



PROJECT MUSE®

Dickens's London

Wolfreys, Julian

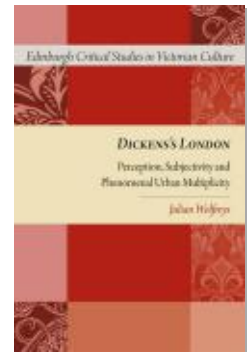
Published by Edinburgh University Press

Wolfreys, Julian.

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

Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64091>

Dickens, Our Contemporary

I refer once more to Heidegger who says that ‘*odos*,’ the way, is not ‘*méthodos*,’ that there is a way which cannot be reduced to the definition of method.

Jacques Derrida

I. Dickens, To Begin With

Before Benjamin; before Kafka; before Proust; before Husserl; before Joyce: there was Dickens; and before Dickens, before Boz (before there could be a ‘Boz’), so, as a consequence, before the reader, always *before* the reader and remaining to come – *there* was London. London, Londres, London (OMF 135).

London (BH 13). But it was London (NN 489). What might the priority I assign Dickens, with regard to how we are invited to *see* a city, suggest, not least about notions of modernity, the subject and, of course, Dickens? What are the senses of modernity to be read, what perceptions are re-presented, in those places where, narrative suspended, the city steps before us? Whether taken for the moment as a subject of early nineteenth-century London, and produced in part by the experience, perception and subsequent memory of the various encounters, or whether understood as the writer of that city in its manifestations from the 1820s and 1830s, and its subsequent revisions in succeeding decades, Dickens is our contemporary.

Reading the Dickens text as presenting a phenomenology of London, the city being *the* exemplary and protean figure – motif *and* trope – for modernity vis-à-vis subjectivity and the inextricability of the subject from the world perceived, the contemporaneity of the text, its abiding relevance to readers in the twenty-first century, resides in its power to make legible the experience of the subject who finds himself *there* before the place, and whose perception, already a transformation of the

experience of being involved, becomes transferred, transmitted to us. More than this, the text of London in the writing of Dickens presents the relation between subject and place in such a manner that, more than merely describing or representing, the text performs place for the reader in such a way that it creates in us the sense of being there, of a phantasmal proximity. Thus representation is replaced with so many acts of re-presentation. If understood as a properly and authentically historical index of place, reading and writing the city as the registration and revelation of London's historicity at given moments, Dickens's images of London-past 'may achieve legibility only in a determined moment of their history. It is in our ability', Giorgio Agamben writes at the conclusion of an essay on contemporaneity, 'to respond to this exigency and *to this shadow*, to be contemporaries not only of our century and the "now" but also of its figures in the texts and documents of the past' (Agamben 2011, 19; emphasis added). Dickens is our contemporary on the unconditional condition that we read him correctly, that we apprehend, and take responsibility for, the urban vision and its memory. If, as Agamben argues, the 'contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; the contemporary is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation to other times', thereby reading 'history in unforeseen ways' (2011, 18), then Dickens is that contemporary inasmuch as he transforms the urban world, and our apprehension of how it was perceived by giving it to be seen through the eyes of an urban subject, into whose position we become subsumed, if we read aright.

Reading in this manner, throughout *Dickens's London*, then, I have sought (somewhat in the spirit, if not the manner, and however reduced in scope or simplified in execution, of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*) to apprehend Charles Dickens's critical engagement with, and re-presentation of, London. The sequence of readings throughout the present volume constitute in part a topoanalysis, or rather series of topoanalyses, in that they start, and always start over again, from a critical engagement with passages that, in engaging, seeks to remain open to those passages as the reader's consciousness receives them. The topoanalysis is always that reading where place and subject are read in relation to one another, as place becomes meaningful and, in turn, determines subjectivity and, often, the meaning of being, and what it means to dwell. In this, the signs of the subject's historicity come to be acknowledged, through the reading of the subject's perception of place. Each reading has to do with, while being anchored by, the idea of place and particular places in the city, whether these be streets, neighbourhoods,

squares or buildings in recognisable locales. The analysis examines the rendering of the materiality of place, along with its sensible 'mood', into the materiality of the letter, and, in doing so, considers the extent to which the Dickensian urban project, if there is one, is less an empirical, mimetically faithful, realist project than it is a serial registration in a phenomenological manner of the ways in which the city writes itself on, and comes to be traced in, the urban subject, as that subject's perception and apprehension are then given voice in the form of narrative, and the poetics and rhetoric of the Dickensian topoanalysis and architexture. Thus, as this last sentence implies, my topoanalysis finds itself situated as a tracing – the invention – of what, in coming to consciousness, is taken as being already inscribed, reiterated and translated in Dickens's own act of reading / writing the city; or taking, as it were, the city's dictation, his being its transcriber, or the medium through which London in the nearly forty years of Dickens's professional life comes – and returns – to impose itself, demanding a response and, with that, inevitably, the act of bearing witness to the phenomenon of London in all its material historicity.

Dickens is no mere, faithful copyist of the city. He is, instead, its most astute materialist historiographer, to use Benjamin's phrase from 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'; and he is this to the extent that he has no 'theoretical armature' or method (Benjamin 1969, 263). Rather, he operates, as Benjamin argues the materialist historiographer should, by basing the act of representation on a 'constructive principle', even as that exceeds the merely mimetic or that in description subservient to an empirical or realist verisimilitude, and the fatal historicism implicit in such forms of representation that remains content to trade in causality, teleology and universalism in which time comes to a halt. In this, Dickens traces the city through its flows and energies, as well as its proper nouns and recognisable forms, which in turn arrives through the play of flow and its arrest in 'a configuration pregnant with tensions [; in this] it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystalizes into a monad' (Benjamin 1969, 262–3). At the same time, though, in exceeding mimetic and related modes of representation, Dickens's topoanalysis also succeeds in making available to the reader the subject's experience translated into the archival memory work of language and, with this, the return of the auratic experience for the subject recorded for the anticipation of its iterability in the reader, on the condition that the reader remains open to this chance of the other's coming.

The coming of the other, its arrival and return, hints at the spectral condition of Dickens's London. Already by the 1850s and 1860s, the London of the texts explicitly referring to, or re-presenting, the 1820s and 1830s (*Boz*, *Pickwick*, *Nickleby*, *Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*,

Little Dorrit, to name only those most obvious texts that bring back an earlier London on the cusp of the Victorian epoch) had begun to be replaced: not simply disrupted by the arrival of the railways, but torn down (Old London Bridge) or altered extensively (the Adelphi) in the names of 'improvement' or 'modernisation'. Dickens's Londons survive from the beginning, as it were, 'only as phantasms'. If cities, and the languages that figure and trace them, survive only in this manner, 'then only those who have understood these most intimate and most familiar deeds, only those [such as Dickens, and the Dickens-subject, the narrator-effect] who recite and record the discarnate words and stones, will perhaps be able one day to reopen that breach in which history – in which life – suddenly fulfils its promise' (Agamben 2011, 42).

This effort to remain open to the other that is London, and also the other in London, is a vital aspect of the singularity of the narrators in the Dickensian text, whether Boz, Master Humphrey, the Uncommercial Traveller, Esther Summerson, David Copperfield or Pip. I shall turn later here to make the distinction between 'author' and 'narrator' as functions of reading / writing. For the moment, however, the idea of being open as a mode of perception and reception serves initially, if not as an explanation, then as a means of comprehending the presence of the Dickensian text, albeit at a remove, in its relatively few appearances in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (2002a).³⁰ Although Benjamin barely cites or comments directly on Dickens, he records, approvingly, the commentaries of others – mostly G. K. Chesterton – on Dickens's affinity for the city, its streets, noises, and the event of London in general as a force in composition and invention. Benjamin's annotations in the direction of Dickens are not the only aspects of his critical discourse that are pertinent here, or throughout. However, given that there are just ten such mentions, and these, moreover, are filtered through the critical perspective of others, it is not without interest that Dickens serves as a touchstone of sorts for Benjamin, in his capacity as reader and writer of the modern urban project.

II. Reading Benjamin Reading (Others Reading) Dickens

Like some attractive, if enigmatic, wanderer in the streets whom one has seen and then catches glimpses of on other occasions, Dickens turns up intermittently in the labyrinth of notes and allusions that comprise Benjamin's unfinished work. It is worth mapping schematically the indirect manifestations of Dickens. He appears, in the words of others, in the following convolutes and in the following sources, and with reference to the following novels: A: *Arcades* (AP 57: Chesterton, *Dickens; The Old*

Curiosity Shop); H: The Collector (AP 208: Wiesengrund, Unpublished Essay, *The Old Curiosity Shop*); J: Baudelaire (AP 233–4: two references, the first to the ‘allegorical element’, the second to ‘Dickens and stenography’, both from Chesterton, *Dickens*); M: The Flâneur (AP 426: Franz Mehring, ‘Charles Dickens’; *Dombey and Son*; AP 436: Edmond Jaloux, ‘Le Dernier Flâneur’; AP 437–8: Chesterton, *Dickens*, first on Dickens’s relation to the street and then to ‘Dickens as a child’); Q: Panorama (AP 532: Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*; AP 535: Chesterton, *Dickens*); d Literary History, Hugo (AP 770: Chesterton, *Dickens*; AP 774: Chesterton, *Dickens*).

