London, Radical Culture, and the Making of the Dickensian Aesthetic

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CHAPTER 3

Re-Visioning the City

The Making of an Urban Aesthetic from Hogarth to the Stereoscope

MY FOCUS SO FAR has been on “radical expression” as an important presence in the print market of the early nineteenth century and on the ways in which it shaped Dickens’s fiction. One way in which radical expressive techniques affected Dickens’s fiction was in terms of moving it away from the more realistic forms of novel writing embodied in the work of Thackeray. This chapter will turn to the ways in which Dickens related to a second strand of popular expression that drew its energies not from the experience of political exclusion but from its location in that great, threatening, fascinating, and characteristically nineteenth-century formation: the big city.

England’s giant metropolis—with its broad main thoroughfares, its palatial buildings, its slums, and its teeming, utterly heterogeneous population—continued throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to be the subject of prints, panoramas, entertainment-providing optical gadgets, novels, and other forms of literary entertainment. Yet these representations tended most often to domesticate the city; they reproduced the city through images that could be consumed in the safety of the home or the viewing gallery and mitigated, through a range of discursive strategies, the socially disconcerting implications of that very urban variety from which the city sketch or panorama drew its expressive energies. The classic statement of this domesticizing impulse is to be found in the opening pages of Pierce Egan’s Life in London. Assuring the reader that he could enjoy the sights of
London without exposing himself to any of its dangers, Egan wrote: “The author . . . has chosen for his readers a Camera Obscura View of London, not only for its safety, but because it is so snug, and also possessing the invaluable advantages of SEEING and not been seen” (2; italics in the original).

Egan’s metaphoric use of the camera obscura as his means of unfolding the city is significant. The camera obscura, Jonathan Crary has argued, is “inseparable from a certain metaphysic of interiority: it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free, sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from a public exterior world.”

In other words, Egan’s metaphoric optical gadget—which is conceptualized as a portable machine in defiance of the stationary position from which real-life camera obscuras operated—promises not only to protect a comfortably positioned reader/viewer from the dangers of the streets but also to break up the seamless life of the city into discreet, manageable scenes for the study or pleasure of the “nominally . . . free, sovereign individual.” The camera obscura, thus, registers the city as a passing show: it transforms the struggle of urban existence into subjects of entertainment. At this level, the camera obscura’s articulation of the city is paradigmatic of a larger process: the nineteenth century’s propensity to reproduce the city as a series of easily consumable linguistic and visual scenes, which would, moreover, be mobile and purchasable. Thus, for example, John Wright—author of the reasonably popular series called Mornings at Bow Street (1825)—found in police reports a source from which he could generate “pictures of what is passing in the streets,” “the phraseology of the vulgar,” and “secrets of low, and now and then high life” for the pleasure of consumers who might enjoy these with their “potted beef and buttered toast.”

We might, then, think of the mechanically produced urban image as a simulacra, sundered completely from the object that it represents, driven arbitrarily by market forces to a range of disparate locations: “floating signs,” as Shelly Rice says about the photographs that circulated in Haussmann’s Paris, “without narrative support in the increasingly complex checker board of the modern image network” (italics in the original). It would be a mistake, however, to dissociate the life of a photograph or of the city sketch from anything like a social imaginary and to relate it only to the passive act of consumption. More specifically, it is important to take into account that the process of uprooting, framing, and circulating that Crary and others have associated with the production and dissemination of the modern image was, in fact, double-edged in its effects. This process did, indeed, constitute the violent, harsh, but endlessly fascinating life of the
streets into mechanically reproducible “scenes” that could be enjoyed in the safety of the home. But it was also implicated in the making of, adapting Michel de Certeau’s term, a specifically urban “space.” In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau argues that “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is, in a sense, actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.”

What made the mechanically produced urban image a vital constitutive “vector” in the “polyvalent unity of conflictual programs” is that it unfolded as “the other” of those great organizing interiors of the Victorian moral universe: the home, the workplace, the centers of administration. In this sense, expressive operations that sustained the “space” of the nineteenth-century urban imaginary are engaged, in their various ways, with probing, fortifying, breaching, and redrawing the boundary between the moralized interiors of the establishment and the chaotic, dangerous life of the streets.

A very powerful anticipation of the defining tensions of the nineteenth-century urban imaginary is to be found in William Hogarth’s *Industry and Idleness* (1747). As is well known, Hogarth followed in *Industry and Idleness* a pattern that he had set with *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732): he produced the pictures in the form of multiple prints that he sold to subscribers, and he continued to focus, at the level of content, on contemporary city life rather than on the mythological or historical subjects favored by high art. Even more than *A Harlot’s Progress*, however, *Industry and Idleness* helped to generate the demand for certain forms of urban representation that would attract consumers from all classes and influence the Dickensian novel itself.

The popularity that *Industry and Idleness* enjoyed with both plebeian and middle-class audiences had a great deal to do with the extremely productive paradox inbuilt within its delineation of the contrasting careers of its protagonists. On the one hand, Hogarth takes advantage of Idle’s immoral activities to give full and dramatic expression to the proliferating, always interesting life of the streets. (In the ninth plate of *Industry and Idleness*, indeed, he self-consciously anticipates the magnetic pull that these representations of street scenes were to have on viewers.) On the other hand, unlike the nineteenth-century city sketch, which saw itself merely as an entertainment-producing commodity, Hogarth’s artistic investment in the life of the streets is mediated by a strong moral impulse that constitutes this life as immoral and dangerous. It is this tension in *Industry and Idleness* that throws into relief the defining dynamic of the urban imaginary as it was to develop in Dickens’s novels as well: its propensity to reinforce the bound-
ary walls of the orderly interiors that sustain the responsible and productive existence but, at the same time, to explore, express, and publicize the immoral but endlessly fascinating life that lay beyond these walls.

Any analysis of *Industry and Idleness* must start by recognizing the strong moral investment that it makes on a certain kind of social space. Goodchild’s superiority over Idle is based on not only his industry and application but also his location within and absolute commitment to the long sequence of interiors across which his success story unfolds: to the workshop, the church, the home, the alderman’s chamber. In the last plate, indeed, Goodchild carries the interiority of his office into the streets of London themselves (fig. 4). Barely distinguishable behind a rectangular glass window, Goodchild’s presence amidst a London crowd is represented by the enclosure of his mayoral coach. This coach, indeed, seems to gesture toward a basic organizing principle by which Hogarth distinguishes the contrasting careers of Goodchild and Idle. Located in the middle ground, it marks the boundary between two clearly opposed modes of representation: the wavering, unpredictable movement of the crowd in the foreground and the rock steady lines that delineate the buildings in the background. A major assertion of the latter mode is the rectangular window of Goodchild’s coach, which defines his location and which is replicated, moreover, in the rows of windows that run across the square building in the background.

