# Dickens's London

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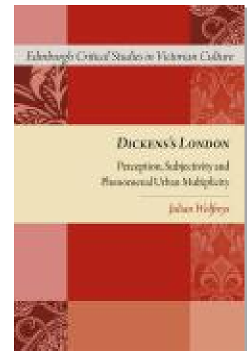


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# Quiet • Soho Square, Lincoln's Inn Fields, Old Square

*Bleak House*

At last we came to Soho Square, where Caddy Jellyby had appointed to wait for me, as a quiet place in the neighbourhood of Newman Street. (*BH* 373)

We drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that were ever seen in the world (I thought) and in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how people kept their senses, until we passed into sudden quietude under an old gateway and drove on through a silent square until we came to an odd nook in a corner, where there was an entrance up a steep, broad flight of stairs, like an entrance to a church. (*BH* 42–3)

Here [in Lincoln's Inn Fields], in a large house, formerly a house of state, lives Mr Tulkinghorn. It is let off in sets of chambers now, and in those shrunken fragments of its greatness, lawyers lie like maggots in nuts. But its roomy staircases, passages, and antechambers still remain; and even its painted ceilings, where Allegory, in Roman helmet and celestial linen, sprawls among balustrades and pillars, flowers, clouds, and big-legged boys, and makes the head ache—as would seem to be Allegory's object always, more or less. Here, among his many boxes labelled with transcendent names, lives Mr Tulkinghorn, when not speechlessly at home in country-houses where the great ones of the earth are bored to death. Here he is to-day, quiet at his table. An oyster of the old school, whom nobody can open.

Like as he is to look at, so is his apartment in the dusk of the present afternoon. Rusty, out of date, withdrawing from attention, able to afford it. Heavy, broad-backed, old-fashioned, mahogany and horse-hair chairs, not easily lifted; obsolete tables with spindle-legs and dusty baize covers; presentation prints of the holders of great titles in the last generation or the last but one, environ him. A thick and dingy Turkey-carpet muffles the floor where he sits, attended by two candles in old-fashioned silver candlesticks that give a very insufficient light to his large room. The titles on the backs of his books have retired into the binding; everything that can have a lock has got one; no key is visible. [. . .]

Here, beneath the painted ceiling, with foreshortened Allegory staring down at his intrusion as if it meant to swoop upon him, and he cutting it dead, Mr Tulkinghorn has at once his house and office. (*BH* 158–9)

He passes out into the streets and walks on, with his hands behind him, under the shadow of the lofty houses, many of whose mysteries, difficulties, mortgages, delicate affairs of all kinds, are treasured up within his old black satin waistcoat. He is in the confidence of the very bricks and mortar. The high chimney-stacks telegraph family secrets to him. Yet there is not a voice in a mile of them to whisper, 'Don't go home!'

Through the stir and motion of the commoner streets; through the roar and jar of many vehicles, many feet, many voices; with the blazing shop-lights lighting him on, the west wind blowing him on, and the crowd pressing him on, he is pitilessly urged upon his way, and nothing meets him murmuring, 'Don't go home!' Arrived at last in his dull room to light his candles, and look round and up, and see the Roman pointing from the ceiling, there is no new significance in the Roman's hand tonight or in the flutter of the attendant groups to give him the late warning, 'Don't come here!'

It is a moonlight night; but the moon, being past the full, is only now rising over the great wilderness of London. [. . .]

A fine night, and a bright large moon, and multitudes of stars. Mr. Tulkinghorn, in repairing to his cellar and in opening and shutting those resounding doors, has to cross a little prison-like yard. He looks up casually, thinking what a fine night, what a bright large moon, what multitudes of stars! A quiet night, too.

