



# Crossing Thresholds: The Aesthetics of an Urban Experience, from Oliver Twist to The Wire

Clémence Folléa

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# UNSETTLING DICKENS PROCESS, PROGRESS AND CHANGE

CHARLES DICKENS — par GILL



ÉDITIONS DU SAGITTAIRE

Édition de Christine Huguet et Paul Vita

Charles Dickens traversant la Manche en emportant ses livres (*Dickens on his way to Paris with his reading books*). Hand coloured print. André Gill, *L'Eclipse*, 14 June 1868.

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*Unsettling Dickens:  
Process, Progress and Change*

Edited by  
Christine Huguet and Paul Vita

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Chapter Nine  
 Crossing Thresholds:  
 The Aesthetics of an Urban Experience,  
 from *Oliver Twist* to *The Wire*

Clémence Follea

The HBO series *The Wire* (2002–2006), the television series focusing on all the facets of the drug trade in Baltimore, is frequently referred to as ‘Dickensian’. Nicholas Kulish of the *New York Times*, for example, wrote that ‘if Charles Dickens were alive today he would watch *The Wire*, unless, that is, he was already writing for it’.<sup>1</sup> A retrospective included in the series’ set of DVDs contains a chapter called ‘a Dickensian Drama’.<sup>2</sup> A recent rewriting of the show called *Down in the Hole: The unWired World of H.B. Ogden* imitates the style and form of a Victorian illustrated novel, thus suggesting further connections between Dickens’s works and the series.

Those who affirm the Dickensian filiation of the HBO series have been repeatedly criticized by another breed of *The Wire* critics, irritated by the use of such a ‘facile, cocktail-party insight’.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of the ‘not-Dickensian’ thesis put forward a range of aesthetic, narrative and generic arguments: while, regardless of Dickens’s many connections with the visual arts and imagination, some insist on the inevitable discrepancy between print and the moving image, others invoke the ‘outrageous coincidences that Dickens routinely relies on’ as well as his

‘sentimentality – another Dickens staple’.<sup>4</sup> These critics often call forth a definition of the Dickensian which essentially relies on Dickens’s heartfelt concern for ‘the dark and downtrodden’ as well as on his ‘escapism, or ... simple enjoyment of life’.<sup>5</sup> But these aspects only encompass what John Gardiner calls the ‘most obvious resonances’ of the Dickensian. Such a definition overlooks the ‘more complex Dickens’, to which readers and scholars have also grown accustomed since the 1940s. The ‘grim alleyways, humorous characters and Christmas cheer’ are one side of the Dickensian coin which co-exists with a ‘subtler, darker, more artistic’ facet, often closer to the actual experience of reading Dickens’s texts.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Dickensian may be conjured up either as a critical tool for literary and aesthetic analyses or as a hazier cultural notion pointing to a pervasive presence. For instance, the comparison between *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire* has been discarded on the ground that ‘while one has spawned a hit Broadway musical, as well as the archetypal image of the Victorian street urchin, Broadway audiences would be hard-pressed to imagine the street characters of the other singing much of anything’.<sup>7</sup> This is a good example of the vaguer cultural use of the Dickensian, in which the experience of a complex and multifaceted text, as is *Oliver Twist*, is replaced by that of a ‘sanitized and jollified’ adaptation,<sup>8</sup> in which only one side of the original novel persists. One of the aims of this paper is to question this discrepancy and to ask whether the aesthetics of *The Wire* may not be linked to a deeper version of Dickens’s writings.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Owen, ‘The Wire re-up: Season five, episode eight – the Dickensian aspects’, *The Guardian* (6 April 2010).

<sup>5</sup> John Gardiner, ‘The Dickensian and US’, *History Workshop Journal*, 51 (Spring 2001): 228.

<sup>6</sup> Gardiner, ‘The Dickensian and Us’, pp. 231–5.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Pensky, ‘Reality, and Then Some, as Conveyed in *The Wire* and *Oliver Twist*’, [www.popmatters.com](http://www.popmatters.com) (21 June 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity. From Dickens to Dad’s Army* (Manchester, 1997), p. 347.

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Kulish, ‘Television You Can’t Put Down’, *The New York Times* (10 September 2006).

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Wire Odyssey: A Retrospective of the First Four Seasons’, *The Wire: The Complete Five Season* (New York, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Laura Miller, ‘The Wire is NOT like Dickens’, [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com) (13 September 2012).