The straight lines, rows, squares, and rectangles that connect the mayor’s carriage to the more permanent places of inhabitation are crucial to *Industry and Idleness*: they constitute the basic visual units that go into Hogarth’s representation of the spatial universe across which Goodchild’s career moves. Thus, the all-important emblem of Goodchild’s early career—the loom that he works in plate I (fig. 5)—may be viewed, despite its scale and three-dimensionality, as a structural variation on the window behind which he finally disappears in the last print of the series. Moreover, Goodchild’s career, characterized though it is by incessant upward mobility, never moves out of the sort of enclosed space of which the workshop of the first plate is a paradigm. To be sure, the succession of spaces that sustain Goodchild’s movement from the loom to the mayoral carriage are capable of registering a range of social differences as well as the internal variety within large-scale corporate activities. These spaces are, however, inexorably framed by the columns and rows that order the congregation which Goodchild attends as a young man or the horizontal lines (of the geometrically arranged tables) and the vertical lines (of the windows and the picture frames) in the banquet scene over which he presides in plate 8.
FIGURE 5. William Hogarth, “The Fellow 'Prentices at their Looms,” Plate 1 of Series *Industry and Idleness* (1747)
The geometrically constructed spaces across which Goodchild’s career unfolds reproduces the city as a network of organized, hierarchically ordered sites of production, administration, and responsible domesticity. This stabilization of social space makes possible the unfolding of the individual subject across time. However, instead of holding his place as a figure at the center of Hogarth’s story, Goodchild’s progress ironically seems to require his shrinkage. In several plates, he appears only as a distant figure of authority. Thus, Goodchild’s career might represent an ideal version of success, yet it also results in his merger with the geometrical spaces that increasingly identify him and separate him from the world outside. Moreover, unlike the domestic novel, *Industry and Idleness* does not naturalize this separation. Hogarth’s picture series structures city life around the principle of contrast, thereby making the delineation of Idle’s reckless life in the streets and the vice dens of London an indispensable precondition for the articulation of Goodchild’s improvement story. The beggary and disorderly grotesquery that are often prominent in the plates depicting Goodchild’s rise—in plates 6 and 8, for example, grotesques occupy the foreground—even more obviously condition his plot line in the contrasting places of Idle’s ruin. Idle’s immorality obviously breaches the social boundary walls within which Goodchild’s story unfolds, accessing the seemingly independent existence of another London, and in this way it sets into motion an expressive trajectory driven by the very social disparities that occupy the gap between the plates instead of unfolding smoothly within either contrasting series.

Hogarth’s commitment to ordering and making visible does not, of course, disappear when he moves from the workshop or the alderman’s chamber to the chaotic London streets. In fact, these streets help to link the very interiors that Goodchild inhabits and are consequently inseparable from the network of addresses, signboards, and official emblems mapping the city. But the creative excess, the sheer irresistibility of Hogarth’s representations of the “other” London also suggests a complex representational system that is oriented toward not only surveying and containing but also multiplying urban contradictions. Coexisting, thus, with the parallel tasks of viewing and disciplining in *Industry and Idleness* is a trajectory of representation that draws its energies precisely from the most unclassifiable elements in London’s street life: its shifting contrasts, its variety, and the irresponsible, reckless, brutal but endlessly proliferating activities of its crowds.

One way in which to uncover the expressive energies that lurk beneath Hogarth’s demonized street scenes and that were to sustain a whole tradition of graphic representation right up until the mid-1830s is by focusing on that characteristically Hogarthian entity: the city crowd (fig. 6). In *Industry and
Idleness, the crowd is not only shown to congregate around the spectacle of a public hanging but is itself constituted as a spectacle. Uncontainable in the interiors that Goodchild inhabits, incapable of sustaining those rational and productive relationships that underlies the lives of the “industrious,” the crowd in *Industry and Idleness* is vast, chaotic, and prone always to acts proscribed in the enlightened world. Thus, the predictability of Goodchild’s regulated life gives way, in the Tyburn scene, to proliferating uncoordinated activities, random collisions between the most unconnected people, and to that sense of “quick, various movement, of surprise seen close” that Donald Gray sees as Hogarth’s legacy to the relatively denuded city sketches of the nineteenth century.8

Moreover, unlike the typical nineteenth-century city sketch, the Tyburn plate is centered around a special occasion: it finds in Idle’s public hanging the opportunity to bring together a very wide range of street folk within a single frame and to give free expression to activities that are hectic, heterogeneous, and completely free of the restraint that regulates behavior in Goodchild’s world. Thus, the crowded foreground of Hogarth’s picture is made up, among much else, of prostitutes who are getting drunk; a fellow who looks up a girl’s skirt as he helps her climb into a cart; sellers of gin, oranges, biscuits, and broadsheets; a man who is about to throw a dog into the cart that carries Idle to the gallows; an enraged woman who claws the eyes of an astonished adversary; a soldier who is down on his haunches urinating; and two boys who laughingly watch him. The sheer surplus of figures that Hogarth spreads across the length and breadth of his picture, the vividness with which he details the people who inhabit the foreground, the sense of drama that he imparts to their expressions and activities, in short the artistic energy that he invests in his representation of the crowd, points to a paradox that runs through *Industry and Idleness* and that is particularly evident in the Tyburn plate.9 On the one hand, Idle’s public hanging is constituted as the culmination of a moral fable based on the segregation and moralization of urban space. On the other hand, like the public hanging, Hogarth’s crowd is spectacular: it is sexual, violent, dramatic, grotesque, and, in this sense, capable of giving Hogarth’s representations an expressive and commercial energy that threatens rather than reinforces the binaries around which his moral tale is built. A remarkable feature of the Tyburn plate is that it articulates, at the level of its content, the tension between its moral condemnation of a life led in the streets and its sense of the popular appeal and, by implication, of the commercial possibilities that adhere to any representation of such a life.10
Indeed, the story of Idle’s life enters the print market even before he dies: the penultimate picture in *Industry and Idleness* focuses on his journey to the gallows but also on a woman who sells a broadsheet entitled “The Last Dying Speech and Confessions of Tho Idle.” Hogarth’s delineation of his wayward protagonist and of the details which surround him expresses powerfully the horror of the fate he has brought on to himself. The cart that carries Idle to the gallows also bears his coffin, and the dramatic gestures of the lean-faced, long-haired Methodist preacher who accompanies Idle suggests the enormity of the transformation that is about to overtake Idle. Above all, it is on Idle’s tiny but finely etched face that Hogarth inscribes the force of his retribution. It is a shrunken, cowering face that is already stamped by death.

