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Dickens's London

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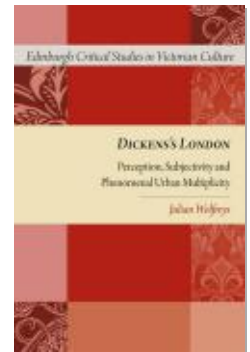
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Spring Evenings • London

Our Mutual Friend

That mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows, gyrated here and there and everywhere. Whence can it come, whither can it go? It hangs on every bush, flutters in every tree, is caught flying by the electric wires, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders upon every plot of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legions of iron rails. [. . .]

The wind sawed, and the sawdust whirled. The shrubs wrung their many hands, bemoaning that they had been over-persuaded by the sun to bud; the young leaves pined; the sparrows repented of their early marriages, like men and women; the colours of the rainbow were discernible, not in floral spring, but in the faces of the people whom it nibbled and pinched. And ever the wind sawed, and the sawdust whirled.

When the spring evenings are too long and light to shut out, and such weather is rife, the city which Mr Podsnap so explanatorily called London, Londres, London, is at its worst. Such a black shrill city, combining the qualities of a smoky house and a scolding wife; such a gritty city; such a hopeless city, with no rent in the leaden canopy of its sky; such a beleaguered city, invested by the great Marsh Forces of Essex and Kent. (*OMF* 147)

Returning to certain fundamentals concerning expression and perception, the subject and the world that gives itself in re-presentation, it is useful to remind ourselves of how the subject and, consequently, the reader come to find themselves oriented, once one suspends the everyday habit of what might be called ‘unseeing’ observation.

The modernity of the urban text of Dickens resides in its implicit apprehension that the self is always oriented in its ‘relation’ to the world. There is unfolded in every figuration of urban place a transcendence constituted through ‘disposition, projection, and comportment’ (Patocka 1996, 48) of the subject vis-à-vis the world of London. The revelation of a modernity is not made manifest, however, either wholly in a direct manner, or solely through the realisation of this transcendent affirmation of concatenation. Relationship, where this is this, where

it may come to be traced belatedly, takes place in language. There is a modernity to be read here therefore, in the privilege of language as being, on the one hand, the expression of being, and on the other, as the inescapable play that constitutes a subject as the place of the world's traces and their role through the medium of expression in constituting subjectivity as belonging to the world, and inextricably bound to it. What is brought to light is relation as such, wherein the text of Dickens unveils the apprehension that the world 'as Kant was the first to say, is neither a thing nor an aggregate of experienced things' because 'it is given in the wholeness of transcendence, in this "original history"' (Patocka 1996, 48). Inasmuch as there is no transcendent determination of London, therefore, the question of transcendence is always one of this originary historicity, which speaks in every articulation of the modern self in its place, realised in a given place and taking place as the event of conscious perception and re-presentation. No ultimate transcendence, therefore, only the quasi-transcendental event of singular revelation, iterable in memory and subsequently haunting the act of reading to come.

While what I explore concerning the nature of expression and its literary modalities in following Merleau-Ponty's consideration of the linguistic closely has a general import for any reading of literature beyond what takes place in the text of Dickens, it is important to bear in mind that it is in the modality of presentation or giving whereby transcendence comes to light as that which gives to the text of Dickens its singular condition, and the privilege in the revelation of an urban modernity and subjectivity that is traced throughout the present volume. Being is 'uncovered', to use Patocka's word (1996, 49), in such a way that, in every subject's disposition towards the world of London in the novels, there is revealed a responsibility to the historicity of place. The history of urban modernity is *there* in the expression of the subject. Subjectivity, the subjectivity of the other, is *there* and at this moment, when I read, in my repetition of the subject-position, as the modern city appears to me, as if – once more – I were *there* in the place of the subject, the place of the other. In those movements of reading and writing, reading into writing, which return a reading from the subjective perspective of the other as the motions map, retrace and construct a London, successive London places in the imaginary, as if perceived for a first time every time I read, the text of Dickens does more than any other to re-present the unique experience and expression of the subject's involvement in urban space.

