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Images of Spatial Representations in Charles Dickens's New York

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Abstract

Agnes Calder claims that Charles Dickens came back from America, 'heartily disillusioned' (Dickens 8). In this paper, through reading *American Notes* (1842), I see the image of spatial representation in the city of New York. On the surface, the city shows Dickens's eye of observation, revealing the dark side of the city. And yet, Dickens's writing expresses more than what he sees. Dickens's image of New York, I argue, is not only a 'realistic' account of what things look like, but a true realisation of how he feels about himself, and about the country in which he was situated in.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, New York, *American Notes*, Space, Image, Representation

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Introduction

The image of America, seems to be a fairy land for the British travelers. Daniel Defoe's most famous character, Robinson Crusoe, has travelled to '*an un-inhibited island on the Coast of America*', as in his title page of the novel *Robinson Crusoe* shows. Although Crusoe's trip was not to the continent itself, the spirit is to travel and to see a different kind of world, such as Charles Dickens himself, as a Victorian traveler, would do. Dickens's *American Notes* may not be as well-known as his other fictional writings about the city of London. According to Gerald G. Grubb, *American Notes* 'appeared in London on October 18, 1842' (Grubb 101). In general, the reviewers do not like it. One of 'the unfavorable reviews' even says that this work of Dickens's 'has no real literary value' (Grubb 1950, 101).

Dickens may be able to use his travel experience later in his novels, as Jerome Meckier points out, to '[transform] an unsatisfactory England into that best of all possible worlds he had hoped to discover in America' (Meckier 273). Harry Stone also claims that Dickens's travel experience in America, is certainly not purposeless and useless. Dickens's *American Notes* can be read as a way, in which one can see 'his artistic methods and limitations' (Stone 464). To be more precise, as Robert B. Heilman puts it, the American experience is Dickens's 'source of materials to be used in satirizing Europe' (Heilman 21), in his later writings. At the first glance, in general, *American Notes* shows that Dickens 'became disenchanted with many things American' (Waller 535). There may be rumors about why Dickens 'became soured upon American manners' and 'customs' (Grubb 1951, 87). And yet, I would argue, his image of New York is certainly worth a discussion in depth.

Dickens's perspective of the city of New York indicates a double ways of seeing – first of all, he sees people and things as what an outsider or a traveler can possibly see, and, second of all, he sees the city as a representation of a party of his personal history. More precisely, this personal history refers to his memory as a young man. This dual way of seeing a city represents his own thoughts and feelings, as Dickens's narrative forms a threshold between his own self and the narrator in the travel writing. Spaces of New York City are filled with metaphorical meanings. But the question is, why these images are significant?

The image of Charles Dickens's New York City is a 'witch's cauldron', which is 'hot', 'suffocating' and 'vaporous' (Dickens 142). Just as Edgar Allan Poe points out in his short story, 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840), there are certain books which are not suppose to be read, '[t]here are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told' (Poe 388). Here, I

would like to add up one more thing – the city of New York, in Dickens’s narrative, is a city which does not permit itself to be visited.

Poe’s man of the crowd is an observer. This man seems to be indicating Charles Baudelaire’s image of the *flâneur*, which is a representative figure, finding himself ‘[t]o be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world’ (Baudelaire 9). As a traveler, Dickens has his own friends who are able to take him around the city, so that he can feel free to see whatever he wants to see. Although he does not tell his readers who these ‘friends’ are, we can be sure that he is ‘grateful’ to have their company, without even mentioning about any of their names, as he writes in the 1859 Library Edition Preface. These friends make Dickens’s observation of New York City possible, as he travels and becomes a man of leisure, when he visits places such as Music and Dance Halls for entertainments. He is also engaged in seeing places he wants to see, particularly Institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals.

The streets of New York City have their own textual and social meanings. Broadway is the first street, which Dickens addresses, when he stays in ‘the upper floor’ of ‘the Carlton House Hotel (situated in the best part of this main artery of New York)’ (Dickens 128), gazing out of the window, at the ‘stream’ of ‘life’ on the street. This ‘stream’ of ‘life’ shows Broadway as ‘a sunny street’. Dickens’s hotel room window is burning because of the hit of the sun, through which, in ‘ten minutes’ time, he sees all kinds of well-dressed ladies, and their colourful parasols. Black and white ‘coachmen’ are in different colours and styles of hats – ‘in straw hats, black hats, white hats, glazed caps, fur caps, in coats of drab, black, brown, green, blue, nankeen, striped jean and linen; and there, in that one instance (look while it passes, or it will be too late), in suits of livery’ (Dickens 128).