In an unexpected maneuver, however, Hogarth pushes the culminating image of his moral drama to the middle ground of the Tyburn plate. The figure who dominates this picture is located at the very center of the foreground and it is not Idle at all but a woman who hawks a broadsheet containing the last dying speech and confessions of Idle. What distinguishes her from the rest of the crowd, despite the ragged appearance that she shares with everyone else, is the purposefulness of her activities. For instance, the bleeding child who wallows in the mud to her right throws into relief the security that she is able to give to her own baby. Moreover, even as she manages her baby amidst the jostling crowd, she is able to channel her entire energy into the act of selling her broadsheet: her posture—the left hand covering the ear to shut out disturbance—suggests the concentration with which she works. Having turned her face away from the crowd in the direction of the real world with real people who are in the act of viewing Hogarth’s picture series, the woman’s open mouth holds in perpetuity her hawking shout.

But exactly what kind of document is the Tyburn woman selling? Generically, a broadsheet such as the one that the Tyburn woman sells descended from an official document that often accompanied the execution of a malefactor. As Peter Linebaugh explains, “The ‘great Bishop of the Cells’ (as the Ordinary was called) talked to the condemned malefactors in their last days. He summarized these conversations and published them in his *Account* along with his sermons. It was then sold in the streets before, during, and after the hanging for the edification of his readers.” “The Last Dying Speech” derived from the *Account* but was “part of a broader library of the street, whose purveyors included reciters of dialogues, litanies, and squibs, taletellers and ballad mongers.” Geared to street culture and to the expressive economy of ballads and legends, “The Last Dying Speech” contained an emotional excess that distinguished it from the *Account* and that
supported “a mythic presentation of the malefactor.”

*Industry and Idleness* vividly registers this process of unofficial mythification. Thus, Idle does not disappear from the life of the crowd even after he is executed. On the contrary, inscribed in a broadsheet called “A Full and True Account of the Ghost of Tho Idle,” Idle’s mythical afterlife circulates through the very procession that accompanies Goodchild’s triumphal journey through London.

By representing the hawking woman’s shout as a focused and powerful act of intervention, Hogarth, thus, seems to be recognizing the unstoppable energy that drives the print commodity and in this way helps morally ambiguous accounts of low life to circulate freely across the disparate social spaces of the city. Paradoxically, it is exactly the print commodity’s capacity to “elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised,” which proves crucial for the making of the new urban aesthetic that would develop continuously from *Industry and Idleness* to *Bleak House* and beyond.

It is possible to uncover more precisely the relationship between the Tyburn woman’s hawking shout and the making of the new urban aesthetic by comparing the process that Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* advocates for its own circulation with the ways in which print commodities actually circulate in *Industry and Idleness*. Thus, unlike Egan’s camera obscura-like book, which detaches not only the represented scene but also the viewer/reader from the city itself, and which generates its social knowledge within the placeless public sphere made up of isolated individual readers, the Tyburn broadsheet—and even more directly the one entitled “A Full and True Account of the Ghost of Tho Idle” which appears in the last plate of *Industry and Idleness*—belongs to the firmly located, physically concrete domain that David Henkin has designated as the “public sphere of urban letters.”

Broadsheets are documents that circulate together with newspapers, calling cards, handbills, and posters amidst the shop signs, the buildings, and the alleys of the city, and they owe their very existence as print commodities to their integration with the human traffic of the streets. As unbound, uncovered, and always readable documents, they seek to draw the attention of every passerby, and ultimately to affect the series of exchanges that will result in their dispersal across the length and breadth of the city.

As part of “city reading,” then, broadsheets based on Idle’s life and death keep in constant circulation those images and discourses from the “other” London that pose such a danger to the organized and organizing centers of Hogarth’s moral universe. In *Industry and Idleness* this threat is not just theoretical: its effects are evident not amongst some imagined community of consumers but directly, and very powerfully, within the internal
world of the picture series itself. Thus, in the opening picture, a broadsheet very similar to the one that circulates in London’s streets in the last plate is shown to have found its way into that geometrically fortified and highly organized site of production: the workshop. It hangs on the sleeping Idle’s loom in the form of a down-market, broadsheet version of the story of Moll Flanders’s promiscuous life. Certainly Hogarth moralizes Idle’s reading habits: Idle’s preference of the Moll Flanders story is at the cost of “The Prentice’s Guide” (which lies torn and rotting on the floor) and it looks forward to a reckless life that will end with his hanging. However, the Moll Flanders broadsheet, together with the words “Spittle Fields” inscribed on the large ale measure that Hogarth strategically places in Idle’s vicinity, also symptomize the mobility of urban texts and especially their capacity to carry fragments of the life of the “other” London to the geometrically enclosed sites of productive and responsible living. What is more, the urban text’s propensity to bring together the differing social spaces of the city generates an important feature in Hogarth’s own articulation of the metropolis.

This feature is evident above all in plate 3 (fig. 7) where the disruptive energies that Hogarth associates with the centers of urban debauchery and crime are, like the broadsheets that the Tyburn woman sells and Idle buys, shown to spill into and threaten the more organized sectors of the city. Every detail in the third plate—the sinking grave which serves as the gambling table; the vicious, hardened faces of Idle’s gambling companions; the moldering skulls and bones that lie scattered chaotically in the immediate vicinity of the grave; the suggestions of unfair play and retaliatory violence—serves to imbue the gambling scene with the nightmare atmosphere that pervades the more permanent vice dens of London. However, if the prostitute’s garret where Idle spends a night or the Blood Bowl where he is shown to divide the spoils of a robbery with a fellow criminal are enclosed interiors constituted, self-consciously, as the “other” of the spaces across which Goodchild’s career moves, the vicious gambling scene in plate 3 unfolds tensely against a background that belongs clearly to the domain of rational, respectable existence. The wall of the brick church that constitutes the background in plate 3 is punctuated by the geometrically shaped doors and windows that remain throughout the picture series, the markers of control and rational organization. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to think of the church wall as the external face of the sort of interiors that Goodchild inhabits. Yet the church wall is part of an urban scene characterized not by its settled homogeneity but by a series of dramatic contrasts: between a group of disreputable characters engaged in a tense, potentially violent activity and the last of the
FIGURE 7. William Hogarth, “The Idle ’Prentice at Play in Church Yard, during Divine Service,” Plate 3 of Series Industry and Idleness (1747)
congregation that files into the church in an orderly manner; between the official insignia of London that appears at the very center of the church wall and the dark, uncared-for, desecrated graveyard that stretches out under its very shadow.

