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

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Our Mutual Friend as a
Reflection on the Popular Aesthetic

In many ways, Our Mutual Friend is the most metatexual of Dickens’s novels: it looks back on and continues to develop, in extraordinarily productive ways, the differing tropes, expressive techniques, and ways of seeing that have been associated, through the course of this book, with the urban aesthetic. Thus, Our Mutual Friend draws imaginatively on modern capitalism’s capacity to “uproot . . . and make mobile that which is grounded, clear . . . away and obliterate that which impedes circulation, and make . . . exchangeable what is singular,” to achieve unprecedented effects with the circulating impulse that have been integral to the urban aesthetic as well. In Our Mutual Friend the list of things that can be uprooted and made mobile and exchangeable includes not only shares, commodities, information, or images but also dead bodies, body parts, and simulated fragments of inner life. Thus, Our Mutual Friend often separates people from their names or from their bodies and, in this way, takes to a new level a familiar feature of the urban aesthetic: its capacity—already evident in Great Expectations—to register the dispersive effects of the city on urban subjects. Finally, in his extraordinary delineation of Bradley Headstone’s descent from respectability to the netherworld of violence and crime, Dickens reflects back on—but at the same time transforms—the two terminal tropes across which this book has unfolded the urban aesthetic: on the one hand, the fortified interiors that Hogarth had constituted as safe havens against the chaos and immorality of the streets and, on the other, the urban
nightscape as the site most capable of sustaining the experience of urban alienation.

One example of the ways in which *Our Mutual Friend* draws upon but also extends a familiar expressive trajectory of the urban aesthetic is to be found in a late chapter of the novel. In this chapter Dickens brings together the effects of finance capitalism and the random intersections that the metropolis precipitates—"the money mills" and "pavements . . . confused by the tread of a million feet." The "money mills" in *Our Mutual Friend* sustain a feverish and seemingly random circulation of shares and currency and, consequently, the unending series of exchanges so important for some of the novel's central effects. These transactions are, however, inseparable from the giant metropolis and its disparate social spaces—its "gritty streets" and "business lanes and courts" but also its drawing rooms; and the "tread of a million footsteps" suggests the urban aesthetic's capacity to register, from amidst the random conglomeration of people that is the city, the unexpected intersections between unrelated people brought together by the city's innumerable financial transactions.

The connection that the sixteenth chapter of *Our Mutual Friend* makes between the "money mills" and the "tread of a million footsteps" that criss-cross the metropolis is important because some of the finest writing on *Our Mutual Friend* has tended to treat the novel's economic activity in isolation from the metropolis in which it is embedded. Thus, for example, Catherine Gallagher draws on political economy's emphasis on the body's centrality to track brilliantly the workings of a "bioeconomics" in *Our Mutual Friend*, in which values move not only between people and things but also between dead and live bodies. Similarly Pam Morris locates, in the domain of the visual, a site that is capable of sustaining unlimited economic activity. Bodies in her account become "exhibition surfaces for commodity display" and the act of looking inseparable from speculation. Gallagher's and Morris's exposition of the range of economic activity is, of course, crucial for a novel driven by a process that makes everything—goods, currency, shares, looks, gestures, the living as well as the dead—mobile and exchangeable. But this process requires the giant metropolis—its diverse locations and the range of resources that these locations make available—as the condition of its realization. Aligned, thus, to the city, the economic exchanges described in *Our Mutual Friend* carry forward a set of issues that have been central to this book throughout: the problems of sociability and individuality in the big city.

The underlying connections between the "bioeconomics" of *Our Mutual Friend*, the internal dynamics of Dickens's representation of London, and
problems of urban sociability and individuality are apparent in one of the novel’s typically startling business activities. The skeletons and stuffed animals that Venus produces from various bones and body parts exemplify an important assumption of political economy: that value may be accumulated, in Catherine Gallagher’s words, by drawing it out of “the organic body and storing it up, suspending it in inorganic forms.” But Venus’s business is crucially dependent on his access to locations available only in the big city—for example, to hospitals and ports from which he buys his raw materials and to West End outlets to which he sells his products. Moreover, some of Venus’s transactions have implications for the ways in which the metropolis impinges on the problem of individuality. For example, the deal that Wegg proposes to Venus points to a link between the city’s numerous impersonal transactions and the problem—in a basic physical sense—of personal integrity. What Wegg hopes to buy back from Venus are the skeletal remains of his leg, which has found its way from the hospital where it had been amputated to the taxidermist’s shop that Venus runs. Wegg’s walk to Venus’s shop through London’s labyrinthine streets, his offer to buy back a part of his own body, and the strange intimacy that the nature of his project gives to what is a business encounter between two strangers bring together a significant set of topographical, social, and anatomical details. These details, indeed, make the Wegg–Venus transaction paradigmatic of an urban aesthetic that is always oriented toward registering the tension between the scattering effects and the random sociability of the urban experience.

