



**HAL**  
open science

## Londres et la Tamise chez Dickens

Georges Letissier

► **To cite this version:**

Georges Letissier. Londres et la Tamise chez Dickens : Lecture somatique de l'angoisse de la pauvreté. Pauvretés esthétiques au XIXe siècle Regards croisés franco-britanniques, 2022, 978-2-36441-437-2. hal-03915732

**HAL Id: hal-03915732**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03915732>**

Submitted on 29 Dec 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Riverine Poverty: A Somatic Reading of Dickensian Angst

Georges Letissier  
University of Nantes

### Résumé

Londres et la Tamise chez Dickens : lecture somatique de l'angoisse de la pauvreté

La Tamise dans les romans de Charles Dickens apparaît autant comme métaphore que comme métonymie de la pauvreté. Une lecture somatique propose, à l'aune de l'angoisse fondatrice qu'a été la pauvreté pour Dickens, d'aborder celle-ci à travers l'imaginaire de la maladie, de la contamination et de la souffrance du corps dans ce lieu hautement névralgique qu'est Londres au XIXe siècle. Ce n'est pas la description socio-réaliste qui intéresse le romancier, mais bien davantage les effets de la misère sur les corps dégradés, voire encore l'humiliation d'une catabase au bord d'un fleuve infesté de vermine et ce qu'il advient des figures errantes qui hantent notamment *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House* ou *David Copperfield*. La scène traumatique initiale pour Dickens prend place près de la Tamise et tout ensuite ramène sans cesse à ses rives aux entrepôts en ruine. Creuset de l'exploitation, du gâchis et de la déréliction physique comme morale, le fleuve chez Dickens excède le traitement réaliste pour lequel pourtant l'auteur victorien est salué par la critique, pour puiser aux tréfonds de l'expérience personnelle, tout entière livrée à l'imaginaire jusqu'à l'hallucination dans *Edwin Drood*. Ainsi le reportage se fait-il scène immersive, constamment au bord du désordre psychique, dans une confrontation avec la vulnérabilité qui est regard halluciné sur la mort.

The river Thames flows through Charles Dickens's London (Ackroyd 2009: 326-327). It is metonymically and metaphorically associated with poverty, understood both as social deprivation and personal traumatic shock. As is well known, as a result of his father's improvidence Charles, then aged 11, was sent out to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, near the river, where rampant poverty was everywhere to be seen. Edmund Wilson famously argued that this was 'a trauma from which he [Dickens] suffered all his life' (Wilson 1941: 13). What amounts to a psychological wound is crucial to account for the novelist's creative impulse.

The tight bond between Dickens's representation of London and the novelist's poverty anxiety in the aftermath of an initial shock has been abundantly documented by critics through a whole range of perspectives from urban studies, cultural geography and psychogeography. The purpose of this chapter is to revisit this seminal topic through the prism of somatic reading, also known as 'empathetic, embodied reading' (Letissier 2020: 96), to experience anew Dickens's literary rendition of poverty through sensations, affects and the body and to consider whether this approach may be extended to some of the pictures and illustrations released simultaneously with the texts, both fictional and non-fictional.

Somatic reading widens the scope of reader-response theory by focusing primarily on corporeal responses such as emotions, sensation and subjective affects. It fills up a blank in reader response which tended to prioritise a rational, logical approach, both with Hans Robert Jauss (1982) who placed the history-bound, collective reception of texts to the forefront, and Wolfgang Iser (1980) for whom the individual act of reading was analysed through cognition and memory retention. In many respects, far from being anachronistic, a somaesthetic grid (concerned with sensations) is consonant with the Victorian interest in the physiological impact of reading (Dames: 14). At the time, though, it was used to resist the somatic pull of sensational fiction and romance in the case of women who were alleged to be too susceptible to the vagaries of the imagination (Leckie: 8-9). In the twenty-first century, what was held as a flaw for the Victorians is viewed positively because it enlarges the spectrum of reader

response. For obvious reasons, this analysis can only study the effects produced by texts and some illustrations as there are no ways to investigate the bodily stimuli aroused in individual readers through scientific experiments. In this context, style, essentially the voice of the text, its rhythm, pace and intonation and their effects on readers' heartbeats and respiratory rhythm, constitutes the most obvious way of tackling the question. This analytical stance may also be extended to visual studies.

### **Catabasis: 'the river [...] bearing away hopes' (Ackroyd 1996: 73)**

In Dickens's oeuvre biography is closely interwoven with fiction. Poverty is a foundational experience for the writer-to-be as he was born in a middle-class family that fell on hard times as a result of the paterfamilias's debts. The story of the father's imprisonment at the Marshalsea is well known and contributed to the Dickens myth. Having enjoyed a carefree childhood, Dickens was forced, in his twelfth year, to become 'a little labouring hind' (*Copperfield*: 208), almost overnight. He was hired for a menial job at Warren's Blacking, a manufacturer of boot blacking, where he had to paste printed labels on bottles. This meant moving from Camden Town to a maze of squalid alleys and grotty buildings in the vicinity of *Hungerford Stairs* descending to the river. Toponyms are tell-tale and seal beforehand a destiny. John Forster, Dickens's friend and first biographer, inserted fragments of the author's earliest recollections in his book:

'The blacking warehouse [...] was a crazy, tumble down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscotted rooms, and its rotten floors and staircase, the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and the decay of the old place, *rise up before me, as if I were there again.*' (Forster: 52. My emphasis)