I must admit I was somewhat disappointed when I discovered that David Simon, one of the series' creators, had sided with the proponents of the 'not-Dickensian' argument. In a 2009 interview for *Vice Magazine*, he explains that whilst Dickens, like *The Wire*, showed 'the fault lines of [his contemporary society] and where money and power route themselves away from the poor', he would always come to the conclusion that, 'thank God a nice old uncle or this heroic lawyer is going to make things better'.<sup>9</sup> According to Simon, Dickens would 'punk out .... *The Wire* was actually making a different argument than Dickens, and the comparison, while flattering, sort of fell badly on us'. In that same interview, Simon recalls his attempt to 'goof with the Dickens comparison' by inserting winks and nods into the show itself.<sup>10</sup> The fifth series delineates a simplistic conception of the Dickensian, which is first mentioned in the second episode and then grows to become a running joke throughout the season. During a staff meeting at the *Baltimore Sun*, the newspaper's executive editor James Whiting insists that his team should depict the 'Dickensian lives of city children'. Then, in a later episode entitled 'The Dickensian Aspect', Whiting prompts one of his reporters to focus 'not only on the murders' of homeless people, but also 'on the nature of homelessness itself'. The reporter, with a wry facial expression, takes the cue and adds, 'the Dickensian aspect of it. Yeah'. The camera lingers on his world-weary face as he lights a cigarette and stares blankly ahead of him. In the light of such a definition, it is easy to understand why Simon made so little of his work's own 'Dickensian aspect'.

Yet, even after Simon's statement and his 'goofs' with the Dickens comparison, the adjective keeps appearing in many articles and essays about *The Wire*. Why does the 'Dickens connection' continue to proliferate so persistently? This paper

explores the various parallels drawn between *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire*, and argues that there exists an essential difference between the Dickensian as it is quoted in *The Wire* and another version of the Dickensian, which resists its own hazier and sometimes simplistic definition. In a discussion about the afterlife of Dickens's works, Sara Thornton and Alain Jumeau observe that, 'persistence is resistance to time, but also to hegemonic or monolithic discourse, since new paths of thought are constantly created in Dickensian writing, no one strand allowed to dominate'.<sup>11</sup> I argue here that a comparison with *The Wire* may serve as a case in point to assess the different forms which the Dickensian can assume in our imaginations today. In my view, *The Wire* has a mesmerizingly Dickensian aspect in the aesthetic *experience* it provides, especially through its articulation of urban spaces: just as in *Oliver Twist*, the city of *The Wire* is composed of different areas, arranged in a parataxis. Whilst readers/viewers are first made aware of seemingly insurmountable barriers between these spaces, they are eventually taken across them and achieve an intense exploration of the margins. This transformation of boundaries into thresholds and the resulting aesthetic experience are essential common features shared by *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire*.

### Preliminary: Points of Comparison

The parallels drawn between *The Wire* and Dickens's writings rely mainly on matters of form, context and content. The formal structure shared by *The Wire* and Dickens is often evoked: the serial format is *the* essential condition of publication which both works were subject to. Their fictional worlds are accordingly elaborate, and as Nicholas Kulish suggests, 'the 12 hours or so of unexpurgated immersion into a world of gangsters or

<sup>9</sup> Jesse Pearson, 'Interview with David Simon', [www.viceland.com](http://www.viceland.com) (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Pearson, 'Interview'.

<sup>11</sup> Alain Jumeau and Sara Thornton, 'Persisting with Dickens: A Global Afterlife', *Études Anglaises*, 65/1 (January–March 2012): 3–5.



prospectors that a season on HBO represents are roughly equal to a reader's investment in a novel'.<sup>12</sup>

Another connection is sometimes established between Dickens and Simon himself. Both men were initially trained as journalists and grew accustomed to look at the world around them through a particularly sharp eye, registering and processing a wealth of teeming details. Their keen sense of observation is essential to their fictional creations, which are also based on meticulous research: like Dickens, who famously walked through the streets of London in search of information for his novels, Simon repeatedly asked the people of Baltimore for guidance in order to correctly portray their lives. Besides, *The Wire* and Dickens's novels are products of imaginative accretions which crystallized slowly, in the long run. The urban underworld of *Oliver Twist*, for example, finds many precursors in *Sketches by Boz*; an early equivalent to the Artful Dodger can be spotted in 'Criminal Courts'; precursors to Sikes and Bull's-Eye are discernible in 'Meditations on Monmouth Street'; 'Seven Dials' paves the way for Dickens's descriptions of Saffron Hill and Jacob's Island. Similarly, many aspects of *The Wire*'s slums were already incipient in Simon's early books, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991) and *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighbourhood* (1997, co-authored with Ed Burns, the series' second creator).

This creative process based on observation, research and long-term imaginative development results in strikingly realistic aesthetics, which are often conjured up when *The Wire* is described in Dickensian terms. The retrospective featured along with the series' DVD calls *The Wire* a 'Dickensian Drama' based on the realism and thoroughness that characterize its depiction of city life. Jacob Weisberg, editor for *Slate.com* interviewed for the occasion, declares that, '*The Wire* is sort of like a great nineteenth-century novel' in which all the layers of