The tension dramatized in the working of Venus’s business plays itself out on a more elaborate scale in the larger world of Our Mutual Friend as a whole. On the one hand, Our Mutual Friend deploys the processes of finance capitalism to intensify the experience of dispersal that had been, all along, an important feature in Dickens’s representation of urban existence. That is, the novel registers the many ways in which the operations of an economy based on shares and promissory notes—on values completely detached from any material moorings—disperse individual identities as well. The Veneerings, the Lammles, Georgiana Podsnap, and Twemlow may, unlike Wegg, remain physically integrated but each of these characters must, sooner or later, confront some fragment of her or his identity that has become detached from her or him. On the other hand, the novel’s many business activities also promote a second and contradictory trajectory associated with the urban aesthetic: they facilitate unexpected encounters between dispersed Londoners and, in this way, a form of urban sociability very different from the more “organic” ties around which the domestic-realistic novel is built.
We could say, in fact, that the money market in *Our Mutual Friend* works to enhance a fundamental and familiar feature of the urban aesthetic: its propensity to depend, for its most characteristic relationships, on not so much the family or the socially contiguous group as the more impersonal, sometimes random encounters that the big city spawns. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the City, in the sense of both the metropolis and its money market, produces several intersections between the most unrelated of people. One “never knows,” as Fascination Fledgeby puts it, “when one gets into the City, what people one may knock up against” (510). What Fledgeby says about London’s financial district is true about London as well. Here, too, impersonal social and economic interests are constantly bringing together disconnected individuals. For example, the newly rich Boffins attract the attention of callers so diverse that their cards often read like “A Miscellaneous Lot at an Auction” (187). On the other hand, bereft of the social and kinship ties that characters in a Jane Austen novel inherit as part of their social existence, the Boffins, too, depend on the random connections that only a city can provide in order to realize even the deeply personal experience of the joy of parenthood. Thus, the Boffins advertise their desire to adopt an orphan and thereby set into motion a process by which children are dissociated from their families, set into free circulation, and made capable of becoming part of the family that the Boffins hope to fabricate: “The suddenness of an orphan’s rise in the market was not to be paralleled by the maddest records of the Stock Exchange. . . . The market was ‘rigged’ in various artful ways. Counterfeit stock got into circulation. Parents boldly represented themselves as dead, and brought their orphans with them” (175–76).

The fabricated family that the Boffins attempt to put together is, of course, a characteristic formation in the urban aesthetic, dramatizing the latter’s movement away from the more organic ties around which the domestic novel had been organized. Such “families” had generated some of the major lines of action in *Great Expectations*. Unlike the Pip–Magwitch relationship, however, the encounter between the Boffins and the London orphan that they hope to adopt cannot be said to sustain the significant effects of the novel’s plot. Rather, the urban aesthetic in *Our Mutual Friend*, drawing as well on the expressive possibilities made available by the operations of finance capitalism, works to extend a second set of preoccupations that had been integral to *Great Expectations*. Thus, the sense of “placelessness” inseparable from Pip’s experience of London unfolds in *Our Mutual Friend* as a more radically decorporealizing process. The Boffins, for example, are
forced to pin their hopes of parenthood on virtual orphans whose mobile, floating identities have been completely dissociated from their material bodily selves.

The virtualization of selfhood and the consequent emptying out of personal relationships that intertwine to make the fabric of the realistic novel are even more evident in the world of the Veneerings. The Veneerings, Podsnaps, and the rest may, like characters in a Jane Austen novel, inhabit similar social spheres and claim to be on terms of intimacy with each other. Unlike what happens in *Mansfield Park* or *Pride and Prejudice*, however, the interactions between the Veneerings, the Podsnaps, and the rest never facilitate the unfolding of their inner lives. These characters, indeed, are not even constituted in what Bakhtin would call “biographical time”; they remain unmarked, through the course of the entire novel, by the biological or maturational effects of time. Rather than developing as a psychologically complex process across time, interiority, in *Our Mutual Friend*, takes the form of a set of socially deployable signs that refer to the subjective domain but attempt to give to instantly fabricated relationships an affective depth that they don’t, in fact, have. Twemlow is amazed at how quickly he and several others become “the most intimate friends Veneering had in the world” (10). The Veneerings are not just adept at forging instant friendships; they also simulate, at short notice, the whole human substructure of a Jane Austen novel out of relationships that are both random and superficial. The wedding party that the Veneerings organize for the Lammles is presented as a “family affair,” complete with “family friends” (104) and a foster father who gives the bride away after having met her on precisely two occasions.

The ease with which the Veneerings transform an encounter with a stranger into an intimate relationship must not be taken merely to symptomize their superficiality. Rather, the Veneerings are typical operators in a world where the imperatives of trade and the opportunities offered by the big city sustain the incessant circulation of not only shares and goods but also attributes associated with the subjective domain. What Pam Morris has called the “code of sincerity,” for instance, has a definite business value in the world of *Our Mutual Friend*: its deployment as a certain disembodied but “cultivated interiority” offers the Lammles a rare chance of making a financial killing. Having extracted a monetary pledge from Fledgeby in return for arranging a lucrative marriage to Georgiana Podsnap, the Lammles work with “the code of sincerity” to simulate for the young couple the effects of inner life and, thus, implicate them in “a variety of delicate sentiments” that they do not, in fact, experience:
“Alfred, my dear, Mr. Fledgeby very justly says, apropos of the last scene, that true constancy would not require any such stimulant as the stage deems necessary.” To which Mr. Lammle would reply, “Ay, Sophronia, my love, but, as Georgiana has observed to me, the lady had no sufficient reason to know the state of the gentleman’s affections.” To which Mrs. Lammle would rejoin, “Very true, Alfred; but Mr. Fledgeby points out,” this. To which Alfred would demur: “Undoubtedly, Sophronia, but Georgiana acutely remarks,” that. Through this device the two young people conversed at great length, and committed themselves to a variety of delicate sentiments without having once opened their lips . . . (240)

