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Dickens's London

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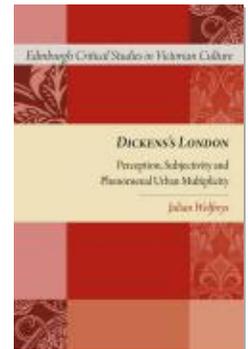
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Jaggers's House • Gerrard Street, Soho

Great Expectations

[Mr Jaggers] conducted us to Gerrard-street, Soho, to a house on the south side of that street. Rather a stately house of its kind, but dolefully in want of painting, and with dirty windows. He took out his key and opened the door, and we all went in to a stone hall, bare, gloomy and little used. So, up a dark brown staircase into a series of three dark brown rooms on the first floor. There were carved garlands on the panelled walls, and as he stood among them giving us welcome, I know what kind of loops I thought they looked like.

Dinner was laid in the best of these rooms; the second was the dressing room; the third, his bedroom. He told us that he held the whole house, but rarely used more of it than we saw. The table was comfortably laid—no silver in the service, of course—and at the side of his chair was a capacious dumb-waiter, with a variety of bottles and decanters on it, and four dishes of fruit for dessert. I noticed throughout, that he kept everything under his own hand, and distributed everything himself.

There was a bookcase in the room; I saw, from the backs of the books, that they were about evidence, criminal law, criminal biography, trials, acts of parliament, and such things. The furniture was all very solid and good, like his watch-chain. It had an official look, however, and there was nothing merely ornamental to be seen. In a corner, was a little table of papers with a shaded lamp: so that he seemed to bring the office home with him in that respect too, and to wheel it out of an evening and fall to work. (*GE* 211)

It is unremarkable. There is nothing to be remarked.

The introduction to Mr Jaggers's home is one of Dickens's more economical impressions of architectural and topographical space. More than economical, it is reserved; it reserves to itself that which would otherwise be traced with simultaneously minute and hyperbolic attentiveness. In part, this has to do, undoubtedly, with the fact that Pip is the narrator. However, Pip's imagination elsewhere in the text can take powerful hold of a passing image and make a great deal of it, to the degree that the absence of any fanciful projection is notable. Perception

is therefore understood as always subject to place to some degree, rather than having any autonomous agency. Jaggers's home has the power to curtail the imagination's flight. Pip notices all there is to see, or seems to do so. He remembers, at least, those phenomena that work, in memory of the visit, to produce Mr Jaggers's house in such a way that is significant for Pip. Such significance as there is resides in circumscribing Pip's analogical associations. As narrator, Pip's memories of place constitute a field of significance, constructing the image of place so as to give to it a meaning in denying Pip's literary phantasies (his associations are driven often by what he has read, to which 'reality' is compared), but also for Pip's audience, whilst withholding direct observation of Mr Jaggers's character. Mr Jaggers is behind the impression of the dwelling space, the god in the machine, in a manner analogous to those rooms at which Jaggers hints but rarely uses. To an extent, therefore, place stands in for person, the attributes of the architecture, its colouration and the combinations in representation tend toward reception of an indirect portrait of the lawyer, behind all of which there is always the law, inevitably.

There is, in effect, the work of implied layering here – implied only inasmuch as every surface suggests something beneath, below or behind it; but once passed, that surface gives way to yet another surface. The spatial and architectural image moves from outside to inside, as we travel with Pip through the areas of the *topos*, shifting through the initial perceptions of gloom, dirt, lack, bareness and neglect. There is an entire house beyond the hall and the three rooms employed by Jaggers, but this is as little seen as it is employed. In contrast, the table is 'comfortably laid', and there is a 'capacious' dumb-waiter, with four dishes of fruit alongside a number of bottles and decanters. Four? Is there an opulence, a hint of decadence or exoticism in such a display of fruit? It is impossible to know, but the perception of the detail remains none the less. It remains as a small enigma of representation, not unlike what appear to be oranges (or are they apricots?) on the cabinet top and window ledge in the Arnolfini Portrait (1434) by Jan Van Eyck, the significance of which is in the undecidability concerning whether such details are symbolic. The house appearing to be 'stately', the furniture offers an echo in its solidity, 'good', in Pip's assessment, like the lawyer's watch-chain. There is no waste, no silver (of course) in the service, and nothing 'merely ornamental'. The books are of a piece, or a family at least, being solely concerned with the law, criminality, justice, legislature and so forth. Finally, Jaggers's work table, which reproduces the workplace in the domestic scene, reiterates the functionality of the dumb-waiter. In effect, this is a portrait: the Jaggers Portrait, by Philip Pirrip, exact date unknown. A Portrait of the Lawyer, by a Young Man.

All of which gives me to ask, what is this place? What kind of place, and what kind of a portrait, are these? If, as Marc Augé asserts, following the work of Jean Starobinski and Jean Baudrillard on modernity, a 'place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity' (Augé 1995, 77), what precisely is given here? All relation refers to Jaggers: the 'historical', such as it is, is inscribed in the books that make up Jaggers's library, the identity of place determined by the occupant. The house – and the image – is nothing so much as a rhetorical and tropological site, in which the paucity of descriptive sustain serves in the manner of phenomenological reduction, leaving everything as a mystery, undecidable as to symbolism beyond the obvious – is there anything beyond the obvious here? How could we tell, how do we know? – and all the more immediately before the reader as a result. Pip's gaze and Pip's narrative, the consciousness which these two constitute, read place as identity, but not the identity of *topos*. There is little in the way of identity for the house. However, its very anonymity, its secrecy and being enclosed on itself serves as a palimpsest of Jaggers, in much the same manner as his office does for Pip, on Pip's first encounter with the lawyer (*GE* 164–5). The difference between the two experiences for Pip is that the first affords much greater play of the imagination.

