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Dickens's London

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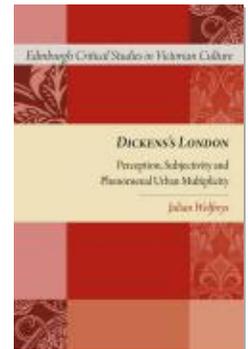
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Insolvent Court • Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn, Houndsditch, Tyburn, Whitechapel, St George's Fields, Southwark

The Pickwick Papers

In a lofty room, badly lighted and worse ventilated, situate in Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn-fields, there sit nearly the whole year round, one, two, three, or four gentlemen in wigs, as the case may be, with little writing-desks before them, constructed after the fashion of those used by the judges of the land, barring the French polish; a box of barristers on their right hand; an inclosure of insolvent debtors on their left; and an inclined plane of most especially dirty faces in their front. These gentlemen are the Commissioners of the Insolvent Court, and the place in which they sit is the Insolvent Court itself.

It is, and has been, time out of mind, the remarkable fate of this Court to be somehow or other held and understood, by the general consent of all the destitute shabby-genteel people in London, as their common resort, and place of daily refuge. It is always full. The steams of beer and spirits perpetually ascend to the ceiling, and, being condensed by the heat, roll down the walls like rain: there are more old suits of clothes in it at one time, than will be offered for sale in all Houndsditch in a twelvemonth; more unwashed skins and grizzly beards than all the pumps and shaving-shops between Tyburn and Whitechapel could render decent, between sunrise and sunset.

It must not be supposed that any of these people have the least shadow of business in, or the remotest connexion with, the place they so indefatigably attend. If they had, it would be no matter of surprise, and the singularity of the thing would cease at once. Some of them sleep during the greater part of the sitting; others carry small portable dinners wrapped in pocket handkerchiefs or sticking out of their worn-out pockets, and munch and listen with equal relish; but no one among them was ever known to have the slightest personal interest in any case that was ever brought forward. Whatever they do, there they sit from the first moment to the last. When it is heavy rainy weather, they all come in wet through; and at such times the vapours of the Court are like those of a fungus-pit.

A casual visitor might suppose this place to be a temple dedicated to the Genius of Seediness. There is not a messenger or process-server attached to it, who wears a coat that was made for him; not a tolerably fresh, or wholesome-looking man in the whole establishment, except a little white-headed apple-faced tipstaff, and even he, like an ill-conditioned cherry preserved in brandy, seems to have artificially dried and withered up into a state of

preservation, to which he can lay no natural claim. The very barristers' wigs are ill-powdered, and their curls lack crispness.

But the attorneys, who sit at a large bare table below the Commissioners, are, after all, the greatest curiosities. The professional establishment of the more opulent of these gentlemen, consists of a blue bag and a boy: generally a youth of the Jewish persuasion. They have no fixed offices, their legal business being transacted in the parlours of public houses, or the yards of prisons, whither they repair in crowds, and canvass for customers after the manner of omnibus cads. They are of a greasy and mildewed appearance; and if they can be said to have any vices at all, perhaps drinking and cheating are the most conspicuous among them. Their residences are usually on the outskirts of 'the Rules,' chiefly lying within a circle of one mile from the obelisk in St. George's Fields. Their looks are not prepossessing, and their manners are peculiar. (PP 571–2)

The relation between subject and place is not always a material one, if ever. One need not be in a particular locale in order to apprehend or remember its effect, the experience of having stood in that place, or the memory of perception. Some places give themselves, they 'call', if you will, in the imagination, by virtue of what takes place in a name, even though you may never have visited them at all. To offer one obvious example: Whitechapel. The very idea of 'Jack the Ripper' and all such a thought entails is, for some, the *sine qua non* of the site. A memory which is not mine, it nevertheless imposes itself, or can do so. After a particular historical moment, it remains the persistent tattoo on the site. Of course, this could not have been the case for Dickens, though for some of his readers, Whitechapel would have been synonymous with crime, vice, poverty and, for some, the Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811. More generally, a condition of modernity (implied in the idea of the haunting of subject by place as one dimension of a particular phenomenal modern condition) is a sense of 'historic temporality' allied anachronistically to 'those passions or situations that repeat themselves, that come back' (Agacinski 2003, 107). The text of Dickens is enmeshed within the ravel of such anachronic iterability; it is reliant on that sense of the past of a place having an iterable, phenomenal force. Such energy may emerge through the most minimal of openings, the cultural past, cultural memory and the anachronic flow arriving in a brief moment of presentation; such is the case before us, in the Insolvent Court.

