

The Imperial Metropolis Deconstructed: Dickens's Diverse Views of Victorian London*

İmparatorluk Başkentinin Öteki Yüzü: Victoria Dönemi Londra'sına Dickens'in Farklı Bakışları

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Abstract

It has been stated that "London created Dickens just as Dickens created London." Indeed, for Dickens, London was a perfect setting for his fiction, a kaleidoscopic space of fantasy and reality, in which characters and types, ranging from the plausible to the grotesque, and representing all walks of life, are situated and depicted through a varied array of interactions and relationships. If one recalls the historical and indeed romanticised image of London as the power centre of the Empire as well as the great emporium through which the riches and products of the colonies are processed for the consumption and enjoyment of the privileged and the prosperous, Dickens's multi-faceted representation of this imperial metropolis not only subverts this image and brings to the fore the world of London's Othered and underprivileged segments, but he also deconstructs it socially and culturally. Thus, through his fictional deconstruction of London as the imperial metropolis of progress and prosperity on the one hand and as a city of decadence, depravations and myriad ills, Dickens presents a social, political and cultural critique of Victorian England.

Keywords: Dickens, London, Dickens and London, Dickens and poverty, Dickens and class

Öz

Denir ki "Dickens Londra'yı yaratmıştır, Londra da Dickens'ı yaratmıştır." Aslında, Londra, Dickens'in romanları için mükemmel bir mekan oluşturmuştur. Hayal ile gerçeğin birbirine karıştığı bu renkli mekan içinde, Dickens, yaşamın tüm yönlerini temsil eden her çeşit insan tipini ve kişilikleri betimlemiş ve çok geniş ve değişik ilişkiler bağlamında yansıtmıştır. Tarihsel olarak bakıldığında, Londra, her zaman, hem İngiliz imparatorluğunun güç merkezi, hem de sömürgelelerden elde edilen zenginliklerin ve türünlerin, üst sınıfların ve varlıkların tüketimine sunulduğu muazzam bir pazar olarak algılanmış ve romantize edilmiştir. İşte Dickens, bu imparatorluk başkentini çok farklı yönleriyle romanlarına yansıtarak, sadece bu tarihsel algıyı alt üst etmekle kalmamış, aynı zamanda Londra'nın mahrumiyet içindeki Ötekileştirilmiş sınıflarını öne çıkarmış ve böylece toplumsal ve kültürel bakımdan da bilinenleri tersine çevirmiştir. Böylece, romanlarında, Londra'yı, bir yandan refah ve ilerleme bağlamında imparatorluğun merkezi, öte yandan ise yozlaşmanın, mahrumiyetlerin ve sayısız kötülüklerin bir şehri olarak yansıtmakla, Dickens, Victoria dönemi İngiltere'sinin toplumsal, siyasal ve kültürel bir eleştirisini sunmuştur.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dickens, Londra, Dickens ve Londra, Dickens ve yoksulluk, Dickens ve sınıf

* An expanded version of the paper presented at "Colloque International: Representing Diversity in the City," Université de Cergy-Pontoise, France, 21-22 Janvier 2011"

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It has been stated that “London created Dickens, just as Dickens created London.” (Ackroyd, 1987, p. 7). Indeed, for Dickens, London was an inspiring and appropriate setting for his fiction, a kaleidoscopic space of fantasy and reality, in which characters and types, ranging from the plausible to the grotesque, and representing all walks of life, are situated and depicted through a varied array of interactions and relationships. If one recalls the historical and indeed romanticised image of London as the power centre of the Empire as well as the great emporium through which the riches and products of the colonies are processed for the consumption and enjoyment of the privileged and the prosperous, Dickens’s multi-faceted representation of this imperial metropolis not only subverts this image and brings to the fore the world of London’s Othered and underprivileged segments, but also deconstructs it socially and culturally. So the main concern of this paper is to demonstrate, through references to Dickens’s writings, how this Dickensian deconstruction of London as the imperial metropolis of progress and prosperity on the one hand and as a city of decadence, depravations and myriad ills, turns by way of fictional representation into a severe critique of Victorian England. In other words, for Dickens, London with its diverse aspects becomes a full metaphor or a kind of mirror, through which the values, norms, manners, classes, institutions, practices of Victorian England are reflected and problematized. Therefore, any attempt to discuss Dickens’s representation of Victorian London with its social, cultural, topographical and institutional diversities needs to be preceded by a foregrounding of the Victorian élitist perceptions of the city as an urban space and also by a totalizing remark about its romanticized image as the metropolis of the Empire as well as British civilization. We need this foregrounding in order to be able to set Dickens’s representation of London as a subjective discourse of subversion or deconstruction against the élitist and romantic perceptions of the imperial metropolis.