A very quiet night. When the moon shines very brilliantly, a solitude and stillness seem to proceed from her, that influence even crowded places full of life. Not only is it a still night on dusty high roads and on hill-summits, whence a wide expanse of country may be seen in repose, quieter and quieter as it spreads away into a fringe of trees against the sky with the grey ghost of a bloom upon them; not only is it a still night in gardens and in woods, and on the river where the water-meadows are fresh and green, and the stream sparkles on among pleasant islands, murmuring weirs, and whispering rushes; not only does the stillness attend it as it flows where houses cluster thick, where many bridges are reflected in it, where wharves and shipping make it black and awful, where it winds from these disfigurements through marshes whose grim beacons stand like skeletons washed ashore, where it expands through the bolder region of rising grounds, rich in corn-field windmill and steeple, and where it mingles with the ever-heaving sea; not only is it a still night on the deep, and on the shore where the watcher stands to see the ship with her spread wings cross the path of light that appears to be presented to only him; but even on this stranger's wilderness of London there is some rest. Its steeples and towers and its one great dome grow more ethereal; its smoky housetops lose their grossness in the pale effulgence; the noises that arise from the streets are fewer and are softened, and the footsteps on the pavements pass more tranquilly away. In these fields of Mr Tulkinghorn's inhabiting, where the shepherds play on Chancery pipes that have no stop, and keep their sheep in the fold by hook and by crook until they have shorn them exceeding close, every noise is merged, this moonlight night, into a distant ringing hum, as if the city were a vast glass, vibrating.

What's that? Who fired a gun or pistol? Where was it?

The few foot-passengers start, stop, and stare about them. Some windows and doors are opened, and people come out to look. It was a loud report and

> echoed and rattled heavily. It shook one house, or so a man says who was passing. It has aroused all the dogs in the neighbourhood, who bark vehemently. Terrified cats scamper across the road. While the dogs are yet barking and howling—there is one dog howling like a demon—the church-clocks, as if they were startled too, begin to strike. The hum from the streets, likewise, seems to swell into a shout. But it is soon over. Before the last clock begins to strike ten, there is a lull. When it has ceased, the fine night, the bright large moon, and multitudes of stars, are left at peace again.
>
> Has Mr Tulkinghorn been disturbed? His windows are dark and quiet, and his door is shut. (*BH* 747–50)

Have you ever paused to consider how *quiet* a novel *Bleak House* is, its complex narrative threads resulting in a nuanced, complex web of diverse, but muted resonances?

No one has, to my knowledge, written or considered a phenomenology of quiet; less still has there been a study of quiet in relation to either space or place, or that which passes between space, place and subject. Yet there it is, *there* in places in the city, quiet gives itself; not an 'it', a 'thing', barely this liminal quality, immeasurable save for its taking place, as and between gradations of noise, sound and silence: quiet remains; it remains to arrive, and so to define. Opening its taking place, quiet enfolds, gives the disposition of phenomena to the world, to be experienced by the subject in such a manner that the perception of quiet can always become a determining quality or disposition of subjectivity. Though mentioned neither in Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802' nor Arnold's 'Dover Beach', published in 1867, quiet is there, belonging to place and time, whether morning or evening, but also to the calm and repose of the subject – until, of course, for Arnold at least, beneath the susurration of the waves there are heard the note of sadness, the melancholy roar, the confused alarms, and clash of armies. Beneath the quiet, below the repose, there is to be imagined the returning tumult. Quiet is escape or retreat, a hide, but it also is a defence, a bulwark, a dam already cracked.

Phenomenological reduction being, as Renaud Barbaras suggests, the 'suspension of natural attitude' revealing to consciousness the 'world's existence' as 'a unique spatiotemporal reality subsisting in self', which suspends the thought of existence 'so as to allow an inquiry into its sense of being' that comes in turn to question the 'very structure of . . . appearance' (Barbaras 2006, 44); then, we can suggest, quiet might be apprehended as the *sine qua non* of such a reduction. With that, to continue, it may be taken equally as the *sine qua non* of such a moment of *époché*, and consequently the revelation of the structure of appearing. Where the text of Dickens suspends narrative – principally, though not