In Dickens’s writing, one can see that he seems to be taking a picture through his hotel room window as a traveler can do, as his eye becomes a symbolic camera eye, looking at people’s movements and their fashion styles as they pass. As a traveler, his mood is cheerful, since Broadway is so sunny, as ‘[t]he pavement stones are polished with the tread of feet until they shine again; the red bricks of the houses might be yet in the dry, hot kilns; and the roofs of those omnibuses look as though, if water were poured on them, they would hiss and smoke, and smell like half-quenched fires’ (Dickens 128). The heat of Broadway feels just like Dickens’s passion of looking at the crowd, as the adventure of walking around New York City has just begun.

And yet, the bright vision and the cheerful mood of Dickens's, after a while, turn to an image of horror, when he walks along Bow Street. This street represents an area, which is full of 'narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth' (Dickens 136). This is one of the worst places in Dickens's New York, because it is very dirty and it is filthy. For instances, the houses here are 'prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays' (Dickens 136).

Houses seem to indicate the condition of people who live there. Apparently, people live in Bow Street are not very healthy, and they look old and shabby. The windows of their houses are 'broken', as if those people are as drunk as 'pigs' (Dickens 136). Their eyes have been injured because they are as unconscious as drunk. Dickens's hotel room window in Broadway seems to be perfect. To compare to other people who live in different areas of New York, people in Bow Street cannot even be named in human terms – even the place they live is like a 'wolfish den' (Dickens 137). There is this 'negro' (Dickens 137) lives in this 'miserable room', among one of the 'squalid street' and a 'square of leprous houses' (Dickens 137). In Broadway, there are black men and white men. At least they all look like human beings. But here, this black man is a nameless 'negro', with a socially insignificant fever in his head. In the bottom of the social class, this person does not even bother to 'look up', when the 'officer' asks him what happened to him (Dickens's 137). Dickens's term 'negro' here, suggests the man's being black. It has a stronger implication of Dickens's discontent of '[t]he barbarity of the slavery system' (Pound 124), as he sees 'the horrors of the system' (Dickens 269).

The term 'Negro' is particularly meaningful, when in the context of Southern America, about slavery, as people can "'own, breed, use, buy and sell" their slaves' (Adrian 319). As Amanda Claybaugh points out, 'British antislavery activities offered their American counterparts moral example, financial support and practical advice. This support peaked in the early 1840s, at the moment when Dickens made his tour of the United States' (Claybaugh 444). Here my point is that, the general impression of America, in Dickens's writing, seems to be rough and barbaric. Clearly, the general condition of the way people live is not as human-like as Dickens has expected – the skin colour and gender are not a particular concern here. I would not see Dickens's *American Notes* as 'propaganda for reform' (Goldberg 74). And yet, I see more about the human conditions in America that Dickens has noticed. For Dickens, in some areas of New York, people – including white or black, men or women, their way of living makes them all look like animals, because 'Such is life: all flesh is pork' (Dickens

134)! In some certain extreme social conditions, the way people live represents them as only different kinds of ‘pigs’ (Dickens 134), or ‘a pig’s likeness’ (Dickens 134).

These people’s situation seems to be indicating Dickens’s moment of Dickens’s own awakening, especially when he sees the ‘colour prints of Washington, and Queen Victoria of England, and the American Eagle’ on the wall of these ‘pigeon-holes’ houses (Dickens 136). It is hard to tell, from Dickens’s writing, how people in New York feel about Queen Victoria. And yet, the contrast between monarchy and ‘an American form of Government, with an elective head of State’ (Benson and Esher 640), is still there. According to the King of the Belgians, in his letter written in Laeken, on 15th December 1843, to his niece Queen Victoria, the reader can see that some people in England, ‘for some years’, thought ‘that Royalty was useless and ignorant’ (Benson and Esher 639). The colour prints of Queen Victoria of England on the wall in the street of New York, certainly brings out ‘a very aristocratic feeling’ (Benson and Esher 640).

