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Dickens's London

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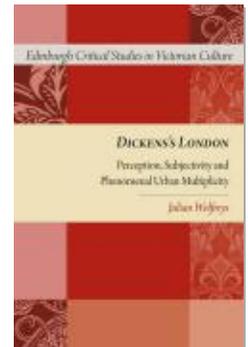
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X Marks the Spot • St Mary Axe

Our Mutual Friend

It was a foggy day in London, and the fog was heavy and dark. Animate London, with smarting eyes and irritated lungs, was blinking, wheezing, and choking; inanimate London was a sooty spectre, divided in purpose between being visible and invisible, and so being wholly neither. Gaslights flared in the shops with a haggard and unblest air, as knowing themselves to be night-creatures that had no business abroad under the sun; while the sun itself when it was for a few moments dimly indicated through circling eddies of fog, showed as if it had gone out and were collapsing flat and cold. Even in the surrounding country it was a foggy day, but there the fog was grey, whereas in London it was, at about the boundary line, dark yellow, and a little within it brown, and then browner, and then browner, until at the heart of the City—which call Saint Mary Axe—it was rusty-black. From any point of the high ridge of land northward, it might have been discerned that the loftiest buildings made an occasional struggle to get their heads above the foggy sea, and especially that the great dome of Saint Paul's seemed to die hard; but this was not perceivable in the streets at their feet, where the whole metropolis was a heap of vapour charged with muffled sound of wheels, and enfolding a gigantic catarrh.

At nine o'clock on such a morning, the place of business of Pubsey and Co. was not the liveliest object even in Saint Mary Axe—which is not a very lively spot—with a sobbing gaslight in the counting-house window, and a burglari-ous stream of fog creeping in to strangle it through the keyhole of the main door. But the light went out, and the main door opened, and Riah came forth with a bag under his arm.

Almost in the act of coming out at the door, Riah went into the fog, and was lost to the eyes of Saint Mary Axe. But the eyes of this history can follow him westward, by Cornhill, Cheapside, Fleet Street, and the Strand, to Piccadilly and the Albany. Thither he went at his grave and measured pace, staff in hand, skirt at heel; and more than one head, turning to look back at his venerable figure already lost in the mist, supposed it to be some ordinary figure indistinctly seen, which fancy and the fog had worked into that passing likeness. (*OMF* 417)

If X is a secret, not to be located, St Mary Axe might be one possible figure, where, like the chiasmus, 'lines meet at a point and continue,

never to meet again' (Bennington 2000, 76), an occasional point then, of convergence, between subject and city, between reading and writing, between perception and memory, the visible and invisible. One might say, *aXe* marks the spot, this being that X which, for Kant, identifies the experience beyond or before any conceptualisation.

All our representations [Kant reflects] are in fact related to some object through the understanding, and, since appearances are nothing but representations, the understanding thus relates them to a **something**, as the object of sensible intuition . . . (1997, A250)

However, he continues, in a move towards that bracketing of the habitual, which opens the necessary phenomenological reduction, 'If I take all thinking (through categories) away from an empirical cognition',

then no cognition of any object at all remains; for through mere intuition nothing at all is thought, and that this affection of sensibility is in me does not constitute any relation of such representation to any object at all. But if, on the contrary, I leave out all intuition, then there still remains the form of thinking . . . (A253–4)

St Mary Axe is, then, not represented as *something*, but instead is imagined immediately as the visible figure for the 'heart' of the city; or this is the convenient fiction at least – for the sake of naming the heart, when no heart might otherwise be found, no centre discerned, that parish called St Mary Axe, long since deprived of its parish church even in Dickens's times, 'these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise'.

There is no need to be 'exact'; we will call, and agree to call, the heart of the city St Mary Axe. Intuition informed through perception grounds itself in, through place, yoking subjective consciousness and its particular representation in the singular event to the spot. After all, in the Kantian schema, 'a something = X' (1997, A250), that X being that of which we know nothing, but which situates itself in this singular instance in the place as organ, as metaphor in a series of substitutions behind which remains, always, the unknowability of London, its disappearance into some fog before the effort at any final representation. Thus, *aXe* marks the singular spot, given between subject and place in the event of experience, where *aXe* 'is not itself', to borrow from Kant once more, 'an object of knowledge, but only [a figure for] the representation of appearances under the concept of an object in general'.

Admittedly, the idea that *aXe marks the spot* is a fanciful conceit, but no more so than suggesting place as the heart of the City, or indeed, this place as more than any other. The narrative conceit imagines place as an organ, a pump, an organic image, which is, at this moment,

secreted, hidden from plain sight. A 'heavy and dark' fog, which circles and eddies, limits visibility. Eyes smart, lungs are irritated; London, the larger organism for which St Mary Axe chances to serve as the location of the heart, blinks, wheezes and chokes, whilst its ghostly double, 'inanimate London', hovers between visibility and invisibility. London is haunted by and haunts its other self, inhabiting and being the environment for dwelling in a liminal space, made all the more unreal, its materiality dissolving in the fog.

