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Dickens's London

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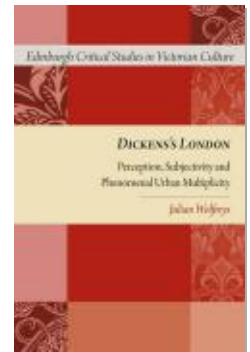
Published by Edinburgh University Press

Wolfreys, Julian.

Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity.

Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

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Melancholy • Leadenhall Street, Newgate, Lant Street, Borough, St George the Martyr

Our Mutual Friend / The Pickwick Papers / Nicholas Nickleby

A grey dusty withered evening in London city has not a hopeful aspect. The closed warehouses and offices have an air of death about them, and the national dread of colour has an air of mourning. The towers and steeples of the many house-encompassed churches, dark and dingy as the sky that seems descending on them, are no relief to the general gloom; a sun-dial on a church-wall has the look, in its useless black shade, of having failed in its business enterprise and stopped payment for ever; housekeepers and porters sweep melancholy waifs and strays of papers and pins into the kennels, and other more melancholy waifs and strays explore them, searching and stooping and poking for anything to sell. The set of humanity outward from the City is as a set of prisoners departing from gaol, and dismal Newgate seems quite as fit a stronghold for the mighty Lord Mayor as his own state-dwelling. (OMF 386)

There is a repose about Lant Street, in the Borough, which sheds a gentle melancholy upon the soul. There are always a good many houses to let in the street: it is a bye-street too, and its dullness is soothing. A house in Lant Street would not come within the denomination of a first-class residence, in the strict acceptance of the term; but it is a most desirable spot nevertheless. If a man wished to abstract himself from the world; to remove himself from within the reach of temptation; to place himself beyond the possibility of any inducement to look out of the window, we should recommend him by all means to go to Lant Street.

In this happy retreat are colonized a few clear-starchers, a sprinkling of journeymen bookbinders, one or two prison agents for the Insolvent Court, several small housekeepers who are employed in the Docks, a handful of mantua-makers, and a seasoning of jobbing tailors. The majority of the inhabitants either direct their energies to the letting of furnished apartments, or devote themselves to the healthful and invigorating pursuit of mangling. The chief features in the still life of the street, are green shutters, lodging-bills, brass door-plates, and bell-handles; the principal specimens of animated nature, the pot-boy, the muffin youth, and the baked-potato man. The population is migratory, usually disappearing on the verge of quarter-day, and generally by night. His Majesty's revenues are seldom collected in this happy

valley, the rents are dubious, and the water communication is very frequently cut off. (PP 417)

The square in which the counting-house of the brothers Cheeryble was situated, although it might not wholly realise the very sanguine expectations which a stranger would be disposed to form on hearing the fervent encomiums bestowed upon it by Tim Linkinwater, was, nevertheless, a sufficiently desirable nook in the heart of a busy town like London, and one which occupied a high place in the affectionate remembrances of several grave persons domiciled in the neighbourhood, whose recollections, however, dated from a much more recent period, and whose attachment to the spot was far less absorbing, than were the recollections and attachment of the enthusiastic Tim.

And let not those whose eyes have been accustomed to the aristocratic gravity of Grosvenor Square and Hanover Square, the dowager barrenness and frigidity of Fitzroy Square, or the gravel walks and garden seats of the Squares of Russell and Euston, suppose that the affections of Tim Linkinwater, or the inferior lovers of this particular locality, had been awakened and kept alive by any refreshing associations with leaves, however dingy, or grass, however bare and thin. The city square has no enclosure, save the lamp-post in the middle: and no grass, but the weeds which spring up round its base. It is a quiet, little-frequented, retired spot, favourable to melancholy and contemplation, and appointments of long-waiting; and up and down its every side the Appointed saunters idly by the hour together wakening the echoes with the monotonous sound of his footsteps on the smooth worn stones, and counting, first the windows, and then the very bricks of the tall silent houses that hem him round about. In winter-time, the snow will linger there, long after it has melted from the busy streets and highways. The summer's sun holds it in some respect, and while he darts his cheerful rays sparingly into the square, keeps his fiery heat and glare for noisier and less-imposing precincts. It is so quiet, that you can almost hear the ticking of your own watch when you stop to cool in its refreshing atmosphere. There is a distant hum—of coaches, not of insects—but no other sound disturbs the stillness of the square. The ticket porter leans idly against the post at the corner: comfortably warm, but not hot, although the day is broiling. His white apron flaps languidly in the air, his head gradually droops upon his breast, he takes very long winks with both eyes at once; even he is unable to withstand the soporific influence of the place, and is gradually falling asleep. (NN 552–3)

