

The Railway and the River: Conduits of Dickens' Imaginary City

Ben Moore

Modern cities are dominated by overlapping and interdependent lines of connectivity, in the form of ports, streets, railways, airports, telegraphs, telephone lines, and, in recent years, electronic wireless networks. Such connections or conduits are typically interpreted as promoting the flow and accumulation of capital, often as part of a logic of ever-increasing globalisation. As one recent economics textbook puts it, 'the cities with the highest levels of global connectivity are also largely the world's most productive cities.'¹ Yet such conduits can also serve as a means of creatively conceptualising or re-imagining the modern city, having the capacity to break apart as well as connect city space, fracturing or transforming old forms of urbanism even as they create new ones. This is the case for Dickens, writing at a time when many modern forms of connectivity were still in the process of formation—the electrical telegraph, for instance, was successfully demonstrated in London in 1837 (the year serial publication of *Pickwick Papers* concluded, and that of *Oliver Twist* began) alongside the route of the new London-to-Birmingham railway line, while the first undersea telegraph line, between Britain and France, was laid a few years later, in 1850.

B. Moore (✉)

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

e-mail: B.P.Moore@uva.nl

This chapter focuses on two conduits that are particularly important to Dickens' imaginative production of the modern city: the railway and the river, as they appear in *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865). While the first is symbolic of nineteenth-century modernity, the second seems comparatively archaic, even primordial; yet each expresses a way of imagining the modern city that is typical of Dickens. The railway encompasses the creative destruction of the modern city, its capacity to produce new forms of technologised vision amidst scenes of spectacular ruination. The river, meanwhile, encompasses a form of subjectivity in which the city-dweller is confronted by an urban landscape that seems to determine his or her identity, threatening to undo Enlightenment concepts of the rational, discrete individual.

In considering these two conduits, I hope to demonstrate that in Dickens' imaginary city, the modern and the ancient are not ultimately independent or separable. Both railway and river activate forms of perception in which the hidden, unseen and deathly act upon the conscious, living, and directly perceived city. To put this another way, in Dickens' sensorium modernity is not symbolised simply by the construction of new conduits—such as the railway—but by their dialectical connection with old conduits—such as the river. Dickens thus produces conceptually a state which Baron Haussmann produced physically on the streets of Paris, as described by Fritz Stahl, quoted in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*: 'the old city and the new are not left standing opposite each other, as is the case everywhere else, but are drawn together into one.'² Railway and river, like Haussmann's boulevards, cut through time as well as space, bringing together the old city and the new. They collapse past, present, and future, turning the city into a spatio-temporal palimpsest where ancient and modern cross over one another, interrupting and intervening in the other's realities. This leads to an urban landscape that is at once exhilarating and radically dislocating.

2.1 THE RAILWAY, RUIN, AND THE ARCHITECTURAL UNCONSCIOUS

Much criticism concerning *Dombey and Son* has explored the function and symbolic value of the railway, which initially appears in two passages (in Chaps. 6 and 15) describing the changes in 'Staggs' Gardens,' where the London and Birmingham Railway (L&BR) is being constructed.³

The L&BR existed from 1833–1846, before being taken over by the London and North Western Railway (L&NWR). The line it established, which operated out of Euston Station, in Camden Town, from 1837, now forms part of the West Coast Main Line. The railway features at two other significant points: in Chap. 20, when *Dombey* travels from London to Leamington, and in Chap. 55, when a train destroys Mr. Carker. It is also relevant to the ‘good spirit’ passage in Chap. 47, which develops questions of visibility and architectural penetration that the railway has raised. In all these cases, the railway destabilises and breaks apart city space, yet re-frames it in a new way. In exploring this process, I aim to show that although the railway is accompanied by fragmentation and ruin, its primary role is to reveal the ruin that *already exists* within the city. As part of this reading, I suggest that the railway illustrates the proposition, adapted from Sigfried Giedion, that engineering is the architectural unconscious of the nineteenth century.