The damp, derelict building oozes destitution and corruption and the proliferation of rodents bespeaks contagion and infection. Poverty is resented as a disease as rats are known to spread epidemics. Stylistically two features are striking: the prevalence of the vertical axis with the irreversible pull downwards and the dread of saturation. The vermin threatens to undermine the building's foundation and invade the upper storeys whilst the place is becoming sodden as if the river's lethal waters swelled the wooden material. The syntax follows the author's anamnesis, one recollection triggering another and these remembrances are sensory perceptions evincing abjection and repulsion. The fact that Dickens is eligible for embodied, empathetic reading is immediately striking from the quotation above, the present tense: 'rise up before me' signals the somatic inscription of this experience which once assailed the sense perception of an impressionable child. There is no longer any need for the concomitant actuality of the horrid elements described for the scene to be acutely tangible through the text. Even if Dickens confessed to Forster, from the distance of time, what his experience had been like then, he is reliving it through the prosthetic body of his young self so that his impressions are still as vivid as they were at the time. Besides, this somatic recreation is also destined to be shared by his interlocutor and, even beyond, by readers through what the neurobiologist Antonio R. Damasio in *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* calls the 'as-if-body loops' (100). Emotions can be triggered in the body through direct stimuli: 'the body loop' or else cognitive representations of emotions – for instance through a text – can activate responses in the brain that are not therefore directly responding to a present, actual stimulus. In the example above there are in fact two levels. The adult Dickens summons up an episode from his own past 'as if I were there again'. But this actualisation of this past moment, which has never fully passed, is an incentive for readers to endorse the 'as if' and share in this experience vicariously by bringing back to the surface sensations from their own life approximating those of Dickens. The recalled experience can of course never pretend to

be exactly the same as the original one. This is true of the reader but also, to a large extent, of Dickens too.

Poverty therefore is not treated so much through a rational, sociological discourse accounting for facts as it is phenomenologically rendered, and the concrete experience of being downgraded takes on a symbolic value through the motif of the fall by moving down to the lowest areas of the Great Wen, those that border the river Thames. This in turn evokes the catabasis which in Greek epics related the descent to the Hades as an ordeal which heroic figures had to undergo to show their mettle. In nineteenth-century London, the Thames *is* indeed the modern-day, urban equivalent to the Ancient underworlds. Speaking of Inspector Field in a contribution for *Household Words* on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1851, Dickens remarked on his indifference to ‘the river at night [...] creeping, black, and silent [...] rushing through sluice gates, lapping at piles and posts and iron rings, hiding strange things in its mud, running away with suicides and accidentally drowned bodies faster than a midnight funeral should’ (‘On Duty with Inspector Field’: 440). Paradoxically, the river is both hyperreal as it carries what society rejects, the refuse of an increasingly materialistic and mercantilist world – including the corpses of those who did not fit in – and symbolical through the black colour and the threnodic tone. In *Little Dorrit* the narrator, by using Arthur Clennam as focaliser, underscores the obnoxious stench of the river which is like an open-air cesspool: ‘Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river’ (*Little Dorrit*: 68) and yet what should be the place of decay and perdition also affords through mud the possibility of shaping. In this sense, the novelist’s fall into poverty has also been seen as the incentive to create. In his pioneering psychoanalysis of Dickens, Edmund Wilson spoke of the trauma of the blacking factory episode as crucial for the writer’s imagination. The novelist who in his young age had been subjected to dire poverty was never able to relinquish the dread of destitution afterwards and even when he became affluent he still preserved in himself something of the criminal and the rebel all at once.

Dickens’s close brush with poverty as an underling at Warren’s was subsequently the matrix for some of his fictitious creations. The most direct development from this unfortunate turn of events is to be found in *David Copperfield*, whose abbreviations *DC* reverse the first letters of the novelist’s christian name and patronym. Murdstone and Grinby’s warehouse where David is sent after his stepfather decides to interrupt his education is aptly located ‘at the waterside [...] down at Blackfriars’ (*Copperfield*: 208-209), a pocket of poverty: ‘by the end of the sixteenth century it had become in parts an open sewer, obstructed by refuse of all descriptions, and had acquired a reputation as a noisome or even dangerous place.’ (Ackroyd 2009: 49)

Strangely, *David Copperfield* illustrates the physicality of writing/reading which is central to somaesthetics, in a radical way. As is well known, it is the most autobiographical of Dickens’s novels and thus his ‘favourite child’ (*Copperfield*: 47). It includes passages directly extrapolated from the novelist’s own autobiographical fragments cited by Forster. It also connects life and fiction in a striking manner. In his fragmentary memoirs, the Victorian novelist recalls the old attacks of spasm he was prone to. On one occasion his pain was so excruciating that Bob Fagin, his work companion at the blacking warehouse, and some of the other young labourers ‘made a temporary bed of straw in [his] old recess in the counting-house’ (Forster: 61) while he was writhing in agony on the floor. In his biography, Ackroyd mentions the incident when Dickens, now at the peak of his celebrity, fell and hurt himself just when he set about writing chapter 11 of *Copperfield* in which David, little Charles’s fictitious double, is placed in the dilapidated warehouse to perform his menial task day in day out. Writing has revived his old injury – both moral and physical: ‘His childhood condition returned, as in his imagination he relived the terrors of the old days [...] But who could have believed that even the physical pain could be revived?’ (Ackroyd 1996: 600). If anything, this

shows that even in the heyday of his career Dickens had kept the spectre of poverty only at one remove and that the act of literary creation could bring it back as physiological pain. Writing has proprioceptive effects that may be more or less conscious as it leads to connecting sensory receptors throughout the body with the nervous system. This of course ties in with the image of Dickens as possessed during his reading tours across England and the United States that eventually proved too exhausting for his declining health. The author became pale or sweated profusely whilst performing the parts of his characters single-handedly. Ackroyd insists on the physicality involved in Dickens's creation, with the obsessive image of a 'wild beast', as if the novelist was to remain for ever trapped in this humiliating condition of 'labouring hind' even after being lionised internationally: 'in later years Dickens would sometimes compare himself to an animal prowling behind bars [...] Anxiety. Solitude. Defilement. Despair. Blacking. All these things come together, and we are left with the image of the young boy writhing in agony on the rat-infested floor.' (Ackroyd 1996: 88)

The image of the forsaken child in dire straits has become emblematic of Dickensian poverty as it applies both to the writer's biography and to the characters he has dreamed into existence all along his career, as is shown in William Robert Buss's famous watercolour 'Dickens's Dream' (1870).



