

Mapping the city: Walking in dickens *Bleak House*

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Abstract

The paper examines how walking, as a performative act in *Bleak House*, allows Dickens to survey and regulate an array of public and private spaces. The neat disjunction which the Victorians endeavoured to maintain between these spaces is consequently rendered problematic. The three main walkers in the novel resist, maintain and re-enforce the maps constructed by the bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie to maintain discipline in the society.

Keywords: *flaneur*, private, public space, circulation, bleak house, dickens

Introduction

Jo comes out of Tom All Alone's, meeting the tardy morning... His way lying through many streets, and the houses not yet being open, he sits down to breakfast on the doorstep of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, and gives it a brush when he has finished, as an acknowledgement of the accommodation. (*Bleak House*, p. 198)

Clattering over the stones at a dangerous pace, yet thoughtfully bringing his keen eyes to bear on every sinking creature whom he passes in the midnight streets, and even on all the turnings that he rattles by, and alike on the heavy sky, and on the earth where the snow lies thin. (*Bleak House*, p.671).

The mid-nineteenth century London, with all its vitality, chaos and contradictions, presented Charles Dickens with myriad modern urban spaces. Dickens teased out the dramatic possibilities of this ephemeral, transitory urban experience by bringing together people across class and social lines, in spaces ranging from slums, or Inns of Courts to stately houses. The urban topography allowed him to question the government and citizen's responsibility towards fellow beings whose struggle with poverty amid squalor is also necessitated by new urban experience. He systematically destabilizes the set of interiors revered by the bourgeois upper middle class, especially the conjugal homogeneous patrilineal household.

In the present paper, I will examine how walking, as a performative act in *Bleak House*, allows Dickens to survey and regulate an array of public and private spaces. The neat disjunction which the Victorians endeavoured to maintain between these spaces is consequently rendered problematic. The three main walkers in the novel resist, maintain and re-enforce the maps constructed by the bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie to maintain discipline in the society. Although Jo is forced to "move on" by the society, yet he makes detours and deviations from the path charted out for him. Inspector Bucket collaborates with the stakeholders to track the deviants. Lastly, Dickens himself as the *flaneur* walks across London and tracks the intersections between disparate people, goods and geographical places.

This mapping of the city by three distinct people problematizes the binaries of inside/ outside and public/private through violent contrasts, complex simultaneity and

chance intersections during their walk. On the one hand is the impulse to delineate the dangerous terrain of the urban topography by looking into the grim realities of urban existence. On the other, the differences between the social classes are sought to be re-affirmed in the face of proliferating dangers of the street. In other words, the circulation or movement necessitated due to urban living is both threatening and generative for the city novel.

Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* shows how the concept of city was formulated by a need for "managing a growth of human agglomeration or accumulation" (p. 93), to structure and delimit the chaotic urban life. This inevitably involves "rational organization" and repression of "all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it" (p.94). In the novel, Jo is both introduced and rejected at the same time. He appears to bear testimony regarding Nemo's death (another outcast) in the Chancery court, the ubiquitous legal institution that validates a person's life. His evidence is summarily rejected as he has, No Father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both. (*Bleak House*, p.134) Even the coroner, "'can't exactly say' won't do, you know. We can't take that" as "it's a terrible depravity". The boy inhabits the ruinous slums of Tom-All-Along's, which are described in what have become the oft-quoted lines of the text. Now, these tumbling tenements contain by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of fowl existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards: and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle,...and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it. (*Bleak House*, p. 197)

Jo indeed through his walk carries "fever" into the bourgeois household by his contact with charitable protagonist Esther. He is both a participant and a victim of the inevitable condition of urban living- circulation. However, the initial contact is established by the most respectable woman of the London fashion galaxy, Lady Dedlock. The exposition of

Lady Dedlock's liaison is set into motion by recognition of handwriting of her lover in a legal document, which like newspapers circulate and regulate the lives of people across the social field. Consequently, the "stable", solid centre of bourgeois respectability is rendered vulnerable through the essential urban dynamic of circulation.