One critic who discusses the railway is Kathleen Tillotson, for whom it is a ‘ruthless’ force associated with ‘the fascination of the new as well as the horror of the strange;’ it is ‘destructive, ruthless, an “impetuous monster”,’ providing ‘no suggestion of hope, of social progress.’⁴ For Steven Marcus, by contrast, the railway is part of the novel’s concern with change, as ‘the great symbol of social transformation’ that ‘destroyed traditional notions of space and time.’⁵ Movement and change are also central for Raymond Williams, who sees the railway as ‘the exciting and the threatening consequence of a new mobility,’ making it symptomatic of the modern city.⁶ Jeremy Tambling also notes the railway’s association with modernity, arguing that it helps shape a Foucauldian society which ‘is becoming Panoptical, regulated, even by accurate clock-time.’ For Tambling this does not imply negativity, but rather indicates that the railway’s characteristic power is ‘monstration,’ or making visible.⁷ For Stephen Kern, such transformation of space and time is symptomatic of 1880–1918, when ‘The thrust of the age was to affirm the reality of private time against that of a single public time and to define its nature as heterogeneous, fluid, and reversible.’⁸ If the railway represents this transformation, it is part of what Benjamin calls the ‘fore-history’ of this later period (making the period 1880–1918 its after-history.) The railway, in this case, is not fully comprehensible at the moment of its emergence. As Benjamin puts it, when discussing what he calls the historical object:

All the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale. It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history. (Thus, for example, the fore-history of Baudelaire, as educed by current scholarship, resides in allegory; his after-history, in *Jugendstil*.)⁹

According to Benjamin, the interior and exterior of the historical object cannot be separated; the past and future exist within it in microcosm, forming what Benjamin calls a 'monad.' If the railway is a historical object in this sense, it should not be read as part of a historical continuum, but as an image that 'attain[s] to legibility only at a particular time.'¹⁰ It must be approached like the poet Charles Baudelaire in Benjamin's example, who can only be understood if he is placed alongside—or 'constellated with'—seventeenth-century allegory and late nineteenth-century *Jugendstil*, both of which he, nonetheless, already contains within himself. The emergent railway, likewise, will only become legible when what precedes and follows it (the stagecoach and the world of modern travel, for instance) are recognised as parts of its own interior structure.

While most critics have found the railway to be an important part of the text, Ian Carter observes that '*Dombey* contains only four brief railway passages,' which, despite their 'complex structure of feeling,' are not sufficient to make it 'a railway novel.'¹¹ This should remind us that, as with any aspect of the novel, the railway should not be given sole, analytical precedence, but related to the other spaces and structures that surround it. One way to do so is to view it as a component of the city's architecture. Yet if, as Denis Hollier suggests, 'Society entrusts its desire to endure to architecture,'¹² the railway is a form of architecture that undoes any such permanence, as the ruinous transformation of Staggs's Gardens in Chap. 6 indicates:

Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream.¹³

This scene of confusion shows that the construction of the railway is also its deconstruction, in Derrida's sense, when referring to the tower of Babel, of 'an unfinished edifice whose half-completed structures are visible, letting one guess at the scaffolding behind them.'¹⁴ Derrida's description captures one of the key characteristics of the ruin: that it is an inverse image of construction that reveals a building's 'scaffolding,' and hence its earliest beginnings. Philippe Hamon takes this temporal confusion in the opposite direction, finding that ruins can have a prophetic quality, so that 'The Romantic ruin somehow anticipated modern architecture,' since both expose internal structure.¹⁵ More generally, the ruin always refers to the future as well as the past because it shows what every building will one day become. This concept is captured in Gustave Doré's 1872 engraving of Thomas Macaulay's New Zealander, an imagined future visitor to the ruins of London first described in a review of 1840 (Fig. 2.1). Blanchard Jerrold, co-author with Doré of *London. A Pilgrimage*, accompanies this image with a quotation from Edgar Allen Poe's 1845 poem 'To Helen,' suggesting that the scene the New Zealander contemplates matches 'The glory that was Greece—/ The grandeur that was Rome' (p. 190), drawing on readers' presumed familiarity with classical ruined landscapes by painters such as Giovanni Paolo Panini (1691–1765). For Benjamin, nineteenth-century Paris similarly evoked the spectre of ancient Greece: 'One knew of places in ancient Greece where the way led down into the underworld. Our waking existence [in the city] likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld.'¹⁶ He later suggests that the Parisian arcades recall the 'temple of Aesculapius,' the Greek god of medicine and healing.¹⁷

