Dickens's London

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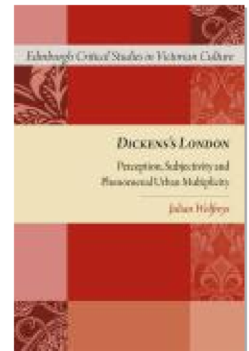
Published by Edinburgh University Press



Wolfreys, Julian.
Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity.
Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
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Voice • Brentford, the Borough

Our Mutual Friend / The Pickwick Papers

> 'For I ain't, you must know,' said Betty, 'much of a hand at reading writing-hand, though I can read my Bible and most print. And I do love a newspaper. You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices.' (*OMF* Ch. 16)

> 'Don't call me Valker; my name's Veller; you know that vell enough. What have you got to say to me?' (*PP* Ch. 23)

V is for voice and for . . .

. . . Weller, pronounced Veller, Sam or Samuel – Samivel to his father – Weller. We know that 'vell' enough. Boz 'corrects' the pronunciation and, of course, the spelling of the proper name and other words in which there sounds the W / V change, save for those moments of phonetic fidelity when Sam or his father, Tony, speak. The reader cannot but hear and see the difference between one voice and that of another. The other speaks, thereby requiring our response, if only in the simple act of attending to that voice, and by extension those voices of the other that inform the London scene. London has more than one voice, then; Sloppy is aware of this. 'Doing' the 'Police in different voices', he is the medium of the capital's polyvocal sounds and rhythms, as these have already been transcribed, reported, converted into a written record. Bringing back the voices, Sloppy admits to an ear for the other; in his vocal mimicry, his is a medium's role, a performance, but, like his creator, he is a resurrectionist. Voice, therefore, always announces and affirms the other. It gives place to the presentation and re-presentation, and through these a ghostly experience, of London, other Londons, cities of times past, which have left their traces, to be replayed or reanimated, as soon as there is a subject to hear.

The voice is always grounded, as well as opening a place, from which it speaks.[29] Sloppy, presenting himself principally as 'voice', as inarticulate

vocalisation through the wide-open mouth and roar of laughter, followed by a furious 'mangling', which defeats the speech of 'gentlefolk' (*OMF* 198), lives, with Betty Higden and her charges, in an 'abode' that is not 'easy to find' in the 'complicated back settlements of muddy Brentford', on the north bank of the Thames, opposite its more genteel neighbour, Kew, in what is now the London borough of Hounslow. Sam, when first encountered, works at the White Hart, one of those 'half-dozen old inns' that still survived in the late 1820s in the Borough, south of the Thames, across from St Paul's Cathedral and the City, 'Old London Bridge', as various Dickensian narrators refer to it, joining the City and the Borough. Both the Borough and Brentford present working-class voices, voices belonging to London's riverside communities. Hearing, and thus receiving, the voice of the other, we hear them in their own words, ventriloquised in turn through the medium of narration's reiteration. Weller's well-known reversal of *v* and *w* is the most immediate and memorable example. Used elsewhere in Dickens as a phonic approximation of working-class London voice in the first decades of the nineteenth century, it intrudes repeatedly enough to make this other 'Samuel' heard, over the supposed authority of his master, Samuel Pickwick. If, as Kevin McLaughlin has argued, Sam (Weller's) language in the form of the 'Walentine' is a sign of the 'unavoidability of an artificial, "poetic" moment' (McLaughlin 1995, 116), such artifice, and with it the implication of performance and persona, presents the reader with the perception that 'voice' is staged, provisional, rather than essential. At least, this is admitted through Weller. The city, appearing through its voices, is a place of provisional identity, unstable meanings and shifting appearances; there is no 'natural' language for London.