A dozen citations in ten locations, eight of which are transcribed from the French translation of G. K. Chesterton’s *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1906). Of the others, only one alludes to Dickens directly, while the remaining three are from essays by, in turn, Theodor Adorno (‘Wiesengrund’), socialist historian Franz Mehring, and French novelist and essayist Edmond Jaloux. Just two novels are mentioned, *Dombey and Son* once, *The Old Curiosity Shop* three times, while the remaining notes address aspects of Dickens’s life, work habits or urban interests.

Taking the passages in order – and there seems no reason not to, certainly there being no justification for reading them in any sequence by which one might construct a narrative of one’s own – we find the following discussions: Chesterton ponders on the relation between title and tale, raising the rhetorical question in order to respond by observing how streets and shops, the most obvious details of what are at once the most neutral and prosaic aspects of urban life and experience in the nineteenth century, in order to read in these, and in shops particularly (‘the most poetical of all things’), as object shades into metaphor and synecdoche, through the metaphorical agency of a ‘key to the whole Dickens romance’, becoming ‘the door of romance’, through which the reader, following Dickens, has his or her ‘fancy’ set ‘galloping’ (AP 57). Chesterton likes to imagine a text of the city never written by Dickens, a ‘huge serial scheme’ and an ‘endless periodical called *The Street*’ divided into shops, one narrative after another beginning with a title, like the entrance to both shop and story, being the generic type of store. Clearly, when Chesterton reads Dickens, his own ‘fancy’ or phantasy comes to life, from the most mundane of circumstances, and in this, the reader in the Dickensian text and the reader of the Dickensian text merge for a time, as the quotidian dissolves into, opening itself on to the romantic and fantastic. One’s own reading of Dickens might confirm such an experience, whether we consider David Copperfield’s various musings, Master Humphrey’s visit to the clock mechanism of St Paul’s or the various ‘keys’ and allusions to fairy tale or the fantastic in *Dombey and Son*.

Of course, this is only to address Chesterton's reading. In a sense, though Walter Benjamin cites this passage in the context of gathering commentaries on shops and arcades, we can say little for sure about Benjamin's reasons for citing this passage. Is it merely to do with shops, or does the Dickensian motion from reality to the imaginary that is staged symbolically by the passage over the commercial threshold, have a greater interest for Benjamin? While part of the agenda for the *Arcades Project* is to make available a critique of the nineteenth-century capitalist commodification of the exotic, in this instance, such a critique is found wanting, for the reason that Dickens's narratives, those at least beginning from the doorways of shops, deconstruct the opposition of materialism and phantasy in that movement by which, on entering various stores (Mr Venus's taxidermist's emporium in *Our Mutual Friend*, Solomon Gill's shop in *Dombey and Son*), one becomes engaged through the agency of the narrative in the imaginary forces suggested by the objects and phenomena rather than by any desire for the commodities contained therein. More ambiguous sites, such as pawnbrokers (*Martin Chuzzlewit*) or Krook's rag and bottle shop in *Bleak House*, trouble the motion or transference, but even in this disturbance the dialectical tension raised calls into question the surety of ontological definition or purpose at the heart of any materialist or commercial enterprise, unveiling in the process its hitherto mystified purposes, and estranging the reader's unthought relation to such commercial urban spaces.

The second of Benjamin's quotations (AP 208) is taken from an, at the time, unpublished essay by Adorno, which touches on the dialectical tensions between materialism and 'the possibility of transition and dialectical rescue' (Adorno 1992, 171–8). As Adorno understands it, Dickens's texts express the other of the capitalist world, a non-place glimpsed *within* the phenomena and objects – 'poor useless things' – of this world, more acutely than 'Romantic nature-worship was ever able to do' (1992, 172).³¹ Moving from this to two further comments taken from Chesterton, Benjamin offers on the first a minimal observation concerning the 'allegorical element' in the biographer's account of Dickens's recollection of a coffee shop in St Martin's Lane, which, for Dickens, returns with something akin to traumatic force every time he enters a 'very different kind of coffee room now', reading reversed on the glass the words COFFEE ROOM seen as MOOR EEFLOC (AP 233). Even as the streets, and shops, had generated the idea of writing, and of the city as textuality in that earlier passage from Chesterton (AP 57), so, here, there is the shock of inscription which links through memory the past and present of Dickens, with the frisson added by having been able to cross the threshold of the shop, being, as it were, on the 'inside' of

society, rather than on the outside, as he recalls himself being as a child. With inclusion comes estrangement, estrangement from, and recognition or apprehension, at least, of oneself as an other. The city thus gives to one the experience of and encounter with modes of encryption that reveal one's otherness to one, as a condition not simply of the work of memory, but of memory in relation to place. What, for Adorno, is the oscillation within a given object that touches one intimately, such resonance for Chesterton is to be apprehended in place in relation to an act of reading / writing; the self writes itself, reading in the encryption the trace of its other self, seen from the other side. This leads Benjamin to yet another extract from Chesterton, this time having to do with stenography. Here, the biographer relays Dickens's apparent horror in the face of the arbitrariness of the shorthand code, the individual marks of which are taken as 'despotic characters' (AP 233). There is a doubleness to this phrase, the idea of character implying both the inscription and a fictional being, which remains unstable, transforming itself from a cobweb into a skyrocket, by which the former signifies 'expectation' and the latter admitting a condition of being 'disadvantageous'.

Two commentaries from *Convolute M*, 'The Flâneur', are next, if not as a consequence of argumentative logic, then as a result of the *Arcades*' ordering. If the previously considered citation on the apparently daunting task of learning stenography had focused exclusively on writing, both passages in *Convolute M* return to writing in relation to London, specifically the impossibility, or difficulty, of the former, without the presence or proximity of the latter. Franz Mehring's article (AP 426) relates Dickens's reiterated epistolary complaint during a European journey in the mid-1840s. London, according to Dickens, is a 'magic lantern', that Victorian curiosity, a hybrid of technology and phantasmagoria; the city seems to 'supply' something to the writer's imagination, 'set[ting] him up' and 'start[ing] me'. He expresses the opinion, in writing, that 'I can't express how much I want' the streets of the capital. Saying what one cannot say and that one cannot say it is, of course, a way of saying precisely that, albeit indirectly. It is a mode of apophatic proclamation, of what lies the other side of silence, so to speak, of what is other, and remains so, remaining to come. A drug and a desire, London is, in the letters Mehring cites, that which writes on Dickens, his subjectivity being the *tabula rasa* for its mystic inscription. Implicit in this conceit is the image of the author as automaton, writing machine, to be 'set up' and 'started going'. There is clearly something uncanny about writing the city, and London is, unequivocally, always already a textual phenomenon, demanding reading, transcription and translation, in order that what is not said comes to be articulated, however

indirectly. Walking the streets anticipates writing, writing being in retrospect a tracing of the topography felt and perceived in the walk. This is confirmed in the second of the two passages, Edmond Jaloux supplanting and supplementing, thereby confirming, Mehring's reading of the letters. Dickens, Jaloux affirms, 'needed the immense labyrinth of London streets where he could prowls about continuously'; and this, as Benjamin edits Jaloux's commentary, connects Dickens to Thomas De Quincey, about whom the French essayist cites Baudelaire, Benjamin's touchstone for the *Arcades Project*. De Quincey, Benjamin notes, citing Jaloux quoting Baudelaire, was "a sort of peripatetic, a street philosopher pondering his way endlessly through the vortex of the great city" (AP 436). Backward then, in what is both a historical retrospect but also the unfolding of layer on layer, palimpsest on palimpsest of textual interrelation, thus: Benjamin–Jaloux–Baudelaire–Dickens–De Quincy, the linearity of which obscures the irregular interanimation, as well as the labyrinthine textile weave of writing / reading threads determined by the urban-text, always and only available as a vast *architexture*.