Historically, the Industrial Revolution in England radically transformed the demographic profile and topography of urban settlements.¹ Indeed, especially in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the influx of migrants from rural areas into industrial centres for employment and economic self-rewarding led to an unprecedented growth of industrialized cities. Consequently, the overcrowding of these cities ushered in various urban problems and social setbacks such as environmental pollution, an increase in crime, the lack of proper sanitation, education, housing, and working regulations, rising social disorder and political discontent (Briggs, 1990, pp. 59-60, 89-90, 92-93, 140-148 *et passim*). However, the prevailing attitude among most of the early Victorian élite and upper-class people towards urban growth and industrialization was increasingly positive and widely optimistic. Indeed, in terms of urban and industrial development, cities in England were largely regarded as what has been termed “symbols of growth and progress,” (Briggs, 1990, p. 59) although to some Victorians, as Asa Briggs (1990, p. 59) has stated, “the spread of cities and the increase in their numbers were matters of concern, even of alarm.” This essentially ambivalent attitude of the Victorians towards the demographic, social, cultural, topographical, economic and even political transformation of the urban environment was also displayed with reference to London. While most upper-class Victorians almost completely ignored the East End of London, with its poverty, deprivations, high crime rate, utter lack of urban infrastructure, and various other extemities, they took for granted the elegant, newly-developed and prosperous West End and the districts around to be the true and imperial image of London (Briggs, 1990, pp. 312-317). For instance, in literature, writers such as Thackeray and Trollope differed from Dickens when they set their scenes mostly within the aristocratic circles and boundaries of the West End. The point has been stressed by Jeremy Tambling (2009, p. 31):

¹ For an extensive study of the urban transformation in Victorian England, see Briggs, 1990, especially pp. 88-276. Also see Harvie, 1996, especially, pp. 425-427, and Matthew, 1996, pp. 474-481.

“Thackeray’s London tends more to the club-land existence of the West End. Dickens’ London is more working-class, centred more on areas east of Charing Cross, and more suburban. Thackeray [...] was more interested in the aristocracy than Dickens: so was Trollope.”

Moreover, this exclusive image of London was further upgraded and reinforced by the Victorian vision and confidence that, as the metropolis and emporium of the Empire, it was also “a world city” (Briggs, 1990, p. 317). For instance, the early Victorian painter and writer Benjamin Haydon wrote in his *Autobiography* (1841) as follows:

“So far from the smoke of London being offensive to me, it has always been to my imagination the sublime canopy that shrouds the City of the World” (qtd. in Briggs, 1990, p. 311).

The intriguing point in this statement is that the smoke, which enveloped Victorian London as an environmental nightmare and was graphically described by Dickens throughout his fiction as deadly pollution, is metaphorically romanticized as “the sublime canopy” which, as it were, shelters the global power of the imperial metropolis. In fact, it was this aspect of London as the cosmopolitan centre of imperial power and global trade that had traditionally been emphasized. Probably one of the most memorable references to London in this regard had been made by Wordsworth in his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*.² For him, this “mighty City” (Wordsworth, 1995, Book VII, line 723) is the economic, social and racial “hubbub” (Book VII, line 211) of “all specimens of man, / Through all the colours which the sun bestows, / And every character of form and face” (Book VII, lines 221-224). As the Empire’s global emporium with “the string of dazzling wares, / Shop after shop” (Book VII, lines 157-158), it presents a display of various foreign types such the Italians, the Jews, the Swedes, the Russians, the French, the Spaniards, the American Indians, the North Africans, the Malaysians, the Tartars, the Chinese and the Africans (Book VII, lines 214-228). To this medley of races and types, Wordsworth also adds a Turkish merchant who, apparently because of his huge Ottoman turban and baggy oriental outfit, is described as “stately and slow-moving [...] / With freight of slippers piled beneath his arm” (Book VII, lines 217-218). From the roar and din of this imperial emporium Wordsworth turns his gaze to the social and cultural domain of the city; he is impressed not only by its theatres, galleries, palaces, monuments, churches, “vast squares” (Book VII, line 135), bridges and various other landmarks (Book VII, lines 129-141 et passim), but also by its elite social life with “gorgeous ladies, under splendid domes, / Floating in dance, or warbling high in air / The songs of spirits” (Book VII, lines 124-126). Also in his sonnet “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge,” written in the summer of 1802 (Wordsworth, 1995, p. 320), the metropolis is so romanticized with explicit emphasis upon its imperial majesty and topographical splendour that it has almost been transformed into a dream city incomparable to anything earthly:

“Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,

2 For a full text of *The Prelude*, written in fourteen books and over a period of five years between early 1799 and the summer of 1805, see Wordsworth, 1995, pp. 750-892.