### **Textual Dissemination of the Traumatic scene**

*Oliver Twist* (1837-39) proceeds to an extension of the specific venue of the traumatic Warren's Blacking Factory to a whole area of London bordering the river: the Bermondsey rookery of Jacob's Island. For Dickens, this non-place can be phrased in 'the superlative degree of comparison only' (*Two Cities*: 5) as 'the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of its inhabitants?' (*Twist*: 416).

Crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half-a-dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows broken and patched with poles thrust out on which to dry the linen that is never there [...] dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations; every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage; all these ornament the banks of Folly Ditch. (*Twist*: 417)

The main characteristic of the passage is to have emptied the place of all characters to preserve only the space signalled by vacancy. To quote one critic: 'A palpable restraint governs Dickens's reportage, a bating of his own dynamic powers.' (Johnston: 138) The narratorial voice is kept under control and only perceptible through the adjective 'crazy' or the punctual anaphora 'every'. Poverty is conjured through the paucity of presence: impersonal infinitives 'to look upon' instead of active agents. Jacob's Island is haunted by the absence of the expected destitutes as if Dickens kept their existence poised on the brink of an ontological void.

A single, derelict house near the river features in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), a novel where two children, the eponymous Nicholas and his sister Kate, are left impecunious at their father's death. Their uncle Ralph Nickleby treats them mercilessly and Kate and her mother are taken by his clerk Newman Noggs to a 'a large old dingy house in Thames Street: the door and windows of which were so bespattered with mud, that it would have appeared to have been uninhabited for years.' (*Nickleby*: 197). Both women are to lodge in this dismal, isolated place. The location is oddly reminiscent of the surroundings of Warren's Blacking Factory: 'There was a wharf behind, opening on the Thames' (*Nickleby*: 197) and the third-person narrator conjures up the sense of awe. Destitution is metonymically rendered through a clutter of heterogeneous, discarded objects: 'an empty dog-kennel, some bones of animals, fragments of iron hoops, and staves of old casks lay strewn about' (*Nickleby* 197-198). Through this incongruous list of randomly assembled, useless things and artefacts, Dickens's third novel already announces the dust heaps disfiguring the urbanscape in his penultimate, and last completed one, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65). Poverty is contagious and the novelist relies on the dual process of personification and reification to erase the dichotomy between people and objects, suggesting that penury reduces all to a state of indistinction. Thus, the ladies are 'discharged' together with their scant belongings in front of the grotty house and Noggs's pockets are said to be 'dilapidated'. Empathetic response is elicited by the typical Dickensian pattern consisting in repetitions with variations: 'Old, and gloomy, and black, in truth it was, and sullen and dark were the rooms' (*Nickleby*: 197). The narratorial intrusion 'in truth it was' which could be construed as free indirect discourse – as this might well be what Kate had in mind at that particular moment – promises a development ('and...') which is immediately denied. The initial impression of darkness and bleakness is indeed reiterated. The reader is likely to be left choking as a result of this stylistic entrapment and the malaise is reinforced by the passing allusion to the bones of animals. The reader's function at this point is limited to visual perception, perhaps to haptic visuality, as the objects are first apprehended as separate single entities, outside the narrative flow. The polysyndeton 'and' marks a series of ruptures preventing a full perception of a logically organised scene. The reader thus touches the objects with his/her eyes, or rather shrinks from doing so, as their presence is disturbing. So the experience of empathetic reading, or bodily reading, anticipates on Kate's remark: 'This house depresses and chills one [...] and seems as if some blight had fallen on it. I should be almost inclined to believe that some dreadful crime had been perpetrated within these old walls.' (*Nickleby*: 198) Quite imperceptibly, the scene shifts from destitution to Gothic haunting.





Newman Noggs leaves the lady in the empty house. (Browne, Hablot Knight, aka 'Phiz', 1839)

This is precisely this anxiety attached to the shabby genteel which Browne expresses through his illustration. The three characters in the foreground are depicted in a conventional posture, with Noggs obsequiously bending to the two ladies who, as may be seen from their attires, have probably known better days. However, the sense of perspective and the hatchings, both horizontal and oblique, trouble what could have been merely a domestic interior with characters respectful of the sense of decorum. The window does not open out onto any exterior vista but replicates the patterns on the walls inside and the cracks and fissures abolish the reassuring prospect of the house as a safe haven. The saturation of lines even arouses a sense of claustrophobia.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) the river appears repeatedly and fulfils a structuring function. To the previously mentioned obsession with poverty and dereliction is added the stain of the moral flaw as Daniel Quilp, the malevolent dwarf, is intrinsically linked to the Thames to the point of having his name attached to it: 'On the Surrey side of the river was a small rat-infested dreary yard called "Quilp's Wharf"' (*Curiosity Shop*: 29). Quilp is a swindler who plies his more or less illicit trade in the seedy dock area. He peddles smuggled goods and extorts money from the wretched denizens of these poverty-ridden areas: 'He collected the rents of whole colonies of filthy streets and alleys by the waterside' (*Curiosity Shop* 29. My emphasis). Dickens's well-known tendency to exaggerate is palpable through the proximity of plural forms calling up the idea of teeming multitudes. This hyperbolic inflation combines the writer's commitment to versimilitude and his irrepressible histrionic bent: 'An exaggerative style may thus descend from vigilant attention to minutiae as well as the excesses of oratory.' (Johnston: 139) The traffic on the Thames reflects the hustle and bustle of a commercial era in which the 'universal struggle' (*Expectations*: 9) crushes the weakest and most vulnerable. Dickens switches from mimetic realism to symbolism by anticipating on Charles Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest. Indeed, the river becomes a battleground. Indeed, the bulkiest vessels claim their rights over and against the lesser boats: 'Coming slowly on through the forests of masts was a great steam ship, beating the water in short impatient strokes with her heavy paddles as though she wanted to breathe, and adancing in her huge bulk like a sea monster among the minnows of the Thames.'