This is not to suggest that I see London 'not as an object, nor "history or "reality"', nor that I omit 'to discuss that which in London requires writers to contest it' (Tambling 2009, 307 n.2; I wonder whether 'contest' is the most appropriate word to describe what writers do when confronted by the demands London might be read as making on the imagination); rather, it is to see the London of writers in general, and Dickens in particular, as being received, if at all, indirectly and through an otherwise ungovernable totality of traces, which specific formations are always already countersigned by the historicity of their constitution, and come into being, as the reading / writing of the material event and experience. Whether this amounts to a contest for Dickens or not, there is always a struggle determined by the resistance to ungovernability or inexpressibility *in toto* and concomitantly either a resignation, an incomprehensibility or confession of giving oneself up to place and, along with that, an admission that one simply does not know and cannot say. London, in the face of this, requires the invention of an other mode of apprehension, perception and representation, one which escapes the merely mimetic, or a form of reading / writing faithful to verisimilitude; one, in short, which endlessly and ineluctably estranges and destabilises through the play between the real and the imaginary, the mundane and the exotic, where the latter interrupts or erupts from the former. London, understood thus, also requires a reading / writing faithful to the forces of interruption and eruption, displacement, fragmentation and ruin, and to seemingly illogical or incommensurate concatenations, as the registration of chance, whereby objects, phenomena and qualities

or modes of determination, otherwise alien to one another, come into proximity through the subject or narrator's encounter with, or experience of them. Hence, in the convolute dedicated to 'Panorama', Walter Benjamin's one direct citation from Dickens (*The Old Curiosity Shop*), where he takes down the phrase used to describe a waxwork's 'character', its 'unchanging air of coldness *and* gentility' (AP 532). It is in the apparently incongruous yoking of nouns that one finds expressed what, throughout Dickens's novels, becomes a recurrent process of registration: a relation in non-relation, which remains faithful to incongruity, incompatibility, heterogeneity, and avoids the falsification of aesthetic harmony through ontological wholeness, in the maintenance of ruin and fragmentation that affirms more than can be said, that admits a significance other than that which is available to expression.

It is perhaps for this reason that Benjamin refrains from all but the most cursory commentary on Dickens, the most minimal remarks serving only as place-holders. It is perhaps also for this reason, that, with the exception of the citation from Adorno, in one way or another, each of the passages excerpted by Benjamin has to do with Dickens's relation to writing, and this most pertinently, most insistently, regarding the visionary reading / writing of London. Thus, Chesterton's 'return' in Convolute Q: 'There floated before him a vision of a monstrous magazine . . . an Arabian Nights of London' (AP 535). The city becomes or is envisioned as an endless serial publication, nothing other than serialism itself, labyrinth after labyrinth of passage, page on page of event, each the supplement of every other, and yet all remaining, in their serial supplementarity, other from one another, whilst being written in the name of London. This might be said to culminate for Benjamin in a comparison he risks between Dickens and Victor Hugo, through, once more, a passage of Chesterton's. In this, the claim is made that Dickens was the literary voice of 'the community', and that the author's desires and those of 'the people' were the same (AP 770). In this, Dickens might be said to be the *genius* of London, but a *genius loci*, whose inventions of London are manifestations of both the spirit of place and its *Zeitgeist* also. Dickens is the medium of the spirit of London, his name a shorthand for a kind of technology of memory and witness, a recording device, by which the 'more than one voice in a voice' has the chance of arriving and being received. 'Dickens' names a polyology, to recall J. Hillis Miller's neologism from the Preface. But, this being so, the proper name announces a mode of polyology that is simultaneously an *apopolyography*, a more-than-one-writing in any inscription that can only trace the city indirectly, and otherwise than mimetico-ontological modes of representation and comprehension dependent on totalisation,

organisation, verisimilitude and homogeneity. If Charles Dickens was the 'old Radical' Chesterton calls him in the final of Benjamin's extracts (AP 774), he was also the first modern, if by modernity we can suggest a modality of re-presentation (to imply the Husserlian definition [of which more in the fourth section, below]) as opposed to representation that is phenomenological rather than empirical; which, furthermore, can be apprehended as such in the shaping of narrative presentation in response to the city. And what is strikingly modern about Dickens is that, like Victor Hugo – and here I borrow from Benjamin, quoting this time Albert Béguin – the English author

transports all that he takes up – and which could appear pure foolishness were reason alone to judge – into his mythology . . . But his vengeance will be to become, himself, the myth of an age devoid of all mythic meaning . . . Every great spirit carries on in his life two works: the work of the living person and the work of the phantom . . . The writer-specter sees the phantom ideas. Words take fright, sentences shiver . . . (AP 775–6)

In light of this, I would propose that if a spectre is haunting London – the spectre of Dickens – then a spectre haunts Dickens: that of the city.

III. Reading Tambling Reading Benjamin (Reading etc . . .)

There have been a small number of prompts, signs indicating the directions in which we will head. Chiefly, these will gather around the notion of Dickens's London as phenomenological in its narration. Although there is, most specifically in the idea of the auratic but also elsewhere, a reading of Benjamin, which might gesture towards Benjamin as phenomenological materialist, this is not the place to develop such a hint. What I have sought to sketch instead is a reading of the fundamentally textual nature of London, through a commentary on those places in the *Arcades Project* where Walter Benjamin nods in the direction of Dickens, as the way through to that presentation of Dickensian phenomenology. Before turning fully to this, however, it is important to consider another's critical intervention on similar subjects. Jeremy Tambling has already responded to Benjamin's various Dickensian prompts, with some telling and astute observations (2009, 7–10). These anticipate to a degree both my own commentary on Benjamin's quotations and, to a lesser degree, particular dimensions of my readings of Dickens. It will be necessary therefore to consider Tambling alongside Benjamin, as we all follow in the wake of 'the Inimitable', pursuing his inventions of the city,

tracing his steps through its streets and looking through his – or rather his narrators’ – eyes.

Considering Tambling principally on the question of the ‘allegorical element’, this being Benjamin’s prompt: the critic cites a passage from Chesterton, quoted approvingly by Benjamin for treating what the latter calls the ‘allegorical element’ (*AP* 233; Tambling 2009, 8). Tambling has already observed of Benjamin that he ‘wrote when criticism, as opposed to appreciation of Dickens, was still comparatively new, relying on G. K. Chesterton’ (2009, 7). Tambling takes Benjamin at his word, asking ‘[w]hat does it mean to think of Dickens in “allegorical” terms, even when he is being autobiographical? It obviously means seeing the world in reverse. And as disconnected and yet organised’ (2009, 78). Though Tambling appears to be apologising, in part at least, for Benjamin’s paucity of sources, and those lacking necessary critical rigour because still novel, he none the less takes up Benjamin’s term, which ‘obviously’ means in a certain way. The figure of allegory is maintained after another of Chesterton’s commentaries, which Tambling argues, ‘has the potential to make the city a text, *with a system and a defiance of any system of reading built into it*. While compelling reading to become allegorical, seeing that which is ‘other’, it makes the writer produce a script from which he is *alienated*’ (2009, 9; emphases added). I would note here that, in remaining on the side of an historicist criticism, one determined by the appreciable separation of text from context and the maintenance of that distinction, Tambling’s consideration has something odd about it, moving between the ‘allegorical’ and the ‘theoretical’, as this latter critical language is encoded in notions of ‘textuality’ and ‘otherness’. Arguably, to read the anachronism from a different perspective, the quality that Tambling reads is already at work in Chesterton’s text – and is precisely what Benjamin apprehends in the English commentator – and which is already immanent in Dickens’s text, at least as this regards the reading and writing of London.

I am not faulting Tambling’s reading here; but, instead, I am attempting to trace a certain process of relay, and with that an unfolding and reformulating of the act of reading / writing the city at work in, and making possible, the Dickensian text from the outset. There is no Dickensian city *before* the text, no simple material correlative that precedes its imaginative reading and writing. If allegory is read by Benjamin, this is not yet to be fully aware of the surface of the text, and to assume a subterranean semantic level, rather than seeing the extent to which Dickens, already aware of the city as text, and unavailable to the modern subject in any other way, does not so much ‘realise’ the city as having the potential for becoming textual; but, instead, that

he apprehends a radical textuality already at work for the subject, and in the subject's response, which must learn an alternative reading and writing. That all is surface is the case, but there is no causality, no logic in what is seen and how it might be read. More than this, the radical perception, towards which Benjamin is moving but at which Dickens has already arrived – this being a question of London and not Paris, and therefore impervious to order and regularity – is that, all being rhizomic surface, there is – *there*, over there, before the subject, unassimilable in any totalising reading, and thus already replete with the subject's exhaustion, incomprehension or defeat, in principle – that which is given to be read / written, but, paradoxically, that which sets reading at defiance and which affirms that which cannot be expressed; except, to recall Dickens's own words, that which can only be expressed as that which cannot be expressed.

