To read Dickens is to encounter an urban writer whose work not only relies on the city for the setting of plot and character, but situates London at the center of his fictions: it is the generator of plot, and the determining element of scene and setting. Even the coaching episodes in his novels, which articulate a pastoral, country, and rural nostalgia depend upon the city as their definitional counterpart. In this way, his novels complicate the binary structure of country and city which Raymond Williams has seen as among the central, defining characteristics of his writing.

Dickens’s work articulates the connection between the making of urban fiction and the invention of modern urban life. It charts the impact of the city that was the central railroad station of the Nineteenth century; everything in that world passed through it. London more than tripled in population during Dickens’s lifetime. Its geographical size kept pace, as it sprawled towards its present boundaries. In the process of coping with its extraordinary fullness, Dickens explores his world-city’s modern world-making power. In describing this London, he makes it our living presence.

Part of the urban power of his work lies in its comprehensiveness. Various critics have argued for particular aspects of city life as his central urban feature; whatever their view, Dickens in his fiction includes elements of urban life that escape the grasp of many other writers.1 His novels are replete with those who did the work of the

1 Peter Conrad, for example, argues that Dickens fiction is part of a larger “recoil into private life” and turns the city into a series of disaggregated domestic interiors (The Victorian Treasure House, London, Collins, 1973, pp. 10, 65, 67, 16), paralleling the view of Alexander Welsh; he argues in The City of Dickens, that London represents for Dickens the earthly city of sin and suffering, and concludes that the novels celebrate the home “as the antithesis of the city” (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. vi, 142. As Sharon Marcus notes, “other critics have complicated the view of the street and the home as opposed in the British novel,” and claimed, as does Peter Keating, that in Dickens “even the respectable middle-class characters are continually drawn to the streets,” their homes merely “temporary stopping places or final havens of rest in which no one can really believe”. Anne Humphreys contends that Bleak House poses secret urban connections
modern city: clerks, schoolteachers, lawyers, grave-diggers, judges, doctors, scavengers, loan-sharks, thieves, murderers, prostitutes, nurses; immigrants and outcasts, landed gentry and the homeless make their appearance. The point is not to make a list—it will inevitably leave someone out—but to take account of the range. Each of these character types is part of a plot generated by his or her social role as well as partaking of a larger urban network. They are located within a wide range of urban environments, both inside and outside, which range from hovels, slums, cottages, apartments, grand houses, palatial squares, crowded streets, bridges, and pathways. In Dickens's world people live in grand style like the opulent Mr. Dombey and in dire poverty like Jo. They exist in familial units of all kinds—Veneerings, Smallweeds, Mr. Bumble & Mrs. Corney, Kate, Nicholas, & Mrs. Nickleby—and solitary individuals like Krook, and each has its pleasures and agonies. Again, what counts is not the list but the range. We have not only domestic interiors and enclosed courts, but broad avenues, coaching roads, and the world of the street, populated by the homeless—Wegg comes to mind—and the home-bound like Wemmick's Aged P.

In the Dickens universe, urban life takes the forms of a theatrical code. London, a synecdoche for the "attraction of repulsion" in Dickens's realm, yet carries the sign of the hurly-burly transformative optimism of theatrical experience. At once magic lantern show, ballad opera, and the gestural encounter of nineteenth-century melodrama, the great city informs Dickens's fiction—which constructs London as a panoramic vision of the music hall out of the materials of labyrinth and marketplace. This is not to deny the sociological aspect of the fiction but, rather, to apprehend its metaphoric subtext. For Dickens this city is real and it is a set of nested tropes.

Historians note his accuracy: Nineteenth century industrial capitalism helped to define the modern city in theatrical terms (Gay, passim; Schwarzbach, chapter 10). Not only was this a function of the reconstruction of the cities, and massive new investment in plazas, parks, and squares, it was also the result of the accumulation of capital and the growing democratization of everyday life. In the city, crowds
now gathered, not only on ritualized occasions and events — executions, coronations, royal weddings, progresses and parades — they also congregated in the course of daily business, including commuting to work.

