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Dickens's London

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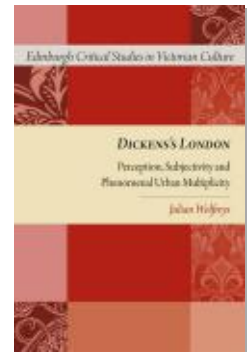
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Krook's • by Lincoln's Inn

Bleak House

I was . . . sufficiently curious about London, to think it a good idea on the part of Miss Jellyby when she proposed that we should go out for a walk.

[. . .]

. . . I admired the long successions and varieties of streets, the quantity of people already going to and fro, the number of vehicles passing and repassing, the busy preparations in the setting forth of shop windows and the sweeping out of shops, and the extraordinary creatures in rags, secretly groping among the swept-out rubbish for pins and other refuse.

[. . .]

Slipping us out at a little side gate, the old lady stopped most unexpectedly in a narrow back street, part of some courts and lanes immediately outside the wall of the inn, and said, 'This is my lodging. Pray walk up!'

She had stopped at a shop, over which was written, KROOK, RAG AND BOTTLE WAREHOUSE. Also, in long thin letters, KROOK, DEALER IN MARINE STORES. In one part of the window was a picture of a red paper mill, at which a cart was unloading a quantity of sacks of old rags. In another, was the inscription, BONES BOUGHT. In another, KITCHEN STUFF BOUGHT. In another, OLD IRON BOUGHT. In another, LADIES' AND GENTLEMENS' WARDROBES BOUGHT. Everything seemed to be bought, and nothing to be sold there. In all parts of the window, were quantities of dirty bottles, medicine bottles, ginger-beer and soda-water bottles, pickle bottles, wine bottles, ink bottles: I am reminded by mentioning the latter, that the shop had, in several particulars, the air of being in a legal neighbourhood, and of being, as it were, a dirty hanger-on and disowned relation of the law. There were a great many ink bottles. There was a little tottering bench of shabby old volumes, some outside the door, labelled 'Law Books, all at 9d.' Some of the inscriptions I have enumerated were written in law-hand, like the papers I had seen at Kenge and Carboy's office, and the letters I had so long received from the firm. Among them was one, in the same writing, having nothing to do with the business of the shop, but announcing that a respectable man aged forty-five wanted engrossing or copying to execute with neatness and dispatch: Address to Nemo, care of Mr Krook, within. There were several second-hand bags, blue and red, hanging up. A little way within the shop-door, lay heaps of old crackled parchment scrolls, and discoloured and dog's-eared

law papers. I could have fancied that all the rusty keys, of which there must have been hundreds huddled together as old iron, had once belonged to doors of rooms, or strong chests in lawyers' offices. The litter of rags tumbled partly into and partly out of a one-legged wooden scale, hanging without any counterpoise from a beam, might have been counsellors' bands and gowns torn up. One had only to fancy . . . that yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked very clean, were the bones of clients, to make the picture complete.

As it was still foggy and dark, and the shop was blinded besides by the wall of Lincoln's Inn, intercepting the light within a couple of yards, we should not have seen much but for a lighted lantern that an old man in spectacles and a hairy cap was carrying about in the shop. Turning towards the door, he now caught sight of us. He was short, cadaverous, and the breath issuing in visible smoke from his mouth, as if he were on fire within. His throat, chin, and eyebrows, were so frosted with white hairs, and so gnarled with veins and puckered skin, that he looked, from his breast upward, like some old root in a fall of snow. (*BH* 63, 66, 67–8)

Reading / writing London opens the fixed, the stable identity, or any objective assumption thereof, to a question concerning what is seen, the modality in which it is given visibility through the response of the subject, and a concomitant, subjective destabilisation, leading to that 'reduction' through subjective perception. The possible apprehension of an urban abyss is maintained at a distance through the registration of experience in response to phenomena, which is detailed, iterable in its rhythms, syntax, grammar and tropic play, and which, as we have had occasion to observe elsewhere, is informed by a proximity in the re-presentation of the trace. The syntax of Krook's window is thus governed, obviously, by Esther Summerson's being both subject of the vision, the subject for whom the window comes to be visible in this particular way, and no other, and the narrating subject, for whom the experience and perception has now been translated into the syntax that follows in the wake of experience, thereby reiterating the visible 'order' of presentation.