The 'Staggs's Gardens' passage makes direct reference to ancient ruins with the phrase 'Babel towers,' suggesting that progress here is also the return to a primeval, biblical past. Later, in Chap. 20, Dombey's train journey demonstrates that the railway can produce a movement towards past as well as future when entering a tunnel, by 'plunging down into the earth'¹⁸ as if towards the underworld, at which point, 'amidst the darkness and whirlwind the motion seems reversed, and to tend furiously backward.'¹⁹ As Gillian Piggott notes, such spatio-temporal disorientation is also found in 'A Flight,' an 1851 *Household Words* railway story that asks, 'why it is that when I shut my eyes in a tunnel I begin to feel as if I were going at an Express pace the other way?'²⁰ For Piggott, this is part of 'Dickens's urban sublime,' an aesthetic mode that registers what Benjamin calls *Erlebnis* (experience that is momentary or ephemeral,



Fig. 2.1 Gustave Doré, *The New Zealander*, in Jerrold Blanchard and Gustave Doré, *London: A Pilgrimage*. London: Grant & Co., 1872. Image courtesy of University of Bristol Library, Special Collections

and hence typical of modernity), as opposed to *Erfahrung* (experience as continuous and unified).²¹ Moreover, as Alf Seegert notes, steam and rail in this story do not follow the contours of the land, but cut through them, as the railway construction cuts through Staggs's Gardens, 'in effect virtualizing the landscape outside the railway carriage.'²² The outside is virtualised because it does not impinge on the sensations of the passenger other than visually, becoming a series of paratactic impressions, like the 'wildly mingled' shapes of Staggs's Gardens, rather than a continuum of experience, as in this passage: 'A double-barrelled Station! Now a wood, now a bridge, now a landscape, now a cutting, now a—Bang! a single-barrelled Station—there was a cricket-match somewhere with two white tents, and then four flying cows, then turnips.'²³ The landscape

is broken into its constituent parts, no longer existing as a continuous whole.

In being as 'unintelligible as any dream,' Staggs's Gardens also anticipates the dream-like stasis of the house where Florence Dombey dwells as a fairy-tale princess, in Chap. 23. Despite the activity that takes place in Staggs's Gardens, it too exists in a suspended state, with bridges hanging in the air, leading nowhere. The 'giant forms of cranes' that fill the area recall the region surrounding Todgers' guest house in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), where 'vast bags and packs of goods, upward or downward bound, were for ever dangling between heaven and earth from lofty cranes.'²⁴ These cranes combine mobility and immobility, their goods 'bound' towards ground or sky, yet seeming 'for ever dangling;' neither up nor down. For Freud, such doubleness is characteristic of dreams, which have undergone 'condensation,' meaning that 'very great number of associations' can be produced for 'each individual element of the content of a dream.' These associations are hard to untangle, since dreams 'show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing.'²⁵ Perhaps this is the source of the railway construction's dreamlike unintelligibility: in seeking to condense together 'contraries,' such as suspension and movement, it creates a contradictory state that resists interpretation. This is another way of saying that the railway is monadic in Benjamin's sense, since its contradictory constituents also point towards both the past (Babel and the classical underworld) and the future (evoking floating glass and iron architecture, such as the Crystal Palace of 1851.) Such condensation of contraries explains why the local neighbourhood is 'shy to own the Railroad.'²⁶ It is unable to read the signs of its own future in the chaos that has descended upon it.

Benjamin directly links dreams and industrial construction in 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' his 1935 *exposé* to the *Arcades*. After discussing the period's use of iron, he introduces a line from Michelet: 'each epoch dreams the one to follow.'²⁷ The confusion of Staggs's Gardens is just such a dream of a new epoch, which only emerges fully in Chap. 15 when the area around Euston has become a 'Railway world,'²⁸ complete with 'railway hotels, coffee-houses, lodging-houses, boarding-houses, railway plans, maps, views, wrappers, bottles, sandwich-boxes, and time tables.'²⁹ Benjamin also draws on Sigfried Giedion's argument that all genuinely new developments in nineteenth-century architecture occurred not in official architecture, such as the Royal Exchange or East India House, both of which are near Mr

Dombey's offices,³⁰ but in 'humbler structures' motivated by practical purposes, where 'Industry unconsciously creates new powers of expression and new possibilities of experience.'³¹ This split is evident in the period's new division between architects (who focus on artistic facades) and engineers (who focus on interior structure), formalised by the founding of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1834.³² Industrial construction is thus for Giedion 'the subconscious of architecture,'³³ or, to put this in psychoanalytic terminology, the 'architectural unconscious.'