London and the experience of London are, if not wholly inseparable, then inescapably bound one within the other, to the extent that it can be difficult to discern where melancholy is a condition of the city's disposition or the perception of its subject, as that perception's modality of giving itself. In the three extracts here, the atrabilious phenomena of the city present themselves in markedly different ways. There are distinct modalities of melancholia, which manifest themselves in human attitude, as the sensible apprehension of the urban effect on the 'soul', and in the

forms of architectural and topographic constitution aiding the reflective exploration of melancholy. Melancholy is related to retirement, repose, resignation, stillness, ennui; but also, it is the manifest and determining phenomenal condition of waifs and strays. The phenomena of melancholy are, therefore, discernible in others, in the situation or circumstance, both as the expression of out-of-the-way and neglected spaces, and as one sensible orientation of the narrator's perception, in response to that which presents itself, appearing before him. Melancholia, it might be said, gives expression to the numinous, not in the aspect of *mysterium tremendum*, that force which causes fear and trembling, but in the perception and apprehension of a *mysterium fascinans*, the capability of attracting or fascinating. Through the examples of reflective melancholy that informs the image of certain parts of the city, the condition of contemplation and meditation invoked is suggestive of a mode of communion with whatever is felt to be wholly other in London, but which is neither revealed nor capable of direct perception, only analogical apprehension, that process by which the subject makes sense of the sensate apprehension through pursuing a relation with ideas already understood.

In the passage from *Our Mutual Friend*, two 'types' of waifs and strays are melancholy: material and human. A relation between the two is traced in the latter observed searching through the former. However, it is in the paper and pins' abandonment and random motion caused by the grey and dusty wind circulating through Leadenhall Street that lies our perception of that which gives to us that understanding of the human 'detritus' of the city its abject quality. The paper and pins are property cast away, 'property' being in legal discourse that which is thrown away, found by chance and unclaimed. As the eye moves over the scene, though, it also chances on the human figures searching through their material counterparts, as so many unclaimed, discarded 'products' of this particular London. While the human examples may manifest signs of melancholy to the eye, this being a condition of their appearance, the other windswept 'property' of the street can have no such constitution, melancholy here being that phenomenon apprehended by the subject. In this moment of the passively directed eye, we see the establishment of 'relations between differences' (Arsic 2003, 13), relations in the absence of relation, which is crucial to the apprehension of the modern city, and equally to the constitution of the modern urban subject, if subjectivity is to find its place within London. The difference without relation is formed through the copula of the perceiving subject, as this makes itself known through the iterability that marks the resemblance as one. Such movement of the 'eye', which reads, and which, in its wake, trails the conscious reflection of writing as what it sees, gathers together, within

the location of the experience, the finite phenomena and objects; and in doing so, there is mapped that sense of relation and connectedness through the sensory awareness of melancholy.

Here is the work of urban re-presentation unveiled, as the materiality of the text traces and gives phenomenal form to the materiality of the city, as this comes to be revealed in turn through that reading / writing of eye / consciousness. Melancholy is that which focuses and serves as the sensate copula of the image; it informs, and is mediated by, greyness and dustiness of that 'withered evening' in London, to which there is no 'hopeful aspect'. This last word doubles itself, figuring both that which appears to perception, and also that which the subject considers; it signifies an appearance or quality, and a disposition, a face directed towards the subject's gaze. It is what looks back at one, that which captures one's attention, and that towards which one turns one's eye. Melancholia is anticipated also in that 'air of death', that 'air of mourning'. Once more, *air* is a doubled and divided trope, being both the impression given by some thing, some other, and also that which is assumed in consciousness. There too, to be seen, are darkness, dinginess, failure, uselessness, the appearance of descent, and with all a dismal pall.

The melancholy of Lant Street, in the Borough, is not that of Leadenhall Street and Newgate Prison, south London being distinctly its own place, singularly other. Dickens knew Lant Street well, having lodged there in 1824, during his father's incarceration in the Marshalsea. Lant Street's qualities are those of repose and a gentle 'air' of dullness, soothing in its absence of energy or excitement. Repose is the condition of the street's presentation to the eye, and it is from this phenomenotopographic constitution, or, perhaps, 'temperament' that there arises, through the subject's perception, the apperception of the melancholy 'shed' on the spirit. From a discernible *there* to the appreciation of that which, *here*, touches one in a marked way, I find myself involved in the world, not separate from it, simply observing. The self comes to apprehend that which appears from within the present scene, experience translated into perception, in a passage from world to being, from the visible to the invisible.

As a result of this analogical apperception (the relation of non-relation between architecture and topography and the soul), the 'spot' is considered 'desirable', a 'happy retreat' and a 'happy valley'. Melancholia enables the possibility of making oneself, if not invisible, then at the very least occluded from any greater public eye. So in retreat, in repose, abstracted from urban energies in general, are Lant Street and its inhabitants that the scene is apprehended as a still life. The subject's gaze transforms the world before it into a pictorial arrangement – a particular

genre, moreover; this is, however, to conflate images if not confuse them, for equally, in its arrangement of workers and inhabitants, in the observed pursuit of mangling, and in this instance of *enargia*, the reader finds him- or herself before a textual example of genre painting, being clearly a scene of everyday life, uninvolved in all but the most minimal narrative interest.