This is Esther's first excursion on foot in London in *Bleak House*. Hitherto, she had seen the city only as a succession of 'vignettes' through a carriage window, stereotypes or the slides of a magic lantern show or phantasmagoria. In moving on foot, Esther enters into the flow of the city, wherein matters are no longer presented *in extremis*, in a 'distracting state of confusion' (*BH* 42) tending towards a collective loss of the senses, as Esther supposes, but instead are apprehended with 'admiration' as a long succession of crowds defined by the double motion of moving 'to and fro' and in the 'passing and re-passing' of the vehicles. Whether defined as pedestrians or passengers, Esther encounters and experiences the anonymous urban mass initially as being a collective,

already underway. Movement is of the initial perception of London (recall Nicholas Nickleby's arrival with Smike), motion being the quality of both those subjects moving about but also as a condition of place, that which is given to the senses, that which shows itself. Even the 'extraordinary creatures in rags' are perceived to be active.

Happening to meet Esther, Caddy, Richard and Ada, Miss Flite introduces Esther to the window of Krook's shop. The initial impression of the shop front and its windows conveyed by Esther, and that which leaves its trace most insistently on her memory, is of writing, architecture transformed into text. The capitals of the inscriptions tend towards a blurring rather than a clarification of vision, while the general initial sense being conveyed is that of the affirmation of transaction, through the reiteration of the term *bought*. The shop front, its signs, its windows filled with signs, and the objects appearing in the windows present a disparate, not to say heterogeneous collection, a concatenation of signs to be read, which is precisely what Esther attempts to do. Rendered passive, motionless, by the plenitude of phenomena, Esther cannot but seek to read. The experience of the window is thus analogous with the experience of reading London for its new subject. In the perception there is sense to be made, at the local, or perhaps *microlocal* level, whereby, for the subject, syntax, topological geometry and architecture bring together a focus on one location in a more generalised space, which offers itself as the apprehensible figure for that which is only indirectly available to the imagination; but the enormity and complexity, the multiplicities coming together in the constellated image, promise to overwhelm the senses. Krook's shop is perceived and received as both singular and manifold, having a topology, the coherence of which relies not on a logic but on the subject's perception of the whole. Perception and re-presentation are, in effect, *of* the world, inasmuch as, in giving itself to the subject, the window serves to disclose the subject as an extension of the world perceived and in the process of being read. And this extract is very much one of process rather than finished object; for as Esther's eye moves from sign to sign, bottle to bottle, books to papers, so too does the shop front – which is never given as a whole but only seen part by part – become available to the reader, who assumes Esther's position, becoming the subjective palimpsest of Esther's re-presentation. All observation, we may learn if we read carefully, taking note from Esther's process, is a reading, which, in turn, is also a writing, the one slightly out of time with the other, and thereby marked by that difference that makes its motion possible.

If London cannot be seen whole, this is only to reveal the limits of a certain reading, and, equally, the necessity for a different reading, a reading of difference rather than of identity. In order for such a reading

to be possible, perception has to shift its ground. We must, of necessity, begin with our experience because, as Kant has shown, the *a priori* is not knowable, as Merleau-Ponty argues, ahead of experience (1962, 220). Without knowing Kant, Esther, as the good reader, begins with experience. Unlike either of her first-person narrating counterparts, Pip and David, her impression, her perception – and hence her revelation of the authentic facticity of her being-in-the-world – begin from the very experience of the world *as* an experience of reading. More than this, Esther's patient, attentive and detailed re-presentation of the shop front before her serves to project Esther as being always in a process of self-constitution through a perceptual field which is, at once, the world of London in this instance and also her own world, herself, the field of vision being the field of her historicity. In this, Esther shows herself; and she shows herself, furthermore, as the figure of the London subject, the modern subject of the modern city, *par excellence*. Having suspended her initial orientation to the world of the capital, as presented in her carriage journey to Kenge and Carboys, she begins a process of reflecting on the condition of her perception through that acknowledgement of the phenomenal flow that constitutes London and its subjects. From this, she arrives before Krook's shop, which immediately presents itself as a problem and a limit: of legibility and comprehension. Before this, Esther remains still, accommodating herself to what is apprehended in the field of vision, thereby giving expression not only to her experience but also to the world as it shapes that experience. In one sense at least, it may be argued that Esther is the paradigmatic modern London subject. Like those strangers, walkers, travellers and other anonymous *flâneurs*, Esther embodies, if not the 'painter', then at least the reader and writer, the interpreter of modern life.