(*Curiosity Shop*: 40). Not only does Dickens choose the polysemic word ‘minnows’, meaning both a small fish and an unimportant person, but he is also most probably aware of the paronomasia minnows/menials.

Poverty takes on a moral inflection in this novel, which has often been criticised on account of its manichean opposition between Quilp, the devilish midget, and Little Nell, who, like Little Dorrit, may be seen as a paragon of virtue. Indeed, with Dickens, stations in life are never divorced from moral rectitude. Incidentally, this is also exemplified by the ‘true gentleman at heart’ (*Expectations*: 142 and *Sadrin*: 106).

The archetypal scene of the derelict building where Dickens as a boy was sent to work is re-introduced when Quilp the manipulator manages to obtain from Richard Swiveller the information that he intends to marry Little Nell. The house by the waterside with its crumbling foundations works as a trope for moral collapse:

The summer-house of which Mr Quilp had spoken was a rugged wooden box, rotten and bare to see, which overhung the river’s mud, and threatened to slide down into it. The tavern to which it belonged was a crazy building, sapped and undermined by the rats, and only upheld by great bars of wood which were reared against its walls, and had propped it up so long that even they were decaying and yielding with their load, and of a windy night might be heard to creak and crack as if the whole fabric were about to come toppling down. (*Curiosity Shop* 158)

Stylistically, the passage translates the motif of the fall through cumulative clauses substracting one element each time to finish off on the nadir of ‘toppling down’. At the level of the whole novel this implacable descent is taken to its ultimate development with Quilp’s drowning. Drowning is a recurrent Dickensian topic that links up with material and/or spiritual deprivation. What Carl Dennis writes may apply to Quilp, although his death by drowning is not clearly a suicide and is physiological and not only psychic: ‘The identification of love with inner completeness is perhaps most obvious in Dickens’ work in its negative form, as the association of selfishness with psychic suicide.’ (1237) Lack of humanity, which may be seen as a form of spiritual poverty, is patent and defines this character as an evil grotesque. The episode of Quilp’s death goes beyond a moral apprehension of destruction to orient the reader towards an empathetic experience in which bodily responses are primed:

“A good black, devil’s night this, to have my dear friend here! If I had but that wish, it might for anything I cared, never be day again.”

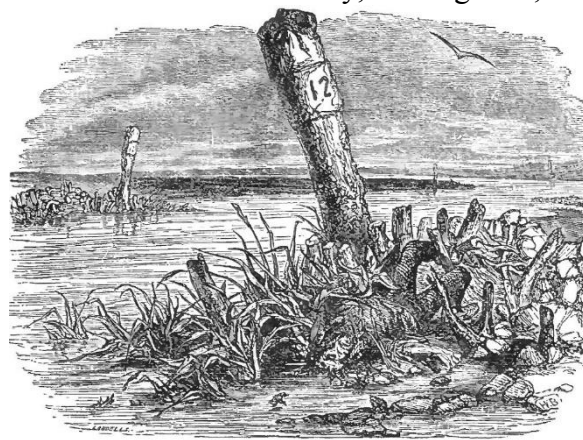
As the word passed his lips, he staggered and fell; and next moment was fighting with the cold, dark water.

For all its bubbling up, and rushing in his ears, he could hear the knocking at the gate again—could hear a shout that followed it—could recognise the voice. For all his struggling and plashing, he could understand that they had lost their way [...] that they were all looking on while he was drowned [...] The strong tide filled his throat, and bore him on, upon its rapid current. [...] One loud cry now—but the resistless water bore him down before he could give it utterance, and, driving him under it, carried a corpse. [...] The place the deserted carcase had left so recently, a living man, was now a blazing ruin. (*Curiosity Shop*: 496-497).

In the above quotation Dickens calls up a limit experience challenging the representational function of language. The narrator smuggles himself, as it were, into the body of a man choking to death. Through this liminal, transitional experience Quilp is still remotely conscious of the commotion in the vicinity of the river even if this awareness declines as he is progressively transformed from ‘a living man’ to a ‘carcase’ (*sic*). The body is described as



undergoing a change, from the semiotic, with Quilp's utterance reminiscent of Macbeth's terror at the thought of night's annihilation,<sup>1</sup> to the somatic, when Quilp's organs are subjected to the force of the water element, and finally to *rigor mortis* as a reified corpse carried along by the current. And through inner focalisation the reader is carried along too by the semantic and syntactic flow. The phenomenological perspective, whereby the tangible sensation induced by water invading the orifices becomes omnipresent, is liable to stifle the reader by proxy. Moral judgement is temporarily suspended by this imposition of a shocking macabre moment. The critical distance allowing readers to keep up a rational approach when facing Quilp's misdemeanours is neutralised by this direct appeal to death anxiety and the natural impulse for survival which is sorely tested. Through this embodied rendition, Dickens perversely places the reader in the position of vicariously sharing the most private and, by definition, inaccessible moment of life: the ordeal of ontological loss. Spiritual poverty is conveyed through the sheer absence of transcendence at the ultimate instant of passing away: '[t]he place the deserted carcase had left so recently, a living man, was now a blazing ruin.'