The new spaces created by the urban reconstruction of London (which was in full swing by the 1850s, having taken shape shortly after the Napoleonic wars) served as impromptu theatres for street performers who could now take their activities from local side-streets and neighborhood building courts to the potentially larger audiences congregating in these public arenas. Such urban theatrical phenomena punctuate Dickens’s novels: Pip and Wemmick in *Great Expectations* (1861), to take only one example, meet on the street amid the crowds going to and from work. Their encounters bear witness to these new experiential conditions, which shape their lives. As Wemmick changes into Jaggers’s law-clerk on the way into the City, and back into the benevolent son of the Aged P. on his return journey to Little Brittain, Pip, standing-in for the Dickensian reader, discovers the transformative theatrical experience that defines this urban world.

Walter Benjamin draws our attention to the transformation of perception brought about by the industrial and urban world. He points us to the ways in which the social world the Victorians were constructing simultaneously trained their bodies in new perceptual modes. The habits that informed everyday life were echoed and reinforced by the transformative media of their era. The working classes, rather than following the Chartist agitation of the early decades of the century, “joined the middle classes in gaping at an immense agglomeration of commodities encased in a plate-glass and iron edifice” — they too had become visual consumers of those very things they had helped to make. (Holway, *Speculation & Representation*, Part II, 1).

Creating the infrastructure that made the modern city possible, the monumental building projects also provided a window into the easier pace of the past in the informal street performances they made possible by the new dramatic staging of the city. At the same time, they made everyone a performer. Lewis Mumford underlines the function of the modern city as encouraging and inciting “the greatest potential number of meetings, encounters, challenges between all persons, classes and groups, providing, as it were, a stage upon which the drama of social life may be enacted, and with the actors taking their turns as spectators and the spectators as actors” (Mumford: 184).

In spite of the new power-relations which maximized competition and which Noddy Boffin defines in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) as “scrunch or be scrunched” (Book III, chapter 5), Nineteenth century London was also the place of “playful self-making” for all — especially for the working
and lower classes. “Through their convivial laughter, their sympathy, their nonhegemonic speech, and their imaginative exuberance” they asserted that “life is not warfare against sin, nor is it only competitive struggle.” Without “wealth or status” they yet become as Pam Morris notes “imaginatively adept at exploiting language, gesture, and common reality to transform, with a sense of ceremony, existences which would otherwise be overwhelmed by necessity and utility” (Morris 1991: 34-35). From the Artful Dodger in Oliver Twist (1838) to Rogue Riderhood in Our Mutual Friend (1865), Dickens’s novels are a portrait gallery of such figures of transformation. In his writings as in his world, the opportunities of London are available to all, including the homeless, so long as they perform in it. The city as marketplace, labyrinth, and stage is the central scene of his work – a measure of his encompassing democratic art.

While Dickens’s representations of lower-class life echo those of Mayhew’s, they also provide a dynamic sense of character and possibility. Where Mayhew’s are static and reinforce conventional stereotypes of the poor that, reinforced by an emergent anthropology that would develop spurious racial distinctions and make class division a seeming fact of nature, Dickens’s characters dramatize their situations as part of a strategy of overcoming such barriers. While Silas Wegg is poor and a rogue, the way in which he accepts Boffin’s offer to read to him – “No, sir. I never did ‘aggle and I never will ‘aggle. Consequently, I meet you at once, free and fair, with — Done, for double the money!” (Book I, Chapter 5) – is but one of many instances in Our Mutual Friend in which theatrical self-presentation functions to bridge class and social divisions as well as further economic gain. Like the Music Hall and Magic Lantern Show, Dickens’s fiction is a world in motion.² It is defined, like the city he made a synonym for his world, by change and transformation. Michael Ginsburg has articulated the formal aspects of this radical turn of his fiction. She notes that the plot of Our Mutual Friend makes it possible for Dickens “to think of history as a process of transformation” (Ginsburg 1996: 147).