In part, Esther's ability to read is grounded in memory, the memory of letters from Kenge and Carboy's, and it is this that carries over into her perception of Krook's in the enumeration, as she describes it, of various inscriptions, presented in 'law-hand'. Esther finds herself involved, in her relation to place which is seen from within as also a temporal relation, concerned with learning how to read and to discern modes and forms of textual presentation, assuming to herself, her subjectivity a disposition and comprehension that neither makes greater claims, nor aims to imply meanings larger than those at hand. In this – a resistance to attempt a movement beyond what is *there* for the subject – Esther's reading, so inescapably the affirmation through her perception of her being involved in – 'engrossed', as it were, in and by – the world, she disappears, save for the rhythm of her narration, becoming in the process the place on which the shop front, its window, its signs, the bottles and

books, become written and imagined, projected in the place of Esther, for the reader of the text of Dickens to receive. As I have suggested elsewhere, in this re-presentation, Esther's narrative becomes the window, a translation of its traces at least, the window becoming narrative and narration. To figure each element is to compose the shop window, to trace for the reader form and vision, as the eye alights as if by chance, on the multiple and heterogeneous phenomena (Wolfreys 1998, 148). Esther's eye moves over the window, its rhythm of observation the 'rhythm of subjectivity' (Louvel 2011, 174). Such rhythmic play dances between writing and image, subsuming both in its general motion whereby the 'movement in space and language' finds itself reiterated as a 'movement of approximation both in perception and in knowledge' (Louvel 2011, 175). Subjectivity, given 'voice' through the rhythm of the eye – as the optical, though invisible analogy for the verbal 'I' – marks the place 'materializing the exchange which keeps having to be renegotiated' (Louvel 2011, 175) in a disposition of subject. This renegotiation introduces into the rhythm a temporal flux as well as a spatial motion that completes the rhythm, seen 'as a moving and fluid form . . . [given] in a syncopation of the visible' (Louvel 2011, 175).

Esther's 'vision' is, then, in addition, a picture, as well as an interpretation. If, as Edward Said observes, writing 'cannot represent the visible' it can 'move toward the visible' (1983, 101); or, as with this interpolated vision of Esther's, it can bring the visible to us, however much a phantasm the 'picture' may be. In doing so, it erases the metaphoricity implicit in the Horatian truism, *ut picture poesis*. Furthermore, Esther's vision reminds us, *contra* Said, that, in the words of Roland Barthes, '[a]ll literary descriptions are *sights*' (1970, 61).²⁶ It is at once a reading / writing of the image, and a pictorialisation of verbal text, in between which her subjectivity mediates between the two, making both known. Between Krook's signs and his bottles, his mouldy books and the uncollected but heaped papers, there is in play the motion between image and word, the visual and the verbal text. What Esther's reading and revelation of the world gives us to apprehend is that, on the one hand, the text of the world and the world of the text are interchangeable, the one is the other, albeit in an exchanged, re-presented form; on other hand, the verbal, legible, written text presents images for deciphering, the pictorial text presents an image remaining to be read. Esther's reading become writing become image of the shop front, with Esther before the shop front, in turn becomes this image, before the reader, on the page of *Bleak House*, for us to remain still before, to look at, examine, decipher and become subsumed within. If no larger image, no transcendent reading is there, this is because there is no transcendent image, no text of

London at which one can arrive. *A priori* London is a fiction, a fantasy, the mistaken projection on to the real of textual worlds, which are found wanting, whereby London evades the reader, hiding behind the illegibility of a totality that has never existed. The *a posteriori* London is equally unavailable, having no textual equivalent that can figure it once and forever, *in toto*. It is a fantasy beyond legibility, beyond comprehension, inscription or possibility. In Esther's passage, there is London, and there, also, is the transcendent realisation of the impossibility of a transcendent, or final reading, writing or image. There is, however, the transcendent realisation that the invention of London is the invention of the subject. There is in Esther's extract the awareness that 'I can experience more things than I represent to myself, and my being is not reducible to what expressly appears to me concerning myself' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 296), and in this subject and city accommodate one another, even as the verbal and visual exchange places in the dance of perception and re-presentation.