Wigs and writing-desks, boxes of barristers, inclosures of insolvent debtors, the 'lofty room' of the Insolvent Court, Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, is understood not simply in itself but through a number of comparisons and allusions. Additionally, its singular condition is discerned in its being frequented by a regularly large number of people who have nothing to do with insolvency. Even the attorneys are

'curiosities', in that they appear to do little in the Insolvent Court but, as we are assured, having no 'fixed offices', they conduct the law either in public houses or prison-yards. Given the present tense of the passage, it might be observed that, like the poor, the law is always with us, always before us – as is insolvency, though that is a different matter. Beginning, as it were, in alliteration, pausing along the way to observe that 'curls lack crispness', and concluding with alliteration, beyond the court and its immediate, mappable location into those gathering places of the working classes – the one perhaps helping to lead to the other, in the world of Dickens's London – the passage conjures through its poetics a formal architextural analogue between the smaller and the larger world, thereby tracing a relation between each of the smaller worlds. Alliteration brings to the fore a formal mapping of relation, addressing an economic interdependency that defines parts of the modern urban condition and its subjects. It is the thread which stitches place to place, this network re-enforced through the aural play on the Commissioners, whose peripatetic practice of the law works through 'crowds', in which are found 'customers' for whom they 'canvass', in a manner similar to 'omnibus cads'.²⁴

Though everything about the place gives itself to be seen, yet there is little of purpose or utility, and barely a narrator; any hypothetical *flânerie* is that of the 'casual visitor', who might speculate on the identity, if not the nature of this location, had he wandered into the Court. Present, given phantasmal presence and giving in turn the discourse on the Court, which is to give the Court to be seen, there is no narrator as such. Only *there*, only as a medium through the agency of projection afforded the veils of language, the narrator-effect is to transform, or at least merge or submerge, the equally phantasmal witness, the subject of the scene into that place; I is the site. Or, as close as one can be to the place one is in, and to which one gives testimony, as it is possible to be, whilst still maintaining that differentiation that allows one to speak, observe, record.

Perhaps more than place, therefore, 'I' becomes – is always already – a site of translation, from the materiality of place to the materiality of the letter. This leaves the reader to judge, but in a manner called by Kant reflective judgement: that is to say, judgement without preconditions, parameters, regulation or criteria.²⁵ Frequently, in Dickens, the reader, or the subject of the city, is called on not only to give testimony, but also to do so without prior evidence, theoretical model, or paradigm for judging. This is why London calls the subject, the narrator, the reader to a halt before a given scene, maintained in a narrative suspension of topo-analytical re-presentation. This occurs through not infrequent intensification caused by a shift from past to present tense; on occasion, this is abetted by the increased frequency of semi-colon use, the (implied)

erasure of adverbial modification indicating place ('there is'), in order that the distance between the subject / narrator and location diminishes, and the occasional parenthesis or apostrophe addressed directly to a 'you', singular or plural, the reader as audience. In order to maintain the novelty of re-presentation, the Dickens text augments the force of simile or metaphor, shifting towards catachresis. (Or it might be, catachresis is already at work, invisible performative in the troping of language, deformation as the condition appropriate to a discourse of re-presentation, apropos London's modernity for its subject.) There is thus at work in such passages not a reading of place organised around a politics of identity, but one organised by, and around, a politics of difference. This, as Thomas Docherty suggests, causes reading to become uncomfortable, inasmuch as it produces, or aims to engender, a new experience, as if one had never seen this, or seen something in this manner. From within representation, out of history, comes the re-presentation of subjective perception enabled by an 'exogamy of language', which signifies a desire 'to escape from the sphere of what is always the same, the spell of what one is and knows anyway' (Adorno 1991a, 187).

To return to detail in the image of the Insolvent Court: the senses are challenged, confronted, from the outset, the vision of place variable, 'as the case may be', the wigs ('ill-powdered') and the writing-desks being the most immediately determined objects at hand. Barristers and debtors oppose one another, between whom, below the wigs and writing-cases, are the 'dirty faces' of the Commissioners. Everything about the Court tends to dirt, destitution, shabbiness and seediness, steam and condensation, unwashed skin and unshaven visages. At inclement times, the atmospheric conditions worsen outside this dismal room, and so does the aura within, the 'vapours' becoming 'like those of a fungus-pit'; while the appearance of Commissioners is further expatiated on, their appearance denoted as 'greasy and mildewed', conditions of appearance – and appearance is that which Being gives, what is shown, and, therefore, the phenomenal essence of what is seen – contributing to the sense of unprepossessing peculiarity in this legal cabinet of singular curiosities.