exclusively, through the shift to present tense in order that the presentation of place become all the more immediate, closely perceived, and felt by the reader – there, in that suspension is the reduction given to be read, London revealing itself through the mediation of the writer in an authentic disposition for the subject involved in that spatiotemporal reality, and the narrated mnemotechnic of its presentation. Quietness, quietude, quiet places: these are found, they give themselves everywhere in London, throughout the text of Dickens, in the midst of noise, confusion, within, hidden from, physical and phenomenal tumult, a world of motion, auscultation, and other sensory assaults, such as the press and imagined overflow of crowds, masses, the throng.

Although the notion of quiet has come to signify the absence, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) has it, of excessive motion, noise or bustle, yet the word's earlier connotations bespeak freedom from agitation, peace of mind, rest or repose, whether physical or emotional, release from work. Quiet can define, or at least determine, the mode of givenness for a particular location, at a certain moment in the day or night, simply through its being noted. Quiet is not silence, not quite. The world remains, as if with the immanence of a roar, not yet the other side of silence, at the borders between quiet and noise, quiet and disquiet, repose and dis-ease. Quiet is also the phenomena, it is that which 'shows' itself in its givenness, as, on the one hand, a quality of place or what takes place (such as the passage through a site, or the presentation of the subject in a specific locus), or, on the other hand, as that which shows itself in a person, often in an echo, or as a response to the quiet that is given, which is found. Passing from place to subject, mediated by subjective perception at a given moment, in the experience of that quiet location, quiet is that which comes to consciousness as well as being a condition of that consciousness. Moreover, quiet is that modality of *époché*'s occasion in consciousness and in the re-presentation of experience and perception, whereby the phenomena of the text, figural or literal, are 'bracketed', as Husserl terms the process, and examined as they are, for every image in a text is always the constellated presentation of the traces of phenomena revealing the unity of a consciousness, and the 'unique spatiotemporal reality subsisting in self'. That the subject is subject to quiet as a condition of conscious reflection as well as a conscious awareness of the disposition of the world in consciousness makes apparent Merleau-Ponty's insistence, *contra* Husserl's 'naïve' phenomenology (the insistence on the possibility of eidetic reduction so as to give access to the essences of any phenomenon), that 'essence proceeds from experience and never absorbs it completely' (Barbaras 2006, 45).

This is noted in the first passage above. Soho Square is marked off in

Esther's perception as a quiet place, even though in the midst of London. Quiet, with solitude and stillness, marks Tulkinghorn's nocturnal passage. Quiet is of the essence to the narrative subject's experience of nocturnal London, legal London. Indeed, as Esther observes in her first experience of Kenge and Carboy's, '[e]verything was so strange—the stranger for its being night in the day-time, and the candles burning with a white flame' (*BH* 43). Legal London is *always* a nocturnal place; there is always something 'dark', to use that delightfully imprecise word. That Esther's experience and subjective impression, the memory of her initial perception, dominate here, is captured in the fact not only that the image proceeds from experience, but that, in re-presenting this, Esther finds a formal means of tracing that experience in the parallel between her 'thinking, thinking, thinking' and the fire's 'burning, burning, burning' (*BH* 44). Consciousness precedes and gives shape to the world, even as the former mirrors the latter, illuminating for the reader that inextricable relation between the interior of the subject and the interior of the office. Before this moment of suspended reflection, with its reduction of the structure of appearance, as the world is given for the subject, there is the arrival at Kenge and Carboy's. The quietude of Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, is arrived at, in distinction to the dirt and dark, and the distracting state of confusion that troubles Esther Summerson, as if entering a different realm situated between Chancery Lane and High Holborn, with its 'old gateway', 'odd nook', its 'silent square' and 'steep broad flight of stairs', giving to the lawyer's chambers the appearance of a church. The repeated insistence of age in name and definition, curiosity, silence, regularity and the sharp angle of the stair well collude in the impression of quiet, a sibilant institutional susurration running through Esther's perception, as the quiet insistence in her memory of place. This impression is confirmed elsewhere as a condition of the city. 'Stir and motion', 'roar and jar', these belong to 'commoner streets', just beyond Tulkinghorn's final walk home. To the quiet places, out of the sight of 'blazing' illumination found in the city's thoroughfares, where 'many . . . many . . . many' traces in the image the press of the people, belong secrets, affairs kept in confidence between lawyers and the architecture.