It should be clear, therefore, that the importance of the Moll Flanders broadsheet cannot be limited to its (negative) role in Hogarth’s moral fable. Rather, as a fragment of street culture driven by the circulatory energies of print capitalism to breach the fortified spaces of respectability, the Moll Flanders broadsheet embodies a second major impulse within *Industry and Idleness* that unfolds in tense opposition against Hogarth’s attempts to map the city and to shut off its respectable and productive interiors from the contaminating effect of its streets. More specifically, this second impulse cuts through the binary structure established in *Industry and Idleness* by the classificatory, disciplinary trajectory within Hogarth’s articulation of the city, and it is oriented not toward segregating the respectable quarters of London from the disreputable but toward bringing urban disparities together in relationships of tense simultaneity. Accordingly, the characteristic mode of this second trajectory is a “spatial phrasing” that is based on fragmentation and juxtaposition rather than on continuity and homogeneity. This juxtapositional impulse was to coexist throughout the nineteenth century’s representations of the city with the classificatory and segregating modes, to constitute what I am calling the urban aesthetic.

This chapter has dwelled at some length on *Industry and Idleness* because it exercised a very strong and enduring influence on nineteenth-century representations of the city. Not only did Hogarth’s characters, plots, and locations continue to circulate throughout the first half of the nineteenth century in reprints and in dramatic and fictional adaptations but nineteenth-century practitioners routinely drew upon Hogarth’s techniques in their representations of London’s low life. What is more is that the tension—between, on the one hand, the techniques with which Hogarth had sought to classify the city and fortify its respectable interiors and, on the other, the juxtapositional possibilities generated by Hogarth’s “spatial phrasing”—never lost its relevance in the nineteenth century’s imaginative articulations of the metropolis. I will now track the development of this tension through the first half of the nineteenth century, focusing on images of the city produced by three popular forms of the nineteenth century: the city sketch, especially as it worked in tandem with Pierce Egan’s written text in *Life in London*, the panorama, and the stereoscope.

The London of the 1820s that Egan depicts was a less menacing, more precisely mapped-out city than the metropolis of *Industry and Idleness*. 
Writing about Paris in 1836 Balzac points to the nature and some implications of such mapping:

Poor women of France! You would probably like to remain unknown in order in order to carry on your little romances. But how can you manage to do this in a civilization which registers the departures and arrival of coaches in public places, counts letters and stamps them when they are posted and again when they are delivered, which provides houses with numbers and will soon have the whole country down to the smallest plot of land in its registers.¹⁷

The classificatory work, whose administrative manifestations Balzac describes, had begun in England during the eighteenth century itself. As John Marriott suggests:

when the ethos for improvement gathered momentum in the course of the eighteenth century, it was framed in terms of the physical rather than the human environment. Such improvement was, therefore, predicated on a detailed knowledge of metropolitan topography; cartographers, surveyors, travel writers and poets applied themselves to the task of mapping the streets of the city so opening them up for the bourgeois traveler.¹⁸

The classificatory impulse, already evident in Hogarth’s work, becomes considerably stronger in Life in London. The well-known frontispiece of Life in London (fig. 8) visually articulates the fantasy of a hierarchically organized London that nevertheless made the city’s social extremes available for observation. In the Cruikshank picture, London’s social life descends vertically from the court to the garret. But the Cruikshank brothers (George and Robert) also use the clearly demarcated segments and niches of the Corinthian pillar (which serves as the allegorical ground for the picture) to separate the social groups and offer them as exhibits for the benefit of the viewer. The Cruikshanks, thus, offer readers a view of London’s heterogeneous social life and extend Hogarth’s system of geometric divisions between segments of the social spectrum.

Egan’s written text, following the Cruikshank frontispiece, deals only with the two extremes of the social spectrum, but like many other forms of representing the city discussed in this book, Life in London seeks not only to contain but also to work with the intersections and mutations incessantly produced by the mobility and radical social diversity of urban life. This double trajectory within the urban aesthetic is encoded in the image of
the encyclopedia that Egan uses to describe London. As a discursive mode, the encyclopedia suggests, at one level, the idea of cataloging—of recording every detail that may contribute to the reader’s knowledge of London. At the same time, however, the diverse entries that randomly follow each other in the encyclopedia also approximate the endless sequence of unrelated but contiguous scenes in *Life in London*, activities that turned Egan’s London into a site where, as John Marriott puts it, “the extremes and paradoxes of life happily coexist.” In a very real sense, indeed, the whole of Egan’s discourse is generated by the conviction that the extremities in the “complete cyclopaedia” (23), that is, London, can be experienced: the paradigmatic character of *Life in London* is Bob Logic who, as a “complete walking map of the metropolis—a perfect pocket dictionary of all the flash cant, slang patter, either of St. James’s or St. Giles’s,” opens up passages between dramatically different areas of London and in this way sustains an important dynamic of the book. Focusing on this commitment to the unfolding of urban variety and, more specifically, on the behavior of Egan’s protagonists as they move between those utterly disparate social worlds frozen in the Corinthian pillar makes it possible to track the continuing unfolding of the juxtapositional trajectory within the urban aesthetic.

In *Life in London* Egan finds, perhaps invents, ways by which he might register the city’s diversity on the figures of his protagonists. One way in which he does this is by fabricating for his book an arrangement of time and space that differs significantly from the ways in which these elements are organized in the realistic-domestic novel. Time, in the domestic novel, works to generate, among other things, the effect of everyday life—its rhythms and its more or less set routines. Moreover, these regular temporal sequences ensure that the socially homogeneous individuals and groups who inhabit the domestic novel meet at regular intervals in such spaces as the parlor, the park, or the church. In this sense, time becomes the taken-for-granted, almost invisible element in which interpersonal relationships and, indeed, individuality itself develop. *Life in London* totally disrupts the normal, everyday pace of time: “Jerry, who used to rise with the lark when at Hawthorne Hall . . . had, since his arrival in London, reversed the scene altogether. His acquaintances, Tom and Logic, had bid adieu to anything like regularity of living, long before . . . and had only gone to repose or left their beds as circumstances required” (234; italics in the original).