We believe expression is most complete when it points unequivocally to events, to states of objects, to ideas or relations, for, in these instances,

expression leaves nothing more to be desired, contains nothing which it does not reveal, and thus sweeps us toward the object which it designates.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty on the mistaken yet persistent belief in the transparency of language. He continues to summarise this position in the following manner: ‘expression involves nothing more than replacing a perception or an idea with a conventional sign that announces, evokes, or abridges it’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 3). He then responds, posing the question: ‘how could language achieve this if what is new were not composed of old elements already experienced – that is, if new relations were not entirely definable through the vocabulary and syntactical relations of the conventional language?’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 3). If language ‘channels all our experiences into the system of initial correspondences between a particular sign and the particular signification we acquired when learning the language’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 4), then that process of channelling, in order to ‘invent’ re-presentation of experience and perception in, and through, the medium of language, must translate. This is a given. What is less immediately grasped though is that translation of this order is a re-presentation of the material conditions of experience between the subject and the world. Language, Merleau-Ponty argues, ‘is the double of being’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 5), the world made discourse, the subject the page, or screen, on which the world becomes word and retransmitted. We ‘cannot conceive of an idea that comes into the world without words’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 5–6).

So far, so general: it is necessary, though, to stay patiently and with some attention to the minutiae of the Merleau-Ponty’s argument in order that the complexity of Dickensian urban figuring be apprehended in its own right. That the image of London on a spring evening ‘in these times of ours’ is an image for someone; that it is expressed at a given moment thereby revealing in the process of being expressed an originary historicity, is inescapable. The image constituted takes place in a language that causes one to apperceive a vision that is markedly counter-picturesque, but which, in being available only through this language belonging to this moment and to someone: here, being is doubled phantasmically.

Staying with Merleau-Ponty, then: when a writer, or the phantasmal subject the writer imagines, approaches the act of re-presenting experience or perception in language – even if that perception is fictional, to the extent that its linguistic articulation concerns, or rather involves, a subject who, though not dissimilar from myself, has never existed – there is still the initial silence of the writer, before narrative begins, before re-presentation and representation come about, the writer being at first silent, the page or screen blank awaiting that which he is going to

say, in order to arrive. When it does arrive, it is as if only those words will do; it is as if they have always been there; it is as if, through the medium of the writer narrative, gives place to a projection for some subject of the world, and a world 'around me', at that, 'which already speaks' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 6–7). Language is thus a 'specter' for Merleau-Ponty, as the title of the essay from which I have cited has it; it is a mode of communication, in which we are given to apprehend that communication is appearance (to reiterate a phrase quoted elsewhere in this volume). Communication causes the appearance to make itself visible, as it is, and in no other manner. To communicate the city at evening in spring as just this experience and no other, at this time and at no other, in this place and in no other, fiction must make the scene, not only seen, but felt with an impossible immediacy.

The peculiarity of such an appearance, a constellated phenomenon through which things appear to view, coming to show themselves in a singular manner distinct from any other as though that were the truth of the world, is what has to be grasped in order to apprehend the presentation of London in the text of Dickens, as distinct from the general argument concerning perception, presentation and the role of language within the subject–world relation. This being so, it remains the case that 'the book [and by extension any text] would not interest me so much if it only told me about things I already know. It makes use of everything . . . in order to carry me beyond it' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 11). The 'ordinary meaning of the signs' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 12) is varied in such a way that conventional signification gives way 'toward [an] other meaning with which I am going to connect' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 12). It is in that experience of proximity, intimacy, of becoming insistently the urban subject formed within, experiencing and responding to the act of reading / writing London, which gives to Dickens's London its especial, haunting singularity. In that 'appreciation' of whirling, sawing, shrill, smoky, scolding phenomena, which cause the leadenness imminent in accents that bemoan; and also in that general, shared sense of being beleaguered, London's sensibility imagined sympathetically as this predominantly, at this moment, in this very place and no other; in that sympathetic reception of the emotional condition of birds and buds – in each of these, quotidian discourse gives way, representation evaporating in the subjective nearness imposed through that re-presentation, as the meaning, the experience of the other.