In *Dombey and Son*, the railway is an example of this architectural unconscious. It brings death and ruin, which are elsewhere repressed (albeit not always successfully) to the surface, a characteristic it shares with the river in *Our Mutual Friend*, which is discussed below. Michael Klotz suggests that the Victorian railway produces a 'tension between the way property functions outside and within the home,' with the movement of goods opposing the 'perception of the Victorian home as a safe and private space:'³⁴ a perception that nonetheless ultimately relies on the goods the railways have moved. More than just bringing out the mobility inherent within domestic goods, however, the train in Dickens also brings out the death and ruin which the domestic interior seeks to cover over. This is evident in Mr. Dombey's train journey, in Chap. 20, where the train appears as 'the triumphant monster, Death,'³⁵ reflecting Dombey's growing resentment and thoughts of mortality following the death of his son, Paul. The phrase, repeated several times with minor variations, is associated with the train's unstoppable movement as it cuts through, and cuts opens, the landscape:

Away, and still away, onward and onward ever: glimpses of cottage-homes, of houses, mansions, rich estates, of husbandry and handicraft, of people, of old roads and paths that look deserted, small, and insignificant as they are left behind.³⁶

As in 'A Flight,' the train gives only fragmentary 'glimpses' of its surroundings, yet these glimpses connect disparate parts of society, bringing together 'cottage-homes' and 'mansions.' The train's movement stitches together town and countryside, overcoming what Raymond Williams calls the:

ideological separation between the processes of rural exploitation, which have been, in effect, dissolved into landscape, and the register of that

exploitation, in the law courts, the money markets, the political power and the conspicuous expenditure of the city.³⁷

Yet the train also carries its passengers *through* the countryside, allowing the suppression of this link between rural exploitation and urban capital once again. This new repression is aided by the anaesthetising qualities of the train's soft furnishings; Klotz notes that railway carriages, particularly in first class, replicated bourgeois homes, as in Augustus Egg's painting *The Travelling Companions* (1862), where two middle-class women sit in a comfortable train carriage, one reading a novel while another sleeps.³⁸ Neither looks out at the landscape, from which they are both separated and protected.

In Chap. 20 of *Dombey and Son*, Dombey *does* look out of the window, but misinterprets what he sees. The train has entered an area of industrial poverty, which must be in the Midlands, since the train is for Leamington Spa:

There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke, and crowded gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance.³⁹

The train breaks through architecture here, revealing the death and lack within. Nevertheless, this revelation is met by the refusal or inability of Dombey, a representative of the dominant classes, to confront the 'want' on which his own edifice of wealth is built:

As Mr. Dombey looks out of his carriage window, it is never in his thoughts that the monster who has brought him there has let the light of day in upon these things: not made or caused them.⁴⁰

All Dombey sees is a 'ruinous and dreary'⁴¹ scene, rendering the view little more than an externalisation of his state of mind. He has no conception of space as a social product, since for him it exists purely to serve the firm, becoming an index of the firm's troubles, and his own. He comprehends the ruin outside as a monstrous, but virtual, excess that confronts

him, rather than part of a system within which he is financially and morally invested. So pervasive is this pattern of thought that the narrator repeats Dombey's error, distinguishing the railway from the social system that has 'made or caused' this poverty, failing to acknowledge that, as a product of capitalist speculation, the train, too, is implicated in the ruin it reveals.

As Klotz observes,⁴² this scene puts Dombey in the position represented in 'Over London by Rail,' another engraving by Gustave Doré.⁴³ Here, a train passes over a viaduct in the background, while a long row of terraced houses and yards fills the rest of the scene. The perspective from the train provides a panoptical view, yet this remains limited, since the passengers have only an instant to take in the scene as the train speeds past, and are unable to see inside the buildings. The train points the way towards total visibility and connectivity, but does not bring it about. As critics have noted, though, Dombey's train journey foreshadows Chap. 47, where total visibility *does* become possible, at least within the pages of the novel. Here, the narrator ponders 'what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural.'⁴⁴ This leads to a desire to reveal the 'moral pestilence':⁴⁵