Hablot K. Brown's woodcut immediately follows the above-cited lines concluding Chapter 59. As has been argued, Dickens's illustrators, principally George Cruikshank and Brown, often referred to as 'Phiz', short for physiognomy, had two ways of using images, either to accompany the plot or to provide a summation. 'The Death of Quilp' (1841) belongs to the second category. It does not much rely on diegesis – Quilp's corpse is hardly noticeable at first sight – as it provides a pictorial interpretation of the textual material it illustrates. If the city is not present, not even on the skyline, the nature that is shown is soiled by human activities. The villain dwarf lies entangled with the weeds, brushwood and rubble to the extent that he seems to have lost his humanity. What the bleak scenery conveys is the overall state of dereliction of a forsaken place which might moreover bear the brunt of the industrial revolution, as suggested by the refuse left on the river bank, chief among which the undignified cadaver. This atmospheric picture connotes more than it denotes and it goes beyond what could be a mere depiction of the drowning episode just before. After all, Quilp's corpse has been brought back to the surface and carried upon the bank by the currents, like the flotsam and jetsam polluting the river Thames. What could first appear as a hyperreal tableau plainly displaying the seamy side of Victorian England, takes on a symbolical dimension. Not only is the river what the Styx used to be for the ancient Greeks once, but with Quilp, the malevolent extortioner, lying amidst the amassed waste, the idea of the financial exploitation of the most vulnerable is also implied. The low, flat riverlands are reminiscent of the churchyard at the beginning of *Great Expectations*, the unforgettable setting for the scene of intimidation when Pip is frightened into fetching food to Magwitch, the starving convict. Predatoriness and the ruthless laws of exploitation have become part and parcel of the human

<sup>1</sup> 'MACBETH: Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more./Macbeth Does murder sleep"- the innocent sleep, [...] the death of each day's life,' William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act II, sc.2, ll. 36-39.

condition in a lacklustre world, devoid of even a single spark of light and in which a number on a stake: '12' may act as a stark, cynical reminder of dehumanising utilitarianism and profit-making. As Frederic Kitton aptly remarks: 'in the weird waterscape, showing the corpse of Quilp washed ashore, he [Phiz] sketched a vista of riparian scenery which, in its desolate breadth and loneliness, has not since, been equalled, save in the amazing suggestive Thames etchings of Mr James Whistler'. (26)

Another memorable underwater scene may be found in Dickens's oeuvre. It is also relevant to the topic of poverty as it underscores class-conflict and patterns of exploitation in pre-Victorian England. When Pip in *Great Expectations* attempts to get Magwitch, aka Provis, an ex-convict and his benefactor, out of England by using the Thames as an escape route, they are stopped by a four-oared boat and ordered to turn over their passenger. Another former convict, Magwitch's sworn enemy, Compeyson, is on board the other boat. There follows a scuffle between the two men until they fall overboard and start fighting: 'He [Magwitch] told me in a whisper that they had gone down, fiercely locked in each other's arms, and there had been a struggle under water, and that he had disengaged himself, struck out, and swum away.' (*Expectations*: 331) This brawl dramatically transposes class antagonisms as Compeyson is a former conman who flaunted his boarding school polish and good looks to get himself a lighter sentence than Magwitch's, forced to steal to sustain himself from an early age.

### **Somaesthetics of Journalism**

Even if Dickens's journalistic pieces have often been praised for their documentary value, they are also extraordinary representations of the writer's inner life. They are driven by a social conscience overwhelmed by deep-rooted personal anxieties, going back to ordeals undergone in childhood and never fully overcome since. As such, they partly qualify as autobiography and do not shrink from resorting to fiction to heighten sincerity. There is also the possibility that they may be prompted by more unconscious motives: 'In the adult writer's investigations into public life, no less than in the childhood adventure, official motives of discovery and report seem bound up with much more private and conflictual voyeuristic impulses deriving, as psychoanalysis teaches, from the most archaic levels of mental functioning. (Kustnetz: 153) It is of course tempting to hypothesise that the 'most archaic levels of mental functioning' could have been influenced by the seminal, traumatic scene at Warren's Blacking Factory and some of Dickens's pieces of journalism do indeed refer to the river linked to different stages and degrees of human wretchedness. Four come under scrutiny in what follows and they resonate with the fiction previously investigated.

Of the four, 'Down with the Tide' is probably the most straightforwardly informative even if it starts rather strangely in a hallucinatory way reminiscent of the visionary opening of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, imbued with the after-effects of the East End opium dens. The narrator first evokes the biting cold wind blowing from the East to widen the scope through a random association of all that the East stands for, from facts to fantasy and myths:

A very dark night it was, and bitter cold; the east wind blowing bleak, and ringing with it stinging particles from marsh, and moor, and fen—from the Great Desert and Old Egypt, may be. Some of the component parts of the sharp-edged vapour that came flying up the Thames at London might be mummy-dust, dry atoms from the Temple at Jerusalem, camels' foot-prints, crocodiles' hatching places, loosened grains of expression from the visages of bluntnosed sphynxes, waifs and strays from caravans of turbaned merchants, vegetation from jungles, frozen snow from the Himalayas. O! It was very very dark upon the Thames, and it was bitter bitter cold. (481)

The opening paragraph exoticises the vignettes of urban poverty around and on the river that are described shortly after. It is also vindicates a mode of perception resting on free

association and the superimposition of antagonistic sensations: the baking hot vapour blowing from the distant African and Asian East and the icy blasts from the far-away Himalayas with what is the closest and nearest: the Thames on that very night. The narrative then consists in the account of the narrator's nightly journey on a Thames Police Galley from Vauxhall to Southwark Bridge to encounter 'certain water rats of human growth' (481), i.e. river thieves, rogue dredgermen, and delinquents of every ilk but also desperate people driven to suicide. The glide down the river follows the episodic structure of a medieval morality play, such as *Everyman* for example. Allegorical characters are met on the way, such as Waterloo, 'an eminent toll-taker' (482) who testifies to the river's secret life, and the account winds up when the Thames Police station at Wapping is finally reached. No action is performed: 'So we took no Tier-rangers captive, nor any Lumpers, nor Truckers, nor Dredgermen, nor other evil disposed person or persons' (485). The onward progress of the boat 'floating down our black highway, sullenly frowned upon by the knitted brows of Blackfriars, Southwark, and London' (485), is conducive to an hallucinatory expedition which is amplified by Waterloo's anecdotes stretching credibility. The perception of space is altered as the buildings looming from the banks become indistinguishable from 'the tiers of shipping, whose many hulls, lying close together, rose out of the water like black streets' (484). The thrill and awe elicited by this nightly exploration of the riverine underworld eclipse the factual account and the reader surrenders to hypnotic transe.