The regular temporal sequence that sustained the unfolding of subjective life in the domestic novel gives way here to an arrangement of time oriented toward exposing Egan’s protagonists to the random variety of the city: to its night life and more generally to its innumerable unforeseen and
unforeseeable encounters. In fact, Egan’s basically *spatial* imagination, the individual figure, for all its lack of inner depth, often emerges as a site where the diversity—often the internal contradictoriness of the metropolis—can be vividly registered. Tom and Jerry may be “superficial” as characters, their unreflective enjoyment of urban contrasts being utterly incapable of sustaining anything like a developing inner life. But Egan’s characters might also be considered instruments of that “complex kind of training” to which the experience of urban modernity subjected “the human sensorium.” Thus, Tom and Jerry do not simply relay to the readers of Egan’s book the scenes that they encounter during their sprees and rambles through London. Their behavior also focuses on their persons the city’s propensity to destroy the internal integrity of things and to habituate the mind, instead, to the experience of random diversity and juxtaposition, fragmentation, and superimposition. Indeed, Tom and Jerry can sustain their situation as connoisseurs of urban variety only by learning how to rapidly erase from or superimpose upon their personalities such markers of social class or station that may or may not be relevant to a particular social encounter. As Egan’s protagonists prepare to enter the “*classic ground*” “of fashion, style, elegance, and manners” in Allmacks very soon after having spent an evening among the “Lascars, Blacks, jack tars, coal heavers, dustmen, women of colour, old and young of All Max,” Tom invokes the “waters of *lethe*” to cleanse Jerry’s “pericranium” of any evidence that might betray their recent association with “the flash part of mankind” (293, 286, 293; italics in the original). On the other hand, when Tom moves around in the Back Slums of London, it is no longer absolutely imperative for him to sustain an unambiguous social identity. He disguises himself as a beggar, yet, Egan writes, “he did not lose the traces of a *gentleman*” (346; italics in the original). Tom’s situation as a conduit between the contradictory social spaces that make up the city and his consequent propensity to bear on his person the signs of urban contradictions symptomize a strand within the urban aesthetic that will turn out to be important for this book. To be sure, Tom’s situation as both beggar and gentleman carries no significance beyond his (and Pierce Egan’s) enjoyment of the social diversity of the city. Corinthian Tom’s many interactions with beggars and whores are not mediated by that self-conscious ideology that inexorably leads Thomas Idle to his hanging ground. Furthermore, Tom and Jerry’s propensity to bring together in relationships of simultaneity the extremities of the social world do not generate the sort of anxiety that comes through so powerfully in the discourses (both fictional and nonfictional) of the 1850s. Nevertheless, Egan’s early attempts to articulate the unstable diversity of the city and, more specifically, its propensity to
fragment but also to generate unexpected convergences does suggest a trajectory of representation that would ultimately produce novels like *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*. For example, Egan’s propensity to present Corinthian Tom as a collage of socially contradictory signs rather than as an introspective subject would energize, in Dickens’s novels, an urban mode of characterization whose effects were very different from those that realism sought to achieve. Moreover, unlike Hogarth who exploited but did not acknowledge the expressive possibilities offered by a fractured cityscape, Egan explicitly finds in the city the source of an expressive dynamic that runs counter to domestic realism’s focus on the everyday life of the middle classes as the only proper subject for the novel. Corinthian Tom speaks for Egan when he insists that a “view of real life” is to be obtained not in those typical sites of novelistic representation—“the closet” or “in the circles of fashion [where] you scarcely meet with any contrast, whatever”—but at the entrance of the Westminster-Pit where dogs are fought and where “flue flakers, dustmen, lamp-lighters, stage coachmen, bakers, farmers, barristers, swells, butchers . . . weavers, snobs, market-men, watermen, honourables, sprigs of nobility, M.P.s” jostle for admission (223, 222; italics in the original).

The popular discursive engagement with the city, of which Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* is an early example, continued well into the 1850s, and one form in which the effects of this continuing engagement are clearly visible is the panorama. More specifically, the panorama deployed its enhanced technological resources to sustain in new ways the central paradoxical dynamic of Egan’s work: the impulse, on the one hand, to topographize the city, to fix and to make visible its details and, on the other, to uproot these details from the discourse of objective geography to set them into circulation. One way in which to unfold the tension between the centripetal and the dispersive forces within the panorama is by focusing on certain significant differences in the conditions in which early nineteenth-century England’s most famous panoramic work—Thomas Horner’s gigantic representation of London—was produced and disseminated.

When in 1823 Thomas Horner first established his “observatory” on the very top platform of the scaffolding erected for the purpose of renovating St. Paul’s Cathedral, he conceptualized his panorama of London in relatively modest terms. As he went on, however, he was more and more impressed by the view he commanded and in the end he produced a panorama of truly gigantic proportions. When it was finally displayed in a massive, specially designed building called the Colosseum, it “enclosed a circle 130 feet in diameter, was 60 feet high, and covered a surface of more than 24,000
feet." Horner's goal was to achieve an "absolute perfection of detail" in his panorama such that even the tiniest feature of the metropolis could be easily recognizable in it. It is clear that he succeeded to a considerable extent. One contemporary described the finished picture as "a *cyclopaedia of information*" (italics in the original) that offered a far more detailed inventory "of the largest and most influential city in the world" than "[h]istories, descriptions, maps and prints." Evidently, therefore, one element in Horner's panorama that impressed his first viewers was its comprehensiveness—its successful presentation of the most immoderate of social formations as a topographically accurate whole. But Horner was able to achieve this only because he had managed to find a godlike vantage point above the dome of St. Paul's. It is exactly this undisturbed and fixed situation from which Horner produced his panorama that may be contrasted against the conditions in which his audience viewed it.