Nineteenth-century urban reconstruction not only defined the theatre of everyday life, it also helped to create the homeless as a distinct and visible group – a class of people with access to this city stage but without personal location. Like other characters in Dickens’s urban comedy, Silas Wegg has no home of his own yet takes center

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stage throughout much of Our Mutual Friend by setting up his stand on a street corner. At almost the polar opposite of the social scale, Nicholas Nickleby discovers that he too can rely only on his self-presentation and role-playing as levers by which to attain a domicile of his own, in a manner of which Wegg is the undisputed master.

Nicholas Nickleby (1839) and Our Mutual Friend (1864), among the Dickens novels most concerned with the theater, both focus on clothes-making. In Our Mutual Friend Jenny Wren models her dolls’ clothing on society, while much of Nicholas Nickleby takes place in the Mantalini’s dressmaking establishment. In both novels, appearances count for so much that clothing is put at its metaphoric center. In both, what a character wears is part of the modern industry of image-making and self-production. Not only his sister Kate but Nicholas as well will discover the power of the projected image — and the temptation to trade upon it for subsistence and possible wealth. Like dressmaking, the production of the self in this world is not a “natural” phenomenon but a technical — and technological — event that articulates the central values of this culture. Here, personality, like Miss LaCreevy’s miniatures in Nicholas Nickleby, is composed. It is an image framed by the portrait painter’s equivalent of a “claude glass” which functions to define a picturesque image.

Whatever the moral differences among characters, they are all arrayed along the same ladder of self-making. Life for Boffin, Bella, Rokesmith in Our Mutual Friend as for Nicholas, Kate, and Crummles in Nicholas Nickleby embodies the dressmaking idea, as Carlyle emphasizes in Sartor Resartus (1833); we are in a world of cutting out shapes, stitching seams, and sewing on ruffles and borders, and thereby assembling a striking appearance out of the abstract, impersonal materials furnished by the industrial revolution, which began in England with the mass-production of cloth. Attiring the individual, this new conception of clothing not only altered appearance but empowered it as part of a world in motion. Tatiana Holway notes that Dickens’s description of the Crystal Palace in his account in Household Words called “Plate Glass,” helped the public to envision this “vast collection” of commodities as “a living picture.” (Holway, “Singular & Peculiar” 11) Frame gave meaning to content, and articulated a visual field which constituted meaning as appearance-in-motion. Dickens’s readers who clipped the illustrations from their monthly numbers, and, putting frames around them, hung them on the walls of their homes, engaged in the same practice. What they experienced was not just illustrations as tableaux but pictures that were intrinsic to a moving narrative, a picture in progress and motion.
The immensity of the first world-city made its impact not in absolute but comparative terms. The Dickensian characters who first encounter it are the outsiders: the homeless wanderers, the uprooted country folk, the rural population. The celebration of their urban opportunity is counterbalanced by the fear dogging Oliver Twist even in Fagin’s den. Wegg, Oliver, Nicholas, Kate, Little Nell, Lizzie are homeless in the great city; it is the condition of their existence there.

By contrast, the reader of Dickens’s novels who follows the efforts of these Dickensian characters to construct a map of the city and read its codes, is a tourist. For him, Dickens’s novels can be guidebooks and photo opportunities. This fiction serves as his home. The contemporary reader thus re-lives what was a great part of Dickens’s popular appeal in the era that invented organized middle-class tourism and its ubiquitous counterpart, photography (Buzard 1993, Crary 1990, Brewster 1976, Baumgarten 1995).