To take the inverse script and its mirror image, seen in the present of the writer but conjuring the writer's other, past self, MOOR EEEFOC : COFFEE ROOM. All is surface, this is not a 'code to be deciphered', as Tambling suggests (2009, 9). There is nothing to be decrypted, everything is there, whether in Dickens's own words, and prior to that before his eyes, or before the reader. Time and depth, visible and hidden: these are the modular pairings which motivate Tambling's observation. Turning back to Dickens's letter, however, we read:

I only recollect that it [the coffee room in St Martin's Lane] stood near the church, and that in the door there was an oval glass plate with coffee room painted on it, addressed towards the street. If ever I find myself in a very different kind of coffee room now, but where there is such an inscription on glass, and read it backwards on the wrong side, moor eeffoc (as I often used to do then in a dismal reverie), a shock goes through my blood. (AP 233; Chesterton 1942, 36)

That which the author *only* remembers, or says he only remembers – for he remembers both street name and, therefore, location, and proximity to an adjacent building – is the oval glass plate in the door, with the shop's definition. Writing, inscribed on the subject, always already read, in conjunction with architecture and site, are inextricably bound together in memory; so much so, in fact, that they are part of the subject, as the subject comes to be defined by this pivotal, not to say traumatic, remembrance. The Dickensian subject – in this example just happening to be Dickens, or one Dickens fictionalising another Dickens, or even two; the subject fragments even as he multiplies – reads the self as an other, in an abyssal staging of selfhood at home and homeless, either side of the glass, never at home with himself. This is what, for Dickens, it means to dwell in London, dwelling on one's own estrangement, and

one's phantom *doppelgänger* as the revenant souvenir of the subject and place; and with this the displacement of the subject as a condition of an uncanny modernity.

More than this, what Benjamin, and Tambling after, appear to fail to read is precisely what Chesterton notes, following his observation – the last remark cited by Benjamin in this particular extract – that ‘effective realism’ comes down to a ‘principle that the most fantastic thing of all is the precise fact’ (1942, 36). While Chesterton’s purpose here is more causal, more biographical and more anchored in a sense of authorial intent than my own interests, he pinpoints nevertheless the relation between the real and the fantastic, or phantastic, reading, as he does, the excess, the exotic, in verisimilitude, in the everyday. In short, Chesterton reads that which Dickens reads: the other within the self-same, Dickens being the name for a reading that becomes transformed into a writing of the other, which opens the other, and remains open to the other, rather than seeking to master or control that. What is at work here, what Dickens puts into play, is not, therefore, a question of the allegorical, but a more radical subject-effect historically and materially enabled by modernity, if not a phenomenologically inflected proto-modernism.

Without departing too far from the current path of inquiry, it is arguable that Chesterton notices in the formal play of Dickens’s acts of reading / writing London that which subsequent commentators, usually of a historicist bent, have lost sight of to a degree, if not completely. For all the many problems or limits of Chesterton’s analysis, there remains none the less a sympathetic apprehension in his analysis, a resonance between the Dickensian text and his reading (however couched in authorial and biographical terms), which is a sign of Chesterton’s own historicity. A near contemporary of Ford Madox Ford, E. M. Forster and Arnold Bennett (he worked with Ford, Belloc and Bennett, amongst others, for the War Propaganda Bureau during the First World War), Chesterton’s appreciation of Dickens is marked, at moments such as that just cited, or in the image of Dickens having the key to the street (which the latter possessed, according to Chesterton, in a phrase not picked up by Benjamin, ‘in the most sacred and serious sense of the term’; 1942, 34–5), with that kind of sensate quasi-mystical ‘channelling’ of London that marks Ford’s *The Soul of London*. In the example of the key trope, there is even a move from the mundane to the messianic: ‘He [Dickens] did not look at Charing Cross to improve his mind or count the lamp-posts in Holborn to practise his arithmetic . . . He walked in darkness under the lamps of Holborn, and was crucified at Charing Cross.’ Importantly, for our understanding of that which Chesterton catches in

Dickens, the former continues: 'our memory never fixes the facts which we have merely observed . . . the scenes we see [in recollection] are the scenes at which we did not look at all – the scenes in which we walked when we were thinking about something else. . .'.

We can see the background now because we did not see it then . . . Herein is the whole secret of that eerie realism with which Dickens could always vitalize some dark or dull corner of London. There are details in the Dickens descriptions – a window, or a railing, or the keyhole of a door – which he endows with demoniac life. The things seem more actual than things really are. Indeed, that degree of realism does not exist in reality: it is the unbearable realism of a dream. (1942, 35–6)

From this, Chesterton, employing this seemingly paradoxical mode of reasoning that is to be found in his non-fictional writings, turns to the mnemotechnic of the coffee room glass. Certainly, the idea of 'eerie realism' touches closely on that uncanny power of evoking a sense of place that has, in Dickens, the power to make one feel and see in the sense accorded these terms by Joseph Conrad.

Thus, returning to Jeremy Tambling's reading of Benjamin's citations, the notion of 'allegory' does not quite work, at least not without modification – or radicalisation – with regard to historicity and origin. Benjamin employs the idea of allegory elsewhere in his writings, to be sure. But I would like to suggest a turn here to the question, for Benjamin, of the constitution of authenticity in the experience of the historical. For Benjamin, the 'hallmark of origin in phenomena' is authenticity; and the discovery of this authentic and phenomenal 'origin' takes place 'in a unique way with the process of recognition' of what comes to be discovered 'in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena' (1998, 46). From these remarks it should be plain that 'origin' is not synonymous with a material or historical source, or that its location is necessarily teleologically prior to the phenomena in question, or discernible in some strictly linear construct. What, then, is meant by 'origin' in Walter Benjamin's use? As that which is unveiled as, or mediated by, the perception of 'authenticity', 'origin', in being recognised, neither depends on nor serves 'to construct a unity' from a 'sequence of historical formulations', even though it 'absorbs' such a sequence (1998, 46). Benjaminian authenticity and origin are then available as sensible apprehensions that, in singular conditions, reveal to the subject facets of a phenomenon's historicity, without being just the causal outcome of historical events. They are, if you will, what haunt the phenomenon, and which spectral force is given to return, as if for a first time, in completely chance circumstances, which, as Benjamin expresses it, is the experience of the virtual; and 'Virtually, because that which

is comprehended in the idea of origin still has history, in the sense of content, but not in the sense of a set of occurrences which have befallen it. Its history is inward in character . . . something related to essential being' (1998, 47). To dis-cover or re-member the revenant spirit in a given phenomenon or constellated matrix of phenomena is, then, to be open to the other, and read what one is given to read, in order that the 'redeemed state of being in the idea' comes to light (Benjamin 1998, 47). It might just be that what Chesterton calls the 'eerie realism' or 'demoniac life' of the Dickensian text is *just* that authentic historicity revealing itself. In that inversion of the glass, MOOR EEFLOC : COFFEE ROOM, the structure that is made available is not one of the surface and subterranean, but rather a mode of contemplation founded on a 'dialectic [that] shows singularity and repetition to be condition by one another in all essentials' (1998, 46).

Allegory might well, from this vantage, be a term for, or else serve in touching on, that which is analogous to the subjective experience of the auratic, or merely, with an eye to the literary text, an analogical form for that produced in the expression of memory, given material form through language, but which is traced by, as it traces, its historicity. Here is Benjamin, from a fragment in his archive: 'Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium.' Benjamin continues:

It is the medium of that which is experienced . . . the 'matter itself' is no more than the strata . . . [in memory, which] yield those images . . . for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them. Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers. (SW2, 576)

There is an affinity here between Chesterton and Benjamin – and, by extension, the Dickensian text. The text as mnemotechnic, formed from memory and the inscription of, and on, the subject, of the site, as memory of place and place of memory have become intimately enfolded, is not 'allegorical' so much as it is a key to a phenomenology of reading / writing the city. Thus, despite this word, when Tambling concludes his initial consideration of Benjamin by observing that 'seeing', in the Dickensian sense as noted by Chesterton, 'is not the beholding what is in front of the eyes but seeing differently, other' (2009, 9), this is precisely so. To suggest, however, as Tambling goes on to do, that 'there is no agency here' misses the mark. For, while it may be the case for Chesterton's reading of Dickens that 'mind and places change places, the mind [being] full of places which the memory cannot necessarily

remember seeing, and places meet the subject with memories of earlier looking', those modes of reading herein implied, by which the subject comes to be formed and informed by the trace of the site, then becomes transformed, translated, in the process, by which a reading becomes what it is immanently: a writing. For, as Benjamin notes above, apropos memory of place: the subject must 'mark, quite precisely, the site' where memory became possessed. It is this archiving habit which marks out the ragpicker and poet, and the relation between them, for, as Benjamin quotes Baudelaire approvingly in seeking an extended metaphor for the work of bearing witness to the poetics of the city, but in an observation equally applicable to Dickens and London:

'Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously: he collects like a miser guarding objects between the jaws of the goddess of industry.' This description is one extended metaphor for the poetic method, as Baudelaire practised it. Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse. (SW4, 48)

Or, as Dickens might have said, not having any method but merely seeking the way, a way that London maps before him, 'Noddy Boffin, *c'est moi*'.