Tulkinghorn, speechless in the houses of others, quiet in his own, is the silent centre of legal secrecy and discretion. If *Bleak House* is 'ababble with speaking, writing, preaching, gabbing scribbling characters' (Budd 1994, 196), Tulkinghorn remains quietly observing – as, in her own way, does Esther. Tulkinghorn takes quietude to an entirely different level from Esther, who describes herself as 'timid and retiring' and 'retired and quiet'; she spends 'six happy, quiet years' at Greenleaf, as she remarks herself telling us twice (*BH* 28, 31, 39). Even Tulkinghorn's

bows are 'quiet' (*BH* 24). To consider briefly the initial representation of the solicitor through the configuration of his essential qualities, he is 'rusty to look at', appears as if having an aureate glow constituted through confidences which repose in him, and of which he is 'known to be the silent depository', an archive so large that it is also analogous with the greatest of mausoleums. The solicitor, perceived in different ways as a vessel of sorts, is 'of the old school', a nebulous definition, and he is 'mute, close, irresponsive to any glancing light'. A black hole, so to speak, his black, unreflective clothes are simply the outward image of Tulkinghorn. The reader is also informed that he 'never converses' unless on a professional topic, and is 'found sometimes, speechless but quite at home', in 'great country houses'. So quiet, so retired within himself is the solicitor that the subjective perception given is one tending towards undecidability, given that, in Sir Leicester's opinion, it is impossible to tell whether Tulkinghorn has 'any idea': 'It may be so, or it may not' (*BH* 23–4). Tulkinghorn's quiet is professional, confidential, discrete. His disposition toward the world is one of quietude, to pick up on Esther's word; the lawyer maintains himself in a condition of stillness and calm.

While Budd's observation that quiet is a positive quality attributed to women and is desirable from a patriarchal perspective, that the principal lawyer and the places of the law are also quiet suggests something that exceeds questions of gender. That quiet, with its close relation, silence, and, equally, with that rare quality in the novel, repose – Lady Deadlock is, from the first, disturbed by ennui, unrest, anxiety and apprehension – is in some manner associated with, or suggestively hints at, secrecy is, again, indicative of matters beyond concerns with gender. Considering the impression of Tulkinghorn from those qualities of his character already commented on, it becomes apparent that quiet is never just a simple or single quality. Tulkinghorn's quiet is the quiet of secrets, of appearing everywhere quietly, and thereby revealing through the quietness and silence the keeping of secrets *as* secret. There is to Tulkinghorn an essential solitude, 'solitude itself and the secret itself' (Derrida 2005, 96). These are not silent; they 'appear', as it were, they sound in the depths of the solicitor's quiet, his secrecy that is everywhere on display, and in his solicitude to remain the mute witness for others. The perception of Tulkinghorn is that, in revealing his 'mask as a mask, but without showing' (Derrida 2005, 96) or presenting himself; in a mode of 'non-presentation' to which quietness attests, the solicitor speaks 'by keeping quiet, keeping something quiet' (Derrida 2005, 96), he still addresses us, if not those before whom he stands. He speaks the quietude, the confidence and repose of the law in its authority and mystery, its essentially *nocturnal* bearing, but also the quiet with which authority is given.