Fascination Fledgeby may not succeed in taking advantage of the “delicate sentiments” that Lammles stakes on him but he, too, is adept at separating out a discursively constituted identity from the person that it represents. Thus, he takes full advantage of the signs of Riah’s Jewish identity to set into circulation a stereotypical image that has nothing in common with what his employee really is. In the process, he harnesses the full force of the anti-Jewish prejudice to transfer to the figure of his employee the most venal aspects of his own moneylending business. For the gentle and benign Riah this means having to cohabit the city with a deeply repugnant version of himself. Thus, he is frequently introduced to strangers as the principal of a firm of grinders:

“But whatever you do, Lammle, don’t—don’t—don’t, I beg of you—ever fall into the hands of Pubsey and Co. in the next room, for they are grinders. Regular flayers and grinders, my dear Lammle,” repeated Fledgeby, with a peculiar relish, “and they’ll skin you inch by the inch, from the nape of your neck to the sole of your foot, and grind every inch of your skin to tooth-powder. You have seen what Mr. Riah is. Never fall into his hands . . .” (385)

Twemlow is even more disconcerted by the experience of decorporealization and reification that is the inevitable result of his being drawn into the circulatory processes of the city. It is a financially irresponsible friend who transforms Twemlow’s “name” to a free-floating scrip in London’s money market. This means that Twemlow is forced to follow the dictates of a sign that refers to him but has nothing to do with what he really is. Twemlow’s bewilderment, as he rushes about answering the legally enforceable summons from those who possess his “name,” suggests precisely a disjunction
between what he knows to be his life and the way that it unfolds after it has become “assured” to somebody else (513).

The decorporealizing effects of the city on the self unfolds at a more complex level in Dickens’s delineation of John Harmon. Harmon is exposed to the most destabilizing aspects of the urban experience immediately after his arrival in London. More specifically, Dickens deploys the machinations of George Radfoot to complicate the ways in which Harmon experiences time and space after he enters the metropolis. The uncertainty that is, in any case, embedded in Harmon’s situation plays out as the spatial disorientation he experiences when he is led by the villainous George Radfoot to an unknown destination on London’s riverfront. Harmon loses touch with the markers of objective geography: street names, addresses, the names of localities. He cannot remember “what turns we took, and doubles we made” (332), and the riverfront unfolds before his eyes not as a panorama or a topography but as an incoherent patchwork of disjointed fragments: a church spire, “the wall, the dark doorway, the flight of stairs,” and finally, “the river, or a dock or a creek” (332, 333) that borders the room where he is drugged. Moreover, the sick and deranged state into which Harmon falls after Radfoot poisons him distorts Harmon’s sense of time as well. He is now unable to register the twenty-four hours that pass between one dark, rainy night to another, or, conversely, he perceives a short period of silence as the “silence of days, weeks, months, years . . .” (333).

Harmon’s disoriented state is, of course, abnormally induced, but it also symptomizes the urban aesthetic’s propensity to break up spatial and temporal continuities in order to work its fragmenting effects on its figures. Indeed, the crisis that ejects John Harmon from everyday time also destabilizes the minimal material preconditions under which an internally integrated sense of selfhood may be attained. Thus, unlike even Lady Dedlock, who is allowed to retain her physical integrity even as her body is made to sustain the contradictory marks of an internally fractured city, John Harmon finds himself actually separated from what will officially be constituted as his own body:

Going out that night to walk . . . I found a crowd assembled round a placard posted at Whitehall. It described myself, John Harmon, as found dead and mutilated in the river under circumstances of strong suspicion, described my dress, described the papers in my pockets, and stated where I was lying for recognition. In a wild incautious way I hurried there, and
there—with the horror of the death I had escaped before my eyes in its most appalling shape, added to the inconceivable horror . . . (335)

By separating John Harmon from his “corpse” and even his name, by freeing his figure, that is, from a stable identity and even a fixed body, Dickens is able to disperse it across the length and breadth of the city in ways that are beyond anything that Lady Dedlock and Pip are made to experience. John Harmon’s identity is displaced, first of all, on George Radfoot’s dead body and transformed into a bizarre commodity that, like the remains of Wegg’s leg, can be circulated in the networks of exchange that crisscross the London of the novel. As the means of Gaffer Hexam’s livelihood, the “meat and drink” (5) that the river yields to the Hexams, the supposed remains of Harmon will be fished out of the Thames, stripped of the value he continues to possess, and then deposited in a sordid riverside police station.