society are 'woven together in [an] enormous tapestry'.<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, Paul Owen writes in *The Guardian* that 'both Dickens and Simon/Burns construct an entire culture from the ground up, from the lowest criminals to the highest reaches of the upper class'.<sup>14</sup> Unlike many other so-called 'cop shows', *The Wire* is not content with simply depicting an everlasting police hunt, leading to one arrest at the end of each episode; instead, the series carries out a fully-fledged exploration of the underworld and of its many intricate connections with the rest of society. Season 1 focuses mainly on the workings of the drug trade itself; Season 2 brings in the difficult lives of longshoremen working on the crumbling docks of Baltimore; Season 3 takes us into the corridors of political power; Season 4 unveils the dysfunctions of the 'Inner City School' system; and Season 5 interrogates the attitude of the media. This fictional world is far-reaching, but it is also filled with a cast of vividly individualized characters who, in the words of a TV critic, are 'written with such specificity that they feel like a person', no matter 'whether they are one of the stars or have only one scene'.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the HBO series has been called Dickensian both for its extensive depiction of society and for its set of distinctive and unforgettable characters. Many critics have underlined the similarities between Dickens's particular kind of realism and *The Wire*'s. However, the comparison was partly disavowed by Simon who – convincingly – remarked that such a parallel could equally extend to Balzac or Tolstoy.<sup>16</sup> I would like to argue that *The Wire* may be compared to Dickens by looking not so much at their *descriptions* of the city as at the *experience* provided by their articulations of urban spaces: *The Wire*'s Baltimore has an effect

<sup>12</sup> Kulish, 'Television You Can't Put Down'.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Wire Odyssey'.

<sup>14</sup> Owen, 'The Wire re-up'.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Wire Odyssey'.

<sup>16</sup> Pearson, 'Interview'.



on the viewer akin to that produced on the reader by Dickens's London. *Oliver Twist* will serve as the main example here because of both its enduring popularity and the disconnection between the author's intention as stated in his preface to the novel – 'to paint [criminals] in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness'<sup>17</sup> – and the text itself, which brings forth the bewitchingly vivid quality of the underworld.

### From London to Baltimore: The Experience of the City in *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire*

In both *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire*, the effect produced by the fictional cityscape relies on parataxis. In Dickens's London 'each street is a separate street', argues Michael Hollington, and yet 'at the same time, Dickens is fascinated by the contiguity of separate streets and scenes'.<sup>18</sup> This argument is equally relevant to *The Wire*'s Baltimore. Apparently impassable boundaries are established, challenged and eventually made into thresholds leading into enthralling and dynamic urban margins.

The first prominent feature of both Dickens's and Simon/Burns's cities is the wide gap that separates central and marginal spaces. In *Oliver Twist*, 'a netherworld of metropolitan criminality' – Saffron Hill and Jacob's Island – co-exists with 'a safe haven of upper middle-class order and security' – Pentonville, where Mr Brownlow welcomes Oliver.<sup>19</sup> *The Wire* similarly moves back and forth from the Centre, where the Police Headquarters and City Hall are located, to West Baltimore, which hosts most of the series' drug traffickers. Boundaries between these spaces are dramatized in Season 3, when Major Colvin creates a drug-free zone – nicknamed 'Hamsterdam' – where traffickers and addicts are all packed

<sup>17</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist, or the Parish Boy Progress* (London, 1993), p. 4. All subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London, 1984), p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Sambudha Sen, 'Hogarth, Egan, Dickens and the Making of an Urban Aesthetic', *Representations*, 103 (Summer 2008): 84.

together and free to roam. Both *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire* contain edifying scenes in which marginal figures venture out of their native underworld and suffer the contempt of central characters. In Chapter 39 of Dickens's novel, when Nancy goes to Pentonville, she receives a 'look of virtuous disdain' from a 'smartly-dressed young female' and is called 'a disgrace to her sex' only fit for being 'thrown ruthlessly into the kennel' (p. 265). A similar scene occurs in Season 1, Episode 4 of *The Wire*, when Bubbles, a confidential informant and engaging drug addict, accompanies Officer Jimmy McNulty into the suburbs where his sons are playing soccer. Bubbles is cold-shouldered by McNulty's wife and stands out as a complete oddity in the 'safe haven of upper middle-class order and security'<sup>20</sup> with which the McNultys, along with most of the viewers, are entirely familiar. These scenes of displacement produce a double-sided effect on readers/viewers. On the one hand, the largely middle-class audience of *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire* are led to recognize the existence of a safe gap separating their own world from urban margins. But on the other hand, readers/viewers may feel some amount of discomfort on seeing that these characters are irremediably marginalized even though, as Bubbles says just before re-entering the underworld, there is only a 'thin line 'tween Heaven and here'.