Oh, for a good spirit who would take the house-tops off, with a more potent and benignant hand than the lame demon in the tale [Asmodeus], and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moves forth among them! For only one night's view of the pale phantoms rising from the scenes of our too-long neglect; and from the thick and sullen air where Vice and Fever propagate together, raining the tremendous social retributions which are ever pouring down, and ever coming thicker! Bright and blest the morning that should rise on such a night: for men, delayed no more by stumbling-blocks of their own making, which are but specks of dust upon the path between them and eternity, would then apply themselves, like creatures of one common origin, owing one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end, to make the world a better place!⁴⁶

As Raymond Williams observes, the 'potent and benignant hand' is 'the hand of the novelist; it is Dickens seeing himself.'⁴⁷ In this case, Dickens wishes not only to reveal the suffering of the poor, but also to emphasise their connection with his implicitly middle-class readership. As Klotz, Mancini and Tambling point out, this is also the perspective of the train. In Tambling's words:

The novel and the train act analogously to each other in letting the light of day in: battered roofs and windows are exposed, brought into visibility by the train, which is thus like the good spirit which takes off the housetops, and which is monstrous in that it questions the distinction between the natural and unnatural.⁴⁸

If the good spirit is both novelist and train, the passage evokes two spatial modes simultaneously: the 'mental space' where the novelist constructs his world, and the 'physical space' of a train moving through the landscape, both of which work to make the invisible visible. This is an act that breaks through the apparent autonomy of separate social spheres, destabilising society, but with the ultimate aim of producing greater social unity.

The final appearance of the train follows Dombey's ex-manager Mr. Carker's flight from Dijon, during which Carker experiences 'a fevered vision of things past and present all confounded together; of his life and journey blended into one.'⁴⁹ Again, the train is linked to temporal confusion, this time even before it has appeared. Carker first travels by carriage, but just as Dombey carried 'monotony with him, through the rushing landscape'⁵⁰ in Chap. 20, so Carker has 'a vision of change upon change, and still the same monotony of bells and wheels, and horses' feet, and no rest.'⁵¹ As Isobel Armstrong notes, space is divided up in this journey, but 'the more the spatial division, the more monotonous and undifferentiated the journey seems to Carker.'⁵² For Armstrong, this is 'peculiarly modern space, empty meaningless space,'⁵³ a corollary to Benjamin's concept of empty homogeneous time. This combination of monotony and change recalls Staggs's Gardens, which was simultaneously frozen and in motion in Chap. 6. For Carker, the confusion of time and space is accompanied by the 'flight of Death,'⁵⁴ leading Tambling to suggest that 'Repetition precedes the event [of Carker's death], which it brings on.'⁵⁵ Moreover, the railway turns Carker's own planned revenge against him: the 'red eyes'⁵⁶ of the monstrous train that bears him down as he flees Dombey recall the 'red eye' of the monster which sat at the heart of the firm in Chap. 13,⁵⁷ and which represents Carker. However, whereas that eye was submerged and mysterious, these eyes openly announce the coming of ruin. The train has turned the House of Dombey inside out, bringing the death hidden at its centre to the fore.

If Carker, who betrayed and undermined Dombey's firm and family before leaving for France, represents death, lack, and ruin within the

house, then his obliteration by the train makes this visible. When he is smashed into ‘mutilated fragments,’⁵⁸ Carker is ‘opened up’ in a violent parallel to the train’s opening up of architecture during Dombey’s journey. Carker’s death takes place in front of Dombey, who is confronted with the disturbing image of ‘something covered that lay heavy and still, upon a board.’⁵⁹ This covering recalls the journals used as wrappings after the death of Fanny, Dombey’s first wife, which displayed ‘fragmentary accounts of deaths and dreadful murders.’⁶⁰ It is a paragonal structure that represents how architecture, especially railway architecture, operates in this text: seeking to contain or conceal death, but also bringing it to the surface. Though Dombey may not realise it, the covered corpse of Carker represents the internal structure of both his family and his business, which the train, with the force of the architectural unconscious, has thrust into the open.