At the same time, though, that which is within has its corollary beyond the walls of this disquieting image. Vapours, steam, dirt, rain; the shabby gentility of the visitors, whose purpose remains unknowable, and more particularly their clothes, which invoke the second-hand shops and stalls of Houndsditch; the Court, the public house, the prison, the 'Rules' – every place is implied as a partial figural and phenomenal palimpsest of every other; what is given is suggested elsewhere. That which connotes 'greasy and mildewed appearance' before us finds, whether on human being or object, a relation beyond. To remind ourselves of what

takes place, what Jean-Luc Marion calls the ‘mode of *givenness*’ (2002b, 19), we should note how, through the givenness of the collected phenomena present in the image, there are gestures towards other worlds outside the Court, as we have already argued. In part, this takes place because of that ‘exogamy of language’. The auratic modality common to things and people as so many privileged tropes of presentation causes us to see beyond the mere depiction, and to apperceive an other London; the discourse of damp, mildew, steam, grease and ‘ill-conditioned’ presentation gives us to see in a more authentic light, by which ‘the given, givens, and the datum, even reduced to their brute factuality, still bear in themselves the ambiguity constitutive of givenness’ (Marion 2002b, 62); wherein, in the very disappearance in the given, of truth of that to which we are subject is all the more visibly there. This is the work of language. Such work, such exogamic revelation works not only through adjectival embellishment, which is at once ‘factual’ after a manner, but also discursively, if not ideologically, ‘inappropriate’ to the representation of the law. Language, the servant of the law, in providing evidence, giving testimony, transgresses the bounds of ‘proper’ representation, admitting the world beyond. Language, if we open ourselves, becoming subject to its play, enables an ‘essential phenomenological operation of . . . reduction’ to arrive ‘beyond objectness and beingness – at pure givenness’ (Marion 2002b, 17–18) And this too is what takes place in the proper name, as the figure of phenomenological immanence *par excellence*, whereby the immanence of historicity is given.

The proper name is as much a detail in the image as is any description of the contents or inhabitants of the Court. Language gives to place co-ordinates, rather than simply ‘context’. Indeed, the name within the frame of reference that is the image belongs to the indexical function that persists in the image, even as language strives to escape from the sphere of the same. In belonging to this indexical modality, it hints that, on the one hand, there is both more than one context and that context is infinite, in principle; on the other hand, there is nothing other than context, and it is only in the act of reading selectively that we delimit what we choose to see as centre or periphery, *ergon* or *parergon*. We had observed already how the extract is determined before us through comparison with the larger world: Houndsditch, Tyburn, Whitechapel and St George’s Fields. There is something rather more complex at work, though, to which we should attend. The question of place in this instance of adumbrated chorography offers at once a mapping through implied inversions and analogues, whilst also being a medium for meditation on a network of places as a collective site of memory. While the Insolvent Court and Lincoln’s Inn Fields might be said to provide the present

nexus in this topoanalysis, its subjects are connected through matters of both law and economics in the present, but also in a relation between the law at, or possibly as, the imagined or desired centre of the *polis* and more generally modern urban culture, and a lawlessness associated with poverty, criminality, insurgency and, generally, an urban proletariat. Dickensian chorography serves to trace a cultural memory of attempted control and rebellion, which, belonging to cultural anamnesis, produces this particular re-presentation of the Court as a mnemotechnic, the poetics of which cause to appear memory of the city itself, as well as a certain mapping effect. With Tyburn to the east, Whitechapel and Houndsditch to the east, and St George's Fields south of the river, on what would have been the Surrey side in Southwark, 'modern' London finds itself haunted at its juridical centre by memories of what forms and informs the identity of that centre. Centre and margin, present and past are inverted, as the periphery and what is absent determine London through a poetics and politics of difference.