A question as to the relation between the quiet and quietude of the law in the figure of Tulkinghorn arises, only partly addressed in passing, and then chiefly through Esther's perception of Old Square and the rooms of Kenge and Carboy's. In itself, this is not without significance because it extends the matter of legal authority, secrecy, confidence, witness and quiet beyond Tulkinghorn, so that the good reader does not mistake these interlinking traces as being essential to him, and to him alone. There is to Tulkinghorn something 'architectural'. Already seen as a species of mausoleum, Tulkinghorn is related to other structures also. He is, the narrator confides in us, 'in the confidence of the very bricks and mortar', the chimney-stacks 'telegraph[ing] family secrets'. As he is the repository of family secrets, so the 'lofty houses' store their 'mysteries, difficulties, mortgages, delicate affairs of all kinds' in his 'old black satin waistcoat'. The solicitor is a retainer and container, a receptacle who lives amongst receptacles, his 'many boxes labelled with transcendent names'. His apartment, which is also his office, is itself a storage place, for those boxes as well as for Tulkinghorn, who sits 'quiet at his table', an 'oyster of the old school'. The quietness is maintained by the heaviness of the furniture, and the 'thick and dingy Turkey-carpet', which 'muffles' the floor. Minimal sound, minimal light, boxes surrounded by caskets, in containers, surrounded, enclosed, confined, retained. This is Tulkinghorn, this is his apartment, this is the house of the law. If Allegory looks down on Tulkinghorn, so Tulkinghorn in his mode of appearing, and his disposition in the world, is allegorical; or rather, the visible appearance of Tulkinghorn, in the impression it gives, is allegorical, the solicitor and his chambers an allegorical performative and a performative allegory. But he, his waistcoat, his boxes, and those metaphors of containment and enclosure that surround the solicitor, all belong to an economy of allegory in which the allegory is that of secrecy, silence, repose, confidence, occlusion, mute witness.

There is nothing behind in the phenomena of this appearance. Here we have the law of structural appearance that is at the heart of phenomenological reduction and the appearance of that law as the structure of re-presentation and perception. As everything is absorbed – engrossed – in the dark, non-reflective non-presentation of Tulkinghorn, so the passage concerning Tulkinghorn's apartment is both engrossing and a gesture of engrossing, that type of writing which produces, through reproduction (every figure a figure of all else, an iterable copy), a legal statement in its final form. There is, in the appearance of the structures of the law and the chiastic law of structures, perceived from the vantage point of a phenomenological reduction – such as I am suggesting, but which, I argue, is also that which the text of Dickens presents, and which

I am merely tracing, following along in the wake of – the appearance of the inessential condition of the law. There is no essence to the law, only the subject's apprehension of the endless substitution (allegorical) of trope for trope. What is the relation here to quiet? To recall those earlier senses of the word, here, in Tulkinghorn's apartments, everything is at rest, in repose, free from agitation. All is contained, self-contained. For everything that is perceived, even though no one is there, with Tulkinghorn, there is always another figure in a process of supplementary iteration. Herein resides the confidence, and the quietude of the law. Having no essence as such, no final object, nothing is available to a final determination, an ultimate meaning. To remind ourselves of the significant condition of quiet, as there is no essence to the perception and re-presentation of the law, so quiet is without a final determination, its appearance defining but also a condition of that which is given in any 'encounter between "us" and "what is"' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 159).