IV. The Dickens-machine: phenomenality and the Subject

If Charles Dickens *is* – or might be, in any given parallel universe – Noddy Boffin according to the Baudelairean definition of the city-poet, then he is also several, diverse others. Sloppy is not alone in 'doing the police' in different voices, therefore. As is well known, doing the police in different voices is a quality attributed to Sloppy's ability to read newspapers by Betty Higden (*OMF* 198), thereby allowing the voices, the 'more than one voice in a voice', to arrive through him in the act of reading. As a good reader, Sloppy, it can be argued, opens himself to the other, his interpretation and channelling being that process by which reading takes place, becoming a writing. But Dickens does not restrict himself. He not only does the police, significantly, he does the *polis* as well. Dickensian narrative – its rhetoric and poetics, and all the other technologies of invention – gives form to the city; and through this the state and the body politic, as these find themselves coming to singular articulation in the 'London particular' (*BH* 42) of Dickensian narrative in its various symptoms, materialisations and presentations. Of course,

a 'London particular' is the name for a fog, as anyone having read *Bleak House* will know. But given that fog is, itself, not simply fog, but metaphor and singular trope for the law and one aspect of the city,³² 'fog' names, arguably, a London resistant to order and full comprehension or representation. There is, we might wish to argue, the reading / writing of a *Realpolitik* that finds itself given form in London narrative. With that, there takes place repeatedly the manifestation, tracing and mediation of London subjectivity in its historicity and the various forces that inform and deform the subject, reified in turn through the Dickensian topoanalysis of London, its inhabitants, flows, rhythms, territorialisations and deterritorialisations. If such a formula for comprehending the Dickens city-text is permissible, then Dickens's narratives, with their inflection of singularity and repetition or – to move Benjamin towards a Derridean turn – singularity and iterability, give a place not only to polyvocality but a heterovocality irreducible to a single, coherent subject. The subject, whether 'Dickens' or Sloppy, is, through the act of reading, rendered a passive agent. Though this might sound paradoxical, agency is there in the shaping of re-presentation, but only insofar as what is shaped arrives and demands that there be a witness to what takes place in the name of London. Hence, the question of voice, and the 'more than one voice in a voice'.

To approach this differently: when I speak of 'Charles Dickens' or 'Dickens', this is not to refer either to the author as particular source or origin of texts, or to the private individual whose life overlaps with that of the celebrity author who that individual became. It is, instead, to identify and give provisional location to a narrating technology or machine. It is to speak of a recording, translating device that serves in the re-presentation of the city and its voices and places in a particular manner. 'Dickens' names also a phantom subject, the projection of the narrating-machine, whose purpose is to experience the city, to bear witness to its events, to read the interactions of characters and location, and to write and tell those. 'Voice' is just a trace, therefore, a mode of inscription, rather than being a living vocalisation behind which is implied a presence. There is no narrator 'there' as such. There is no *there* for a narrator, save the haunting and haunted place of performativity in our imaginations when we read. Narrative, narrating, these are modes of production. From this understanding, 'Dickens' is, in any of the commentaries or analyses that follow, an apparitional effect in addition to being a technology of narrative; or, to recall the words of Walter Benjamin, the 'medium of that which is experienced' and which yields through processing the images of authentic memory. Such a phantasm, itself no more than a medium, is, on various occasions, displaced

through various non-synonymous substitutions such as 'Boz' (the Boz of the *Sketches* and that of *Pickwick*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* should not be thought of as being exactly the same, there being differences in register), 'David Copperfield', 'Esther Summerson', 'Master Humphrey', 'Dr Marigold' or any other ghostly figure, the apparition coming into being through tropological play, who steps forward in order to structure and reveal virtually the provisionally 'essential being' of a subject, a place or an event's historicity (often all three in conjunction).

'Dickens' names a reading / writing process grounded in history. Properly historical, it not only responds to the material conditions of a historical moment, but also bears the trace of historicity in its inscription, and this is shaped in turn by the material conditions and phenomena to which it attests. It does not bear witness to events and experiences directly, however, but unveils the past as virtual space, giving form to memory, thereby making possible the chance for 'evocation' and an authentic re-presentation of experience as translated in memory. In this, 'history' is not merely empirical fact or context; it is of the essence of language and memory – hence 'e-vocation', that which is called out from something, some moment, some time, but equally that which calls out from the other. If there appears to be formal repetition in the Dickens reading / writing, this is not the limitation of imagination, but the response to the force of memory and history, which demands of the reading / writing subject a fidelity to the enormity of the material experience. For, as Walter Benjamin would have it, memory is a 'fan', which, once opened, reveals itself as having 'no end of its segments' for the subject. 'No image satisfies' the reading subject, argues Benjamin in the apprehension of a figure whose insatiability is not dissimilar to Dickens, 'for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside—'

that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake all this has been unfurled and dissected: and now remembrance progresses from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier. (SW2 597)

Once having been apprehended in one detail, nothing about London satisfies the Dickens-machine, and so the reading / writing technology increases productivity, speed, intensity, acquisition and recording. Image, taste and touch (Benjamin's terms) signal the sensible nature of the subject's experience, which, become traces of memory, must be rendered in some translatable form; and which, though given in other words, makes available to the reader to come a phenomenal experience, *as if* the reader were standing in the place of the phantom subject who

narrates. It is this phenomenal condition – that which drives and feeds the very insatiability it has created – at the heart of, and so disclosing what Benjamin calls ‘essential being’, that which the Dickens-machine opens, and which the Dickensian subject has had unveiled to him or her by his or her encounter with the urban. So as Dickens registers, reads and writes detail after detail, London ‘grows ever mightier’ through memory of the phenomenal experience transcribed.

The problem – and there is one for some readers – is that we confuse things and phenomena. That there is a city called London, that it exists materially and has a history: none of these ‘facts’ is in question. However, there is a fundamental and radical difference, an order of reading and not reading, the gap between which appears incommensurable for some in terms of a true or authentic (to use that Benjaminian word once more) comprehension. This difference amounts to a statement, the baldness of which might appear staggering in its wilful simplicity. The ‘real’ London is one thing, the London one reads on the pages of a novel by Charles Dickens is another. The latter may be a translation of the former, it may be inspired by aspects or experiences of the former; but as soon as transcription and memory take place, even in the experience by which memory becomes encoded with experience, there is already an opening of the gap between the two Londons. In turn, in principle, and in effect, this opens the place for innumerable other Londons to be given. The difficulty for some is in the inability to recognise that which puts the difference to work, which is this: we must apprehend, as Gilles Deleuze argues following Kant, the truth of the relation between the given and the subject; we must even, necessarily, work through the relation between the one and the other, in order to arrive at the truth and so avoid a confusion between ‘the essential and the accidental’ (1991, 70). London is just such a given; the narrator is such a subject, as reader / writer of the city. However ‘the given is not a thing in itself, but rather a set of phenomena, a set that can be presented as a nature only by means of an *a priori* synthesis. The latter’, Deleuze continues, ‘renders possible a rule of representations within the empirical imagination only on the condition that it first constitutes a rule of phenomena within nature itself’ (1991, 111).

To take the question step by step: prior to any synthesis, before also what Gaston Bachelard terms ‘the immense domain of the imagination’ (1994, 212), there is the material ground to be considered. As Paul de Man argues though, materiality is irreducible to a single concept. There are three materialities: ‘the materiality of history, the materiality of inscription, and the materiality of what the eye sees prior to perception and cognition’ (Miller 2001, 187; see de Man 1996, 119–28). Thus, J. Hillis Miller, whose summary of one of de Man’s ‘most difficult and

obscure' considerations from *Aesthetic Ideology* captures with a succinctness and adroit precision the stakes of a sustained challenge to the notion of 'realism', a challenge which hegemonic forms of critical materialism and historicism fail, in the main, to grasp, this failure often being allied to certain formal and aesthetic dismissals of Dickens over the question of being 'properly historical'. Understanding this, one can observe of Dickens (to make specific the de Manian critique) that what is otherwise reduced to the aesthetic dimension of representation fails to appreciate the work of 'cognition and [the] deep complicity with the phenomenalist epistemology of realism' (de Man 1996, 120), wherein an authentic historicity might be given to read.