Jo becomes the vector of the disease originating from the putrescence in the pauper's graveyard. His walk through the streets is necessitated by bureaucrats who fail to provide for the poor of the country. Dickens is here expressly critical of the governmental malfunctioning and institutional charity which bully the poor in the name of charity as in the case of Mrs. Pardiggle or Mrs. Jellyby who fails to put her own house in order. The whole reformist impulse is satirized as it is displaced on negative religious and apparently secular motivations of state intervention to reform the poor into a standardized kind of life.

De Certeau states that "rather than remaining within the field of discourse which upholds its privilege by inverting its content..., one can try another path". It can be done by analysing the success of "swarming", singular and plural practices that,

far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance, and combined in accord with unreadable but stable tactics to the point of constituting everyday regulations and surreptitious creativities that are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization...But what spatial practices correspond, in the area where discipline is manipulated, to these apparatuses that produce a disciplinary space? (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 96)

The every day practitioners or walkers improvise the path taken by them and hence create spaces for themselves. In spite of being asked to "move on" by the police, and quarantined by Inspector Bucket, Jo is able to organize the possibilities and interdictions that walking grants him, he invents and improvises certain possibilities. He returns to Tom-All-Alone's, evading the surveillance of Inspector Bucket. He expresses his gratitude for Nemo and Mr. Snagsby and the three men seem to form a sort of community who can be kind and charitable in their extreme destitution and indigence. He succumbs, ultimately to the infection he carries and circulates in a place where Gridley had succumbed to a legal affliction. While Gridley was tracked, Jo escapes detection.

Inspector Bucket walks a different walk in the text. He is the protector of the bourgeois family, its prestige, its secrets and its well being. He has a penetrating eye that can look through people and places and register any deviance with great perspicacity. He possesses techniques of surveillance, classification and stratification that expose a major concern that underlies the contemporary representation of urban aesthetic. Not unlike Tulkinghorn, he remains indifferent and unmoved by various crimes or the suffering of the individuals. He believes in keeping private and public life separate. In private he cherishes the "domestic bliss" represented by the Bagnets. His professional ethics, however, demand maintenance of discipline at any cost.

Inspector Bucket finds out Grindley in the George's Shooting Gallery. He skilfully negotiates (using bribe) with Mr. Skimpole to obtain knowledge about Jo, and then very

perceptively unfolds the mystery around Mr. Tulkinghorn's death. DA Miller in his remarkable book *The Novel and The Police*, demonstrates how the disciplinary mechanism works in the novel. In the earlier novels, the carceral as a topic had helped Dickens to secure the difference between,

On the one hand, a confined, institutional space in which power is violently exercised on collectivized subjects, and on the other, a space of "liberal society", generally determined as a free, private, and individual domain and practically specified as the family. (p.59)

In *Bleak House*, the Chancery court demands certain readjustment in the representation of the social discipline. As the operations of the Chancery court are too expansive and diffuse, the narrative demands some tangible, immediate resolution. The detection attempted by Mr. Tulkinghorn and Mr. Guppy is bound to fail as they work in their individual capacities and take law that they serve, into their hands. The Detective Police then satisfies the desire created by the elusive organisation of Chancery to provide a simplified representation of order and power. Inspector Bucket and the new police polices, "substantively as well as nominally, for the law" and his representation serves a particular ideological function within it, and not against it. Thus, he follows the map of the city charted for him by the bourgeois and the State bureaucracy as he moves across the urban landscape. The denouement provided by him to the detective story is most gratifying to the producers and consumers of the state surveillance system. It works under the aegis of the legal apparatus which frustrates any expectation of a justifiable end. Inspector Bucket, with his Bull's Eye, scans the city space, both "inside" and "outside" the panopticon of power. He fixes people with his eye into hearing him out. He has a way of negotiating his way by talking to people in a familiar way,