As a result, 'everything happens as though in effect language had not existed' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 13). This, once more, is a general principle belonging to the experience of literature. What can be acknowledged, though, is that 'through the complicity of speech and its echo',

between ourselves and the text, and the place which gives place for the text to come, with its subject, into being, there remain 'relations of spirit to spirit' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 13). I am, Merleau-Ponty insists, 'brought within the imaginary self' (1981, 12). In this, a rapport is created between myself and a 'strange expressive organism' (1981, 14). That organism is already there, before the book is written, however. It is always before Dickens, and before each of the subjects to whom it speaks, and who in turn perceive its expressions. The 'phenomenon of expression' belonging, as Merleau-Ponty acknowledges, not only to the study of language but also 'to that of literary experience', the play of representation in expression is our only recourse to the 'lived experience of expression' (1981, 15), the expression of an other, even or especially perhaps when that other is a phantasm, construct and performative projection. (This might just be why, if it matters, literature does matter.) This comes to be apprehended, fleetingly, in the uncanny life of paper, a 'currency' that circulates, simultaneously intimating both economic motion and the flow of the city's life-blood. No longer just a metaphor, the circulation suggests London as assuming the appearance of an animate force. There is in this passage a quality of 'lively confusion', as Robert Douglas-Fairhurst describes it, which is 'central to Dickens's imagination', and which has 'usually made his critics uneasy' (Douglas-Fairhurst 2011, 58) – or some of them at least. Such confusion is usually defined through the blurring of boundaries between 'people's insides and outsides', though here it is in the excess of multiple significations that there is given a strange 'spirit', a vivification in re-presentation that is more than mere life. It is all the more uncanny in that there is little of the human, save for the city which is a human production and projection: in short, a phenomenon of expression. And to risk a strong reading, that uncanny, frenzied motion of paper, its being both blood and money, its being that which gives expression to the city, to its subjects and to the subjective realisation of place and the relation between subject and city, is *the* figure of Dickens's text itself.

If, therefore, the twenty-two-year-old Henry James was correct in his review of *Our Mutual Friend* that Dickens's 'genius [is] not to see beneath the surface of things', thereby making Dickens 'the greatest of superficial novelists', he is only partly correct (James 1971, 481). Or rather he is right, but for the wrong reasons. For if James desired to see into the 'superfine textures of human life' (Douglas-Fairhurst 2011, 59), this was only to remain on another surface, one maintained by choosing psychologism over any phenomenological inquiry (whether it was called this or not). Psychologism is merely the hypothesised – and, in James's case, quite possibly hypostasised – 'beyond', the 'inside' that

one attempts to read from the signs of the 'outside' of any human being. In this – and there is nothing wrong with this – James remains more the writer, if not the painter, of nineteenth-century life, than Dickens, while Dickens's disinterest in psychology frees him, after a fashion, to consider being from the perspective of the 'chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones in accordance with the . . . truth [that] nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history' (Benjamin 1969, 254). The psychology of a character is merely a quaint and somewhat dated interest by contrast, when compared with the modernity of that image of the past, which is 'seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again' (Benjamin 1969, 255). Against James the *fin de siècle* psychologist, there remains Dickens the historical materialist, in the Benjaminian sense; only through an understanding of that rapport between subject and the 'strange expressive organism' of Merleau-Ponty is this grasped. The being which 'speaks', or who reads and writes the city, reveals the city as it comes to be given, as its appearance determines expression in its materiality and historicity. In this process of speaking, reading, writing and, with all due acknowledgement to the complex temporalities, relays, delays, echoes and deferrals which inform the belatedness of any re-presentation, any memory of perception, the subject also appears, but on this condition: the being, the subject 'is what he is talking about' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 15); being is always a becoming, a taking place, the locus of an originary and singular expression of historicity embedded in, produced from out of the materiality and historicity of place, whereby he 'finds himself in' or 'finds himself involved in' that appearance of place, to recall variations of reiterated formulae in the Dickens text.