That said, returning to the question of materialities, and, in particular, the third materiality – this being perhaps the most significant apropos the matter of the narrating subject and its relation to place; once the materiality that the eye receives prior to perception undergoes that synthesis spoken of by Deleuze, the given is no longer available as 'thing', as such. It is, to reiterate Deleuze's words, a *set of phenomena* that *renders possible a rule of representations*. Such 'representations' for the subject, once perceived and reflected on – and thereby synthesised or mediated through 'memorial consciousness' in some fashion in order that the 'perception of the event' or experience comes to correspond, or be analogous, with 'an (actual or possible) memory of this perception' (Husserl 2005, 248) – are apprehended as the phantasmic figures projected by the work of memory. In this way, the past returns as apparition, as spectral or virtual presence or present. In turn, perception, 'somehow', to cite Edmund Husserl, 'becomes modified into re-presentation of what was received' (2005, 248). Not representation, not simple mimetic manifestation, but re-presentation, memory as the mediated trace through which past becomes space, and the subject's relation to thing, to place and event, is structured. Therefore, whatever London there is, as a *there* distinguished from the I whose perception gives place to form and form to place, this London or these Londons that we read the Dickens-machine reading / writing are (obviously) already processed through various filters and layers, maintaining any 'historically' real London at a further remove. It does not matter that we can visit streets, look at shop fronts and details of architecture, take photographs and so on, as if, in doing so, we were to close a gap between a now and then, when the *then* of the text was never a *there* available in any unmediated way. All such activity would be only to attempt to reconstruct, and so invent once again, making real the phantasmal re-presentation of the phenomenal experience of the Dickensian subject. Such activity amounts to a misunderstanding, thereby confusing, once more, the essential and the

accidental, the phenomenal and the empirical, and avoiding or seeking to hold at bay, downplay, marginalise or deny ‘a phenomenology of inner experience’ (de Man 1996, 123) – for which reading is one name.

The Dickens-machine places its subject in a given place so as to read, write and relay an architectonic vision and a sense of the world expressing the subject-memory of place. In the presentation of the subject-memory, the technology of narration produces the image in the reader of location as if the reader were in that place, before that site, but having sight of place as *over there, not-I*: in short, as other. Thus I receive in phantasmal form a sense of the world, and through this the apprehension that the “sense of the world” does not designate the world as a factual given’, to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy’s formulation, but ‘as the constitutive *sense* of the fact that there is world’ (1997, 54–5). This brings me back to the Husserlian term ‘re-presentation’, despite the reservations that Nancy has regarding phenomenology’s being closed off, or attempting to close itself off, from a ‘letting-come’, as he puts it (and there is an implicit and sustained answer to this problem in the work of Jean-Luc Marion, particularly *Being Given*), and with that a concomitant ‘surprising of sense, and also . . . its letting-go’ (1997, 36). The reader as subject in the Dickens text is all too aware of the surprising of sense, and of letting go, becoming passive in the face of what can always arrive or arise, to become in the process lost in reflection on the city, or on a particular vision or location.

Inasmuch as this *letting-come* takes place repeatedly in Dickens, or that there arrives that impression of London taking the senses by surprise (pleasantly or unpleasantly, traumatically or uncannily), the Dickensian text might be read as anticipating and overcoming a particular limit in Husserlian phenomenology. It is important that we remember in particular the recollection of the coffee shop, and from there think the connection between journalistic and fictional narratives in terms of the play of ‘more than one voice in a voice’ by which the city comes, keeping in mind the play of memory that is essential. The image I receive as memory of my past subjectivity and the site that gives ground to my memory of my past self is, in its apprehension, a ‘phantasy presentation’. It is this “image” appearance’, according to Husserl, which returns to me the earlier perception of an experience. In the distinction made here between perception – I perceive at a given moment, which is the *now* of my perception – and memory, the image of that perception returns as “image” re-presentation of the earlier perception’, which, in turn, is doubly constituted: on the one hand, it is the constellated image of particular phenomena, events and experiences; on the other hand, ‘its appearance is the image of the earlier perceptual appearance’

(Husserl 2005, 233). In the temporal distinction between perception and re-presentation, memory and the constitution of the subject take on – perhaps *make visible* is the more appropriate phrase – the poetics of re-presentation; that is to say, specifically a form, an architectonic construct or invention, of the *there is* arrives, and, with that, the subject for whom there is the *there is*, both *in* the re-presentation and to the subject who has consciousness of, and therefore narrates (if only to him- or herself), the memory in particular form, with particular effects and modes of apprehension.

This is seen in the example of the coffee shop memory. What arrives before any representation of the present scene is the memory as it was first perceived by the earlier Dickensian subject. This remembered event and that prior perception are what comes to shape, and so determine, the reading / writing of the subject's present narration. That Dickens utilises the shibboleth MOOR EEFLOC : COFFEE ROOM is particularly helpful here, once more. For we perceive in that graphic division and inversion an irreducible difference, as temporal as it is formal or spatial, which illuminates the force of memory in the constitution of narrative even as the revenant trace overcomes any present perception. As a result, what comes to be revealed through this is the narrated modality of the image constellation of synthesised phenomena. There is traced the reception of the sense of the world in its overcoming of the subject. With this, as a result, 'the appearance of the event in memory is an "image" of the appearance of the same event in the earlier perception' (Husserl 2005, 236), whilst remaining separate. As a result, the two times of perception and memory remain articulated through the spatial and temporal play, even as they threaten to engulf one another, through the inscription of difference – and, additionally, the *différance* – that informs re-presentation and the being of the subject whose presence is always caused to differ and defer itself from itself. And re-presentation has always already taken place, the mirror inversion of the glass script reminding the reader of an over-determining priority by which reading is underway, whether immanently or brought to the fore in an explicit awareness of memorial consciousness to itself. Indeed, it is through reading that re-presentation is opened in *and* to the subject, and from which there is no retreat, or before which there is, and can be, no sense of the world. All reading / writing amounts to such re-presentation: a 'memorial presentation', which, formulated as 'intuitive presentation of the event' (Husserl 2005, 236) through the place of the subject, takes the reader as if by surprise, as if for a first time – and thus, with the power of that authentic and originary revelation, that touches one most closely.

V. Interruptions in the field of vision

Dickens likes to get in your way, to get in your face – not to show you how the tricks are achieved, but to make you refocus, to see, as if for a first time, what you are looking at without really seeing it, and so to think about the experience of perception and the perception of experience. Whether we speak of Boz meditating on Monmouth Street, the stranger confronted with the neighbourhood of Todgers's, or Esther Summerson in the face of a London particular, we have to confront the fact that each is involved with responding to that which particular places or phenomena of London impose on them. The encounter is, must be, phenomenological. By extension, the figure we name 'narrator' is also involved in similar processes of confrontation, experience and response, by which a dynamic is put into play. There is a convergence between place and subject that is analogous with that between text and reader. That this takes place might be noted if one observes how, repeatedly throughout the Dickensian text, but with an especial intensity and gathering force giving the appearance of velocity in the fictions, sentence structure becomes increasingly attenuated or distorted. Most frequently, though not exclusively, the semi-colon assumes the formal role of distinguishing in the architectonics of re-presentation the details of place, as if each moment of punctuation announced the shift of the eye from phenomenon to phenomenon. All that can be written down is written down. That which cannot remains immanently there, unwritten but to be imagined by the reader who steps in for the narrating subject, becoming possessed in turn by that subject's re-presentation of perception.

Take this familiar passage concerning the scene from an interior, in Chapter 2 of *Our Mutual Friend*, 'The Man from Somewhere'. Here, the reader is positioned before a mirror, a 'great looking-glass'. Though the compound noun by which Dickens defines the object may be somewhat obsolete today, it was not that uncommon a phrase in the nineteenth century, as the title of Lewis Carroll's second *Alice* book suggests. There is a minor cultural history to the term's use, inasmuch as, according to the *OED*, it appeared on several occasions in book titles from the end of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century.³³ In each of several examples, the title in question would hold a 'looking-glass' not up to nature but up to England, the state of the nation. Thus, 'looking-glass' is a figure for reflecting, and causing the reader to reflect upon, social and cultural habits or blind spots, which require illumination and bringing into focus. This, in miniature, is the purpose of Dickens's 'looking-glass'. It offers a deliberately distorted composite image of a London demi-monde. Not merely reflective, therefore, exaggeration

and distortion, fragmentation and iterability serve to draw the reader's attention to social phenomena, but also, importantly, to the question of how one sees, that an 'eye' or viewing mechanism is an always necessary medium in the process of looking, and with that, the idea is introduced that there is no perspective, which is not also, immediately, a perception, and that perception and perspective are, furthermore, positioned; a viewing subject, the eye of some *one*, is always implicated. There is always an 'I' who looks, and reads. The looking-glass trope – for it is the mirror that 'reflects', in the double sense of showing through a process of light refraction, on the one hand, and applying conscious thought to, and cognition of, its phenomena, on the other – functions 'blindly' in order that the reading subject might 'reflect' on how he or she 'reads' what strikes the eye, with such a rapidity as to give the illusion of instantaneity, and, with that, the illusion that one just sees, and that phenomena, uninterpreted, are simply objects, vision being mistaken as empirical.