Harmon’s figure is scattered across the city not only by a “bioeconomics” that keeps his supposed body in circulation but also by the discursive systems that the metropolis employs to disseminate and seek information about its citizens. These systems work to appropriate John Harmon’s identity, to present to the world (and to him) a version of himself that is separate from him. The public notice that Harmon reads is supplemented by a range of official and unofficial discourses—proclamations, court verdicts, newspapers—that proclaim John Harmon dead, describe the sensational circumstances of his murder, and announce rewards for any information relating to him. Decorporealized and thus freed from anything like a fixed social location, the hero of *Our Mutual Friend* now begins to function as the classic urban signifier: it becomes capable of moving itself and, by implication, of also moving the action and the scenes of the novel across the social extremities that made up nineteenth-century London:

Thus, like the tides on which it had been borne to the knowledge of men, the Harmon Murder—as it came to be popularly called—went up and down, and ebbed and flowed . . . now among palaces, now among hovels, now among lords and ladies and gentlefolks, now among labourers and hammerers and ballast-heavers, until at last, after a long interval of slack water, it got out to the sea and drifted away. (30)

In *Our Mutual Friend* the most complex effects of the urban aesthetic and especially of its propensity to work with the radically disparate elements that circulate in the city are evident in Dickens’s delineation of Bradley Headstone. Thus, *Our Mutual Friend* follows *Bleak House* in using surfaces
(such as the different sets of clothing that Bradley Headstone is made to wear) to inscribe on the respectable schoolmaster’s figure the contradictory marks of a socially divided city. But, unlike *Bleak House* and even *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* also works with complex subjective states generated, for example, by the repressions that respectability demands or by the proscribed but uncontrollable violence of sexual jealousy. Oriented toward destabilizing Bradley Headstone’s improving consciousness, the subversive trajectory within the urban aesthetic continues to develop through disconcerting juxtapositions at levels that had not been available to either *Bleak House* or *Great Expectations*.

Any attempt to think of Bradley Headstone as an urban subject must begin by taking into account that streets are as important to the unfolding of his life as the school to which he is attached. Indeed, from the very beginning, Headstone’s life is characterized by the tension between his professed commitments—to his classroom and to the happy domesticity that he might have attained if Lizzie had agreed to marry him—and his propensity to always be pulled out of the network of familial and respectable social relationships that sustains the typical bourgeois subject. Bradley may share a minimal social connection with Lizzie because of the mediating figure of Charlie Hexam who, in his effort to “get up in the world” (205), moves from his father’s disreputable riverside hovel to the relative respectability of Headstone’s school. But this link is not enough for them to be able to interact in an interior setting socially accessible to both. Thus, although Charlie and Headstone carefully plan the meeting at which the latter might propose to Lizzie, Headstone’s actual proposal takes place in the streets, during what Lizzie, at least, perceives as an unexpected encounter:

As they advanced, she saw them coming, and seemed rather troubled. But she greeted her brother with the usual warmth, and touched the extended hand of Bradley.

“Why, where are you going, Charley, dear?” she asked him then.

“Nowhere. We came on purpose to meet you.”

“To meet me, Charley?”

“Yes. We are going to walk with you. But don’t let us take the great leading streets where everyone walks, and we can’t hear ourselves speak. Let us go by the quiet backways. Here’s a large paved court by the church, and quiet, too. Let us go up there.”

“But it’s not the way, Charley.”

“Yes it is,” said the boy, petulantly. “It’s in my way, and my way is yours.” (355)
Charley’s determination to lead his sister along a single predetermined path, his choice of the semiclosed court as a means of cordoning off his sister and Headstone from the promiscuous traffic of the streets, prove inadequate defenses against the urban aesthetic’s propensity to precipitate unexpected (often tense) encounters between people who occupy very different positions in the city’s social world. The urban aesthetic not only finds in streets, doorsteps, and, toward the end, even the river the sites where the unlikely love affair between the pretty but poor and unlettered Lizzie and the gentlemanly Eugene Wrayburn might unfold; what is more, it also pits the tense, self-improving Headstone against the implacable class arrogance of Wrayburn and, thus, creates the conditions for its own most complex unfolding.

The tension, or more accurately, the simmering violence that is inseparable from Headstone’s consciousness as he follows Eugene across London’s night streets has its origins, paradoxically, in that set of enclosed spaces that had emerged, in Hogarth’s original articulation of the urban aesthetic, as the sites of the productive, morally, and socially responsible life. Middle-class interiors may continue to sustain economic and social stability in both *Industry and Idleness* and *Our Mutual Friend*, but in the later work they are also associated with a repressive morality that stretches all the way from Podsnap’s proscription on anything that might bring “a blush into the face of the young person” (117) to Miss Peecher’s propensity to repress those erotic thoughts that would “astonish the pupils” of her school (305). This repressive morality complicates the whole relationship that Hogarth had plotted between Goodchild’s commitment to middle-class interiors and his stable, morally privileged, improving career, on the one hand, and the degradation attendant on Idle’s life in the streets on the other. Headstone’s self-improving career may continue to be predicated on his commitment to a set of respectable interiors, but in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens implicates the experience of upward social mobility itself in the repressive morality of the middle class and, by implication, in a whole internal process that will work its contradictory and destructive effects deep within the urban subject’s consciousness. *Our Mutual Friend* activates these effects by deploying, in an original way, a maneuver that is very much part of the urban aesthetic. Dickens could be said to follow Pierce Egan, for example, when arranging an encounter on one of London’s streets between such diverse urban types as Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone. But *Our Mutual Friend* stakes far more on this encounter than the comic effects that the city’s diversity routinely yields in *Life in London*: 
The master and the pupil walked on rapidly and silently. They had nearly crossed the bridge, when a gentleman came coolly sauntering towards them, with a cigar in his mouth, his coat thrown back, and his hands behind him. Something in the careless manner of his person, and in a certain lazily arrogant air with which he approached, holding possession of twice as much pavement as another would have claimed, instantly caught the boy’s attention. (207)

The provocative arrogance of Eugene Wrayburn’s walk already points to the kind of use that Dickens will make of this encounter between two socially disparate individuals who inhabit the city. But it is during the first quarrel that the schoolmaster and the gentlemanly lawyer have over Lizzie that the corrosive effect that the latter’s social and sexual arrogance will have on the former’s repressed consciousness is revealed:

“You think me of no more value than the dirt under your feet,” said Bradley to Eugene, speaking in a carefully weighed and measured tone, or he could not have spoken at all.