The city can neither see nor be seen. Phantasmagorical, London is punctuated by the uncanny presentation of gaslights become 'night-creatures', but which also, as supplements to sight, take on the function of eyes inasmuch as they are said to sob. The fog, a double itself of spectral London, becomes denser, darker, heavier, the closer it gathers around the 'heart', until it becomes 'rusty-black'. What we 'see', therefore, what we apprehend within the invisibility and extremely limited perspective, is analogous – today – to an X-ray; for we see inside the unhealthy, diseased body, the miasma crossing the corporeal boundaries to encompass the heart. All that is solid is dissolved, not into air, but as a 'heap of vapour', which enfolds 'a gigantic catarrh'.

The narrating subject, never more spectral in the text of Dickens than in this disquieting urban vision, gives access to the otherwise invisible, allowing the reader to 'see'. Such sight is both limited and yet transcendent after a fashion. The 'eyes of this history' can see into the fog, where the eyes of St Mary Axe cannot, to follow Riah into the fog. The narrative subject's vision therefore offers insight, it penetrates, revealing the hidden; the eyes of the narrating subject are the eyes of the 'history', capable of moving beyond what is only 'indistinctly seen', misperceived through the confluence and influence of 'fancy and fog'. At once animate and inanimate, narrative agency is spectral and technological. There is, to be precise, a narrative technology: the idea of the narrating subject, at once human and inhuman – we read narration conventionally as a 'voice', a human agency, even though we know this to be convention, the idea of the 'narrator' being merely a fiction to give presence to acts of writing – which has a 'spectral' power. Not simply, fancifully, a ghost, the technology, or technicity (from *tekhné*, 'art' or 'craft'), of narration causes the image to appear, even as it makes possible its gaze. It sees and gives us access to an equally spectral sight. Invisible to those it places under its surveillance, it 'sees' into the invisible.

Though obviously the X-ray was not discovered until 1895, my analogy being therefore admittedly, wilfully anachronistic, X is that which traditionally announces what cannot be said, what is not available to comprehension or knowledge. The symbol of unknown quantities

ever since Descartes wrote his *Géométrie* in 1637, X has served to signify the principal axis for any given set of co-ordinates – the ‘heart’ of the City – but also situates the chiasmus, which in this extract is figured by both the ‘heart’ and the name ‘St Mary Axe’: for this is the heart, at the heart, and thus provides the axis for the chiasmus that puts into disordering play the animate and inanimate, the living and dead, the visible and invisible, day and night, the familiar and uncanny, the light and dark, as those figures of inverted and displaced parallelism, by which London both reveals and hides itself through the narrative technicity of spectral vision. We thus come to grasp, however indirectly, that we see nothing so much as a phenomenology of perception at work here. In drawing attention to the limits and impossibilities of full vision, in moving between visible and invisible, this movement replicated in the movement of the linguistic consciousness through its chiasmic folds and tropes, perception of the city *is* also perception of the condition of perception, and its technical extension in narrative.

Through this, the city as ‘hallucination’ is ‘made flesh and concrete . . . an immense area of . . . signs that mediate the city to the individual and that individual to the city’ (Barber 1995, 7); through the visual apprehension of the perceiving sensibility by which the phenomena of the city are traced, and so returned to the reader, our mental ‘eyes’ find themselves, in reading the text-image at the limits of visibility ‘in a process of visual suffusion, compacting a multiplicity of gestures and movements into the act of seeing the city’ (Barber 1995, 7). All narration gives us to see what is not there as such; here the text of Dickens gives access to a vision of the invisible, and thus unveils the modern subject’s power of visualisation, in that very place where conventions of representation founder, perspective is ruined, the panorama impossible. This is the modern world, this ‘mesh of space and time [confused, displaced, deferred, disordered], which itself transmits the history and experience of the’ city (Barber 1995, 7). This is London ‘performing its dense projection of vision into the eyes of its spectators’, if they know how to perceive, how to read. It is envisioned, projected, by the unknown, unnamed stranger, the *flâneur*, that phantom figure of the narrator who is also, perpetually, the ‘modern inhabitant . . . [and] participant entangled utterly in the visible, susceptible to an infinity of aural and visual acts’ (Barber 1995, 7).

Wherever this figure is, *there* X marks the spot: for the subject brings the city into focus, in one place, at one time, every time, all that passes from the invisible to the visible, for our perception, in the narrated form of the ‘phenomenal appearance we intuit’ *as if* we were there (Bennington 2000, 85). Perception as the perception of experience



St Mary Axe

marks the place of the subject. X, the heart of the vision, the cross-hairs by which perception comes into focus, marks also a 'necessary convergence towards a unity . . . [a] unity of consciousness which cannot be an object of experience' (Bennington 2000, 85), but which communicates and so makes possible through the text of Dickens our act of reading / writing the multiplicities of London.