So the first stage of our urban experience in *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire* consists in discovering the existence of apparently irreconcilable spaces, separated by solid boundaries. But, on a deeper level, Dickens and Simon/Burns question these boundaries, especially by creating parallels between centre and margins. In *Oliver Twist*, the world of Saffron Hill stands out in many ways as a parody of Pentonville: Fagin's den is repeatedly depicted as a mock household, and Fagin, according to Michael Hollington, resembles 'a kind of ironic Jewish patriarch presiding over a family idyll which inverts familiar bourgeois

<sup>20</sup> Sen, 'Hogarth, Egan, Dickens', p. 84.



values .... A topsy-turvy morality prevails'.<sup>21</sup> When referred to as a 'respectable old gentleman', Fagin is introduced as a reputed and valuable member of the netherworld society. It is, after all, the Artful Dodger who first uses this nickname, before the narrator takes it over; the nickname thus briefly belongs to the underworld, which is therefore depicted as a contrapuntal centre. *The Wire* makes a similar connection between central and marginal worlds by depicting the drug trade as an alternative business, subject to the same political and economic stakes as legitimate businesses. Stringer Bell, an important drug trafficker, endeavours to play his own game by the rules of standard business: he is thus seen enrolling in an economics course and studying *The Wealth of Nations*. Whilst Fagin appears as an alternative patriarch, Bell makes himself into an alternative businessman. Moreover, centre and margins are often connected through visual parallels in *The Wire*: in the aforementioned sequence from Series 1, Episode 4, for example, a match cut links the McNulty children playing soccer to children from the slums running around on the street.

With their urban aesthetics, *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire* deploy a searching social critique. Readers/viewers are made to feel the existence of boundaries which, 'thin' and questionable as they are, remain nonetheless impassable. By emphasizing the 'connection between criminals and upstanding members of the bourgeoisie, asking which are devils and which men', Dickens 'challenges the innocence, ignorance or indifference' of his readership.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, *The Wire* is 'clearly structured to raise questions about the real world in the viewer of the fictional one'.<sup>23</sup> *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire* challenge the boundaries they describe and, by doing so, cause their audience to experience moral discomfort and to engage in social reflection.

<sup>21</sup> Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque*, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque*, pp. 57, 55–56.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, 'The Wire re-up'.

## Crossing Thresholds

Urban boundaries are not merely questioned in *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire*; they are also transfigured and made into thresholds, leading to an aesthetic experience of disorientation. In her discussion of *The Wire*'s spatial aesthetics, Ariane Hudelet showed that the series' strongpoint lies in trying to overcome the city's fragmentation.<sup>24</sup> Just like Dickens, Simon and Burns demonstrate that 'this dividing line is a fantasy'.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the city is imagined as a site shared by everyone, where, as Simon has it, 'cops and dealers, addicts and lawyers, longshoremen and politicians, teachers and reporters' are 'part and parcel of the same tribe, sharing the same streets, engaged in the same, timeless struggle'.<sup>26</sup> This 'tribe' reaches out to include readers/viewers, who are taken for a very immersive and destabilizing exploration of the margins.

Because some of his contemporaries took exception to his depiction of the London slums in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens felt compelled to write a preface which he appended to the 1841 edition of the novel. In it, he addressed readers of 'so refined and delicate a nature, that they [could not] bear the contemplation of these horrors' (p. 5). He asserted his refusal to 'abate one hole in the Dodger's coat, or one scrap of curl-paper in the girl's dishevelled hair' (p. 5). Post-1841 readers of *Oliver Twist* are thus warned that the novel contains ruthless descriptions of the 'cold, wet, shelterless midnight streets of London' and of 'foul and frowsy dens where vice is packed and lacks the room to turn' (p. 5). The depiction of Saffron Hill is indeed true-to-life and, as Philip Collins reminds us, 'several

<sup>24</sup> Ariane Hudelet, 'L'individu et le groupe dans *The Wire*: l'identité confirmée ou contrainte par les catégories', talk presented at Nanterre University during the seminar '*The Wire*: a fiction in the ghetto. Race, classe et genre dans les séries télévisées' (10 February 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Kent Jones, 'Down in the Hole', *Sight and Sound*, 18/5 (May 2008): 23.

<sup>26</sup> Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth be Told* (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 31.



readers familiar with the facts acknowledge the accuracy of *Oliver Twist* as a guide to the metropolitan criminal life of this period'.<sup>27</sup> As early as in Chapter 8, the Artful Dodger takes Oliver, along with the reader, into the depths of the London underworld: we are thus confronted with 'small shops', where 'the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children', with 'little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in the filth', and with 'public-houses' where 'the lowest orders of Irish were wrangling with might and main' (p. 64). Such passages destabilized and even angered many of Dickens's contemporary readers. An 1839 reviewer of *Oliver Twist*, for example, expressed his

repugnance that the decent veil over human guilt and infirmities should be withdrawn .... This is the great objection which we feel towards *Oliver Twist*. It deals with the outcasts of humanity, who do their dirty work in work, pot, and watch houses, to finish on the Newgate drop.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, *The Wire* deals with an urban underworld ruthless enough to destabilize a twenty-first-century audience. The show never indulges in gratuitous violence, but viewers are nonetheless faced with the dismal details that make up the everyday life of criminals and 'drug fiends'. The show's plunge into the underworld is visually embodied in the opening credits: very long shots suggesting a safely distanced point of view (very high buildings, a helicopter, surveillance cameras) alternate with close-ups of scenes from the criminal world (blood running down the pavement, an arm and a needle, vials of heroine), which intimate that viewers are to be fully immersed in the grim reality of the underworld. The opening credits' last sequence conveys a similar sense of unmitigated immersion: a low-angle shot of a surveillance camera cuts to the point of view offered by the camera itself; the camera is pointed at children, who throw a projectile at it, thus cracking its lens and, at least

