber. An indescribable character of faded gentility that attached to the house I sought, and made it unlike all the other houses in the street—though they were all built on one monotonous pattern, and looked like the early copies of a blundering boy who was learning to make houses, and had not yet got out of his cramped brick-and-mortar pothooks—reminded me still more of Mr and Mrs Micawber. [. . .]

When I got to the top of the stairs—the house was only one story high above the ground-floor—Traddles was on the landing to meet me. He . . . gave me welcome . . . to his little room. It was in the front of the house, and extremely neat, though sparsely furnished. It was his only room, I saw; for there was a sofa-bedstead in it, and his blacking-brushes and blacking were among his books—on the top shelf, behind the dictionary. His table was covered with papers, and he was hard at work in an old coat. I looked at nothing, that I know of, but I saw everything, even to the prospect of a church upon his china inkstand, as I sat down—and this, too, was a faculty confirmed in me in the old Micawber times. Various ingenious arrangements he had made, for

the disguise of his chest of drawers, and the accommodation of his boots, his shaving-glass, and so forth, particularly impressed themselves upon me, as evidences of the same Traddles who used to make models of elephants' dens in writing-paper to put flies in; and to comfort himself, under ill usage, with the memorable works of art I have so often mentioned. (DC 372–3, 374)

Here, typically for David Copperfield, place and memory are associated, in this case the particular *lieux de mémoire* having the power to recall not experience of Camden side-streets themselves, but other times and places for David. Place provokes memory but not of itself; rather the subject connects with his other selves, and in this manner to the memory of others, and other perceptions, by associative analogy; the phenomena of the scene engender the modality of re-presentation. This is so whether Copperfield observes the conditions of the streets surrounding the Veterinary College, or, somewhat differently, the condition of Traddles's room. This is, itself, a singular location in a singular building, all the more worthy of remark apparently, and so worthy of our attention, precisely because its singularity stands out despite the building resembling every other house in the terrace. Typical, again, of a Copperfield narration is the hybrid determination of place through the mix of the ordinary and the exotic – or, perhaps more precisely, the filtering of the quotidian through an exotic prism of the imaginary, whereby an aesthetic apprehension serves in exceeding representation in order to draw attention to detail and, simultaneously, to make strange the unremarkable, bringing out the visible from the invisible. This quality of exoticism is extended further in the narrator's registration of the uses to which items are put, or otherwise made different from themselves and their proper uses, by Traddles in his room. The exoticism of phenomena resides, therefore, in their exhaustion, their inutility, their confusion and disorder, or else in their being put to uses for which they were not intended. In this, Traddles and the neighbourhood belong to one another. As there are various 'little trifles' – as David calls them; whether with an affected nicety or irony it is hard to tell – of the vegetable and inorganic kind thrown into the street, so Traddles's papers cover the table, his blacking and brushes wedged behind the dictionary; his chest of drawers is 'disguised', and his other personal items stowed in such a way as to call up for David the memory of a younger Traddles. Objects in themselves are nothing, but, associated with another, they are keys to remembrance, as well as the personality of another, who haunts the present older self in the maintenance of habit.

All this is seen without looking: 'I looked at nothing, that I know of, but I saw everything.' In Copperfield's admission there is sketched a connection between unconscious awareness and visionary perception,

which by-passes both the material world and the present, the details to return only in memory. Reality acts as the prompt for the element of unreality to surface in the image of what is there and the vision of what is not, strictly speaking. What is seen can only be seen authentically in a belated manner, in the mode of a reverie, 'in the dreams of memory' that affect, Gaston Bachelard notes, 'the dreamer when he is faced with the most concrete things' (Bachelard 1994, 59), beginning with the experience and perception of the street in Camden Town. Though the places Copperfield has occasion to visit are not his, not concrete locations belonging to his experience or memory, yet there is that in them which assumes, or gives to Copperfield, a sequence of phantasmal images conjured from memories of childhood. This is all the more marked because the narrator has already acknowledged lack of knowledge about Camden in passing, having asked 'one of our clerks' for directions. Though the doxa concerning medical students' experiments on donkeys might be taken as a sign of what is to come for the reader, yet it is only fully in the face-to-face encounter with the trifles of the street and, subsequently, the confined disarray of Traddles's quarters, that the subject's act of re-presentation comes into being. It is perhaps in the chance aural association of 'skittles' and 'Traddles' that the seed of the unreal might be said to have begun to germinate, preparing Copperfield, despite his topographical unfamiliarity, to enter so unexpectedly into the instant visionary reverie, where 'imagination, memory and perception exchange functions'. In this way, the image – a sonic image given a particular form in that moment of linguistic condensation – 'is created through co-operation between the real and unreal' (Bachelard 1994, 59), the imminent become manifest through the encounter between subject and place, however unfamiliar with the concrete reality of Camden David might be. The past thus returns, 'situated elsewhere', 'time and place impregnated with a sense of unreality . . . Thus, on the threshold of our space, before the era of our own time, we hover between awareness of being and loss of being.' And, Bachelard observes, 'the entire reality of memory becomes spectral' (Bachelard 1994, 58).

That which is observed in its oddity, its inutility, misuse or incongruity causes to reveal, through its perceived strangeness and the estrangement it unveils from within itself, the ability to give the younger self to the older subject, as the younger subject calls to his older, unaware *doppelgänger*, from within the uncanny singularity of the object and its phenomenal oscillation. One's being comes to be given, to return as the ghost of being, in the estrangement of the image and in that – again singular – juxtaposition of images. Singularity has arisen through conjunction, material forms in perceived relation mimicking, and perhaps

echoing, or perhaps supplementing, that earlier chance association and condensation of the motifs 'skittles' and 'Traddles'. Singularity in this instance – first, the subjective association between words, through sonorous approximation and, subsequently, the emergence of Traddles's house as singular despite its being exactly the same as all the other houses in the street – presents itself precisely in what is taking place in David, through the complex interplay and tensions between past and present, perception and re-presentation, image and memory.

What I have called 'conflation' and 'condensation' here is also, strangely, a motion of displacement, that which Freud had termed *Verschiebung*, and which is only poorly served in the English term 'displacement', the one suggesting the other through that 'certain similarity in the sound', but also there being marked the movement, the shift or motion, the displacement by which this extract appears motivated, and which in turn informs David's perceptions of Camden and the subsequent emergence of the occluded relation between self and place. David, a stranger to this neighbourhood of north London, is displaced from within himself, a shift occurring within him, as memory, image and perception are, themselves, the subjects and vehicles of phenomenal dislocation. What the reader witnesses taking place in David's subjective experience of Camden, therefore, is what Bachelard terms a 'decisive psychic action' in the 'dynamic imagination' (Bachelard 1994, 198). However, that action, whereby condensation and displacement determine the instant of visionary revenance, does not 'save' the subject from the painful memory. Instead, the self in the present and the present place are displaced by the return of what Copperfield calls here 'the old Micawber times', which times return through that portal in reality opened by both the play between game (skittles) and name (Traddles), and those phenomena in the street (shoes, cabbage leaves, saucepans, bonnets, decaying umbrellas), which, if they do not change names exactly, are metonymic¹⁷ to the extent that they change from being functional realities to become unreal and incapable of functioning. Out of the immensity unfolded through the action of place upon Copperfield through the subject's perception of Camden Town, an unexpected intimacy, a proximity that is emotional and psychic rather than simply material or topographical, reveals itself, between subject and place. Unreal London can arrive, without warning, with a greater force and the ability to touch one uncannily, even at those moments when this is little to be expected. The small, the inconsequential and the random, are not always what they appear in reality.