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Dickens's London

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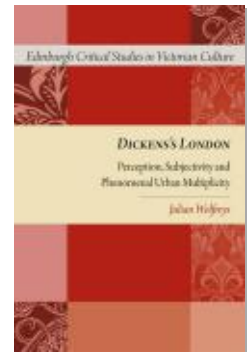
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Walking • St Martin's Court, Covent Garden

The Old Curiosity Shop

Night is generally my time for walking . . . I have fallen insensibly into this habit, both because it favours my infirmity and because it affords me greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets. The glare and hurry of broad noon are not adapted to idle pursuits like mine; a glimpse of passing faces caught by the light of a street lamp or a shop window is often better for my purpose than their full revelation in the daylight, and, if I must add the truth, night is kinder in this respect than day, which too often destroys an air-built castle at the moment of its completion, without the smallest ceremony or remorse.

That constant pacing too and fro, that never-ending remorselessness, that incessant tread of feet wearing the rough stones smooth and glossy—is it not a wonder how the dwellers in narrow ways can bear to hear it! Think of the sick man in such a place as Saint Martin's Court, listening to the footsteps, and in the midst of pain and weariness obliged, despite himself (as though it were a task he must perform) to detect the child's step from the man's, the slipshod beggar from the booted exquisite, the lounging from the busy, the dull heel of the sauntering outcast from the quick tread of an expectant pleasure-seeker—think of the hum and noise being always present to his senses, and of the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through all his endless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come.

Then the crowds for ever passing and repassing on the bridges (on those which are free of toll at least) where many stop on fine evenings looking listlessly down upon the water with some vague idea that by-and-by it runs between green banks which grow wider and wider until at last it joins the broad vast sea—where some halt to rest from heavy loads and think as they look over the parapet that to smoke and lounge away one's life, and lie sleeping in the sun upon a hot tarpaulin, in a dull slow sluggish barge, must be happiness unalloyed—and where some, and a very different class, pause with heavier loads than they, remembering to have heard or read in some old time that drowning was not a hard death, but of all means of suicide the easiest and best.

Covent Garden Market at Sunrise too, in the spring or summer, when the fragrance of sweet flowers is in the air, overpowering even the unwholesome

steams of last night's debauchery, and driving the dusky thrush, whose cage has hung outside a garret window all night long, half mad with joy! Poor bird! the only neighbouring thing at all akin to the other little captives, some of whom, shrinking from the hot hands of drunken purchasers, lie drooping on the path already, while others, saddened by close contact, await the time when they shall be watered and freshened up to please more sober company, and make old clerks who pass them on their road to business, wonder what has filled their breasts with visions of the country. (OCS 9–10)

When Master Humphrey walks through St Martin's Court, around Covent Garden, that walk translated through perception as the phenomenal apparition of place, and the experience of one who walks in that world transmitted also, this is there, for us to experience, as if we were there, in that place. Dickens's narrator in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is Master Humphrey, as is known. His initial appearance is defined through nocturnal *flânerie*, seeing and experiencing the streets at night, from which motion and reflective consciousness develops the image. Night in London dictates the mode of understanding through the phenomena that persist, and insist in the subject's response, aurality rather than the visual being inevitably foregrounded, though not exclusively so. But from sound, and the fleeting images half-glimpsed and reflected, come imaginative, if not visionary possibilities, as a result of which the passage is, equally and in turns, both materially grounded and given over to the speculative and fanciful. Here is the city through the lens of the Romantic imagination, rather than a sketch of the Victorian urban world, disinterestedly observed.

The passage assumes a motion between from the interior world of the solitary walker to the external world of the city, and also from the outer world of the night's inhabitants and their occupations to the inner world of both the walker's meditations and those of an imagined 'sick man'. With such transference, the 'translation' of phenomena into the traces inscribed in the subjective apprehension, comes a movement from out the self of Master Humphrey into the crowds, whose 'never-ending' pacing takes up and amplifies his own. And there is also an echo between Master Humphrey's 'infirmity' to the undisclosed ailment of the inhabitant of St Martin's Court, who cannot choose but listen, it would seem, being unable to sleep. Such parallelisms hint at the phenomenal sensibility, and with this, the uncanny similarity between the world of the mind and the world of the streets, their motions being not dissimilar, and each iterating the other's workings. Thus a play unfolds from interior to exterior, involving the world in the subject, the subject in the world.

Movement complicates any relationship between self and other in

the reading / writing of the city. The other is only and always there in the self's experience of the other. This is fundamental to understanding why the narrator in the text of Dickens mediates our experience of the city and its re-presentation in what is, initially, a self-reflexive way, and with that sense of intimacy and proximity. The narrator puts himself *in* the city even as he narrates its representation, recalling its events and its experiences. These are always experiences *for someone*. And such reflection on experience causes perception of and empathy with another, so that one's own experience is analogous with the experience of the other, as if the other were in some way 'in' the self.

It might be asked how the other enters into the subject's experience, beyond the immediate formal and aesthetic device of the first-person narrator or narrator-effect, by which the 'I' of another enters me as I read, and, reciprocally, it is as if I come to stand in the place of the other? In no small measure, experience of the city and re-presentation of that experience is, if not exactly available for sharing, then at least open through the force of analogy to the transference of perception, in which transport one is admitted to the singularity of another's apprehension, as place registers on self, the act of reading the text standing in the place of reading location and event. One observation that arises here is that 'seeing' is equivocal, if not enigmatic, and that this question of 'seeing' is not merely a theoretical question but one written into the passage from *The Old Curiosity Shop* by which Master Humphrey introduces the novel and the city, and so insinuates himself through the act of walking into the space between reader and place. In that to-and-fro of perception (and there is no neutral 'observation' not already perceptual in its translating force here, to which a matter of duration, of different times and velocities of perception also attests) two distinct modes of 'seeing' emerge – two at least: on the one hand, the visual; on the other, phenomenal insight.