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air” (Wordsworth, 1995, lines 1-8).

What Wordsworth romanticized and mythologized about the London of his time was in fact a traditional view of the imperial metropolis, which the Victorians also shared since they regarded it as what Briggs has called “[the] port and storehouse” of the Empire (Briggs, 1990, p. 312). It was this very vision of London perceived in terms of the Empire’s economic and international power that Dickens again and again reversed and deconstructed in his writings. For the Victorian élite and upperclasses, this romanticized London was the perennial centre of the imperial structure and, hence, a perfect epitome of British imperial progress and civilization. Yet for Dickens and some other Victorians, like Henry Mayhew, interested in social realism and thoroughly aware of London’s urban deprivations for the underprivileged, this imperial centre was subverted by its dark side, which was topographically represented by the areas east of Strand and, indeed, by the East End itself. Through their vivid and, in places, exaggerated representations of the diverse aspects of this often ignored and othered London, both Dickens and Mayhew brought this Other London into focus³ so that it could be made the very concern of the government and its institutions for reform, development, and improvement.

Perhaps the most striking example of Dickens’s deconstruction of the élitist and romanticized view of London is his grotesque and exaggerated description of the city in *Bleak House*, which is given the appearance of a post-diluvial metropolis, buried in mud, polluted and congested:

“As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth [...]. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft, black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foothold at street corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest” (Dickens, 1996, p. 13 [Ch. 1]).

This apocalyptic image is further reinforced by the ever-present deadly fog that in fact turns the city and also the country into an inhospitable environment:

“Fog everywhere. Fog up the river [...]; fog down the river [...]. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights [...]. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards [...]; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers [a] shivering little ‘prentice boy on deck” (Dickens, 1996, p.13 [Ch.1]).

³ For various graphic descriptions of this Other London, see Mayhew, 1986, pp. 15-19, 100-111, 139-146 *et passim*.

The fog may be regarded as a metaphorical backdrop that Dickens uses in *Bleak House* for his criticism of the delay of justice, judicial corruption, and legal complexities. Yet it also conceals a world of misery and destitution, in which the poor and the underprivileged, ignored by the prosperous and the privileged, try to survive. Indeed, this Other London of extreme misery and destitution is inhabited by what Dickens (1996, p. 66 [Ch. 5]) calls “the extraordinary creatures in rags,” who are othered by the establishment, and whose existence and identity are never taken into account. In *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens (1994, p. 211 [“Characters,” Ch. 1]) emphasizes the point:

“It is strange with how little notice, good, bad, or indifferent, a man may live and die in London. He awakens no sympathy in the breast of any single person; his existence is a matter of interest to no one save himself; he cannot be said to be forgotten when he dies, for no one remembered him when he was alive. There is a numerous class of people in this great metropolis who seem not to possess a single friend, and who nobody appears to care for. Urged by imperative necessity in the first instance, they have resorted to London in search of employment, and the means of subsistence.”

Dickens constantly reiterates this social reality in his novels and indefatigably stresses the inhuman living conditions of the underprivileged, who indeed make up what he calls “London’s destitute population” (Dickens, 1993, p. 305 [Ch. 46]). Since they are mostly homeless, they always search for “some cold arch or doorless hovel wherein to lay their heads” (Dickens, 1993, p. 305 [Ch. 46]). Of this class of the homeless there are, as described in *Sketches by Boz*, “the ragged boys who usually disport themselves about the streets [and] stand crouched in little knots in some projecting doorway, or under the canvas blind of a cheesemonger’s” (Dickens, 1994, p. 58 [“Scenes,” Ch. 2]). Obviously, the case of Victorian street children was a serious social concern and must certainly have preoccupied Dickens exceedingly, who, therefore, often brought it to the fore in his writings. For instance, in *David Copperfield*, David in love with his employer Mr Spenlow’s Paris-educated daughter Dora (Dickens, 1992, p. 366 [Ch. 26]) is so worried by his own poverty that in his sleep he dreams of himself as a street boy:

“As to sleep, I had dreams of poverty in all sorts of shapes, but I seemed to dream without the previous ceremony of going to sleep. Now I was ragged, wanting to sell Dora matches, six bundles for a halfpenny” (Dickens, 1992, p. 478 [Ch. 35]).