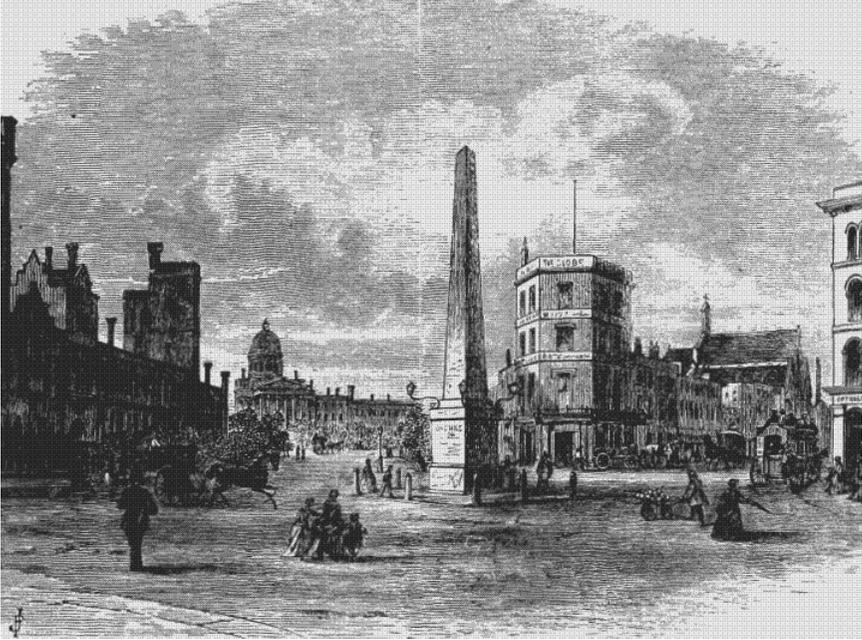
In such a chorography, what I have described as an adumbrated technique amounts to a phenomenology of the name, place reduced to signature. The proper name gives. There – on the page, on the map – it is, it calls as, the signature of 'things past', of events and experiences, if one shares or has access to certain histories or cultural memories. The name stands as countersignature to what is merely observed. A quantum trope, the name gives on to the difference and other of the Court.

Thus Tyburn is the site of the 'first permanent gallows' (Porter 1994, 153), set up in 1571, but also a place of transgression, apprentices being 'allowed a "Tyburn Fair" holiday', with the victims of executions regarded as 'heroes' (Porter 1994, 153). Large crowds could often be depended on at such holidays, often exceeding 30,000, with the largest recorded as around 80,000 in the eighteenth century (Inwood 1998, 308). As early as 1388, though, it was a place associated with executions, Sir Nicholas Brembre, previously Mayor of London until 1386, being 'dragged to Tyburn on a hurdle and hanged, drawn and quartered as a traitor' (Inwood 1998, 79); in May 1535, 'three Carthusian priors . . . were executed . . . before a vast crowd for denying royal supremacy', to be followed a few months after by the exaction at Tyburn of more 'London Carthusians' (Inwood 1998, 151). Servants were frequently hanged there, for stealing from their employers (Inwood 1998, 341), and Jonathan Wild, the 'hero' of Henry Fielding's novel, *Jonathan Wild the Great* (2004), and the model for Peachum in John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (Inwood 1998, 374), was executed at Tyburn in May 1725. Tyburn was, then, a 'favoured site for a hanging', the earliest recorded being in 1196 (Ackroyd 2000, 291; see 291–3, and 295–6), but also a

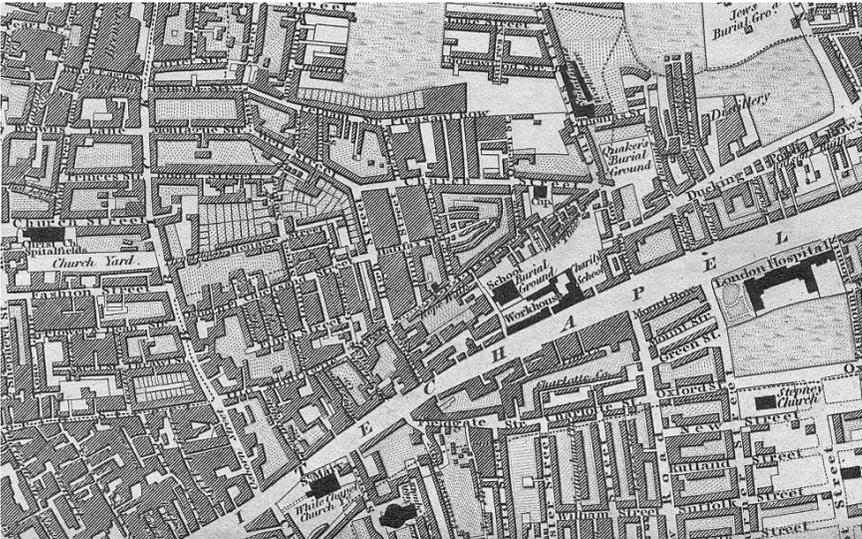
place of semi-licensed and sanctioned release for the working classes, through a particularly secularised form of carnival, law and order in London having taken the place of the church in the authorised discourse of transgression (Stallybrass and White 1986, 1–79 *passim*). And, of course, as the West End spread for the upper- and upper-middle classes in the late eighteenth century, Paddington became referred to as ‘Tyburnia’ ‘after public executions had ended at Tyburn in 1783’ (Porter 1994, 212; see Inwood 1998, 575, 576).