The view of London that Horner's panorama offered spectators was, in every sense, spectacular. Horner's gigantic picture spread cylindrically across 24,000 square feet of painted surface under the 15,000 square feet dome of the Colosseum, which was painted as the sky. Moreover, by affecting what Gillen D’Arcy Wood has called "a very modern marriage between entrepreneurship and visual technology," Horner's exhibition offered the visitor a range of viewing positions. The exhibitors devised an ultramodern system made up of pulleys, trolleys, and, most sensationally, the first hydraulic elevators ever used in London to lift the viewer off the ground and to transport her or him to several points in the gigantic, empty hemisphere that the Colosseum enclosed. These spectacular technological arrangements gave to the viewer considerable ambulatory freedom and, by implication, access to certain visual effects that could not have been available to Horner himself when he was painting his panorama from his fixed position on top of the dome of St. Paul's. More specifically, the shifts that the exhibiting machinery affected in the viewer's position enabled her or him to grasp the city as fragments, to think of the city as a collage of dispersed details that did not necessarily have to conform to geographical continuity. In an important sense, Horner himself encouraged his viewers to abstract and compare the disparate details of his panorama. For one thing, Horner's gigantic painting completely subsumed tonal values to comprehensiveness and clarity in detailing: it sought to ensure that no effect of light or shade got in the way of a viewer's appropriation of this or that feature of the city. Indeed, Stephan Oettermann has attributed the "hyper clarity" of Horner's detailing to a real estate agent's view of London aimed at putting into circulation "the dimensions and price of the listings."
It is important not to take Oettermann’s comparison between Horner’s panorama and “a mail-order catalogue” too literally. What makes Oettermann’s insight valuable, however, is that it points to certain impulses within the panorama that tended to fly against its maplike ability to fix the exact locations of places. More specifically, it points to the ability of the panorama, as a form, to register what, following Jonathan Crary, may be called modern capitalism’s propensity to “uproot . . . and make mobile that which is grounded, clear . . . away and obliterate that which impedes circulation, and make . . . exchangeable what is singular.”27 In a couple of prints that he published in 1851 on the subject of the Great Exhibition, Cruikshank demonstrated just how far panoramic representation could go in this direction. Cruikshank found in his very subject a mode of organization that privileged the dispersive impulses that Crary associated with modern capitalism over the traditional panorama’s commitment of replicating a realistic topography from a fixed point of view. All the World Going to See the Great Exhibition of 1851 represents the world itself as a dream space, depicting a densely detailed crowd of ships, trains, pyramids, and camels that move along the rims of the earth toward the Crystal Palace, which is located at the center of the upper hemisphere. The Dispersion of the Works of All Nations from the Great Exhibition of 1851 is even more vivid in its dramatization of the unrelated simultaneity of diverse, far-flung images and commodities brought together by the imperatives of trade. The print holds together tiger skins, oriental umbrellas, exotic headdresses, cannons, cellos, clocks, railway engines, and dresses that float without people in what seems uncannily like a postmodern collage.

We could, thus, argue that although the panoramic mode was oriented primarily toward mapping the city’s streets and buildings, it also demonstrated the possibility of holding together, within a single frame, elements that were widely dispersed in space. Cruikshank was to draw upon and extend even further the panorama’s expressive possibility in the most elaborate picture of his later years. Cruikshank’s The Worship of Bacchus (1860–62) is a massive oil painting, over thirteen feet wide and seven feet long, and it is inhabited by over a thousand figures. What unifies the picture is that all the figures exemplify, in some way or another, the evil effects of drinking. On the other hand, the figures are also divided into various self-contained, often disconnected tableaus that range from elegant, elite interiors to brutal and drunken scenes enacted in the streets of London. Cruikshank was drawing on the panorama’s capacity to bring together disparate locations while attempting to map the evils of drinking across the whole spectrum of English society, but he was also extending the panorama’s expressive possi-
bilities by saturating his locations with a social content that panoramas did not always have. What is more, in an extraordinary lecture he gave during an exhibition of his painting, Cruikshank demonstrated that it was possible to discursively activate the figures and groups in his picture in a manner that a picture could not, on its own, have done. Cruikshank hoped that his picture would be “read” rather than merely viewed and that viewings would often be accompanied by lectures, so that “the mind may be operated upon through the ears as well as the eye at the same time.” In his own lecture Cruikshank explained what was literally happening in the “diagrams” scattered across his canvass, but he also used the resources of language to improvise anecdotes—for example, around “acts of [drunken] violence that he had witnessed in the city” to make unexpected connections between this or that group.

Cruikshank’s pieces are important because they suggest the possibility of a panoramic imagination where London’s streets, buildings, and localities would appear not as markers in the discourse of objective geography but rather as floating urban signifiers, saturated with this or that semantic content and capable of entering into relationships of “opposition, alteration and juxtaposition” with other urban signifiers to create what Roland Barthes has called “the basic rhythm of signification.” In this sense, the panoramic mode would, indeed, have a special kind of significance for any articulation of the London of the 1850s when metropolitan improvements, rising standards of living, and the pervasive rhetoric of progress tended to overshadow the problem of poverty and when doctors, sanitary inspectors, journalists who wrote about “the residuum” or the “sunken sixth” often compared themselves to “explorers investigating foreign, ‘savage,’ and uncharted territory.” On the other hand, as a mode always capable of bringing together the socially disparate and spatially dispersed parts of the city in relations of “opposition, alteration and juxtaposition,” the panoramic imagination had the potential of breaching the structural demarcations by which respectable London sought to separate itself from its unregenerate “other.” In “The Last Words of the Old Year,” an essay that appeared in Household Words in the same year as Cruikshank’s prints, the Great Exhibition remains one of capitalism’s dream spaces: “a great assemblage of the peaceful glories of the world.” But the panoramic imagination can now emulate, at the discursive level, the circulatory processes of modernity that had brought together goods from all over the world in the Crystal Palace, wrench the “Great Exhibition” itself from an environment overlain with connotations of progress, and pit it against virtual spaces of other kinds: “the dark exhibition of the bad results of our doings.”
It is now possible to propose certain specific ways in which the panorama contributed to the making of an urban aesthetic. At the simplest level the panoramic mode was capable of registering, more vividly than ever before, the random diversity of the city. Henry Mayhew focused on precisely this function of the panoramic mode when he described the experience of viewing London from high up in the sky as a passenger in the Royal Nassau Balloon: “Indeed, it was a most wonderful sight to behold that vast bricken mass of churches and hospitals, banks and prisons, palaces and workhouses, docks and refuges for the destitute, parks and squares, and courts and alleys, which make up London.”

About fifteen years before Mayhew wrote this, Dickens was, perhaps, already sensing possibilities the panoramic mode would open up for novelists. In an 1847 letter to Edward Tagard, he invoked the moving panorama as the form most capable of registering a radically fractured cityscape. Dickens described Paris as a succession of “gaudy or ghastly” sights, and he added that as he walked through the streets of Paris, “Hospitals, Prisons, Dead-houses, Operas, Theatres, Concert Rooms, Burial-grounds, Palaces, and Wine shops” passed before him “as in a rapid Panorama.” In _Bleak House_, which he began some three years after his visit to Paris, Dickens would demonstrate how a basic feature of the panorama—the long, unbroken sequences that moved across a bewilderingly diverse cityscape—could be absorbed within the expressive economy of language and in the process transform spatial parameters within which novels usually worked.