visually, the viewer's own TV screen. This short sequence suggests that the boundary separating the audience from the underworld depicted in the series is momentarily removed: viewers should prepare, the credits seem to say, for an unsettling experience. Despite the feeling of shock expressed by some of its reviewers, *Oliver Twist* did not carry out such a brutal assault on its audience; the novel was even described by *Punch* as a crime fiction 'strongly recommended for weak stomachs'.<sup>29</sup> 'Sikes and Nancy', Dickens's public reading derived from his novel, constituted a more radical attempt to affect audiences. Accounts of Dickens's performance suggest that the experience was an emotional one for many spectators who, like viewers of *The Wire*, were strongly immersed in this world of injustice and danger.<sup>30</sup>

The opening credits of *The Wire*, with their alternation of extreme long shots and close-up shots, also connect the experience of immersion with that of disorientation: by being confronted with minute details from an unfamiliar world, instruments of a so-called 'panoptical vision' are challenged, and their pretension to see and know everything is undermined. And, indeed, penetrating the urban underworld proves a confusing and destabilizing experience in both *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire*. In Chapter 8 of *Oliver Twist*, for example, the 'covered ways and yards', the 'disclosed little knots of houses', and their mysterious 'door-ways' (p. 64) are means to 'obscure visibility': they evoke 'a nightmare atmosphere rather than [disclose] the details of a locality'.<sup>31</sup> The passage when Oliver goes through Smithfield market with Sikes is a potent example of such phantasmagorical disorientation. The text bodies forth 'a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confound[s] the senses' (p. 147). It suggests that, beyond the threshold leading

<sup>27</sup> Phillip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London, 1962), p. 262.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Ford, 'Oliver Twist', *Quarterly Review*, 127 (June 1839): 51.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, p. 257.

<sup>30</sup> See Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, pp. 263–65.

<sup>31</sup> Sen, 'Hogarth, Egan, Dickens', p. 98.



into the underworld, one can 'see with no possibility for knowing'.<sup>32</sup> This feeling of incomprehensibility is emphasized by the pervasive presence of 'filth and mire' and of 'a thick steam ... mingling with the fog' (p. 146). The narration itself adds to the effect: despite the narrator's endeavour to list and classify what he sees, 'the totality becomes chaotic and confusing'.<sup>33</sup> This is evident for example in the following sentence: 'Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade, were mingled together in a dense mass' (p. 146). The accumulative syntax suggests that the city's 'energy challenges [the narrator's] ability to perceive and order'.<sup>34</sup> A similar moment of disorientation occurs in Season 3, Episode 7 of *The Wire*, when Bubbles walks through 'Hamsterdam', the drug-free zone where, as in *Oliver Twist*, 'drunken men and women [are] positively wallowing in the filth'. Fog and steam obscure the scene and its populace, making for a nightmarish atmosphere. Through the incessant movements both of the figures onscreen and of the camera itself, which keeps panning and tracking back and forth, and through the fast-paced editing (no shot lasts for longer than four seconds), viewers are plunged into a world that challenges and confuses their senses.

### Slang, or the Imaginative Richness of the Underworld

The thrill of being immersed into a disorientatingly mysterious world is also part and parcel of both *Oliver Twist*'s and *The Wire*'s appeal to middle-class audiences. *Oliver Twist* displays a contradictory awareness that slums are both a symptom of social decadence and a place full of imaginative possibilities. The text fully indulges in these possibilities: it often 'quenches'

<sup>32</sup> David Craig, 'The Interplay of City and Self in *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*', *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, 16 (1987): 22.

<sup>33</sup> Craig, 'The Interplay of City and Self', p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Craig, 'The Interplay of City and Self', p. 20.

the reader's 'thirst for blood', as Sylvère Monod puts it in his study of *Oliver Twist* as a Newgate Novel,<sup>35</sup> and it even sometimes seems to relish the aesthetics of the 'unattractive and repulsive truth' morally evoked in the preface (p. 6). *The Wire*'s slums similarly waver between social and moral decay and aesthetic dynamism. While Michael Ginsburg argues that criminals in *Oliver Twist* are often 'more interesting' than other characters,<sup>36</sup> Kent Jones points out that *The Wire* 'only comes fully alive when it is on the wrong side of the law'.<sup>37</sup> In both works, this 'exotic' quality is mainly embodied in street language. Slang distinguishes between central and marginal figures, making sure that the latter are irreconcilably different from the former, but it also evinces the imaginative vibrancy of the underworld.

