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Dickens's London

Wolfreys, Julian

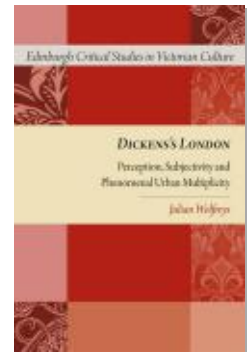
Published by Edinburgh University Press

Wolfreys, Julian.

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

Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

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Time • The City, Coram's Fields

No Thoroughfare

Day of the month and year, November the thirtieth, one thousand eight hundred and thirty-five. London Time by the great clock of Saint Paul's, ten at night. All the lesser London churches strain their metallic throats. Some, flippantly begin before the heavy bell of the great cathedral; some, tardily begin three, four, half a dozen, strokes behind it; all are in sufficiently near accord, to leave a resonance in the air, as if the winged father who devours his children, had made a sounding sweep with his gigantic scythe in flying over the city.

What is this clock lower than most of the rest, and nearer to the ear, that lags so far behind to-night as to strike into the vibration alone? This is the clock of the Hospital for Foundling Children. Time was, when the Foundlings were received without question in a cradle at the gate. Time is, when inquiries are made respecting them, and they are taken as by favour from the mothers who relinquish all natural knowledge of them and claim to them for evermore. (NT 1)

There is no one time in Dickens, no single temporal measure. Clock time, cosmic or 'natural' temporal flows, motions, circulations, time in a linear motion, time as the marker of haunting memory, the different times of narrative movement, the times of reading, the *epoché* called into existence through temporal suspension – and, inevitably, the temporal given prosopopoeic form. Before coming to the personification of Time, we might pause to consider the relation in the text of Dickens between certain temporal motions, the 'natural' world and Being. Associated with flow, Time is figured in the image of the Thames, as in the opening nocturnal moments of *Our Mutual Friend* (OMF 13), which further situates temporal flow topographically through the river's flow between the 'future', implied in the iron bridge at Westminster, and the past, signified in the stone of London Bridge. The time of the Thames is the time of work, getting a 'living', but also that of the reminder of the end of time, in the dead bodies by which that living is earned. Time and the

Thames are again invoked in *Our Mutual Friend*, though in a markedly different manner:

Mr. Mortimer Lightwood and Mr. Eugene Wrayburn . . . had taken a bachelor cottage near Hampton, on the brink of the Thames, with a lawn, and a boat-house, and all things fitting, and were to float with the stream through the summer and the Long Vacation. (*OMF* 147)

Here the motion of time and river, on which desultory human existence is borne, is perceived, if not as one, then at least synonymous or analogous, through the implied logic of zeugma, which serves as a rhetorical undercurrent. Human time is carried on the tidal and seasonal flow – indeed, the temporality of Being is a flow – even as, in the novel's inaugural passage, the riverine time brings a living through the death of others, as has been acknowledged. Most significantly, time, presented as sound, 'paves the way for a new matrix of perception' (Danisus 2002, 15) – and this can be of great importance in London, when on so many occasions vision is hindered, sight limited, the visible occluded.

To Time's personification, which ultimately here intimates the merest moment of a weak messianism (on which I shall conclude): *No Thoroughfare* starts factually enough, dating itself. Against this date – 30 November 1835 – a clock strikes, that of St Paul's, to announce our entrance into the narrative, and also to fix momentarily the precise time of day – 10 p.m. – on 30 November. This is not any time; it is London time. Such nomination is significant in relation to the year, Greenwich Mean Time not being adopted globally until 1884, and not nationally until 1847, with a necessary standardisation known as 'railway time' (though not without legal challenge as late as 1858). At the time of London time in which our story begins, therefore, local mean time or sundial time was still the standard. There is thus, already, in *No Thoroughfare*, written more than thirty years after the time of its setting, a temporal localisation: a disordering also perhaps, at least rhetorically, and as something of an *après-coup*, given the 'national' fact of date situated in distinction from the 'regional' temporal record.

The temporal discordance is then exaggerated in the irregular, if not 'anachronistic' sounding of the bells belonging to various London churches, which set up a dissonant 'resonance in the air', some chiming before, some after 'the great clock of St Paul's. The initiation of propopoeic manifestation takes place through this collective resonance, inasmuch as the bells are heard to strain their 'metallic throats', completing time's initial apparition in that grotesque figure of a flying, cannibalistic Father Time, whose scythe executes the sound in the 'sweep . . . over the city'. If Being is always, in some measure, temporal, Being

experienced as a temporal experience of the world, and so available to reflection through temporal awareness in anticipation, memory, the different times of experience and the experience of temporal flow, then it is, too, inescapably, in its endless becoming, a Being towards death. More radically, though, as these opening lines intimate, time *is* death; we are given in the analogical apperception the consciousness that death haunts us in time, it is there as the temporal apprehension of that which moves towards us, which maintains the inexorable movement. 'London time', then, is the sound of death, as well as life, the one within the other. But the sound of London, the passage intimates, however quietly, is that which calls up the apparition of Death. As in a number of other places, London is realised nocturnally through the aural, rather than the visual image. Equally, as I have argued, such an auscultatory impression gives a more immediate sense of closeness to one in this perception of sound rather than sight.