The full effect of this paragraph can only be gauged by citing the extract at length:

The great looking-glass above the sideboard, reflects the table and the company. Reflects the new Veneering crest, in gold and eke in silver, frosted and also thawed, a camel of all work. The Heralds' College found out a Crusading ancestor for Veneering who bore a camel on his shield (or might have done it if he had thought of it), and a caravan of camels take charge of fruits and flowers and candles, and kneel down to be loaded with salt. Reflects Veneering; forty, wavy-haired, dark, tending to corpulence, sly, mysterious, filmy—a kind of sufficiently well-looking veiled-prophet, not prophesying. Reflects Mrs. Veneering; fair, aquiline-nosed and fingered, not so much light hair as she might have, gorgeous in raiment and jewels, enthusiastic, propitiatory, conscious that a corner of her husband's veil is over herself. Reflects Podsnap; prosperously feeding, two little light-coloured wiry wings, one on either side of his else bald head, looking as like his hairbrushes as his hair, dissolving view of red beads on his forehead, large allowance of crumpled shirt-collar up behind. Reflects Mrs. Podsnap; fine woman for Professor Own, quality of bone, neck and nostrils like a rocking-horse, hard features, majestic head-dress in which Podsnap has hung golden offerings. Reflects Twemlow; grey, dry, polite, susceptible to east wind, First-Gentleman-in-Europe collar and cravat, cheeks drawn in as if he had made a great effort to retire into himself some years ago, and had got so far and had never got any farther. Reflects mature young lady; raven locks, and complexion that lights up well when well powdered—as it is—carrying on considerably in the captivation of mature young gentleman; with too much nose in his face, too much ginger in his whiskers, too much torso in his waistcoat, too much sparkle in his studs, his eyes, his buttons, his talk, and his teeth. Reflects charming old Lady Tippins on Veneering's right; with an immense obtuse drab oblong face, like a face in a tablespoon, and a dyed Long Walk up to the top of her head, as a convenient public approach to the bunch of false hair behind, pleased to patronize Mrs. Veneering opposite, who is pleased to be patronized. Reflects

a certain “Mortimer,” another of Veneering’s oldest friends; who never was in the house before, and appears not to want to come again, who sits disconsolate on Mrs. Veneering’s left, and who was inveigled by Lady Tippins (a friend of his childhood) to come to these people’s and talk, and who won’t talk. Reflects Eugene, friend of Mortimer; buried alive in the back of his chair, behind a shoulder—with a powder-epaulette on it—of the mature young lady, and gloomily resorting to the champagne chalice whenever proffered by the Analytical Chemist. Lastly, the looking-glass reflects Boots and Brewer, and two other stuffed Buffers interposed between the rest of the company and possible accidents. (OMF 20–1)

Though neither a scene explicitly addressing London, nor one apparently engaged in memory work, this ‘at home’ event is important in thinking through the Dickens text as phenomenological. There is little description of the room’s architecture or furnishings here. Everything concerns reflection, as we have said. The entire passage amounts to a reflection on reflection, through a number of reflections on what is reflected concerning the people in the room, who serve formally as a series of correlatives in the construction of the passage, and which use moves this extract from being merely a statement or faithful representation, to a performative and labyrinthine gesture of numerous foldings and bendings, inversions and distortions across the plane of the ‘great-looking glass’. The iterable formulae serve as refractions, images of images, all of which combine in a continual modification, so that this particular, overburdened, exhaustive and exhausting paragraph serves as a reflection on reflection.

More than this, though, it engages – and engages the reader in – a mediation, a narrative transformation of the physics of reflection, which process implies indirectly a means to reflect in the reader’s imagination on the ontology of society given in the phenomena perceived and thus experienced through the passive agency of the mirror. The looking-glass is passive inasmuch as it serves to focus figure after figure, drawing the reader’s attention to a given image. But in the distortion of the image, where, for example, Mrs Podsnap’s nostrils are distorted in order that hers come to resemble those of a rocking horse, the agency is transformed, so that the mirror becomes an active amplifier of detail. This is not the only example of the slippage from passivity to activity; indeed, the passage is nothing but this motion, and its repeated rhythms cause a concentration of amplification, everywhere one looks. The eye – as well as the ‘I’ – moves from the materiality of vision to cognition and consciousness of subject.

The use of present tense maintains performatively the seemingly endless reflective mode of perception, what strikes the eye in looking in the glass having already been modified. Expectation of any other purpose

is frustrated by sequential iteration, as the multiplicity of relations only appears to promise to continue. Every detail, in essence, not only mirrors every other, it gives a preview of what is to come, whilst reflecting on what has already been seen. Reflection of phenomena is therefore both temporal as well as spatial. The motion of the narrative across the surface plane of the mirror, and what is reflected in that mirror, stages an abyss without depth, if such a thing is possible. In the world of the mirror, a virtual mediated world, there are only phenomena, which, in their relation to one another, foreground the coming to consciousness of the subjective experience of phenomena. In other words, the mirror – and the passage – shows and tells, albeit indirectly, the reader how reading begins, how the materiality of vision is surpassed and how narration is always phenomenological. This is borne out by the fragments of analysis to which the Veneerings and their guests are subjected, which tend towards essential rather than factual ‘reflection’, or which lead from the merely factual to the apprehension of essence. Authenticity of essence is arrived at through distortion and amplification. The mirror may be read, then, not as object in itself, but as self-reflexive phenomenal trope for considering how reflection’s reflectedness (if I can put it like that) opens to us a *first* thinking of phenomena rather than objects, and so to reflect on the apprehension of experience as it appears to take place.

Returning once more to the textual example. We make an assumption about realist narrative – and, indeed, narrative in general – that it flows, or should flow, more or less continuously. Unless it is Lawrence Sterne, some markedly self-referential, modernist or (so-called) postmodernist author, interruptions, digressions and other formal displacements in narrative continuity are assumed to be discrete and to be subsumed, so as to be as unobtrusive or un-self-advertising as possible. In Dickens’s narration of the Veneerings and their guests reflected in the looking-glass, however, the paragraph is nothing other than the constant breaking into of narrative flow and the assumption of transparency that accompanies this by virtue of the notion of reflection, given continuous fragmentary surges in the charged iteration of ‘reflects’. In order for reflection to be seen, and for the literal reflection to be transformed as mental reflection, there must be some ‘eye’, to insist on this point. A ‘narrator’ is there, to be sure, as those arch comments on those reflected make clear. But, in its play of iterability, interruption and fragmentation (is the work of the mirror image analogous more with a kaleidoscope or a broken glass?), the space of reflections refuses to admit to what Merleau-Ponty calls – regarding Cézanne’s refusal to follow the ‘law of geometrical perspective’ – a ‘medium of simultaneous objects capable of being apprehended by an absolute observer’ (2004, 41). Dickens’s breaking of the smooth surface

and the motions installed therein brings the reader into closer proximity. Such fracture and movement locate the reader as subject of, to this experience, in an intimate manner akin to how one perceives the sense of the world. To stress, once again, what is crucial here for understanding the radical nature of the Dickens-machine in its narrative modalities, the effect here is not simply 'aesthetic'. It is, far more fundamentally, concerned with showing us how we see, how we perceive, and how our sense of the world is felt through the subjective relation to the space of perception; it achieves this, moreover, in the 'normal process of seeing' (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 40), as this is connected to, and enfolded in, reading, analysis, writing and, by extension, memory.

What the mirror reveals, so to speak, is that the phenomena on which I reflect are the principal images by which I judge the world. There is an I and a *there is*.³⁴ But the *there is* is always a condition of my sense of the world, always announcing that place both *is* and is thought *there*, where it is. One reflection here, another there, the looking-glass offers evidence of the *there*, as the *there is*, to my senses. Each reflected image as *punctum* both implies and reflects every other point, and also both the *there* in itself *par excellence*, and evidence of the *there is* to my senses. The looking-glass is, therefore, both subject and substrate for my perception and for the reflection on the condition of my perception of the world. Dickens is never under any illusion that seeing and perception are anything other than this immediacy and proximity of relation, which, in reflection, condenses the temporality, the duration, of the gaze. In this passage, it is strikingly clear that, whether one considers matters of orientation, relation or reflections, whether in themselves or for one another: all are merely the displaced, differing and diverted phenomena connected to, and by my presence, to my experience and my perception. To extend this, each phenomenon is seen to be absolutely itself, in itself and equal to itself; but in its reflection of each and every other phenomenon, whilst remaining other, wholly other, each is in its singularity and iterability as reflection, by definition, substitutable for every other one, though given in relation only by my perception (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 47).