The most prominent function of slang in both *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire* is to fuel the realistic depiction of the underworld. Street language is researched, detailed and genuine, and it often has to do with the workings of the criminal underworld. The crime business is called 'the game' in both *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire*; to turn informer is invariably 'to peach' in *Oliver Twist* and 'to snitch' in *The Wire*; policemen are called 'traps' in *Oliver Twist* and 'Five-Os' – in reference to *Hawaii-Five-O*, a 1968–1980 TV cop show – in *The Wire*. Street language thus defines its speakers as members of a certain social background. In *Oliver Twist*, this method of marginal characterization is first ushered in when Oliver meets the Artful Dodger: at once, the Dodger demonstrates that he belongs to a certain layer of society, familiar with 'the mill' and defiant of 'the beak', respectively defined in Fred Kaplan's edition as 'the treadmill; a circular machine worked by prisoners in British jails'

<sup>35</sup> Sylvère Monod, *Dickens Romancier. Etude sur la création littéraire dans les romans de Charles Dickens* (Paris, 1953), p. 110. My translation.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Peled Ginsburg, 'Truth and Persuasion: The Language of Realism and of Ideology in *Oliver Twist*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 20/3 (Spring 1987): 228.

<sup>37</sup> Kent Jones, 'Down in the Hole', *Sight and Sound*, 18/5 (May 2008): 24.



and 'the magistrate' (p. 62). The Artful Dodger thus displays 'an identity utterly removed from those found among most of Dickens's family readers'.<sup>38</sup> A similar process takes place in *The Wire*'s very first scene, when a street character talks about 'rollin' bones' (playing dice) in back alleys and accuses a boy of 'fak[ing] a few shooters, play[ing] it out till the pot's deep. Snatch[ing] and run[ning]' (cheating and running away with the money). Readers of *Oliver Twist* and viewers of *The Wire* are thus hurled into an unfamiliar environment, where slang constitutes 'a sign of ... corruption, of the deviation and lack of concern for a linguistic normal standard',<sup>39</sup> acting as yet another boundary between central and marginal urban spaces.

This is most strikingly the case when street language is translated into Standard English. When the criminals of *Oliver Twist* speak amongst themselves, the narrator often provides translations of what they are saying. For example, when Charley Bates declares that it is 'time to pad the hoof', we are told that 'this must be French for going out' (p. 70). Later on, when Sikes orders Fagin to 'Jerk the tinkler', the narrator explains that 'these words, in plain English, conveyed an intention to ring the bell' (p. 105). The ironic and slightly condescending tone increases the distance that the narrator endeavours to set between himself and these disreputable figures. In *The Wire*, the distance between central and marginal figures is also often predicated on the obscurity of slang, which requires that the detectives tackle it collectively, in order to understand it. For example, in Series 3, Episode 1, Officers Lester Freamon and Roland Pryzbylowski endeavour to decipher what is said on the wiretap with the help of Officer Caroline Massey, 'one of the most discerning ears in Crabtown':<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Steven Michael, 'Criminal Slang in *Oliver Twist*: Dickens's Survival Code', *Literary Criticism*, 27/1 (Spring 1993): 58.

<sup>39</sup> Ginsburg, 'Truth and Persuasion', p. 223.

<sup>40</sup> Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth be Told*, p. 219.

WIRE: Cause I'm looking to, you know, saddle up, and then put another bat on this motherfucker. He need to feel with me today or I'ma take it to someone who can handle them, man.

OFFICER FREAMON: Saddle up an' put another bat on the motherfucker?

OFFICER PRYZBYLEWSKI: 'Settle' up and put another 'bet'.

OFFICER FREAMON: But what was that last part?

OFFICER MASSEY: Man said, 'he need to deal with me today or I'ma take it to someone who can handle them'.

OFFICER FREAMON: Girl, you do have an ear.

The gradual process of understanding what is said on the wire, along with Freamon's final compliment to Massey's 'ear', emphasizes how unfamiliar street language may be to central characters. Such scenes of translation provide realistic representations of the boundaries that separate readers/viewers from the urban margins.

But more often than not, slang remains untranslated, and the audience receive no help to understand it. It is paradoxically in these instances that the boundaries between urban spaces turn into thresholds. Indeed, when street language is used as an open textual strategy, it may result in poetic pleasure: what we are left with when the meaning of slang is unclear is the linguistic gusto that characterizes street language. As Paul Owen has it:

Dickens and Simon also share a delight in language .... Dickens's fidelity to his lower-class characters' speech patterns ... obviously echoes the lovingly transcribed slang of Baltimore's various subcultures in *The Wire* .... For every 'Feel me?', 'parlay' and 'game done changed' in *The Wire*, there is ... Bill Sikes muttering, 'Come on, you sneaking warmint'.<sup>41</sup>

While many standard characters prove rather literal, criminals in both *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire* stand out for their 'ability to

<sup>41</sup> Owen, 'The Wire re-up'.



manipulate language'.<sup>42</sup> In his preface to the novel, Dickens appears wary of street language:

I endeavoured ... to banish from the lips of the lowest character I introduced, any expression that could possibly offend; and rather to lead to the unavoidable inference that its existence was of the most debased and vicious kind. (p. 6)