2.2 THE RIVER, THE CLUE, AND THE UNCANNY

In terms that recall Steven Marcus’s description of the railway, quoted above, F. S. Schwarzbach suggests that *Our Mutual Friend* is ‘primarily about change, and not only change as transition, but change as transformation as well.’⁶¹ For J. Hillis Miller, Dickens’ Thames is more radical than this; it confounds ‘the rationalities of cognitive mapping,’ serving as a ‘realm of otherness’ or ‘underwater locus of metamorphosis,’ which is resolutely non-topographical.⁶² Tambling develops a similar idea, arguing that the river evokes the Derridean concept of ‘life death,’ a ‘reminder that every concept contains its other,’⁶³ making it a profoundly dialectical object, and a form of the Freudian unconscious, which, like dreams, and, I have argued, Dickens’ railway, cannot express ‘The alternative “either-or” [...] in any way whatever.’⁶⁴ My reading here builds on such interpretations, citing Freud and Lacan to help argue that the river is both a highly uncanny urban conduit and a structure with two sides, one of which is unseeable and unrepresentable, and the other a site of signification that simultaneously demands and resists interpretation.⁶⁵ As with the railway, I focus on how Dickens deploys visuality as an index to reading the river, especially in the novel’s opening scene, which establishes the role the river will play throughout *Our Mutual Friend*.

At the start of Chap. 1, Gaffer Hexam, a boatman and scavenger, is out on the Thames at night with his daughter Lizzie, looking

for something in the river: 'there was no clue what he looked for, but he looked for something, with a most intent and searching gaze.'⁶⁶ Hexam's gaze, directed towards the river, has no defined object, though it soon becomes clear he is looking for human bodies. Initially, however, the gaze gives 'no clue' about its purpose. Yet it is itself in search of a clue, in the form of disturbances in the water: 'Wheresoever the strong tide met with an impediment, [Hexam's] gaze paused for an instant.'⁶⁷ A gaze that searches for clues while itself remaining inscrutable replicates the gaze of the detective, like the inspector who appears in Chap. 3, and spends the night looking for Hexam in Chapter 13, or of the criminal, which is what Hexam is accused of being by Rogue Riderhood, in Chap. 12. It also suggests the gaze of the physiognomist, seeking to draw out a human logic from the blankness of the river, or the architect, seeking to impose a structural order onto the dark and indeterminate river. It is a gaze that hopes to uncover what is concealed, or bring to light what should have been left submerged.

This opening echoes throughout the novel, the first instance where the visual field is defined by obscurity rather than clarity, and where a non-human structure serves as an index for the human. Another example is Mr. Venus' shop, where 'nothing is resolvable into anything distinct, save the candle itself [...] and two preserved frogs,'⁶⁸ and where Silas Wegg seeks to buy back his missing leg bone. In both cases, something secret, and deathly, seems to be hidden in the city. As the first chapter continues, something *is* drawn out of the river: money, apparently taken from the pockets of a dead man, making Lizzie shiver and turn 'deadly faint.'⁶⁹ For Lizzie, this money should not have returned to the surface. It recalls the money used to pay Charon, the ferryman of Hades in Greek mythology, from whom Gaffer symbolically steals, and whose character he partly takes on.

For Freud, the feeling of untimely re-emergence is typical of the *Unheimlich* or uncanny.⁷⁰ *Unheimlich* is the opposite of *Heimlich*, but also one of the latter word's meanings. Consulting Grimm's 1877 dictionary, Freud finds that *Heimlich* can mean 'that which is obscure, inaccessible to knowledge,' tipping it into the eeriness and unfamiliarity indicated by the word *Unheimlich*.⁷¹ For Freud, the re-emergence of the hidden or concealed element in the *Heimlich* is the primary generator of the uncanny; or, more precisely, 'an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been

surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.’⁷² An archetypal example is the feeling that emerges in relation to ‘death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts.’⁷³ To the extent that *Our Mutual Friend* is concerned with the return of the dead, then, it is a novel about the place of the uncanny and the archaic in modern life.