But the panorama contributed to the emerging urban aesthetic at another closely related level as well, a contribution that flowed from the ambiguous status of the details that went into the making of the panorama. Thus, as parts of an accurate topographical representation, the buildings, monuments, and streets that made up the panorama could only have fixed locations. However, these details were also capable of freeing themselves from the topographical imperatives of the panorama, of circulating as independent urban signifiers, and of precipitating conjunctions and intersections unimaginable within the discourse of scientific geography. It was the panorama’s capacity to produce potentially mobile details even as it focused on the city as a whole and, thereby, to suggest unexpected connections between widely dispersed and socially disparate locations of the city that Dickens seized upon when, in _Bleak House_ for example, he cut a discursive path across London that would lead from the Dedlock townhouse to the paupers’ graveyard.

More than any of the forms discussed so far, it was the technologically advanced operations of the stereoscope that demonstrated the range and
sophistication of effects that could be brought into play in nineteenth-cen-
tury simulations of the big city. As something fabricated out of objects that
were simply added to “others in a succession that only underscores their
disconnection,” the stereoscope articulated, in an extreme form, an image
of the city built out of randomly circulating details. Unlike the city sketch or
the conventional panorama, it dispensed even with contiguity in real space
as the basis of its organization. However, if the stereoscopic representation
completely disregards the real location of an urban detail or the relationship
that it bears to the objects that actually surround it, it also promotes rela-
tionships of other kinds. As Rosalind Krauss put it, “The file cabinet is a dif-
f erent object from the wall or the easel. It holds out the possibility of storing
and cross-referencing bits of information and of collating them through the
particular grid of a system of knowledge.”

The system of “cross-referencing” to which Krauss refers could, of
course, produce manufactured knowledge or even pure illusion. Indeed, as
“the technical reconstitution of an already reproduced world,” the stereo-
scopic scene was, in many senses, the ultimate example of the nineteenth
century’s increasing propensity to simulate the domain of the visible. Thus,
“Photography”—an essay that appeared in Household Words—describes
the operations of the stereoscope in a way that highlights precisely the illu-
sion-producing trajectory that so often underlay the operations of Victorian
optical gadgetry. The stereoscope, in this essay, produces an amazing specta-
 cle: a groom “biting the puppy’s tail off, with an expression of enjoyment.”
Equally, however, “Photography” reiterates Rosalind Krauss’s sense of the
representational possibilities generated by the way in which the stereoscope
organizes its signifiers. The stereoscope, like the camera, trained the mind
to respond to a new kind of discursive experience: “the art of judicious
groupings.”

“[T]he art of judicious groupings” will have major implications for the
Dickensian urban aesthetic. What I want to emphasize now is that the ste-
roscope made it possible to extend these groupings across not only two- but
also three-dimensional space. Here again the stereoscope’s representation
of receding space was very different from the realism that the use of perspec-
tive achieved for painting. As Jonathan Crary puts it:

The stereoscopic relief or depth has no unifying logic or order. If perspec-
tive implied a homogeneous and potentially metric space, the stereoscope
discloses a fundamentally disunified and aggregate field of disjunct ele-
ments. . . . When we look head on at a photograph or a painting our eyes
remain at a single angle of convergence, thus endowing the image surface
with optical unity. The reading or scanning of stereo image, however, is an accumulation of differences in the degree of optical convergence, thereby producing a perceptual effect of a patch work of different intensities of relief within a single image.

It would seem, thus, that by dispensing with the imperative of optical unity, the stereoscope made it possible to fabricate the depth of a scene and bring together two visual planes inaccessible by the stationary eye. Moreover, the “hallucinatory clarity” with which the stereoscope imbued certain objects, while leaving others in the shade, suggested the possibility of establishing visual relations based on differing intensities of focus. Therefore, if the machine-based transformation of vision destroyed any direct link between the eye and what it was seeing, it also reconfigured the domain of the visible, ensuring its unfolding on a vast scale and in relation to an increasingly complex set of coordinates.

It may be argued that the technologically induced transformation of vision could have little consequence for the novel, since the novelist’s omniscient eye was, in any case, capable of limitless mobility and vision. But this is an ahistorical argument. As Sharon Marcus has shown so effectively in the context of nineteenth-century France, authorial omniscience could work only within certain historically determined parameters. More specifically, what Marcus does is to track the changing functions of Asmodeus, a mythical figure whose supernatural powers traditionally helped to sustain authorial omniscience in a certain form of French literature. Thus, in its earliest version—as the devilish hero of Lesage’s *Le Diable boiteux* (1707)—Asmodeus simply removes roofs and peers inside houses. When Jules Janin revived him in an 1831 preface for a fifteen-volume collection on Parisian scenes, Asmodeus is capable of generating a bird’s-eye view that will organize “buildings as a series of scenes” and “the apartment house as a planar picture to be observed, as a live, three dimensional scene.” It is only in the 1840s that Asmodeus’s eye begins to approximate the elasticity as well as the alienated nature of the truly modern vision. Asmodeus is now able to align his viewpoint to a building’s vertical front even as he approaches it from the sky and to transform a building’s walls into transparencies so that everything that happens there appears before the viewer as “so many moving pictures framed under glass.”

The changing powers of Asmodeus symptomize the modernization of vision or, more specifically, the modernization of the ways in which the city could be visualized. By the 1840s the omniscient authorial eye had far out-reached its early, relatively simple functions. The technology that underlay
stereoscopes and the viewing conditions for Horner’s gigantic panorama suggested the possibility of unfolding the city not only as a linear sequence, but also from different heights and angles. Moreover, the “hallucinatory clarity” of focus which the stereoscope achieved enabled the omniscient authorial eye to imagine and fabricate unexpected juxtapositions or sequences based on vividly articulated details dispersed over not two but three dimensions of urban space. These new ways of seeing would turn out to be vital for the making of novels like *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*, and they would determine the internal dynamics of not only the discursive unfolding of London but also such properly novelistic features as plot construction and characterization.