“I assure you, Schoolmaster,” replied Eugene, “I don’t think about you.”

“That’s not true,” returned the other: “you know better.”

“That’s coarse,” Eugene retorted, “but you don’t know better.” (263)

We can uncover more precisely the kind of pressure that Eugene Wrayburn is shown to exert on Headstone by turning to Norbert Elias’s great analysis of the ways socially deprived individuals often negotiate the experience of upward mobility. Elias argues that while the experience of upward mobility enables the individual to access social spaces that had hitherto remained closed to her or him, it makes the individual hypersensitive to the ways in which he or she relates to social superiors. Unsure of his or her relationship to “the colonizing upper class,” resentful of but at the same time attempting to emulate those who have already arrived, the self-improving individual is “less balanced” and “more severe,” threatened from above and below. Exposed to “the cross fire from all sides,” the situation of the self-improving individual reveals “the immense effort which individual social advantage requires.”

Elias’s work helps present the relationship between Headstone and Wrayburn, and especially of what Rosemarie Bodenheimer has called “the alternating current crackling in their scenes together,” as a tense play of
class positions that only the social diversity of a city can sustain. Implicated in a sexual rivalry, Wrayburn’s aggressive rhetoric aggravates Headstone’s sense of social inferiority, destabilizes the respectable parameters within which this life had been lived, and activates that propensity toward violence that had been encoded within what Dickens describes as Headstone’s “nature” (263). Compelled through the day to exercise the watchfulness and repression that had been the condition of his integration into respectable society, Headstone finds in London’s night streets the possibility of an alternate mode of life:

Tied up all day with his disciplined show upon him, subdued to the performance of his routine of educational tricks, encircled by a gabbling crowd, he broke loose at night like an ill-tamed wild animal. Under his daily restraint, it was his compensation, not his trouble, to give a glance towards his state at night, and to the freedom of its being indulged. (491)

This passage recalls and, at the same time, radically transforms the oppositions around which Hogarth had structured *Industry and Idleness*. Thus, the schoolroom that Headstone inhabits during the day is constituted not as a fortification against the dangerous and chaotic life of the streets but rather as a psychological cage whose system of restraints only builds up the pressure that will inexorably drive Headstone to the streets. Again, the London streets that Headstone scours during the night are emptied of the teeming life with which these are associated in the whole tradition of urban representations from Hogarth to Egan and beyond. What Dickens does instead is to follow an expressive strategy that he had first deployed in *Great Expectations*, representing the London of *Our Mutual Friend* as a tangle of empty streets that confronts the nocturnal walker with a sense of his or her own unanchored situation. Headstone’s lack of moorings is, indeed, self-consciously dramatized in the series of purposeless walks into which he is drawn by Wrayburn:

I stroll out after dark, stroll a little way, look in at a window, and furtively look out for the schoolmaster. Sooner or later, I perceive the schoolmaster on the watch; sometimes accompanied by his hopeful pupil; oftener, pupil-less. Having made sure of his watching me, I tempt him on, all over London. One night I go east, another night north, in a few nights I go all round the compass. Sometimes I walk; sometimes I proceed in cabs, draining the pocket of the schoolmaster, who then follows in cabs. I study and get up abstruse No Thoroughfares in the course of the day. With Venetian
mystery I seek those No Thoroughfares at night, glide into them by means of dark courts, tempt the schoolmaster to follow, turn suddenly and catch him before he can retreat. (488–89)

Of course it is Headstone’s own jealousy and Wrayburn’s cold determination to make him suffer for it that draws Headstone into the ambulatory traps that his rival sets up. But the night streets that offer Headstone no destinations may also be thought to sustain a form of urban subjectivity that is darker and more modern than that found in Industry and Idleness or Life in London. Unable to live within the constraints of respectable interiors, yet deeply ashamed of his plebeian past; proud of his acquired respectability, yet driven inexorably by a taunting, socially superior sexual rival toward acts of violence that will proscribe him forever from respectable society, Headstone’s situation as an urban subject is characterized by a radical inability to belong. “To walk,” de Certeau has argued, “is to lack a place,”11 and it is exactly Headstone’s “placelessness” that is imaged in the purposeless walks that he is so relentlessly made to undertake. In Our Mutual Friend, indeed, the experience of placelessness invades Headstone’s body itself: it separates him from himself, transforms him into a “haggard head suspended in air.”

This representation of Headstone as a “haggard head . . . flitt[ing] across the road” (492) inserts his figure into the double trajectory along which the urban subject is typically unfolded in Dickens’s later fiction. On the one hand, Dickens’s image suggests, in its most extreme form, the experience of having lost one’s social moorings, of lacking the most obvious of referents: one’s body itself. On the other hand, the image also draws attention to Headstone’s situation as a mobile and radically unstable urban subject, separated from his respectable body and made liable by the circulatory processes of the city to be brought into contact with those who would have no place in the respectable social domain that he normally inhabits. Headstone’s restless night walks do, in fact, throw him in the path of Rogue Riderhood, the disreputable waterside character already implicated in several semicriminal activities.