If we return to Hexam’s gaze in light of Freud’s essay, it becomes evident that the river plays the role of the unconscious, which is the site of repression; most clearly in a passage from which I have already quoted:

Wheresoever the strong tide met with an impediment, his gaze paused for an instant. At every mooring-chain and rope, at every stationary boat or barge that split the current into a broad-arrowhead, at the offsets from the piers of Southwark Bridge, at the paddles of the river steamboats as the beat the filthy water, at the floating logs of timber lashed together lying off certain wharves, his shining eyes darted a hungry look.⁷⁴

Hexam searches the river not for a body, but for the *trace* of a body, in the form of an ‘impediment,’ which functions as a fracture or gap in the surface of the river. He looks for places where boats ‘*split the current* into a broad-arrowhead’ [my emphasis] as evidence of what lies beneath. Lacan’s Seminar XI is helpful here. Lacan insists on the distinction between the Romantic unconscious—‘the locus of the divinities of night’—and the Freudian one, which is ‘at all points homologous with what occurs at the level of the subject.’⁷⁵ He draws attentions to what allows Freud to identify the unconscious *as* unconscious:

In the dream, in parapraxis, in the flash of wit—what is it that strikes one first? It is the sense of impediment [*empêchement*] to be found in all of them. Impediment, failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence, something stumbles. Freud is attracted by these phenomena, and it is there that he seeks the unconscious.⁷⁶

The *empêchement* or impediment is the sign that reveals the unconscious; though ‘reveals’ is perhaps the wrong word here, since the impediment can operate only as a clue, not as something that would lift the lid on the contents of the unconscious. It points towards, but does not undo, repression. Similarly, for Hexam, the impediment or split in the river only indicates the presence of the body, which takes on the role of repressed material, its return generating an uncanny effect.

The dead body is what should remain concealed (the uncanny), but also what the gazing subject desires, since it is from the bodies that Hexam gets his livelihood. Lizzie, however, views the river differently:

[Hexam:] 'It's my belief you hate the sight of the very river.'

'I—I do not like it, father.'

'As if it wasn't your living! As if it wasn't meat and drink to you!'⁷⁷

While Lizzie hates the sight of the river, for her father it is the site (and sight) of desire. It conceals, but also bears witness to, the object for which Hexam's 'shining eyes darted a hungry look:' the dead body, which can no longer feel or return desire. The closest Hexam can come to consummation is to plunge his arms into the water of the river—presumably into the pockets of a drowned body—and the actions he performs on the money he retrieves: 'He chinked it once, and he blew upon it once, and he spat upon it once [...] before he put it in his pocket.'⁷⁸

The play of vision goes further though. It is not only between Gaffer Hexam and the river, or Lizzie and the river, but between Lizzie and Hexam. While Gaffer observes the river, Lizzie observes him: 'She watched his face as earnestly as he watched the river. But, in the intensity of her look there was a touch of dread or horror.'⁷⁹ There are at least two kinds of clue, therefore: the surface of the river and the surface of the face. Lizzie reacts to the slightest alteration in her father's face, as when he suddenly steers towards the Surrey shore, and 'Always watching his face, the girl instantly answered to the action in her sculling.'⁸⁰ Lizzie's response to the river is mediated and determined through her father; it is not so much the river she hates as her father's attitude towards it. Gaffer, meanwhile, reads Lizzie's facial reactions: when she shivers upon seeing a stain in the boat, he asks, 'what ails you?' being 'immediately aware of it, though so intent on the advancing waters.'⁸¹ Like fear of the uncanny for Freud, Lizzie's dislike is not rational: 'What hurt can it do you?' Hexam asks, Lizzie replying, 'None, none. But I cannot bear it.'⁸² The river is harmless, and Lizzie knows it is harmless (though there is irony here, as it will later kill Rogue Riderhood and Bradley Headstone) but it is nonetheless intolerable. Her repetition of 'none' effectively carries a double meaning, like the word *Heimlich* itself, or the language of dreams, forming a kind of double negative, which means both no and yes. More generally, the opposing attitudes of Lizzie

and Hexam here represent the two sides of the uncanny, and of the subject's relationship to repressed material; for Hexam, the river is *Heimlich*, familiar and desirable, whereas for Lizzie it is *Unheimlich*, repulsive and disturbing, though only through her father's reaction—through the *Heimlich*. In this sense, the river produces a 'profound attraction of repulsion,' as St. Giles's did for Dickens according to John Forster's biography (1872–4).⁸³ Here, though, these contrasting affective states are split between two different characters, who nonetheless remain intimately bound together by family ties.