Note how the recurrence of tropes occurs. The parallelism between seemingly distinct phenomena informs the movement through the passage, into the house and through to the different aspects of the room. The further we follow Pip, the closer we observe, after him; we learn only what has already been conveyed. Passing one surface, one layer of description, we find another, the purpose of which is to keep us from moving any deeper into the identity or meaning of either the house or Jaggers, as I have already intimated. The very move from house front to room, to dinner, to bookcase, to work table, is one of the avoidance of choices, for each move results only in another impenetrable surface. The house is 'stately', each room, the image of the others, being dark and brown; the dinner table is 'comfortably laid', the furniture 'solid and good', reminiscent (once again) of the watch-chain. The office is brought home. Wherever Jaggers is, everything is the same, all is 'under his own hand'. In one sense, then, as I have already remarked, Pip's imagination is defeated, even though he does observe, somewhat enigmatically, that he knows what kind of loops the carved garlands on the hall panels resemble.

What does this all have to do with London, though? A detour is necessary, in order to arrive at our destination; if, as Paul de Man has commented, literary language is definable as a 'nonconvergence between the stated meaning and its understanding', then reading, as de Man

continues, has to 'begin in this unstable commixture of literalism and suspicion' (1979, 57–8). Pip's presentation of the lawyer's dwelling – and, we speculate, the lawyer also – gives to us little more than the bare scene, and yet it is because of this relative poverty of interpretation that we should be suspicious of Pip's rather banal observations. There are already two readings at work here, if not more. There is – there *was* – Pip's initial perception; this has then been filtered through his memory, to appear in the form of the reading / writing, the composition or portrait we have before us, poised carefully between seemingly minimal interpretation and the odd moment of departure into embellishment. Following in the wake of these, we find ourselves in the position of the first Pip, seeing through the hindsight of the second. Thus far, the motion of the reading has been one of entry, interiorisation and increasing attention to detail, albeit attention without embellishment, rather than taking in the whole, but all the while assuming association, relation and identity, so as to appear to give meaning to place, even as other significations appear suspended, through a speculative symbolism that in no way can be confirmed – *or denied*. Pip, as subject, is not positioning himself, though, at least not directly. It may be that a reading of Pip's subjectivity is available from the manner of his narrating self's representation of his narrated self's perceptions. Interestingly, though, the reading has tended towards an analogical excavation of the meaning of Mr Jaggers. Mr Jaggers is aligned with the house, the house an image of the lawyer, giving little away, having the promise of sequestered spaces, abstract because occluded and definable only in their impenetrability.

To approach this problem in representation differently, if the office can be transposed on to the home; if each trope is a figure for every other, all folded on to one another through the implication of iterability; if Mr Jaggers's hand is on everything, in control, and everything thereby remains solid, stable, never merely ornamental but, at bottom, useful, serving a purpose within a system of purposes; then Pip's reading cannot enter the penetralia, either of the house or Jaggers, but must live on the surfaces, each supplementing the others, to come back to this point. Moving out from the hand, the table, the dumb-waiter, the rooms, the hall, the house, there is the city, or a secret city at least, the city of the law, before which Pip must always remain; as with every reader, Pip is always before the law. There is here the hint of a London, not available, to which one never has access. Beyond fantasy, story-telling, the flights of the imagination that colour Pip's imagination in his reading of situations, events and experiences, there is a world for which he never comes to terms. Jaggers is the guardian of that world; gatekeeper and symbol, his house thus the most typical. Pip, perhaps the most typical

reader in the world, has to stay before what is given. The world for Pip is a mystery not to be solved, of which London is the greatest enigma, Jaggers its representative. But this is not a limit of Pip's. Rather, his inability to perceive beyond what is shown is typical of us all, and in this he is reminiscent, however accidentally, of no one so much as the figure of the man from the country who comes seeking the law, who waits all his life but who cannot get past the first doorkeeper, in Kafka's parable, *Vor dem Gesetz*.

Besides showing what is there, this passage offers its effect, that effect being occlusion, the hidden, the absent and silent, or rather all that cannot be said, all that remains the other side of narration. Addressing Pip's mediated re-presentation and returning to the bareness of the scene, it has to be suggested that here is a narrative of *topos* which is reduced to absolute effect: not a pure phenomenality perhaps, but, in its reduction, what is given to Pip, and so to us, is the 'bracketing of [the phenomena's] mundane beingness and reality' (Marion 2002b, 52). Pip is confronted, as are we, with an absolute and unconditional requirement that we accept what there is, as the assertion of a universal authority, given the forms of Jaggers and his house. Thus we remain before a mystery, a conundrum not to be solved. Indeed, the enigma of place must remain in place, a problem not to be solved but maintained. This is the categorical imperative, if you will, to which Pip is subject. In what is seemingly the most direct re-presentation, the most allusive expression might be heard. For '[i]mage, the equivocity of language, and metaphor, all escort and authorize the saying of the True' (Badiou 2008, 38). The house in Gerrard Street is an analogue for Jaggers, Jaggers, the analogue of the city's impenetrability. Both are analogues that speak enigmatically because allusively, but always with the authority and truth of the law, of the ultimate inaccessibility of the meaning of London as a whole. All that is perceived, all that is shown, is *there* before the subject, in its givenness. There is thus nothing other; this remains before the subject, who remains before the place in which he finds himself, seeing but not understanding. No Ariadne will appear to solve the riddle of London's labyrinth, which the Dickens-machine so effectively constructs.