Victorian Literature and Culture (2004), 407–419. Printed in the United States of America.

"TURN AGAIN, DICK WHITTINGTON!": DICKENS, WORDSWORTH, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CITY

By Patrick Parrinder

IN A BRILLIANTLY SUGGESTIVE ARTICLE, the urban historian Lewis Mumford defined the form of the "archetypal city" as follows:

> First of all, the city is the creation of a king . . . acting in the name of a god. The king's first act, the very key to his authority and potency, is the erection of a temple within a heavily walled sacred enclosure. And the construction of another wall to enclose the subservient community turns the whole area into a sacred place: a city. (12)

This ancient city, which arose just before the beginning of recorded history, is double walled. It has an inner as well as an outer boundary. The outer walls enclose the area inhabited by a subservient population, but the city itself exists for the sake of the temple and its adjoining palace, the homes, respectively, of the god and the king. Some great historic city centers such as Rome with its Vatican, Moscow with its Kremlin, and Beijing with its Heavenly City preserve a structure that is apparently descended from this model. In Anglo-Saxon London, however, an abbey and a seat of government were established at Westminster, just outside what became the walled City overlooked by the grim citadel of the Tower. Canterbury, not London, became the nation's religious capital. London, in effect, marks a stage in the separation of spiritual and temporal powers and, thus, in the secularization of the city. Medieval London was able to assert its independence from the monarchy through the institution of its self-governing Corporation, presided over by the Lord Mayor. The mayoralty was the only significant temporal office in the land not in the gift of the king; and this explains why, in the folk-tale, the ragged boy Dick Whittington could become Lord Mayor of London.

As Ian Baucom has written, "maps adore boundaries" (352) – but narrative, especially fictional narrative, has little respect for territorial boundaries. Even in the case of natural barriers such as coastlines, deserts, river banks, and mountain ranges, its task is to cross them rather than to mark them. Novels of travel and adventure typically show their protagonists eagerly on the move, their attention fixed on the desired destination, scarcely aware of such purely artificial boundary lines as they may be crossing. The significance of the trope of "entering the great city" in the classical male *Bildungsroman* may be attributed, therefore, to the city's double boundaries. In crossing the outer boundary, the *Bildungsroman* hero

experiences the promise of the inner boundary, which at once encloses the "heart of the city" and the individual goal of emotional fulfillment or "heart's desire." The hero entering the city joins the undifferentiated crowd of its subservient population, yet he dreams of a special destiny which involves gaining entry to the inner circle. Here, for example, is Thackeray's Arthur Pendennis as "the coach drove into London":

> What young fellow has not felt a thrill as he entered the vast place? Hundreds of other carriages, crowded with their thousands of men, were hastening to the great city. "Here is my place," thought Pen; "here is my battle beginning, in which I must fight and conquer, or fall. I have been a boy and a dawdler as yet. Oh, I long, I long to show that I can be a man." And from his place on the coach-roof the eager young fellow looked down upon the city, with the sort of longing desire which young soldiers feel on the eve of a campaign. (283)

Virginia Woolf in her novel *Night and Day* (1919) refers to "the printed pages of our novelists," in which the characters arrive in London by stage-coach; even in the modern age of express trains, she adds, a journey to London "can still be a very pleasant and romantic adventure" (316). The "adventure" lies, of course, in anticipation, and it posits a barrier that could not be crossed by any mere conveyance such as a coach or train. And so Pendennis's initiation into adulthood, his engagement in the front line of the "battle for life," remains elusive long after he has reached the capital. Where exactly is the inner boundary? Indeed, does London, the "modern Babylon" or metropolis towards which so many English fictional heroes are bound, have any kind of structure? This latter question has long troubled historians and town planners, as well as novelists of London (Ash 1).

Defining London's Boundaries

IN *THE SOUL OF LONDON* (1905), Ford Madox Ford argues that, though England is a "small island," London is "illimitable" (Hueffer 16). London's walls, as we have seen, failed to limit the city from the start. In 1756 an Act of Parliament sanctioned the building of the New Road across the fields from Hoxton to Paddington, an attempt to define London's northern edge. By the nineteenth century, the area generally referred to as London was up to a hundred times larger than the City ruled over by the Corporation with its Lord Mayor. About one tenth of the population of England and Wales lived in this greater London, which was divided into over ninety administrative parishes or precincts (Sheppard 22). The result was that the New Road, formerly the city's outer boundary, became an inner boundary, being the location of several main railway termini and of the underground railway line sometimes known as the Inner Circle.[1] In general, an outer city boundary cannot be redrawn without calling the inner boundaries into question. The old area of the walled City became increasingly irrelevant after the seventeenth-century Great Fire, yet, until the foundation of the London County Council in 1888, London outside the City had "no existence either in history or law" (Gomme 2). Modern planning and local government have accepted the so-called "'onion skin' theory" (Ash 16) whereby London ultimately merges into the whole of south-eastern England. The onion skin metaphor has, of course, the possibly unintended consequence that the city's internal boundaries are themselves boundless, and the center can never be found.