The contrast is evident in the difference between the ways in which Dickens’s homeless figures arrive in the city and make their way through it, and the experience of the reader-tourist. Note that immigrant and tourist-reader thought of London not simply as “the capital of a great nation, but the metropolis of the world” (Illustrated London News 17 May 1851). Nevertheless, they perceived and experienced it in fundamentally different ways. For the immigrant and the homeless wanderer on the streets, London was bewildering, a place without evident or meaningful sign-posts. They were thus placed at the mercy of an Artful Dodger as is Oliver Twist, or a Rogue Riderhood who kidnaps, drugs, and robs John Harmon and throws him into the Thames to drown. Perhaps because he had read of them in Dickens, the tourist-reader did not often undergo such dangers; his experience of such criminal terrors was vicarious. He was not only plunged into the maelstrom of this immense city as he read of the adventures of the homeless protagonist and identified with him, but was given the opportunity to perceive it panoramically through the agency of the narrator. Thus he surveyed London in representations that made the whole legible, and in this way bounded the force of those elements that put the Dickensian protagonist at risk. When seen from above by the tourist-reader, the maze of the city which bedevils the homeless and immigrant wanderer, is lucid, because it is visible as a panorama.3

3 Yet it is also a characteristic feature of Dickens’s art not only to allow his readers the “long-sight” of panorama but as well to plunge them again and again into one of the innumerable “labyrinths whereof the mystery was known but to a few”; overwhelmed by the “crowds of people and mountains of goods” (Dombey & Son, 218). As tourists, readers might be taken on a detour and offered a glimpse of one of the places that “hide their musty treasures from the public eye with distrust” (Old Curiosity Shop, 4) and that only the perspicacious narrator can see; or conveyed to a rooftop where an animate chaos of
As Tatiana Holoway notes in her deft comparison of the Crystal Palace and Dickens’s narrative strategy, the same audiences “admitted for the price of a shilling” to both plunged into what was thus simultaneously a more mediated and a more immediate experience of London. In this city they were liable to be “swallowed up in one phase or another of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination” (Dombey & Son, 480) and then taken by the narrator, — “the native, all-knowing cartographer of the London maze,” as Gerhard Joseph tellingly refers to him, “the painstaking cataloguer of person and incident” (10) — to a vantage point from which to make sense of the details of a world that appears to make none. The narrator’s characteristic soaring ambition of revealing the coordinates of social relations requires the routine preliminary effect of “bewildering” an observer who can then be brought “up.” Promising and withholding through the nineteen-month run of a serial a “long-sight,” the narrator “perceives in the prospect innumerable features and bearings non-existent to a short-sighted person” (Martin Chuzzlewit, preface).

This narrator is at once an omniscient mystifier and a patient guide through the labyrinth of London. He turns the reader from a tourist into a homeless wanderer, and then awards him the keys to a bewildering city. Perhaps he bestows the opposite favor on his chosen protagonists, transforming them through the magic of his art from homeless immigrants to the familiar who are at home in their chosen city.

In 1866, Dickens proudly noted that “I know London better than any one other man of all its millions” (Maxwell 1992: 281). By that time his knowledge had reached around the world, fusing his understanding and the metropolis itself: for his readers Dickens and London were virtually the same. The myriads of tourists since then who have made the Dickensian sites of London, whether real, imagined, or commercially constructed into places of pilgrimage, attest to the power of “the Inimitable” for them he, like Pip in Great Expectations, “comprehends the metropolis” (Maxwell 1992: 278).

“slight features [...] sprung out from the mass without any reason, as it were, and took hold of the spectator’s attention, whether he would or no,” as in the figure of the “man who was mending a pen at an upper window” and “who became of paramount importance in the scene, and made a blank in it, ridiculously disproportionate in its extent, when he retired (Martin Chuzzlewit: 130).

4 In the form of his 14 completed novels (The Mystery of Edwin Drood was still ahead of him), Sketches by Boz, and All the Year Round, and Household Words as well as the constant references to the city in his travel writing.
Works Cited