Such involvement identifies the ineluctable and inescapable relation between subject and world. Language is not 'over here', 'with me', and the world 'over there', somehow separate from the 'I speak' or 'I think', even when it appears that there is no 'I' in the expression, as in the passage above. And while this recognition of the inescapable connection and proximity may well be general, what is peculiar to the text of Dickens, I would argue, is that narrative suspension, whereby the grammar of London demands it be figured in the articulation of perception, which gathers its intensity through those modalities of presentation involving grammatical and syntactical reiteration. The expression of the urban world assumes a material form through the materiality of the text that, through iterability and modulation of form, variations on theme, insists in the structural apprehension. We witness, but also, importantly, in or *through* reading, find ourselves involved in,

a ‘renewal and recovery’ of the world ‘which unites me [and *us*] with myself [*ourselves*] and others’, and thus assume the subject position of a ‘consciousness *in* the hazards of language’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 17), for the time of reading. The urban text in both its ostensible forms – the one built and experienced, perceived, on the one hand, and the one read / written, re-presented, appearing to memory, on the other – illuminates ‘modalities of the system of embodied [and therefore material and historical] subjects’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 18). Dickens’s discourse of the modern city operates in the singular manner that it does – this, I would argue, is a fundamental aspect of its modernity – through a double gesture. Breaking with narrative motion to reflect on the experience of London for its always hypostasised subject, for a subjectivity always already hypostasised in its intimate enfolding with the city’s phenomena and forms as they communicate through appearance, Dickens’s urban language ‘envelops and inhabits’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 19) subjectivity without distancing the subject position through reflection until the habitation, the being-involved, announces itself from within the non-reflective apparition of London. Subject-position and, through that, modern urban subjectivity returns in reading, in my reading, in the other’s expression in me, for me, and this revenance, which is always already that of the city for someone, is always capable of being ‘rebuilt again by the other person . . . by others who may come along [each and every other reader], and in principle by anyone . . . This transcendence arises the moment I refuse to content myself with the established language’ (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 20).

Moreover, language, Merleau-Ponty continues, is not, ‘while it is functioning, the simple product of the past it carries with it’ (1981, 22). To recall an earlier comment, coming back to that circulation of paper: when I read the opening sentences of the extract I enter into that moment, as if I were there, as if the phenomena of the event in this instance arrive to re-present themselves, give themselves phantasmally through the material medium of the language. Never just a constative observation distinct from what it represents, the language is performative inasmuch as we move through the assonant echo from *mysterious* to *currency*, to *circulates*, and from within this the internal aural oscillation between *currency* and *circulation*. In turn, the susurrations and motion of the paper in the wind marks itself through ‘*when the* [there is a phonic and phonemic after-echo of the wind’s motion here] *wind*’, with that slight vowel modulation, the sound engaged again in the performative ‘*blows*’, the latest sonority repeating that earlier sibilance. And while the sonic repetition is not exact, its variations are markedly, decidedly there, in a chiasmic play, ‘circulating’ through partial and whole alliterative



Whitechapel

devices, and in consonance as well as assonance ('w-' / 'sawed' / 'sawd-', 'wh-'), extending to further consonance in the final sound of 'whirled'. The wind blows through the sentence as it blows the paper through and around London – *in London*, as the fulcrum of the sentence states it. The erratic motions of the paper are then performed in the second clause of the first sentence in the tonal modulations and rhythmic play of *here, there and everywhere*, the figure of gyration anticipating the motion whilst also picking up the susurrating assonance and sibilance of the first part of the sentence. The wind in London is the wind I hear, I feel in the reading / writing of the London atmospheric current, and in my perception, the insistence and propinquity that performativity intensifies to present a consciousness to me, as if the questions that follow are mine, as if I am the subject in the moment, at that particular place, experiencing the unpleasant qualities of a London spring evening. In the present that the communication and the appearance of London, the wind and the evening figure collectively, a phantom present in the expression crosses from the 'period when it was written'. In this apparition for me, the 'inalienable subjectivity of my speech enables me to understand those extinct subjectivities [and, in addition, those phantasmal subjectivities belonging to those who have never existed as such, through the haunting agency of the literary] of which objective history gives me only traces' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 24–5). History is thus revealed as 'not just

a series of events external to one another and external to us' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 25). As a result, the 'radical awareness of subjectivity enables me to rediscover other subjectivities and thereby the truth of the linguistic past' (Merleau-Ponty 1981, 25) and, with that, the authenticity of the re-presentation of the perception of the event, the place and the subject's historicity. Though no subject is there as such, the insistence of the moment presses on me as if it were my perception, and I am made subject to this vision of a spring evening in London.