Dickens is known for his denunciation of the harsh treatment of the poor and *Oliver Twist* 'has been regarded as a pamphlet against the 1834 New Poor Law and the rules regulating life inside the Workhouse.' (Bouvard: 82) Precisely 'Wapping Workhouse', published some twenty years later than *All the Year Round*, returns to this shameful establishment from a documentary perspective that is nonetheless inflected by the writer's visionary force. Before being let in this Bastille for the-down-and-outs, in the present case womenfolk exclusively, the so-called Uncommercial Traveller chances upon an apparition, the double of a suicide who drowned himself: 'a figure all dirty and shiny and slimy, who may have been the youngest son of his filthy old father, Thames' (20). This manly, spectral presence points out the way to the all-female 'werkiss' where the narrator is soon admitted. The visit follows a Dantean progress opening with the worst – 'the Foul wards' in which the idiotic and the imbecile are promiscuously packed together. The extreme physical proximity between the visitor and the unsustainable vision of demented women at each other's throats, only separated by a grid, precludes any empathetic stance. Indeed, the reader is exposed to sado-masochistic violence triggering a loss of rational control and critical distance. This onslaught of brutality is induced by crushing sensations: 'these two old ladies, separated by the breadth of the grating—otherwise they would fly at one another's caps—sat all day long, suspecting one another, and contemplating a world of fits [...] Many, apparently worse, varieties of epilepsy and hysteria were about' (22-23). Indeed, empathetic reading entails a somatic and semiotic response to the sensorial content of the text, and the raw violence of its images (Patoine: 48). Having reached the 'Refractories' quarter the Uncommercial Traveller is thereafter confronted to another sensorial experience directly conveyed to the reader, more through unmediated presentation than representation: aural dissonance. Patoine speaks of 'haptic audibility' to evoke the corporal propinquity established through the phonatory organs between the subject in fiction and the reader or spectator (Patoine: 65). The narrator is so struck by this physiological characteristic that he insists upon it by expanding upon it to generalise on certain categories of the population:

I have never yet ascertained in the course of my uncommercial travels, why a Refractory habit should affect the tonsils and uvula; but I have always observed that Refractories of both sexes, and every grade, between a Ragged School and the Old Bailey, have one voice, in which the tonsils and the uvula gain a diseased ascendancy. (24)

The collective voice of the workhouse inmates grates on the ears of the Uncommercial Traveller and transforms what could have been simple reportage into an immersive, albeit, alienating scene: ‘Number Two laughed (very uvurlaly), and the skirmishers followed suit.’ (25)

‘Night Walks’, also published in *All the Year Round* in 1860, is probably the most hallucinatory of Dickens’s journalistic pieces and it also bears resemblances with *Our Mutual Friend*, the river novel *par excellence*. Perambulating in the streets at night is caused by sleeplessness, as with Eugene Wrayburn’s ‘purposeless walks’ (*Mutual Friend* 536). To physically apprehend the city at night the narrator doubles up as ‘Houselessness’ and, plunged in darkness, the urban area turns into a soundscape signalled by onomatopoeias: ‘Houselessness would walk and walk and walk, seeing nothing but the interminable tangle of streets [...] Drip, drip, drip, from ledge and coping, splash from pipes and water-spouts’ (127). Onomatopoeias, as a mimetic mode of expression, originating in the corporeal, partakes of what Julia Kristeva calls ‘spoken music’ (*musique parlée*) (Kristeva: 191), in other words derived from shouts, laughter or infant babble. In his peripatetic somnambulism – ‘I had a night fancy in my head which could be best pursued within sight of its walls and dome’ (130) – Houselessness attains to a psychedelic (etymologically ‘soul’ and ‘to make visible, to reveal’) condition whereby the dichotomies of the real world are reversed. These visions that are not predicated upon logical assumptions or sociological arguments but on phantasmagoria allow for an unwonted take on poverty and exclusion. First, the narrator fantasises what connects the sane and the insane members of the population, namely their dream activity. It is constant with the demented ones and limited to nighttime for the great majority of the mentally healthy ones: ‘I wonder that the great master who knew everything, when he called Sleep the death of each day’s life, did not call Dreams the insanity of each day’s sanity.’ (131). Under the influence of somnambulism that is alleged to warp perception, Houselessness fancies that he can descry from the surface of the Thames waters the very spots where suicides finished their miserable lives. So he has a vision of where their corpses now lay at the river’s bottom: ‘But the river had an awful look, the buildings on the banks were muffled in black shrouds, and the reflected lights seemed to originate deep in the water, as if the spectres of suicides were holding them to show where they went down.’ (128) And as if this bleak optical illusion was not enough in itself to give an inkling of the horrid side of urban life, Houselessness is also subjected to a temporal delusion. He foresees in the murky waters the severed limbs of a mutilated , whose murder has not occurred yet, conveying both a striking image of unprecedented abjection and a sense of unescapable destiny: ‘The chopped-up man, had not been lowered with a rope over the parapet when those nights were; he was alive, and slept then quietly enough most likely, and undisturbed by any dream of where he was to come.’ (128)