It is through the phenomenon of melancholy, and in that double register, of external scene and conscious reflection, that the image-text as example and illustration of *enargia* is grounded. Though not a material property, melancholy is of the material and immaterial, inextricably; it gives to the image and the reading of place its animation, such as it is. As such, it gives to the image and its re-presentation that sense of 'lustre', which, according to George Puttenham, in *The Arte of English Poesie*, is a constituent element of *enargia* (1968, 119). Though in repose, though gentle, the image of quotidian existence in a bystreet of the Borough is vividly drawn nevertheless. That this is an example of *enargia* – indeed, that many of the images of London in the text of Dickens may be considered as at once examples of iconotexts and yet instances of *enargia* or *hypotyposis* – is understood if we appreciate fully the work rhetorically in the passage in its uniting the 'outward shew . . . upon the matter with wordes' and the 'sence of such words . . . inwardly working a stirre to the mynde'. Thus the image performs rhetorically that which, in its figurative trace of the play of phenomena, opens access from place to subjectivity, already acknowledged. Such 'ornament poetically', as Puttenham calls it, is what creates the efficacy of such passages for us; we stand before the image, standing in for the narrating subject, becoming that subjectivity momentarily, or perhaps coming to have that subjectivity occupy us, becoming haunted in turn by the re-presentation of the perception of place.

The image does not exist in the same sense as the thing, of course. The former remains as phantasm, the latter as material object. However, as the three passages treating of melancholy give us to reflect through the acknowledged relation constituted through the fictive and phantasmal 'eye' of an equally phantasmal 'subject' – and by which, in turn, the apparition of place makes itself felt both *for* and *in* us, here, appearance produces the impression that we are as much 'in' that world as it comes to be 'in us', as Merleau-Ponty suggests (1968, 158). The motif of vision, of visibility and of the optical possibility as that which the written text mediates is therefore more than merely a rhetorical device. It serves to direct our reading of the city as if mediated through a visual modality without which the textual presentation cannot return, with that immediacy of involvement. Reliant on the illusion of visual elements, imitations

of the material, the architectural, topographical, illumination or lack thereof, and so forth, the textual image of place is equally dependent on the play of phenomena, conveyed in particular verbal tropes, such as 'melancholy'. Writing the city thus directs the reader to look where we do not; that is to say, it works on the reading subject to make him or her conscious of what takes place in our conventional or habitual experience of the world. In those suspensions of narrative, in order that one's vision may be redirected, there is a concomitant phenomenological suspension of habit, a bracketing of our unthinking relation to reality.

Thus, the final passage, from *Nicholas Nickleby*, in which the narrator directs the sight of others from the outset, moving the expectations of sight from the grand squares of London to 'this particular locality'; removed from the West End and London's more upmarket nooks, the reader is directed to the City square, both in particular and in general. The 'stranger' in the Dickensian text, the figure who often stands to look at the city, and through whom the effect of place on its subject is imagined, appears briefly, a marginal focal point, but also that figure through which we come to see, and to see, moreover, in a manner that is perhaps somewhat disappointed. Disappointment might be said to arise as a result of the disparity between Tim Linkinwater's 'fervent encomiums' and the 'sanguine expectations' of the stranger, which are not 'wholly realize[d]', when presented with the reality, for which Tim's words stand in as subjective projection.

In the registration of this gap, we might read the singularity of place, and the wholly subjective turn of mind in re-presentation by which that singularity comes to be conveyed. London can only be known, specific places throughout the capital can only be perceived authentically, if felt. The experience that inscribes the city in the subject and the subject in the city is that which only returns, if at all, in the mnemotechnic work of the image-text that evokes the very thing by which it has been marked: 'affectionate remembrances', 'recollections' and, thereby, 'attachment'. All else is mere surface detail, historical or social fact. The city only assumes its force, its singularity, through the realisation of a subjectivity as singular as its own.

The City square is presented principally in negative comparison, therefore, through what is absent, at least with regard to the models already advertised, but also implicitly in the disappointed perception of the urban 'stranger' – indeed, the eyes 'accustomed' to the general leafiness of Fitzrovia, Mayfair and Bloomsbury. The distinction made between districts and their perception is not insignificant, and serves in part to explain the impossibility of knowing or representing London *in toto*. Given that there is nothing of the residential square conventionally

understood to be seen, what does the eye of the stranger, or that other *flâneur* observed, the 'Appointed', who 'saunters idly by the hour', see exactly? That the square has little traffic, is quiet and retired as a consequence. In these qualities, it lends itself to melancholy, reflection and waiting. The City square is a place defined by the implied lack of extremes of condition, all being once more silent, or if not, then informed only by a 'distant hum'. The melancholy disposition is here allied implicitly with languidness and a propensity towards sleep, as imagined in the figure of the idle ticket porter, in whom, in turn, this condition is a result of the influence of place. Melancholy, idleness, silence and quiet, languid motion, lingering snow, refreshment, sauntering perambulation: in effect, one is given to see little, unless *seeing* is understood as insightful perception into the concatenated phenomena of place, which, through the marking of the yearly cycle, are assumed to define the square. The visible world appears largely, if not solely, then, through the association in the mind's eye of all that is invisible, but which touches the subject all the more intimately for that. Through that melancholy and contemplation, encouraged in the passage by languid heat and quiet, we come to interrogate 'our experience precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves . . . if only in order to see these margins of presence', through fixing our perception on 'what is apparently *given* to us' in the absence of all else (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 159).