After the body is recovered from the water, it might seem that the secret of the river is recovered, that its uncanny state has been defused by knowability. Yet the positions of Hexam and Lizzie remain unreconciled, so that still neither attitude to the river can be accepted as definitive. Lizzie refuses to sit next to the body,⁸⁴ while Gaffer seems to foreclose on the possibility of it being anything other than a source of money. The final sentence of the chapter registers this continuing duality by commenting on the corpse, now towed behind the boat: 'A neophyte might have fancied that the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint changes of expression on a sightless face; but Gaffer was no neophyte and had no fancies.'⁸⁵ Though Gaffer rejects the body's signifying potential, for the narrator, and presumably Lizzie, it continues to generate ambiguous signs. Except that now face and river have combined into a single, indecipherable clue, as the corpse seems to turn its own 'sightless' gaze onto the living, through the ripples of the Thames.

Lizzie's sense of the river as intolerable is extended to the poverty-stricken masses that live along its banks. As becomes clear during Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn's journey across London to see John Harmon's body in Chap. 3, the poor threaten the 'respectable' city, seeming at once living and dead, human, and inhuman, and thus potentially diseased and contagious:

The wheels rolled on, and rolled down by the Monument and by the Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher ground, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out among vessels that seemed to have got ashore, and houses that seemed to have got afloat—among bowsprits staring into windows, and windows staring

into ships—the wheels rolled on, until they stopped at a dark corner, river-washed and otherwise not washed at all, where the boy alighted and opened the door.⁸⁶

The people of Limehouse Hole are 'moral sewage,' a term that cuts two ways: they are both a *source* of moral contagion, and a *product* of the social morality of the affluent middle classes. Moral sewage comes from the social body, but might also return to infect it. This passage harks back to the 'good spirit' passage of *Dombey and Son*, where the term 'moral pestilence'⁸⁷ is used, though the metaphor there is of gases and vapours rather than water. The sentiment, though, remains the same: the middle-classes have cut themselves off from the poor, but remain tied to them by the conduits that run through Dickens' city.

Mortimer and Wrayburn's journey cuts across London from West to East, starting at the Veneerings' house in 'Stucconia,'⁸⁸ usually taken to be Tyburnia in Bayswater. Franco Moretti suggests that in this journey we see Dickens' 'stroke of genius,' which is to 'see the city as a whole, a single system.'⁸⁹ Like Balzac, says Moretti, Dickens finds a third way between the upper-class silver-fork, and lower-class Newgate novels of the 1820s and 1830s, uncovering the hidden connections between these two social orders, which the earlier genres had obscured. This distinguishes Dickens from a writer such as Thackeray, who as Sambudha Sen notes, wrote from the position of a political and aristocratic insider, confining his fictions to one social group.⁹⁰ Dickens, by contrast, ties the city together even as he cuts it apart, so that the same river that disrupts the unity of the modern city also becomes a conduit or line of connection between classes; even if, as in the passage above, this is often more threatening than comforting.

If the river of *Our Mutual Friend* ties together London, the railway ties together separate cities, producing new national and international networks. In 'A Flight,' the narrator talks wonderingly of 'a flight to Paris in eleven hours!'⁹¹ struggling to convince himself upon his arrival that his presence 'is no dream,'⁹² so rapidly has it occurred. Like the 'dream' of Staggs's Gardens, this railway journey is often unintelligible, a 'giddy flight' that seems to produce 'delusion[s].'⁹³ A delusion or dream is also what John Harmon experiences when he is drugged and plunged into the river in *Our Mutual Friend*. Where Hexam looks for clues in the Thames, Harmon has 'no clue to the scene of my death,'⁹⁴ remarking:

As to this hour; I cannot understand that side of the river where I recovered the shore, being the opposite side to that on which I was ensnared, I shall never understand it now. Even at this moment, while I leave the river behind me, going home, I cannot conceive that it rolls between me and that spot, or that the sea is where it is.⁹⁵

The surface of the river might be read, but its underside, which carried Harmon, resists conscious thought. Yet it must exist, since it separates two known times (before and after Harmon's 'death') and two known places (the river's banks).

This dual work of connecting and separating is perhaps the key role of railway and river of Dickens: both mark out the space of the unknowable, indicating its presence but not necessarily opening it to view. They simultaneously stitch the city together and unstitch the co-ordinates that make it comprehensible, blending the signs of progress with the return to a primeval, archaic past, which acts upon the city like an architectural unconscious. It is through this duality of past and future, known and unknown, *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*, that these conduits help produce Dickens's distinctively modern vision of urban space and urban subjectivity.

NOTES

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