This section aptly concludes with ‘Some Recollections of Mortality’. This article reports a visit to the Morgue in Paris paid by the Uncommercial Traveller, which brings back to his mind the recollection of coming across the corpse of a poor girl, probably a prostitute, who had drowned herself: ‘I called to mind a certain desolate open-air Morgue that I happened to light upon in London’. (190) What is striking about the two anecdotes is the Victorian author’s concern with seeing, witnessing and surmising what is going on. The emphasis is laid on defamiliarisation and this is evident right from the insertion of the phrase ‘open-air Morgue’ (190) which of course allows for the shift from Paris to London but also points to the oddity of calling a natural spot, Canal Bridge in Regent’s Park, a mortuary. So this is more the troubling experience for the spectator which is foregrounded than a real interest in the remains of a poor desperate creature. Basically, what matters above all is the fact of being confronted to the spectacle of death. Indeed, like his illustrators, Dickens expresses a real concern for

ways of seeing. So text and picture overlap for ‘the text similarly concerns itself with what and how we see, with visual images and the culture in which they circulate.’ (Stein 179) Thus at the Paris Morgue the narrator, ‘sated at a glance’(190), after casting a glimpse at the corpse, immediately turns his attention to the assembled onlookers: ‘wondering whether one might have guessed, from the expression of those faces merely, what kind of sight they were looking.’(190) What transpires is that the spectators do not so much see the dead man for what he is, or used to be, as they project their own thoughts onto the cadaver lying before their eyes. For instance, they ask themselves whether they are likely to offer the same spectacle when their time comes or feels instantaneous dislike for the deceased chap, whom they would probably have knocked down had they known him when he was still alive. This ‘wolfish stare’ (190) is combined with the concern with the materiality of death and the taxonomic activity which prevailed at the time in the sciences: ‘And there was a much more general, purposeless, vacant staring at it—like looking at waxwork, without a catalogue, and not knowing what to make of it.’ (190) Self-reflexively, the interest elicited by the scene of this cadaver on a slab in a morgue shifts from the objet – the corpse – to the mental and physical effects entailed for those who have purposefully come to see it. And Dickens underscores the metaphysical consequences of the visual drama that is implied by the fact of ‘*looking at something that could not return a look.*’ (190. Italics in the text)

Through an embedded narrative, the memory of a prostitute discovered by chance years before in London transposes the experience of the confrontation with death on a moral plane. Because the woman is young ‘under thirty’ (191) and destitute ‘poorly dressed in black’ (191) she is a typical representative of the exploited underclass whose cause the Victorian novelist publicly defended.<sup>2</sup> So the main interest of Dickens’s piece of journalism is to show how a morbid curiosity for death – the passage in the Morgue in Paris – is transformed into a moral engagement with a victim of society. From being first perceived as a specimen ‘at a wax-work exhibition without a catalogue’ (191), the expression is actually repeated, the woman’s corpse becomes ‘this spectacle of our dear sister here departed!’ (191) Dickens takes up the very words from the burial service in the Book of Common Prayer to bestow some solemnity upon what was at the time a fairly common occurrence, a prostitute at the end of her tether seeing no escape but in committing suicide. Yet it is worth noting that the pathos of this episode does not so much stem from a lyrical flight as from the decisive role attributed to glances throughout this article. Society’s callous indifference to the predicament of prostitutes is rendered palpable when a barge towed by a horseman approaches the scene. The man with the horse cares so little for the body that he lets the animal trample the girl’s hair. In the process the tow rope turns the cadaver’s head suddenly and the woman steering the barge casts an unutterably contemptuous look at the poor dead woman: ‘as if it were made in another likeness from herself, had been informed with other passions, had been lost by other chances, had had another nature dragged down to perdition’ (191). It is as if Dickens intuitively felt that his emphatic, exclamatory rhetoric: ‘So dreadfully forlorn, so dreadfully mysterious...’ (191) was to remain powerless as against the somatic effect induced by a physically sickening sight – a corpse trampled and strangled – which of course causes instantaneous horror in the witnesses of the scene and the reader too.

---

<sup>2</sup> Baroness Angela Burdett Coutts and Charles Dickens cofounded Urania Cottage (in Shepherd’s Bush, East London), a home for young women who had turned to a life of immorality, including theft and prostitution. In her 2011 biography this is how Claire Tomalin analyses Dickens’s dedication to the cause of poor, vulnerable women: ‘Dickens knew very well that he was only touching a huge social problem which had its roots in society’s neglect of the housing and education of the poor, its tolerance of the grim conditions in which workhouse children were raised, its acceptance of the double standard and the miserable pay and treatment of the lowest grades of female domestic servants – and also perhaps in something ineradicable in the nature of men and women.’ (208)



LOOKING OVER TOO, I SAW, LYING ON THE TOWING-PATH, WITH HER FACE TURNED UP TOWARD US, A WOMAN.

Charles S. Reinhart's wood engraving illustration of 'Some Recollections of Mortality' opts for a minimalist approach, first by leaving out the episode of the Paris morgue and by choosing to render visually one sentence only: 'Looking over too...', which dramatises the conjoined acts of looking and seeing. The setting is stark in its simplicity and shuns sensationalism by relegating the dramatic development of the barge to the background. The dead woman, who is the most clearly and distinctly drawn figure, immediately attracts the spectator's glance while the other components of the picture incrementally pale into the blurred scenery behind. The broken ice in the foreground connotes both society's indifference and *rigor mortis* that has already set in. Yet the dead woman's lifted arms force credibility and convey Reinhart's overt intent to lend a statuesque dimension to the poor lass. With her curly hair spread out and wide staring eyes directed heavenwards, the woman is thus turned into a monument, as it were, following the Latin etymology *monumentum*, from *monere* 'to remind', thus affording a gloss on the article's title. The Uncommercial Traveller towering above is summed up through the phrase 'I saw' in the quotation used as a caption. So, ultimately, the picture interpellates the observer through the enigma of these two glances condemned to eternally miss each other. To the uncommercial traveller's intent eyes peering at the corpse in the hope of some revelation is opposed the fixed gaze of the dead woman who already belongs to an elsewhere.