The bringing together of Bradley Headstone and Rogue Riderhood in a London night street activates the second trajectory within the urban mode of characterization: its propensity to expose the respectable subject to the city’s low life. Thus, Dickens had already produced characters such as Lady Dedlock and Pip out of the play of respectability and its degraded other. With Bradley Headstone, however, this play is achieved not by some extraneous plot connection but from pressures that emanate from within
the schoolmaster’s respectable personality. Thus, Headstone’s figure had been designed, from the very beginning, to sustain simultaneously the connotations of respectability and murderous violence. For example, the “respectable hair guard” (261) that he is made to wear is overlain with connotations of extreme violence—transformed, by a play of language, into a murder instrument that Headstone would like to wind around Eugene’s neck and use to strangle him. In this sense, the intersection, affected by the urban aesthetic, between the paths of the respectable schoolteacher and the semicriminal Rogue Riderhood only facilitates the full articulation of a tension that had always been encoded within Dickens’s representation of the schoolmaster.

The first encounter between Headstone and Riderhood itself sets up an expressive system oriented toward registering the respectable everyday life of the schoolteacher as well as the unregulated drives that will push him beyond the pale of respectability. Walking with Riderhood across London at the dead of night, Headstone never once relinquishes his respectable social identity. Yet the violent project that obsesses him also binds him to Riderhood, driving him inexorably along the route that the disreputable riverside character takes.

The intertwining of Headstone’s path with that of Riderhood enables Riderhood to incessantly track the dual trajectory of the schoolmaster’s life and, in this way, to bring together the disparate social worlds that Headstone inhabits into relations of tense simultaneity. Thus, for example, Riderhood chooses to bring his knowledge of the “other” Headstone, the pathologically violent criminal who has just attempted to murder Wrayburn, into the room where he teaches, the very space where the schoolmaster’s respectable social identity is most firmly embedded:

“I ain’t a learned character myself,” said Riderhood, surveying the class, “but I do admire learning in others. I should dearly like to hear these here young folks read that there name off from the writing.”

The arms of the class went up. At the miserable master’s nod, the shrill chorus arose: “Bradley Headstone!”

“No!” cried Riderhood, “You don’t mean it! Headstone! . . . Hooroar for another turn!”

Another tossing of arms, another nod, and another shrill chorus: “Bradley Headstone!”

“I’ve got it now!,” said Riderhood after attentively listening, and internally repeating: “Bradley. I see. Chris’en name, Bradley, sim’lar to Roger,
which is my own. Eh? Fam’ly name, Headstone, sim’lar to Riderhood, which is my own. Eh?” (714)

Moreover, as the beleaguered schoolmaster’s story moves toward its terrible denouement, Dickens creates around it a discursive zone that allows for the free intertwining of Headstone’s figure with that of Rogue Riderhood. Thus, even in the passage just quoted, Riderhood makes significant use of the breach he has affected in Headstone’s respectable personality: he twines his own name around that of the schoolmaster while seeking to understand, in his mock serious way, that Bradley and Headstone denote the former’s first and last names. Similarly, Headstone does not hesitate to blur the boundary that separates his figure from that of Riderhood whenever it suits him to do so. On the day when he assaults Wrayburn, for example, Bradley puts on a set of secondhand bargeman’s clothes so similar to what Riderhood habitually wears that the latter describes him as a better looking version of “myself” (569). Headstone will never, in fact, be able to free himself from the social identity that he chooses to superimpose on his own. Headstone may have thrown his bargeman’s clothes into the river with the hope of regaining his normal existence as a respectable schoolteacher, but in retrieving Headstone’s discarded clothes from the river, Riderhood retrieves not only some crucial evidence against Headstone but also the characteristic signifiers of an expressive mode that finds in the individual figure a site where the internal social fractures of nineteenth-century London may be inscribed. The work of such signifiers is dramatically visible in the image with which Dickens concludes the Bradley Headstone story: “When the two were found lying, under the ooze and scum behind one of the rotting gates, Riderhood’s hold had relaxed, probably in falling, and his eyes were staring upward. But, he was girdled still with Bradley’s iron ring, and the rivets of the iron ring held tight” (722).

This image where the self-improving Bradley Headstone is physically fused to the semicriminal street character resonates against that decisive maneuver by which Hogarth, in his inaugural exposition of the urban aesthetic, had managed to segregate Goodchild from the chaotic and immoral life of the streets even while articulating the capacity of the popular and often immoral print to break into respectable interiors. This latter dynamic—this intrusive and disruptive strand within the urban aesthetic—unfolded powerfully across Dickens’s later novels, sustaining, among several other effects, the disconcerting superimpositions of Bleak House or the innumerable connections that Great Expectations plots between gentlemanliness and crimi-
nality. But it was not until his last complete novel that Dickens deployed the destabilizing possibilities within the urban aesthetic against those very binaries by which Hogarth had so carefully separated the domain of respectability from the chaotic and immoral “other.” In this sense, the grotesque image with which Dickens concludes Headstone’s story marks, in an unusually vivid manner, the basic orientation of an expressive strategy that drew so strongly on Hogarth’s sense of the city’s menacing differences that it could end only by wreaking its devastating effects on a figure who had always remained at the center of Hogarth’s moral imagination: the respectable, hardworking, upwardly mobile subject.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, more than in any of his other works, Dickens is self-consciously concerned with the artistic decisions that went into the making of his own fiction. For example, *Our Mutual Friend* engages powerfully, if indirectly, with a mode of writing that enjoyed great prestige in nineteenth-century England but whose aesthetic priorities were very different from those of Dickens. One difference between Dickens’s method and that which underlay the domestic-realistic novel related to the privileged status that the latter accorded to the everyday life of the middle class. More specifically, Dickens felt that domestic realism’s preoccupation with “ordinary domestic relationships” had increasingly begun to produce “a little, finite systematic routine” that he embodied both in the day-to-day lives of the Podsnaps and in the sort of novels that they approve:  