The last mode that this book associates with the production of the urban aesthetic is perhaps the oddest. Walking, on the face of it, has little in common with the workings of machines or the effects of writing and, as a mode of observing the city, it did not, of course, originate in the nineteenth century. But in contemporary accounts, virtually everything that this chapter has discussed—the writing, sketches and the optical gadgets—become associated with the activity of walking. The title page of Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* equates Tom’s and Jerry’s “Rambles and Sprees” with the camera obscura’s ability to discover and record the scenes of the metropolis, and, in a passage quoted earlier, Dickens had compared a walk through Paris to the experience of viewing a panorama. These comparisons suggest that the activity of walking enabled the nineteenth-century urban pedestrian to sustain the by-now-familiar experience that underlay the urban aesthetic: to remain both aloof from and immersed in the chaotic, socially diverse life of the city.

As it happens, it is precisely walking and its capacity to sustain the doubleness associated with the urban aesthetic that drives Dickens’s first attempt to write the city. Several critics have demonstrated how *Sketches by Boz* adapts and transforms the mediating strategies developed by Egan to socially separate himself and presumed readers from the characters and scenes that he describes. Dickens may not invoke the metaphoric camera obscura to protect his readers from the brutality of street scenes they will be made to witness, but, as Deborah Epstein Nord shows, he finds in humor a very effective distancing device. Again, the sympathetic mode in which Dickens sometimes describes a character or scene from low life is invariably mediated by what Audrey Jaffe has called “a self consciousness about [the] social position” that binds Boz to his middle-class readers.

It seems to me, however, that in Jaffe’s fine account of narrative positioning in *Sketches by Boz*, the problem of the social works exclusively at
a synchronic level. Jaffe unfolds convincingly the social nuances that are invariably encoded within the narrator's transactions with his characters and his readers. She does not, however, acknowledge that Dickens's attempt discursively to separate himself and his readers from his low-life characters is always in danger of becoming undermined by the central activity of the book: walking.

The starting point of *Sketches*, the indispensable precondition for its existence, is, of course, the ambulatory freedom that, as the narrator claims, distinguishes him from those who “brush quickly by,” “steadily plodding on to business” (59). This distinction does, indeed, reiterate the author's sense of superiority over the subjects that he describes—it constitutes Boz as, in Jaffe's words, “the untrammelled individual” who finds “interest in what the man on his way to business cannot take the time to see.” But Dickens's opening declaration might also be understood diachronically as “a process of appropriation of the topographical system” (italics added), to adapt Michel de Certeau's terms. That is, the “speculative” pedestrian's walk through London is not something that involves a superior, flâneur-like enjoyment of the endless variety of urban life but is an act that will join together socially and geographically disparate parts of the city to produce a “story.”

One way to track the process of fragmenting and joining that transforms walking in *Sketches by Boz* into a “spatial practice” is by turning to a piece like “The Hospital Patient.” The starting point of “The Hospital Patient” is, of course, a typically productive encounter between the urban perambulator, not tied down to any routinely taken path, and a dark, unfrequented bit of urban space. But for Boz the hospital interior he glimpses from the outside is not merely a possible subject for a sketch. Rather, it is something he stores in his memory, transforming into a potentially mobile signifier that can, like the low life described in the circulating broadsheets in *Industry and Idleness* or the detachable locations of Horner's panorama, be made to relate, discursively at least, to other forms of life that proliferate in the city. In fact, it is precisely the activity of walking that provides Boz with the opportunity to connect the hospital room to another section of the city. The story of the woman battered by her lover that Boz picks up while “strolling through Covent Garden” ends inexorably in the very hospital whose “gloomy and mournful scenes” are, for Boz, already a subject of intense interest (241, 240).

In “The Hospital Patient,” then, the hospital interior and the police station at Covent Garden no longer remain undifferentiated locations within the city. Rather, they become part of a discursive economy, spaces that will
sustain the unfolding of what might properly be called a story. This story, moreover, uncovers a social domain that is organized not as hierarchically separable positions where the author and his readers are situated above the subject but rather as a continuum made up of radically disparate spaces. It stitches together within the virtual space of the middle-class reader’s mind a dark social landscape made up of a desolate London pavement “hours after midnight,” “the gloomy and mournful scenes” within the hospital, and a police station near Covent Garden filled with criminals (240). Boz’s perambulations thus help, in de Certeau’s words, to “traverse and organize places; . . . select and link them together; . . . make sentences . . . out of them” and, in this sense, to replicate that “spatial phrasing” with which the panorama or the stereoscope had helped to produce the urban aesthetic.

The aesthetic investment that Dickens made in “city stories” is brought into sharper focus when considered alongside the consistent skepticism with which Thackeray responded to the figure of the urban pedestrian. In a brief commentary on Egan’s book, for example, Thackeray picked not on the pedestrian’s ability to register urban contrasts but on the “varieties of lounge in which the young men indulge—now a stroll, then a look in, then a ramble, and then presently a strut.” This skepticism unfolded more elaborately in a subsequent series of articles that he contributed to Punch. Here the “speculative pedestrian” is reincarnated as Mr. Spec—a journalist who undertakes a tour of London, not because he believes that any kind of literature can come out of the streets but because his editor orders him to travel “in London and bring me an account of your tour” in an attempt to cash in, yet again, on a best-selling formula. Like Tom and Jerry, Mr. Spec does try to move between the highest and lowest levels of social life in London—“out of mere love of variety and contrast” (194)—but all that he can recover from this experience is the “leer” and the “wink” of a street sweeper and a vision of veterans so resplendent in “scarlet and gold lace” that it seemed strange “they did not mount their chargers to go to dinner” (181, 196). Similarly, Spec uses exaggeration to reduce to absurdity the speculative pedestrian’s ability to read the city and uncover its hidden stories. Every man or woman in the streets of London, Spec claims, is “invested with an awful character” and is, therefore, nothing less than a “riddle to be read henceforth” (181). Indeed, the “very dummies in the hairdresser’s” invite Spec to interpret “their new and dreadful significance.” In these circumstances Spec can only confess to a mock helplessness in dealing with a “subject so tremendous” (182, 181).

Thackeray’s skepticism about the city’s potential to generate meanings beyond what adheres to its surface details and, more specifically, about “sto-
lies” fabricated out of the social diversity of the city points again to the very different ways in which he and Dickens related to the popular expressive resources to which both had equal access. These differences would have surprisingly precise effects on their novel writing and, in this sense, demonstrate the extent to which the novelistic aesthetic that Dickens developed with the help of popular expressive resources deviated from a more properly literary form of novel writing associated with Thackeray’s fiction.