The apprehension of immediacy must also be thought regarding the relation between time and sound, in the temporal and resonant representation of the nocturnal cityscape. That 'Dickens's works constitute an important touchstone for Victorian sound' is undeniable (Picker 2003, 11). Equally undeniable is the sense in this passage, as elsewhere, that, when it comes to the sounding of time, such reverberation is older than the nineteenth century; but also, in its purposeful deployment as the medium of the vision that breaks the bounds of realism from the very outset, exceeding the merely mimetically faithful, the figural excess provides for perception a sense of a modernity. The very idea of a 'London time' is thus out of time with itself, and in more than the simple fact of the off-kilter church bells sounding ten o'clock. In moments such as this, the archaic and modern engulf the idea of the Victorian in that perception of the auratic by which London is *known* rather than just *seen*, apprehended without being represented in an associational economy, rather than one which is rational or realistic. But this revelation of aura works precisely through that yoking of the sensate apprehension with the hallucinatory vision of the pre-modern figure of Father Time.

If, in 'the Kantian-Coleridgean conception, the imagination is the means by which we can gain insight into those transcendental truths that lie beyond the limits of our ordinary experience' (Craig 2007, 55), here imagination that so often makes itself known in the text of Dickens offers a truth in that auratic experience of London, which it makes available. Such truth as it is, is in the arrival of the perceptual awareness of that which the city gives to be known. The fixities of temporal order undone, this, the image informs us, *is* London, even if what we are given as its subjects can only be apperceived in a sensory epiphany,

not expressed in other words. The ‘real’ of the city, ‘that can only be discovered in and through the imagination is . . . dissolved into what we know can only be a “fiction”, a series of associations held together, like the mind, in “a heap or collection of different perceptions . . .”’ (Hume cit. Craig 2007, 205); but is recovered in the perception of aura, in that sensory revelation, the instance of the epiphanic – not for everyone, not even for a group, but for one subject, here and there, in this or in other ways.

Sound, arguably, can effect this with greater and more unexpected force than the visual, for sound can take me unawares. The visible can shock, affront, overwhelm, move me to laughter or to tears. In sight, though, the desire to read takes hold in a counter-gesture to that which is unexpectedly before my sight, and I subsume it into the habitual, by which reality reasserts itself, and I distance myself from the effect, the phenomenal in the vision, by appealing, on conscious reflection, to questions of the aesthetic. To risk a hypothesis, therefore, returning in the process to this extract from *No Thoroughfare*: time, although ‘managed’ through its mechanical and technological control, understood as just another technology in the service of industry and economy – though largely attributed to Benjamin Franklin, ‘time is money’ seems a peculiarly Victorian epithet – its audible rhythm the illusion of assurance that humans control time, rather than the other way around; when ‘freed’ by the imagination, Time appears as that transcendently authentic figure, over which there is no human control. That the extract – indeed, the story – starts from a statement of ‘facts’ and numbers, the first sentence being without commentary other than the bare record, is itself a reflection on the human desire to control, fix time, register it as ‘history’, keeping time in place by affixing it with numerical place holders. Such registration reinforces the illusion of the empirical, the objective; sound, on the other hand, can only be received subjectively. Dating and the ‘truth’ of time, as historical statement, is the frame that opens on to the image of the narrative, but which, through the agency of sound, is broken, admitting the auratic and allegorical, the impression and perception.

And it is through the perception of a lower sound that Time’s other figure appears to the subject. Time being double, as already inferred: life and death. Here Time expresses itself differently, in a different voice. It is not only lower, more difficult to catch in the midst of the discordant cacophony; it is also nearer, and much behind the other chimes. So far behind, it appears as if it were solitary, this figure that resonates from the clock of the Foundling Hospital, at Coram’s Fields. The narrator pauses to reflect on the difference of times from themselves, in the locution ‘time was . . . time is . . .’. Once more, one might perceive a shift

in the different markers of past and present, in that the first of the two phrases is idiomatic, conventional, the second opening from within that to shift one's temporal perspective. It is in the specific perception of the times of temporal register that the specific subject is announced, for through that a reflection is made on the hospital's practices. Time affords the subject meditation, and so gives access to the articulation of the distinction. Time is thus apprehended as being of the city, London Time, inasmuch as it has no single, or universal, form or appearance. It is only understood in the event of its sounding. In the reading of such differences and the difference that makes possible the reading / writing of London times, there is the acknowledgement of a difference in apprehension between the sensible and the intelligible, which this extract opens, at the level of the sensible itself.

What is 'made visible' in this is the '*birth* of correlation between consciousness' and the world, re-presented as a unity of the phenomenon, 'whose double sense, at once "subjective" and "objective", is thus revealed' (Dastur 2000, 26–7). In this, in the Times of the city, the senses of modernity affirm themselves. Encouraging us to hear the low, near voice, almost indistinct save for its being out of time with all those other clamorous calls, sound, in the absence of sight, opens for us a vision of the difference of times, which survives in the face of Death. That subjectivity which hears, instead of simply seeing (and therefore remaining blind), opens itself to the last 'not-yet reified sense' (Darius 2002, 89); as a consequence, it does not admit to a rationalisation and the otherwise 'growing reification of reality' (Adorno 1991b, 102). In the sound of London's Time, the passage suggests, hearing the other of time and the temporality of the other, we might be saved from Death. There is still time. There is always another time – if we listen, and if we learn to perceive differently.