Mr. Podnap’s world was not a very large world, morally; no, not even geographically: seeing that, although his business was sustained upon commerce with other countries, he considered other countries with that important reservation, a mistake, and of their manners and customs would conclusively observe, “Not English!” . . . Elsewise, the world got up at eight, shaved close at a quarter past, breakfasted at nine, went to the City at ten, came home at half-past five, and dined at seven. Mr. Podnap’s notions of the Arts in their integrity might have been stated thus, Literature; large print, respectfully descriptive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Painting and Sculpture; models and portraits representing Professors of getting up at eight, shaving close at quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Music; a respectable performance (without variations) on stringed and wind instruments, sedately expressive of getting up at eight, shaving close at quarter past, breakfasting at nine,
going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven.

(115–16)

Dickens’s hostility to the protocols of domestic realism—a hostility that he expressed not only in *Our Mutual Friend* but also more directly in non-fictional pieces—must be understood as his means of asserting certain differences between his own mode of novel writing and the protocols of domestic realism. Thus, the Dickensian novel did not itself ever remain confined to the social parameters within which the domestic novel worked: to the “quiet domesticity, placid emotions that are developed about the paternal hearth,” as Dickens himself put it. Rather, novels like *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend* are driven by plot connections that bring together dramatically disparate social spaces.

Moreover, Dickens’s propensity to produce dramatic social juxtapositions, rather than sustaining the internal integrity of the fictional world that he was describing, points to a second and more fundamental difference between Dickens’s methods and those associated with realism. The latter sought to produce, for a predominantly middle-class audience, the seamless *continuity* of its everyday life and, in this way, to achieve the effects of truthfulness and naturalness. The realistic novel, as the *Westminster Review* put it, unrolled incidents “in orderly chronological sequence” and unfolded “character according to those laws which experience teaches us to look for as well in the moral as the material world” and which described “outward circumstances in their inexorable certainty yielding to no magician’s wand.” Judged by the criterion laid out by the *Westminster Review*, the Dickensian novel would appear—and the quarterly press often pointed this out—irregular, inartistic, and commercial: something which produced a variety of entertaining effects by stitching together fragments of various popular, often subliterary modes. It is the interest that *Our Mutual Friend* has in artistic and cultural products that are fabricated from fragments, or in the relationship between artistic labor and the processes of the market, that suggests the depth of Dickens’s metatextual engagement, in his last complete novel, with his own practices as a novelist.

*Our Mutual Friend* does not celebrate every activity generated by the market-driven, hybridizing process associated, throughout this book, with Dickens’s own fiction. For example, Silas Wegg’s career, first as vendor and performer of street ballads and then as Boffin’s reader, exemplifies how easy it is to abuse the relatively informal and accommodating conditions in which popular entertainment may be produced. Thus, while reading for Boffin, the
half-literate Wegg habitually improvises with his material, not in order to generate any particular effect but to glide over some passage that he cannot decipher. In this sense, Wegg reduces to a fraud the whole process of fragmentation and rejoining that underlay Dickens’s own novel writing. Wegg’s activities can nevertheless be understood as part of *Our Mutual Friend*’s metatextual engagement with the conditions in which Dickens’s own novels were produced and disseminated. Indeed, as someone who reads for money, works with fragments, moves up the hierarchy of literary entertainment, and is conscious about the bodily energy expended in order to create literary value, Silas Wegg reproduces but degrades some key features of Dickens’s own career as a literary entrepreneur. The positive potential of these features, and especially of improvising with fragments, becomes evident in Jenny Wren—not only at the discursive strategies that go into her making but, more metatextually, at the similarities between her methods of work and those of Dickens himself.

Jenny’s figure is never represented as a self-coordinating, organic whole. Rather, it is made up of separate pieces that can be juxtaposed in relations of continuity or contrast to produce unexpected effects. For example, Jenny’s facial expressions are often so unnatural that they seem to be creations of a puppeteer manipulating two parts of his puppet simultaneously: “She had an elfin chin that was capable of great expression; and whenever she gave this look, she hitched this chin up. As if her eyes and chin worked together on the same wires” (202).

Similarly, Jenny’s cascading hair—the “golden stream [that] fell over herself and over the chair, and flowed down to the ground” (395)—and her crippled, diminutive body are treated as separate entities that are brought together to create a powerful, disconcerting effect. The sight of “the little creature looking down out of a Glory of her long, bright, radiant hair” appears, to even as insensitive a character as Fascination Fledgeby, to be a “vision” (255).