But as Tulkinghorn's quiet – a quiet residing hidden in plain sight everywhere in the law, in its offices, its architecture, its structures and institutions – is not quite Esther's, it is also not that quiet that 'engrosses' him and engulfs him, obscuring him from the general view, as he passes towards home. There is that quiet of the night belonging to the great wilderness of London. The reader is told this is a 'quiet night', a 'very quiet night', with a 'solitude and stillness'. This is not a silent night, for just at the limits of perception remain that roar and that glare of the busy thoroughfares less than a mile from the places traversed by Tulkinghorn. The houses that entrust their mysteries to Tulkinghorn are noted for their mute witness to the solicitor's passage, as they refrain repeatedly from saying 'Don't go home!' or 'Don't come here!' The country may be seen, were we there to see it by the agency of the moon, as 'in repose, quieter and quieter', but that moonlight is also what illuminates Tulkinghorn's way. What is to be seen is presented *as if* for a solitary viewer. Moonlight illuminates nothing quite so much as the auto-affirmation of the subject to himself as the controlling, the universal eye to which the scene presents itself, from which vision flows, as if Lincoln's Inn Fields were some Romantic landscape with its echoes, in which repose and quiet rest. Quiet in the scene is implied by those minimal sounds that cannot be heard in town, the 'murmuring weirs, and whispering rushes'. It is figured more immediately in the perception that 'even in this stranger's wilderness of London there is some rest', and the experience of sound's diminution: 'noises that arise from the streets are fewer and are softened, and the footsteps on the pavements pass more tranquilly away.' 'Every noise', we are invited to imagine, 'is merged, this moonlight night, into a distant ringing hum, as if the city

were a vast glass, vibrating'. That one gunshot, a loud, heavily rattling report, shatters the quiet, as it breaks the image of the city as a huge glass vessel, thereby opening the scene to barking, howling, the striking of clocks, and the 'swell' of the streets' hum, all of which noises appear to emerge from their containment beneath the vast glass momentarily to the senses, before the quiet closes again around the instance of violence, leaving only Tulkinghorn's windows 'dark and quiet'.

Quiet is a trope for all that hovers, passing almost imperceptibly. It may suggest suspension, and from within that the possibility of authentic reflection, perception, and a subjective consciousness meditating on the conditions of being in the world. It is, in its admission of watchfulness, perception and temporality, a condition that reminds us that absolute silence is impossible, but also that there is impermanence. Not 'quietness' (to call it this would be to raise it to the level of a concept) nor 'the quiet' (the definite article implies certainty of meaning and definition), the figure traces relatively an aural experience or attitude, without being confined to this. Nothing as such in a literary text – quiet can only be indirectly assumed – quiet is suggestive of undercurrents, murmurings, low resonances. That quiet is associated at all with a site such as nineteenth-century London appears, at first sight, counterintuitive. It is for that reason perhaps that the moment of the picturesque night-scene adverts to a Romantic and 'natural' representation, in order to bear witness to what is unnatural, what is unavailable to direct presentation, such as murder, beyond which is not quiet but a quietus, death as a radical quiet. In the city, violence breaks out from within the perception of quiet, much as secrets eventually break the bounds of containment in *Bleak House*. All the subject can do, like Esther, is remain passively, quietly awaiting the revelation. London makes possible revelation, eruption, but this is not in the subject's control, and the city thus teaches us to read what we are reading, in Hugh Kenner's phrase on what he calls part of the business of *Ulysses* (1977, 382). *Bleak House* teaches us to read for what is not spoken directly or out loud, what is not in plain sight or daylight, what resides on the margins, in the quiet passages we pass by, in the quiet delivery of phrases that say one thing and mean another. If quiet is the phenomenal emblem for the law's work, it is also other, it is the place in which the subject – Esther Summerson – resides, learning how to become the good reader, but knowing that reading does not always proceed in the most clearly articulated ways. Quietness, not simply a supposedly positive attribute, but also a commodity at a premium in the capital, teaches the subject to habituate herself to patience and attentiveness, and to differentiate those phenomena that are barely discernible. This is all the more important

once we recall that London, and the novel, are immersed in '[i]mplacable November weather', enveloped in a miasma of smoke and fog, fog, as we are told 'everywhere, . . . up the river . . . down the river, . . . on the Essex marshes, . . . on the Kentish heights' (*BH* 13). So poor is the visibility at the heart of London that dogs are indistinguishable, horses barely so, and there is doubt, at least regarding visible evidence, whether day has broken (*BH* 13). Like Esther, we have to be quiet, in order to hear whatever there is to hear muffled and muted, in an otherwise nearly invisible world.