Houndsditch, a road running along the boundary of the City wall, and the area adjacent, was also an ambiguous location dating back to the Middle Ages and the early modern period. In his *Survey*, John Stow records that ‘Houndes ditch’ was a place of ‘much filth (conveyed forth of the city), especially dead dogs’ (Stow 1956, 116; see Ackroyd 2000, 22); however, by Stow’s time, the area was already built up, to the extent that many inhabitants ‘suffered severely’ as a result of plague, with a common burial pit holding over 1,000 corpses being nearby (Weinrebb and Hibbert 1995, 396–7). The areas of Spitalfields and Whitechapel, ‘from Houndsditch in the west to Vallance Road in the east’ (Inwood 1998, 414), have always been associated with the poorest members of London society, criminality and immigration. Most immediately, though, and this is what the passage from *Pickwick* signals, the ‘market’ and second-hand clothing spread along the ‘eastern edge of the City, especially along Houndsditch, the . . . centre of second-hand clothes dealing’ (Inwood 1998, 453).

The last proper name to invoke memory of place, or to signify a site of memory, is that of St George’s Fields. Invoked through the reference to the obelisk at St George’s Fields, this location south of the Thames is the site of what is known as the massacre of St George’s Fields (1768), where the Gordon Riots are said to have begun in 1780. There is thus something of an irony in that this is the place of the ‘Rules’, where the Commissioners are said to live, that ‘circle of one mile’ from the Obelisk taking in, to the south-west, the Marshalsea Debtors’ Prison, which would, of course, still be in full operation at the time of *Pickwick*. That aside for the moment, St George’s Fields, generally a site with a particular history of lawlessness, offers recorded scenes of what Stephen Inwood terms ‘popular unrest’, dating back at least to 1640. The site was used as a gathering point for ‘City apprentices, suburban leatherworkers and watermen’ (Inwood 1998, 221), in order to march on Lambeth Palace. Not only a convening point for radicals and dissenters, the Fields was also the working-class equivalent to Ranelagh and Vauxhall, with the Apollo Gardens and the Dog and Duck popular places of amusement, as well as being (allegedly) the ‘resort of low and vicious characters’



St George's Circus (previously Fields)



Whitechapel

(Walford 1878, 347). Though, for many generations, the Fields was a locus of recreation and popular assembly, by the time of Samuel Pickwick – and Sam Weller – the area had already been subsumed by the spread of suburbanisation, the location having been chosen in 1815 as the site of the new Bethlehem Royal Hospital (Bedlam) (Inwood 1998, 308). Of the area, in 1812, James and Horace Smith wrote, satirically, ‘St George’s Fields are fields no more, / The trowel supersedes the plough; / Huge inundated swamps of yore / Are changed to civic villas now’ (Smith 1879, 4).

History remains immanent, though, in the name. If the extract gives in a particular fashion more than it shows, this at least illustrates for us the manner in which, while place can always be an archive or repository, that which is erased or lost, in leaving traces what takes place in a given locus always exceeds any representation of a given experience. Perception is otherwise, and if there is that which is clearly given, givenness is also obscure, calling for the subject to read closely. Critically, the Dickens text situates itself apropos London in relation to its reading subject, calling for the subject who knows how to read and distinguish the literary difference within descriptive, realist or mimetic surface-fidelities. Close reading attends to difference; any other kind of reading misses the literary. It is in the poetics of figuration that opens, resonates with that ‘temporalized delay’ externalised in the dualism of place and subject, or location and narrator. In this delay, the effect of close reading, the Dickens text would have us understand as we loiter in the place of an other – as if we could be there and as if that place were there for our perception – there takes place the ‘strictly phenomenological conversion of what gives itself (the call) into what shows itself (the responsal). The conversion’, Marion continues, ‘imposes a delay – a slowness, but a ripening slowness . . . The visible’ – that is to say, the truth of the image, of historicity – only has its chance of coming to light ‘in this very delay. Temporality itself delays only in order to attest it’ (Marion 2002b, 296). In this, the idea of the narrator or the subject are merely mediums; for what arrives, what calls, that which gives itself in short, is nothing other than London, the multiplicities of the city. Perhaps, it might be worth hypothesising, this is why that suspension in, and of, the Dickensian present tense, the shift of focus effected by semi-colon following semi-colon, the abandonment of the objectifying adverbial modifier and verb, the Dickens-machine idles, resonating at certain frequencies, demanding in the process that from the temporality of delay, we see exactly what calls, and what is given.