But Jenny is not just a typical embodiment of Dickens’s methods; she also deploys these methods in her own creative practices. At the simpler level, Jenny fashions her resplendent dolls’ dresses out of the bits and pieces of waste material that she regularly picks up from Fledgeby’s establishment. At a deeper level, moreover, the success of Jenny Wren’s work is dependent on her ability to extract, from the random traffic of London’s streets, a set of details that belong to a social world to which she can have no access. In an important passage that resonates against Dickens’s own early situation as a speculative pedestrian, Jenny Wren explains exactly how London’s streets offer her indispensable material for her work:
Look here. There’s a Drawing-Room, or a grand day in the Park, or a Show, or a Fete, or what you like. Very well. I squeeze among the crowd, and I look about me. When I see a great lady very suitable for my business, I say, “You’ll do, my dear!” and I take particular notice of her again, and run home, and cut her out and baste her. Then another day I come scudding back again to try on, and then I take particular notice of her again. Sometimes she plainly seems to say, “How that little creature is staring!” . . . All the time I am only saying to myself, “I must hollow out a bit; I must slope away there”; and I am making a perfect slave of her, with making her try on my doll’s dress. Evening parties are severer work for me, because there’s only a doorway for a full view, and what with hobbling among the wheels of the carriages and the legs of horses, I fully expect to be run over some night. However, there I have ’em, just the same. When they go bobbing into the hall from the carriage, and catch a glimpse of my little physiognomy poked out from behind a policeman’s cape in the rain, I dare say they think I am wondering and admiring with all my eyes and heart, but they little think that they are only working for my dolls! (393)

Jenny here makes exactly the same maneuver that Dickens had made in works such as Sketches by Boz and The Uncommercial Traveller. As Boz or the Uncommercial Traveller, Dickens had scoured the streets in order to find, as Audrey Jaffe puts it, “capital in what must be, for others incidental.” The Uncommercial Traveller, especially, makes explicit the project that can be said to underlie the activities of both Dickens and Jenny Wren: “The idea of ‘uncommercial travelling,’” as Audrey Jaffe puts it, in an insight that is as applicable to Dickens as to his persona, “is wonderfully disingenuous, for, while not selling to those he encounters in the course of his travels, the narrator’s intent is rather to sell what he can make of his interest in them—to sell them.”16 It is exactly this possibility of turning observations into marketable, cultural commodities to which Jenny Wren refers when she triumphantly claims that while others can merely see her staring at fine ladies, she is, in fact, making these ladies work for her dolls.

Jenny Wren’s work does not, however, end with the extraction from London’s streets of the details that she will need for her dolls’ dresses. These details are often put through a process of radical refashioning before they can be made suitable for the market. Indeed, as someone who is committed to producing only the “gay events of life” (393) for a clientele made up of young children, Jenny will often need to execute, in an extreme form, that process of fragmentation, uprooting, and reactivation inseparable from the Dickensian aesthetic. Thus, for example, Jenny Wren will transform and
redeploy a detail appropriated from the saddest of occasions to project a scene that is utterly different from the one in which the detail had originated:

“Why, godmother,” replied the dressmaker, “you must know that we Pro-
fessors, who live upon our taste and invention, are obliged to keep our eyes always open. And you know already that I have many extra expenses to meet just now. So, it came into my head, while I was weeping at my poor boy’s grave, that something in my way might be done with a clergyman.”

“What can be done?” asked the old man.

“Not a funeral, never fear!” returned Miss Jenny, anticipating his objection with a nod. “The public don’t like to be made melancholy, I know very well. I am seldom called upon to put my young friends into mourning . . . But a doll clergyman, my dear—glossy black curls and whiskers—uniting two of my young friends in matrimony,” said Miss Jenny, shaking her forefinger, “is quite another affair. If you don’t see those three at the altar in Bond Street in a jiffy, my name’s Jack Robinson!” (661)

Jenny’s propensity to move signifiers across widely dispersed domains approximates the discrepancy between the harsh conditions of her own life in a poor area of London and the brilliant aristocratic interiors that she helps to fabricate. Indeed, Dickens often focuses on the squalid and harsh conditions of Jenny’s life to throw into relief the splendor of the dresses she designs. Toward the middle of the novel, for example, the aged Riah and the crippled Jenny are made to struggle across a maze of dirty and fog-ridden London streets before they are suddenly brought face to face with a resplendent shop window exhibiting Jenny’s art:

Thus conversing, and having crossed Westminster Bridge, they traversed the ground that Riah had lately traversed, and new ground likewise; for, when they had recrossed the Thames by way of London Bridge, they struck down by the river, and held their still foggier course that way.

But previously, as they were going along, Jenny twisted her venerable friend aside to a brilliantly-lighted toyshop window, and said “Now look at ’em! All my work!”

This referred to a dazzling semicircle of dolls in all the colours of the rainbow, who were dressed for presentation at court, for going to balls, for going out driving, for going out on horseback, for going out walking, for going to get married, for going to help other dolls to get married, for all the gay events of life. (392–93)
This sudden, unexpected intersection between a harsh and bleak exterior and a warm, beautifully arranged interior is, of course, a typical effect of the London aesthetic that matured over so many years in Dickens’s novels. But the splendid scene that literally springs out of a fog-swept London might also be seen as Dickens’s means of showcasing the outstanding work of a self-taught artist who works with the fragments she has picked up from London’s streets. Perhaps Dickens was also celebrating, from the vantage point of what was to be his last complete novel and from within the gloomy atmosphere in which much of it is enveloped, that city-based, hybridizing, improvisational, market-driven labor that had produced his own fiction.