Yet it is the human sound of one aspect of London, and one manifestation of 'the Londoner' in the voice of Sam, that registers so indelibly in the reader. We come to be inhabited by that voice, for the moment of its enunciation, and in this there takes place 'a taking up of others' thought through speech, a reflection in others, an ability to think *according to others*, which enriches our own thoughts' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 179), and our apprehension of those London subjects. We do not, of course, sense all of London; nor should we. Such an apprehension is impossible, no more imaginable than a full representation of London through a single image. But what we receive through this given voice, in this experience, is working-class humour and subversion of authority. An image appears for me, of a subjectivity greater than that of the individual who speaks, for through voice, accent and idiom, a world of difference emerges to my apprehension. More than the individual subject's voice, I hear in this a trace of one image of the city; for in that

matter of accent, delivery, rhythm, idiom, in the 'trace of a voice, phonetic writing' that which is heard 'is also linked to drawing (contour); what one sees is linked to what is de-scribed. Rhythm, as a consequence, is thus produced by an interaction between voice and the visual' (Louvel 2011, 180). Voice 'textualises' the image, the image an apparition in the trace of the voice. This textualisation, which is also the opening to the visualisation, does not present London in its entirety, to stress the point once more. It does, however, through the voice and figure of Samuel Weller, imagine the working-class male Londoner in a comic, affirmative fashion; it also situates that figure in a place that, once opened, cannot be close but leads to different perceptions of the world. Moreover, what we receive is one figure of working-class south London at a singular temporal instance. For there is 'no essence, no idea, that does not adhere to a domain of history and of geography. Not that it is *confined* there and inaccessible [though not everyone receives the transmission] . . ., but because . . . the space and time of a culture is not surveyable from above' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 115). Whoever 'Dickens' was, Dickens understood this like no other. We only experience London in the singular, through the particular voice; while voices might sound the same, we do not hear if we do not attend to what is singular in the voice, in its moment, and in its projection as a presentation to be differentiated from those other voices of the city that initially sound the same.

Additionally, if voice is always grounded, formed and informed, equally voice says, 'there is', it announces and affirms the *there*, the place of the body, and the otherness of the experience in the place of another, to which the body gives form, which I experience through perception that is both visual and auditory. Sloppy and Sam are not simply voices, they 'exist' for me as corporeal figures, texts given shape and rhythm, but which, importantly, remain inanimate until the voice, its rhythms, punctuation, timbre are imagined and take place. While this is necessarily true of any character in any fiction, the general truth does not negate what remains particular to both Sam and Sloppy: it is their voices which are that which leaves the most indelible trace on the reader of the Dickensian text, in speaking for, in the place of working-class London subjects, their histories and cultures. Yet, as both figures admit, though the voice is *there*, a trace of urban location, it is provisional, once again. Voice returns as a contingent, performative, inessential interruption in order and representation. Whether it is Sloppy's corporeal disorder ('Of an ungainly make was Sloppy'; *OMF* 199) or what McLaughlin calls the disorder of Samivel Veller's similes, dispersed at random throughout the novel, like chance encounters, which refuse the formal equivalence on which such speech acts rely by convention (McLaughlin 1995, 113–14),

the other of London disrupts in order to call attention to the absence of any 'natural' perspective or authoritative voice. More than one voice, less than a voice: London, Londres, London (to recollect Mr Podsnap's futile, bilingual attempt at nomination and definition) – a performative, 'radically dispersed' (McLaughlin 1995, 113) series of rhythms, pulses, fluxes, traces and phenomena, coalescing as the experience and perceptions of its subjects, and returning in each singular encounter, or the voice that is received, 'a performative moment that calls attention to itself as such' (McLaughlin 1995, 115). And the modernity of the voice as both trace and phenomenon of the city, signalled in that shift from one Sam(uel) to the other, signals also the transformation from representation to re-presentation, from empirical observation, collection and ordering (Pickwick), to phenomenal perception, chance association, and endless, iterable motion and random energy (Veller). The transition in *Pickwick* is also one of narrative form, genre and ideology. Through Sam Weller's voice, the city arrives and the picaresque retires, making way for the sound of the nineteenth century.