This study started from a seminal traumatic scene where the sudden fall into poverty led to a child's psychic collapse. It argued that the anxiety of poverty as a potential repetition of the physically and morally unbearable was also an incentive to create. The psychogeography of London's urban poverty focuses on the Thames embankment. The river has sensorial connotations founded on somatic experience such as the horror of rodents teeming. Thus, the argument consisted in showing that despite his rational denunciation of the obnoxious plight of the socially deprived, duly substantiated by facts and shocking examples, Dickens in his fiction-writing could not divorce his treatment of poverty from the obsessions that underpinned his whole creation. Moreover, as has been demonstrated in the third section, the distinction between fiction *per se* and journalism is hard to sustain as in his contributions to *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* the Victorian writer could not refrain from exhibiting his tendency to let his visionary power transform his perception and inform his

testimonies. For all the above reasons what stands out is the embodied treatment of poverty, through the dialogue between text and image, which in turn calls for a whole range of empathetic reader responses.

#### Books cited

- Ackroyd, Peter, *Dickens* (1990), London: Minerva, 1996.
- , *Thames. The Biography* (2007), New York: Anchor Books, 2009.
- Bouvard, Luc, ‘The Thames Persistently Revisited: Dickens on the Edge of Water’, in *Persistent Dickens* (Alain Jumeau and Sara Thornton eds), *Études Anglaises*, Janvier Mars 2012, 65/1, pp. 80-95.
- Damasio, Antonio R., *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York: G.P. Putman, 1994.
- Dames, Nicholas, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science & the Form of Victorian Fiction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Dennis, Carl, ‘Dickens’ Moral Vision’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Fall 1969, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Fall 1969), pp. 1237-1246.
- Dickens, Charles, *Oliver Twist or, The Parish Boy’s Progress* (1837-38), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- , *Nicholas Nickleby, The Life and Adventures of* (1839), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1978.
- , *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1959.
- , *David Copperfield, The Personal History of* (1849-50), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1987.
- , ‘On Duty with Inspector Field’, 14 June 1851, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/872/872-h/872-h.htm#page430> (Last consulted 17<sup>th</sup> October 21)
- , *Bleak House* (1853), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1981.
- , ‘Down with the Tide’, *Household Words*, Volume VI, Magazine No. 150, 5 February 1853, pp. 481-485. Dickens Journals Online [https://www.djo.org.uk/media/downloads/articles/2135\\_Down%20with%20the%20Tide.pdf](https://www.djo.org.uk/media/downloads/articles/2135_Down%20with%20the%20Tide.pdf) (Last consulted 17<sup>th</sup> October 21)
- , *Little Dorrit* (1857), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985.
- , *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- , *Great Expectations* (1860-63), London and New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1999.
- , ‘Wapping Workhouse’, *All the Year Round*, 18 February 1860, in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (Daniel Tyler ed.), Oxford U.P., 2015, pp. 19-28.
- , ‘Night Walks’, *All the Year Round*, 21 July 1860, in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (Daniel Tyler ed.), Oxford U.P., 2015, pp. 126-134.
- , ‘Some Recollections of Mortality’, 16 May 1863, in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (Daniel Tyler ed.), Oxford U.P., 2015, pp. 186-195.
- , *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), London: Penguin Classics, 1997.
- Forster, John, *The Life of Dickens*, 1872, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/25851> (Last consulted 18<sup>th</sup> October 21)
- Iser, Wolfgang, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- Jauss, Hans Robert, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- Johnston, Freya, ‘“Gigantic domesticity”: The exaggeration of Charles Dickens’, in *Dickens’s Style*, (Daniel Tyler ed.), Cambridge U.P., 2013, pp. 137-154.



- Kitton, Frederic George, *'Phiz' (Hablot Knight Browne), A Memoir, Including a Selection From His Correspondence and Notes on His Principal Works*, London: George Redway, 1882.
- Kristeva, Julia, 'La musique parlée ou remarques sur la subjectivité dans la fiction à propos du *Neveu de Rameau*', *Langage et langages de Leibnitz à l'encyclopédie. Séminaire de l'École supérieure de Fontenay*, M. Duchet et M. Jallet éd. Paris: Union générale d'éditions, pp. 153-206.
- Kustnetz, Ella, "Gone Astray: Dickens as Journalist (Part Two)", *Dickens Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 1995), pp. 153-167.
- Leckie, Barbara, *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, The Newspaper and the Law, 1857-1914*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Letissier, Georges, 'A Somatic Experience of Dickens's Fiction', in *Reading Dickens Differently*, Leon Litvack, Nathalie Vanfasse (eds), Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2021, pp. 95-112.
- Patoine, Pierre Louis, *Corps/texte. Pour une théorie de la lecture empathique*, Lyon ENS éditions, 2015.
- Sadrin, Anny, *Lectures d'une œuvre Great Expectations*, Paris: Éditions du Temps, 1999 (first published by Unwin Hyman, 1988).
- Shakespeare, William, *Macbeth*, (Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason eds.), London and New York, Arden Shakespeare, 2018.
- Stein, Richard L., 'Dickens and Illustrations', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens* (John O. Jordan ed.), C.U.P, 2001, pp. 167-188.
- Tomalin, Claire, *Charles Dickens. A Life*, London: Viking, 2011.
- Wilson, Edmund, *The Wound and the Bow*, Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1941.