All the representations as such that Dickens makes of poverty, misery and destitution in Victorian London not only sharply contrast with the imperial magnificence of London but also gesture to the unbridgeable social gap that existed between the privileged and the unprivileged of the age. This social gap is also paralleled by the topographical and environmental diversity that characterized the urban landscape of the metropolis. Due to the air pollution, the absence of an efficient sewage system, the lack of adequate infrastructure, muddy and congested streets, and poor housing, London looked to Dickens an uninhabitable city where, besides poverty, hunger, and crime, there were all kinds of various other social and urban ills. Especially the Thames was a kind of open sewer; for instance, as Alexander Welsh (1986, p. 25) has pointed out, the Board of Health “directed the flushing of sewers into the Thames, which in 1849 supplied most of the drinking water in London”. Moreover, in a letter, dated 7 July 1858, Dickens complained about the polluted Thames:

“[...] the Thames in London is most horrible. [...] I can certify that the offensive smells [...] have been of a most head-and-stomach distending nature” (qtd. in Welsh, 1986, p.25).

The environmental waste and pollution in the Thames, such as described in detail in *David Copperfield* (Dickens, 1992, pp. 646-647 [Ch. 47]), is not the only instance whereby Dickens deconstructs the imperial metropolis. Similar scenes can also be seen at Smithfield and Covent Garden. In *Great Expectations*, for example, when Pip takes a stroll to Smithfield, the marketplace for the livestock, while waiting for Mr Jagger's return to office from the court, he is extremely disgusted by what he sees:

“When I told the clerk that I would take a turn in the air while I waited, he advised me to go round the corner and I should come into Smithfield. So, I came into Smithfield; and the shameful place, being all asmeared with filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So, I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of Saint Paul's bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate Prison” (Dickens, 1965, p. 189 [Ch. 20]).

As for Covent Garden, which is described in *Little Dorrit* by way of binary opposition, it is a kaleidoscopic place where beauty and ugliness, elegance and desolation, the rich and the poor, the privileged and the unprivileged, plenty and destitution can be seen side by side:

“Courtly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place with famous coffee-houses, where gentlemen wearing gold-laced coats and swords had quarrelled and fought duels; costly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there were flowers in winter at guineas a –piece, pine-apples at guineas a pound, and peas at guineas a pint; picturesque ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there was a mighty theatre, showing wonderful and beautiful sights to richly-dressed ladies and gentlemen, [...] desolate ideas of Covent Garden, as having all those arches in it, where the miserable children in rags [...], like young rats, slunk and hid, fed on offal, huddled together for warmth, and were hunted about [...]; teeming ideas of Covent Garden, as a place of past and present mystery, romance, abundance, want, beauty, ugliness, fair country gardens, and foul street gutters; all confused together” (Dickens, 1967, p. 208 [Ch. 14]).

This dichotomic picture of Covent Garden metaphorically becomes a full portrait of London, which, on the one hand, is the metropolis of imperial power as well as the emporium of imperial prosperity but, on the other, hides under this appearance the gaping reality of deprivation and social injustice.

So, to conclude, it is this hidden and extremely disturbing reality that Dickens problematizes in his fiction and, by doing so, deconstructs the established and romanticized image of London. If one recalls that Dickens began his writing career in the 1830s when the working masses and radicals in Europe were fighting for their rights, and revolutions were taking place, one might assume that he may have been influenced by these political and ideological developments and that he may therefore have resolved radically to subvert the establishment by representing in his fiction the inhuman plight

of the socially and culturally Othered. One might even hasten to regard him as a radical, a socialist, a revolutionary. However, he should not be attributed any of these identities; he was in fact a reformist, indeed a sensitive and serious reformist. Through his vivid and moving depictions of London's dark side with its Othered and underprivileged masses, he deliberately tried to influence the authorities and the institutions to pass the necessary legislation and take the necessary measures for sweeping reforms in all sections of social and working life. Actually, with its social problems, class differences, urban and environmental pollution, miseries and destitution, institutional corruption and political inequalities, his London was a metaphorical projection of the diverse aspects of Victorian England at large.

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