But, despite this avowed intention to use slang solely for moral purposes, the text displays a sheer aesthetic relish in street words. This is first and foremost evidenced by the nicknames of street characters: just as *Oliver Twist* introduces 'the Artful Dodger' or 'Toby Crackit', *The Wire* features names like 'Peanut Butter and Jelly' and 'No Heart Anthony'. The lines of dialogue uttered by these characters are also rife with aesthetic vigour. The Artful Dodger's language embodies the first occurrence of 'playfully ironical' speech (p. 63) in the novel. His nonsensical utterances, for example, 'Toor rul lol loo, gammon and spinnage, the frog he wouldn't, and high cockolorum' (p. 88), and lilting rhythms, for instance in 'com-pan-i-on' (p. 62), imply that the Dodger, just like Dickens, is a language-player. Slang therefore displays a poetic quality which readers are free to revel in. Thus, the 1839 review of *Oliver Twist* called Dickens a 'regius professor of slang, that expression of the mother-wit, the low humour of the lower classes, their Sanskrit, the hitherto unknown tongue'.<sup>43</sup> Such a description could as easily be applied to *The Wire*'s street talk: Baltimore slang brings together semantic obscurity and a playful use of words, as for instance in 'Ronnie Moe got 851 this morning' ('Ronnie Moe was arrested this morning', with 851 as a reference to the common band frequency for police radio) or in 'your ass be on the bottom of Vine Street sucking on a 40 yelling 5-0' ('You will be at the far end of Vine Street drinking a beer and looking out for the police', with 40 as a reference to 40-ounce bottles of beer). The effect, mingling bewilderment and aesthetic pleasure, is close to

<sup>42</sup> Ginsburg, 'Truth and Persuasion', p. 228.

<sup>43</sup> Ford, 'Oliver Twist', p. 51.

that which the thieves' jargon in *Oliver Twist* would have produced on Dickens's Victorian readership. Simon deliberately refuses to clarify Baltimore slang in *The Wire*, for he believes that,

[the viewer] likes not knowing every bit of vernacular or idiom. He likes being trusted to acquire information on *his* terms, to make connections, to take the journey with only his intelligence to guide him.<sup>44</sup>

Notwithstanding the footnotes in new critical editions, readers of *Oliver Twist* also experience such pleasant defamiliarization when crossing the threshold leading into urban margins.

### Conclusion: *The Wire*, Dickens and the Dickensian

The similarity between Dickens's work and *The Wire* does, in the end, have to do with a thorough depiction of all the city's layers. But it has appeared that a more accurate parallel may be drawn by looking at how these urban layers are articulated and at the kind of experience provided by this configuration. With their juxtaposition of urban spaces, *The Wire* and *Oliver Twist* unsettle their audiences, originating social reflection on the one hand and aesthetic pleasure on the other.

This intricate facet of *Oliver Twist* is often overlooked by critics of *The Wire*, whose definition of the Dickensian, although it is crucial to our contemporary culture, has little to do with the experience of the original text. In 1941, Edmund Wilson changed our understanding of the Dickensian by showing the existence of a darker Dickens who 'identified himself readily with the thief and even more readily with the murderer',<sup>45</sup> and was fascinated by the aesthetic potential of the underworld. But the author of the 1841 Preface to *Oliver Twist* embodies quite another part of Dickens, which John Carey calls 'the self he

<sup>44</sup> Nick Hornby, 'Interview with David Simon', *Believer* (August 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Edmund Wilson, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', *The Wound and the Bow* (London, [1941] 1961), p. 14.



approved of or 'the conformist part of him',<sup>46</sup> and which is responsible for 'the right minded references' that pepper his prefaces.<sup>47</sup> Many passages from *Oliver Twist* show the author of the Preface being overwhelmed by the author of the novel. This aesthetic undercurrent of the text, I think, finds many echoes in *The Wire*.

Thus, by conjuring up a deeper part of Dickens's text, which provides an experience more difficult to theorize, more subconscious perhaps, the boundaries established between Dickens's writings and *The Wire* may, in turn, be made into thresholds. This is merely one attempted answer to the Dickens-vs.-*The-Wire* debate that continues to rage on the web, and also more largely to the question of the Dickensian today. First of all, that this debate should exist at all proves at least one thing: Dickens's texts are not to be left alone, and the Dickensian continues to have a far-reaching and protean influence in cultural spheres. What Wilson describes as 'a familiar joke, a favourite dish, a Christmas ritual'<sup>48</sup> exists alongside a more obscure, less intelligible layer of the Dickensian which, as I tried to argue here, also persists and refuses to be buried under its more obvious counterpart.