All this time, kept fresh by a certain enjoyment of the work in which he was engaged, he was up and down at every house we came to; addressing people who he had never beheld before, as old acquaintances; running in to warm himself at every fire he saw; talking and drinking and shaking hands at every bar and tap; friendly with every waggoner, wheelright, blacksmith, and toll-taker; yet never seeming to lose time, and always mounting to the box again with his watchful, steady face, and business-like "Get on, my lad!" (*Bleak House*, 686)

The combination of "friendly" familiar way, bustle of activity, and "watchful" eye makes him welcome to people. In his last case in the novel, he is outmanoeuvred by Lady Dedlock when she changes clothes with Janet, the mother of the child. Since the markers of the class that he follows are displaced on another body, Inspector Bucket misreads the "map" which uses the traditional symbols of identity. These markers are abandoned by Lady Dedlock to seek asylum in the pauper's graveyard where her lover is buried. Rumours, which are characteristic of urban living, escape from the keyhole, which he unmistakably keeps blocked. These rumours persist in "flitting" and disrupting the narrative that the State and its protectors want to imprint in the society while maintaining the order and discipline.

The most significant trajectory is, however, that of the omniscient narrator, which can be in most cases be perceived as belonging to omniscient author. The omniscience of this narrator is not derived from "lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more", to use de Certeau's phrase. The narrator "maps" himself by his assertion of distance from the social

field he lays bare. Yet it is not the distance that a *flaneur* was able to maintain by abstracting himself from the urban context and reintegrating the disturbing aspects into “an economy of delight”. This walker extracts unrelated elements, blocks of the city- people, places, secrets- in all their contradictions, and places them in a situation of tense simultaneity.

The narrator carefully juxtaposes disparate social spaces and unconnected people brought together by the inevitable transactions. The juxtaposition of socially varied spaces and people generates immense possibilities for plot and characters in the novel. The narrator, with his camera-like eye, chooses to close-up on certain aspects of urban landscape and to sweep across others. His walking produces, what Certeau describes as two pedestrian figures, “synecdoche” and “asyndeton”.

Synecdoche re-places totalities by fragments (a less in the place of a more); asyndeton disconnects them by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive (nothing in place of something). Synecdoche makes more dens; it amplifies the detail and miniaturizes the whole. Asyndeton cuts out: it undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility. (*The Practise of Everyday Life*, 101)

The narrator peeps into the houses of the affluent Chesney Wold and Bleak House and working class home of Mrs. Bagnet. He silently observes the quarters of Richard and Ada at Symond’s Inn, Miss Flite’s rooms or Mr. Krook’s rag and bottle shop with all the memorabilia of Chancery suit. He witnesses Sir Leicester’s histrionics or Little Swill’s adaptation of Krook’s murder. He overhears Mrs. Perkins and Mrs. Piper’s gossip. Moreover, he describes Tom-All-Alone’s as the counterfoil of Bleak House as both the properties are part of the Jarndyce suit. He closes in on the pauper’s graveyard or the dirt in the streets.

The narrative moves not only synchronically across diverse spaces but also diachronically in the form of montage progression. As in the *Lady Dedlock* plot, various cues and secrets are uncovered as the Lady herself is propelled into radically different spaces. The interconnection embedded in the plot is a precondition of radically satisfied city life. The narrator heightens the apprehensions of the contemporary middle-class reader and shakes them out of complacency by asking

What connection can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard step? What connection can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of the world, who, from the opposite sides of the great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together. (*Bleak House*, 197).

Characters also bear the marks of internally divided society. The deployment of markers that register social on the body, like clothes, language, etc allow a surface play of signifiers that frees the character from moral commitments and psychological complexities. *Lady Dedlock’s* secret relationship with *Hawdon* frees her figure from the specificity of her environment and network of relationships. Her body holds together “the contradictory marks of the social extremities through which it is stretched.”

With establishment of new *Bleak House* as the centre of bourgeois happiness, the narrator reaffirms domesticity after testing its limits through various dispersive strategies. Thus, in

Bleak House, we find the “organicity” of the world in the novel is threatened by constant movement, circulation and walk. The regulative eye of the narrator and the police re-establishes the distinction between private and public and brings the deviants to punishment.

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