Furthermore, although this immediate scene is not explicitly the exploration of the memory of the past in relation to present perception, it gives me to understand how perception always relies on memory for the validity of my sense of the world, inasmuch as the time of reflection, of the duration of the eye moving from one reflection to another, offers a spatial metaphor for the work of memory in any moment of the subject's experience and reflection on that experience.³⁵ It being the case, to borrow from an argument of Wolfgang Iser's in which he advocates a phenomenological approach to the act of reading, that in

'every text there is a potential time-sequence which the reader must inevitably realize'; and, moreover, that the 'reading process always involves viewing the text through a perspective that is continually on the move, linking up the different phases [or, in this case, reflections], and so constructing . . . the virtual dimension' (Iser 1972, 285), so what the Dickensian looking-glass reflects is just the temporality and modulation of such a process, involving experience, perception and the continual modification of the process. The process gives insight into the fundamental aspect of reading, most frequently, in the text of Dickens, the reading of place through the subject's search for connections between fragments, which themselves make us aware of gaps in re-presentation as they remain before us, and the narrating subject, as so many elements that will not otherwise cohere without the realisation of perception. This realisation on the part of the narrating subject closely mirrors our own experience, as 'this experience comes about through a process of continual modification . . . the reading process . . . illuminat[ing] basic patterns of real experience' (Iser 1972, 288). Nowhere is this more insistently foregrounded and experienced repeatedly than in the subject / narrator's experiences of London, the streets, locations and neighbourhoods, interiors, architectural forms, and the detailed observation of the phenomena comprising these sites. The narrating subject thus offers, in the various encounters with the city's exteriors and interiors, a process that 'mirrors' (with all the modifications, mediations, plays of shadow, moments of indistinctness, distortions, exaggerations and effects of perceptual parallax that this term implies, instead of any uncomplicated or simple reflection), in the duration of the encounter, the reading subject's own continuous striving, 'even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern' (Iser 1972, 288).

An objection might be raised that this is true of any reading. Indeed, given the generality of Iser's commentary, it might be hard to see what distinguishes Dickens. Such arguments are fair enough – or would be, were I advocating here a phenomenological reading of Dickens in light of Iser's generalisations. However, what is being proposed here is not a matter of application but of explication: Dickens's narrative voices, in their presentations of the urban, and the figuring of place in relation to subject, as such re-presentations of self and site take place in narrative, are already phenomenological. To put this differently, the narrative mechanism meets the demands of reading the city and does so through a phenomenological mode of perception. This being so, the purpose here in having recourse to Iser's essay is to illuminate phenomenological processes of reading that are already underway in Dickens's text. Dickens, it might be said, is a phenomenologist of the city, *avant la*

lettre. This, in another reading, might serve to explain why Dickens has such an influence on many subsequent writers of London, but, whether or no, what *does* occur in the text of Dickens through its modalities of perception and re-presentation is, for fictive narrative, a new way of seeing. Iser's generality, as this is alluded and returned to, helps offer a 'theorised' model of what is intuitively at work in Dickens, which it has been the purpose of the various essays to show.

Dickens, most insistently of any Victorian writer, repeatedly frustrates the desire to form a whole, undifferentiated image. The mechanisms of the text offer paradox, contradiction, interruption, space and the experience of the aporetic. It does so, on the one hand, with a frequency and density allied to the experience of the modern city, thereby foregrounding the question of the ontology of the city, while, on the other hand, it constantly demands how the narrating urban subject comes to terms with the modernity of place through the formation of subject positions in relation to place, the formation epistemologically of an 'I' who sees and is involved in the perception of a *there is* comprised of phenomena in such a manner that unbroken comprehension and flow of reception are no longer possible. As Iser argues in general, 'it is the very precision of the written details [as themselves traces inscribed in memory of urban phenomena] which increases the proportion' (Iser 1972, 290), if not solely of indeterminacy, as Iser has it, but also of a self-aware cognition of that which the phenomenon of London demands. Moreover, Dickensian singularity resides in a 'grouping together' of phenomenal elements for someone who stands and gives focus for the reader, which in their resistance to an interaction that appears to offer consistency and integration, presents and re-presents the city as problem. In this, there is a textual, architectonic and *architextural* 'richness' that plays on a tension between 'our awareness of this richness' and any 'configurative meaning' (Iser 1972, 290–1). The Dickens text exploits the problem of the modern subject's perception as a problem of modernity, through what is seen, experienced, and how this is then re-presented in the mnemotechnic of urban configuration. As Iser suggests, with respect to modernist writing,

In this very act the dynamics of reading are revealed. By making his decision [the reader but also the narrating subject in the Dickens text] implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text; at the same time it is this very inexhaustibility that forces him to make his decision. With 'traditional' texts this process was more or less unconscious, but modern texts frequently exploit it quite deliberately. They are often so fragmentary that one's attention is almost exclusively occupied with the search for connections between the fragments; the object of this is not to complicate the 'spectrum' of connections, so much as to make us aware of the nature of our own capacity

for providing links. In such cases, the text refers back directly to our own preconceptions – which are revealed by the act of interpretation that is a basic element of the reading process. (1972, 285)

What is general in Iser is particular in Dickens, historically speaking. While other texts ‘unconsciously’ make available a formal inexhaustibility, Dickens brings into play the inexhaustibility of the urban place as text; as the principal ‘modern’ writer of the city, deliberately exploiting the endlessness of London, quite explicitly in the iterable, often labyrinthine phenomena, and at the performative level of sentence structures, as convoluted as the haphazard nature of the architecture and topography. As will be seen, it is in ‘seeing’ the city from the position of narrative subject that London as concatenation of sensory apprehensions and phenomena comes into being for the reader. The Dickensian modality of re-presentation works through exhausting the subject in the face of urban inexhaustibility; it challenges epistemological certainty through the ineluctability of fragmentary information allied to the rhythmic motions of the prose; it engages in a poetics of iterability, and in addition puts the reader to the task of making connections through the occasional use of poetic devices such as alliteration or a deliberate borrowing from other literary modes or genres in order to foreground the experience of form, whilst constituting the subjective experience and perception of place.

All of which tells us that we are always before the modern Babylon, even as London is always before us, returned in revenant re-presentation. We have always to begin again with Dickens, after Dickens. With Dickens and the re-presentation of the city, *as if* for a first time, again and again, we are made aware of, thereby being given to consider through the shaping of our experience and perception, the phenomenal ‘origin’ that gives itself in its authenticity and historicity. In this, London is re-presented to our experience as what Iser calls a ‘living event’ (Iser 1972, 285): if not living, then a virtual event, a revenance of evocation, the iterability of which is marked by that which in the spirit of London – as Dickens inscribes it, as the field of vision projected by the Dickens-machine generates it – remains open, remaining to be read and written. And the continuous reinscription of our proximity to the experience of the Dickensian narrator as reading / writing subject in the face of a London always remaining to be read forces us to feel, if not see ourselves *in* that experience; in its invention of the city, the Dickens-machine produces an *aide-mémoire*, if not a souvenir of the city itself, which prevents us ‘both from apprehending ourselves as a pure intellect separate from things and from defining things as pure objects lacking in all human attributes’ (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 51). For Dickens, London is a human awful wonder, not of God, as Blake would have it, but of our



Early Nineteenth-Century London Street

own humanity – it is the signature of an age we have not yet outgrown, and which we have yet to read. In reading / writing London, the Dickens subject illustrates how '[c]ontemporariness is . . . a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it, and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it' (Agamben 2011, 11). More exactly, contemporaneity, Giorgio Agamben argues, is *'that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism'*. Those who coincide too well with the epoch . . . are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it' (2011, 11). In Dickens, the subject sees, responds to and is formed by London, *seeing* always as if for a first time, and placing us in that place, to assume the perception anachronistically of the other. But Dickens maintains the contemporaneity in another manner also; for, in most, if not all the novels, London bears in its figures, its re-presentations, traces not only of 'times of ours', but also of that earlier epoch, before 'Boz', but calling Boz into being – the 1820s and early 1830s. This is the London in which the subject wanders, and wonders, losing himself – and, occasionally, herself – in the city. For, as the Dickensian subject knows

—Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. (SW3 352)