*Down in the Hole. The unWired World of H.B. Ogden*, a recent rewriting of *The Wire*, makes the most of the imaginary potential of the Dickensian. The book's parodic title plays on 'HBO', the American TV channel on which the show was initially aired, and on 'Way Down in the Hole', the song used to accompany *The Wire*'s opening credits. *Down in the Hole* came out in 2012, in the wake of a buzz started on the internet. In March 2011, Sean Michael Robinson posted on his blog, *The Hooded Utilitarian*, that *The Wire* was adapted from a Victorian novel which

began syndication in 1846, and was published in 60 instalments over the course of six years. Each instalment was 30 pages, featuring covers and illustrations by Baxter 'Bubz' Black, and selling for one shilling each. After the final instalment, *The Wire* became available in a five volume set, departing from the traditional three.<sup>49</sup>

This internet fraud gave way to a book, in which mock academic essays alternate with excerpts from the 1846 novel (that is, passages from *The Wire* rewritten in Victorian style). The book's preface, written by 'Henry Flowers', 'Sterling Professor of Literature at Princeton University' and author of *The Excruciating Agony of Influence*,<sup>50</sup> informs us that H.B. Ogden 'enjoyed a spirited if primarily imaginary rivalry' with his contemporary Charles Dickens (p. iv). The book thus sets itself as a fictional contribution to the Dickens-vs.-*The-Wire* debate. *Down in the Hole* includes a 'letter' dated 8 February 1848, in which Thomas Carlyle recalls that he once mistook Ogden for Dickens and was 'hard pressed to discover ... why anyone might do so' (p. 126). His plea that, whereas 'by Charles we are cheered considerably' Ogden 'makes us disappointed in our fellow', parodies the argument according to which *The Wire* cannot be Dickensian because the Victorian author 'transforms many of his corrupters from villains to clowns'.<sup>51</sup> Hence, out of an apparently endless and arguably somewhat sterile debate, a new aesthetic experience was born.

DeLyria and Robinson are clearly close readers of Dickens's texts as well as attentive viewers of *The Wire*, and their book carefully combines the urban aesthetics of these two fictional worlds. The illustrations by 'Baxter "Bubz" Black' are modelled on those by Dickens's illustrators. Robinson

<sup>46</sup> Wilson, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> John Carey, *The Violent Effigy. A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London, 1991), p. 17–18.

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Sean Michael Robinson, "When It's not your 'Turn': The Quintessentially Victorian Vision of Ogden's *The Wire*", [www.hoodedutilitarian.com](http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com) (23 March 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Joy DeLyria and Sean Michael Robinson, *Down in the Hole: The unWired World of H.B. Ogden* (New York, 2012), p. iii. All subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

<sup>51</sup> Pensky, 'Reality, and Then Some'.



explained that before he started to work as 'Black', he 'sat down and copied a whole range of [Phiz's] drawings in pencil, just trying to internalize his stylization and visual tics'.<sup>52</sup> His illustrations are also inspired by the work of George Cruikshank, whose shadowy street corners, derelict buildings and mangy figures are everywhere to be seen in *Down in the Hole*. Figures 4, 5 and 6 exemplify how Robinson recast scenes from *The Wire* in the style of Dickens's illustrator. Robinson's parodic



Figure 4. 'The Last Chance' by George Cruikshank, from *Oliver Twist* (London: Richard Bentley, 1838).

<sup>52</sup> Noah Berlatsky, "'The Wire' Was Really a Victorian Novel" [Interview with Joy DeLyria and Sean Michael Robinson], *The Atlantic* (10 September 2012).

artwork brings together the aesthetic experience provided by Dickens's illustrated novel and that offered by *The Wire*.<sup>53</sup>

The language of *Down in the Hole* reveals a similar combination. Joy DeLyria plays with the linguistic gap built by the narrator of

*Oliver Twist* when translating the slang of Fagin's crew into Standard English: *Down in the Hole* recreates this discrepancy between narration and dialogues; but its street language, rather than deriving from nineteenth-century slang, is directly lifted from *The Wire*. In the first chapter, for example, two young drug dealers, D and Wallace, argue about the invention of chicken nuggets. The latter declares that 'the man who invented these' must be 'richer than a motherfucker'. The narrator then describes D's reaction, before transcribing his response: 'D smiled at this evidence of naïveté. "Nigger, please"' (p. 28). The 'jarring effect'<sup>54</sup> resulting from such a contrast makes palpable for us the linguistic shock that



Figure 5. From *Down in the Hole: The unWired World of H.B. Ogen* by Sean Michael Robinson, published by powerHouse Books. Robinson's Cruikshank-like illustration refers directly to visual elements from Series 1, Episode 2: "The Detail" of *The Wire*, an individual, partially concealed behind brickwork, peering through a spyglass, though in the HBO series, the optical device is the zoom lens of a camera. See *The Wire*, <http://www.hbo.com/the-wire>.

<sup>53</sup> I would like to thank Sean Michael Robinson, whose comments and suggestions were extremely helpful.

<sup>54</sup> Berlatsky, "'The Wire' Was Really a Victorian Novel".



Dickens's contemporaries would have felt on reading *Oliver Twist*. By merging together Dickens's text and scenes from *The Wire*, *Down in the Hole* modernizes the multifaceted experience initially offered by *Oliver Twist*. Readers of this parody have the impression of standing precisely on the threshold between *Oliver Twist* and *The Wire*. *Down in the Hole* suggests, as I tried to do here, that there exists, after all, a doorway between these two serial works, connecting the effect they each produce. In doing so, *Down in the Hole* represents a moment when the myriad tracks leading out of the Dickensian text shimmer in all their persisting complexity and profuseness.

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