It seems that both worlds, across the Atlantic, are each other’s counterparts. The King of the Belgians remembered that there was ‘a very rich and influential American from New York’, he thought that the Americans need ‘a Government which was able to grant protection to property, and that feeling of many was for Monarchy instead of the misrule of mobs’ (Benson and Esher 640). In Dickens’s New York, ironically enough, images such as ‘designed ships, and forts, and flags, and American Eagles out of number’ can particularly be seen in those poor areas, in a way which the rich American man from New York in the letter of the King of Belgians, seems to have a point. These colourful images of American dreams come to make a sharp contrast with the reality of the visible world of New York City – the area of ‘ruined houses, opened to the street, whence, through wide gaps in the walls’ (Dickens 138). The ‘wide gaps’ of the walls seem to ironically indicate the ‘gaps’ between the dream image and the visible reality, reinforcing the ambiguity of the private and the public spheres, as the houses are ‘opened’ to the street.

Dickens has made a decision of leaving America and going home to England, when he was in New York. Most probably, he realises that home is not perfect, but it seems to be at least livable. This City of New York, in his eyes, is nothing more than a broken dream. Visiting a ‘Lunatic Asylum’ (Dickens 140) in Long Island area, Dickens was again, painfully shocked by the ‘naked ugliness and horror’ of human faces and human conditions. A typical one is called the ‘moping idiot’, with ‘long disheveled hair’, ‘the gibbering maniac’, ‘hideous laugh and pointed finger’ (Dickens 140). The wall of the dining-room is ‘empty’, ‘with nothing for the rest of the eye to rest’. Among these ‘bare, dull’ and ‘dreary’ spaces, Dickens

sees a sadness of this 'refuge of afflicted and degraded humanity' (Dickens 140 - 141). The true meaning of American spirit, here in Dickens's eyes, is something as hot and as dry as a desert, 'sickening and blighting everything of wholesome life with its reach' (Dickens 141). New York seems to be the most of it, with the 'crowd' of terror in the 'madhouse'. The 'threshold' of the mental hospital reveals Dickens's feelings of 'deep disgust and measureless contempt' (Dickens 141). It is a threshold of non-returning, no matter physically or spiritually. Dickens does not even look back again.

Home is not perfect, but at least it has a sense of humanity. Dickens's observation of prisons in New York, once more, makes the readers see the vivid image of a kind of human-as-animal way of living. Even prisons back home in England, for Dickens, treats the prisoners as human beings, instead of caged chickens. For example, Dickens sees this man of sixty years old, who 'has murdered his wife, and will probably be hanged' (Dickens 132). Dickens depicts this man in his 'small bare' prison cell, in a way which shows that this man is like an actor on the stage, with a spot light coming from above, as 'the light enters through a high chink in the wall' (Dickens 132). The wall of this prison cell indicates the consciousness of the man and his thought, when he is reading in this 'four walled room' (Benjamin 37). And yet, ironically, this man is not allowed to walk freely in the city, unlike the *flâneur*. He looks up at Dickens's eyes, 'for a moment', but soon he 'gives an impatient dogged shake; and fixes his eyes upon his book again' (Dickens 132).

Dickens tells the officer, that '[i]n England, if a man be under sentence of death, even, he has air and exercise at certain periods of the day' (Dickens 132). Dickens also notices that there is a 'lonely child, of ten or twelve years old' also in another prison cell. He is again in deep shock, when he realises that this boy is the son of that reading man. The function of this boy is to be 'a witness against his father' (Dickens 132), but he is also treated as a prisoner, staying in a separate cell for a month.

This child 'of ten or twelve' in the city prison of New York, most probably makes Dickens thought about his own childhood. It was almost twenty years ago before he visited America. According to Angus Calder, in the year of 1823, Dickens's 'family moved to London, faced with financial disaster', because Dickens's father John Dickens 'had been arrested for debt, and soon the whole family, except for Charles who was found lodgings, joined him in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison' (Calder 7). Although Dickens did not join the family in the prison, and yet, according to Calder, this 'family shame' 'transformed him', 'which haunted him till his death' (Calder 7). This boy in the city prison of New York happens to have a similar age to Dickens's, when his family was in prison.

Dickens's walk in the city prison of New York, comes as a symbolic walk into his own personal history. The prison boy can be seen as a form of child labour, since he is there not for his criminal behavior, but to watch his father. The situation of this boy, somehow reminds in Dickens himself, that his memory of his early form of child labour, as '[t]wo days before his twelfth birthday, the boy began work as a factory at Hungerford Stairs, labelling bottles for six shillings a week' (Calder 7). Dickens's illustration of New York may only be a very small part of his *American Notes*. The quality of his writing about New York, I would conclude, as Dickens sees himself in it, shows the most of his self.

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