London's immense size is a favorite theme of Victorian and Edwardian novelists. Smike, David Copperfield, and Esther Summerson are among the Dickens characters who observe

from a distance the glow the metropolis projects onto the night sky; Esther, who sees it near St. Albans, is some twenty miles away. Ford Madox Ford suggested that the "influence of London" began at the point where the glow first came into view, or, alternatively, where the tree-trunks first began to be blackened by soot (Hueffer 33–36). In *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), looking back to the time before London's great expansion, Dickens shows Gabriel Varden the locksmith approaching the city at night:

> And now, he approached the great city, which lay outstretched before him like a dark shadow on the ground, reddening the sluggish air with a deep dull light, that told of labyrinths of public ways and shops, and swarms of busy people. Approaching nearer and nearer yet, this halo began to fade, and the causes which produced it slowly to develop themselves. Long lines of poorly lighted streets might be faintly traced . . . and London – visible in the darkness by its own faint light, and not by that of Heaven – was at hand. (26; ch. 3)

The traveller is about to plunge into the labyrinth of "poorly lighted streets," yet he is, one might think, as far from finding the center as ever. *Barnaby Rudge*, however, gives a strong sense of the city's central and peripheral boundaries. The metropolis in the 1770s was "belted round by fields, green lanes, waste grounds, and lonely roads, dividing it at that time from the suburbs that have joined it since" (122; ch. 16). Gabriel's house is in suburban Clerkenwell, but its function in the story is indicated by its nickname the Golden Key; the gate to which it offers potential access is in the wall of Newgate Prison. One sees here the influence of Scott's *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (1818), where the "sad heart" of Edinburgh is the Tolbooth prison (18; ch. 1). Scott's urban topography contrasts the "sad heart" with the lonely area of Salisbury Crags in the Pentland Hills overlooking the city. Moreover, Scott's novel of Jacobean London, *The Fortunes of Nigel* (1822), portrays both imprisonment in the Tower and the existence at the city center of an "Alsatia" or no-go area of the criminal underworld. The novel ends with a melodramatic shoot-out in the woods of Enfield Chase north of London, corresponding to Dickens's use in *Barnaby Rudge* of Epping Forest. In the passage quoted above, Gabriel is riding from Epping Forest to London.

It will be noted that in these novels the "sacred enclosure" at the heart of the ancient city has become something irredeemably fallen and secular: a criminal underworld (as also in *Oliver Twist*), a citadel, or jail. But there is another traditional definition of London's boundaries, which we may call magical rather than sacred. This definition exerts a strong pull on Dickens, on Scott insofar as he is concerned with London, and also, as we shall see, on the Wordsworthian narrator in *The Prelude* (1805; 1850). This is the view of the city provided by the Whittington legend – a view of it as the location of a fortunate fall, a fall leading to social and economic salvation. Dick Whittington goes to London because he thinks that, like the heavenly city in Revelation 21.21, its streets are paved with gold. That is, he imagines he has only to enter the city to find the key to its far-famed wealth. In his naivety he has yet to learn that the city has an inner as well as an outer boundary. Later, disillusioned by his life among the subservient multitude, he tries to leave, pausing only to rest on a stone on the slope of Highgate Hill. And there the bells speak, recalling him as one who is destined to penetrate to the commercial metropolis's inner core.

A true Londoner is a cockney, and a cockney must be born within the sound of Bow Bells. Not only could the bells be heard far outside the city walls, but their last-minute plea to Dick to "turn again" suggests an outer circumference for London much greater than that

conventionally assigned to the city before the Victorian period.[2] We should note, too, that while Dick is fleeing to Highgate his cat has gone with his master's argosy to the Bartary coast, signifying the city's global commercial reach across all terrestrial boundaries. What may be found at the heart of the city is, therefore, like the wealth of Marlowe's Jew, a kind of infinity – "infinite riches in a little room" (Marlowe 163). Or, as H. G. Wells writes in *Tono-Bungay* (1909), "The whole illimitable place teem[s] with suggestions of indefinite and sometimes outrageous possibility, of hidden but magnificent meanings" (126). For Whittington, as a folk-tale hero, the infinite riches within the inner boundary can be enjoyed without a qualm, and he can aspire to marry his master's daughter without any suspicion of fortune-hunting. Most of this innocence has gone, however, in the folk-tale's nineteenth-century rewritings.

Wordsworth and the "Drooping Boy"

THERE WAS A PORTRAIT OF WHITTINGTON with cat in the Mercers' Hall as early as 1536, little more than a century after the death of the historical Sir Richard Whittington (Besant and Rice 134). The story was embellished and retold in plays, ballads, and chapbooks. Samuel Pepys watched a puppet-show version at Southwark Fair in 1668, found it "pretty to see," and was a little embarrassed by his response to it: "how that idle thing doth work upon people that see it, and even myself too," he noted (313). Wordsworth and Dickens share a similar embarrassment, though the tale had a formative influence on both writers. Dickens's allusions to the legend are often facetious, as we shall see. Wordsworth in *The Prelude* associates it with the earliest stages of his mental growth. As a child, he eagerly questioned a schoolfellow who had just returned from the metropolis:

> Marvellous things
> My fancy had shap'd forth. . . .
> Dreams hardly less intense than those which wrought
> A change of purpose in young Whittington,
> When he in friendlessness, a drooping Boy,
> Sate on a Stone, and heard the Bells speak out
> Articulate music. (108; VII: 108–17)

Here Wordsworth is sitting, in imagination, with Whittington on the boundary stone from which he will learn his destiny; but his schoolfellow's answers fall "flatter than a cagèd Parrot's note" (108; VII: 106), rather than ringing in his ears like bells. *The Prelude* has begun with Wordsworth leaving behind the "prison" of a "City's walls" and finding himself at once in "open fields" which herald poetic inspiration (1–2; I: 1–8, 59–61). The city suggests London,[3] but its clear-cut topography is deliberately archaic. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's actual entry into London as a teenager was a moment of tumultuous excitement, recalling his childhood dreams and showing no intimations of his later disillusionment. Like the classical *Bildungsroman* hero, he felt on the verge of penetrating to the city's heart when, in fact, he had only crossed the outer boundary or "threshold":

> Never shall I forget the hour
> The moment rather say when having thridded

> The labyrinth of suburban Villages,
> At length I did unto myself first seem
> To enter the great City. On the roof
> Of an itinerant Vehicle I sate
> With vulgar Men about me, vulgar forms
> Of houses, pavement, streets, of men and things,
> Mean shapes on every side: but, at the time,
> When to myself it fairly might be said,
> The very moment that I seem'd to know
> The threshold now is overpass'd, Great God!
> That aught *external* to the living mind
> Should have such mighty sway! yet so it was
> A weight of Ages did at once descend
> Upon my heart; no thought embodied, no
> Distinct remembrances; but weight and power,
> Power growing with the weight: alas! I feel
> That I am trifling: 'twas a moment's pause. (145; VIII: 689–707)

The "vast Metropolis" is "The Fountain of my Country's destiny/And of the destiny of Earth itself" (146; VIII: 746–48). All previous great English poets had lived and worked there – surely his destiny must lie there as well? Wordsworth's ideas on this point quickly changed, if we are to believe him when he says that he took up residence in London two years later "In no disturbance of excessive hope,/At ease from all ambition personal" (107; VII: 68–69). In any case, Book VII of *The Prelude* records his failure ever to feel at home while he was residing in London. He visits Parliament, the law-courts, the theaters and fashionable churches, but these are merely external shows, concealing a reality of alienation and the struggle for survival that he identifies in figures of failure such as the artisan with a sick child and the blind beggar. The city is a prototype of the artificial human world in that it has no moral center, and offers the poet no escape from the subservient multitude.

If the experience of entering London for Wordsworth is at once momentous and "trifling," it is partly because, unable to find a center, he also has to invent a non-existent outer boundary for the city. He can only "seem to know" when he has passed the threshold, since there is no physical dividing line between the metropolis – a proverbial maze or labyrinth – and the "labyrinth of suburban Villages" that lie outside it. (The visit he is describing seems to have taken place in 1788 or 1789, when he would have arrived by the Cambridge mail-coach (Moorman 125–26) terminating at an inn such as the Bell and Crown in Holborn.[4] That is, the coach would have taken him to a destination some way outside the old City, but well inside the outer boundary marked at that time by the New Road.) What Wordsworth describes as his "illimitable walk" through London's "wide waste" in the months that followed takes him to such peripheral locations as Vauxhall Gardens and "Half-rural Sadler's Wells" (107–13; VII: 76, 159, 288). At its heart, however, is not the seat of "weight and power" that he has imagined but the proletarian spectacle of Bartholomew Fair, described in the final part of Book VII. It is here that the inexhaustible exhibition that London presents to his eyes, the endless procession of its subservient multitude, reaches a hellish climax. (The fair was held in Smithfield, close by the walls of Newgate Prison.) For once the poet adopts an aerial perspective, "Above the press and danger of the Crowd," and looks down into a pit full of

monstrous apparitions:

> what anarchy and din
> Barbarian and infernal! 'tis a dream,
> Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound. (123; VII: 657–61)

As Saree Makdisi writes, Wordsworth here feels "the terror of the dissolution of maps, boundaries, categories, and spaces – of subjectivity itself" (36). After this image of "blank confusion," "a type not false/ Of what the mighty City is itself," (124: VII: 695–96), he gets out of London as fast as he can; his boyish dreams have turned into a vision of horror. He is beginning to realize that the Whittington story is the wrong story for him, and that he can penetrate to the center of the English poetic canon while living in a distant countryside, in Somerset or Grasmere. It is true that Wordsworth did not entirely lose his awed sense of London's "weight and power," as is shown by his 1802 sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge." But the city he conjures up in that sonnet is sleeping and silent, and there are no magical bells to summon him back there.

The Whittington Theme in Dickens's Novels

APART FROM THOMAS HEYWOOD, author of a *Famous and Remarkable History of Sir Richard Whittington* (c. 1670), Walter Scott may have been the first British writer of prose fiction to show one of his characters climbing Highgate Hill and listening to Bow Bells. At the beginning of *Rob Roy* (1817) Francis Osbaldistone refuses to follow his father's profession as a City banker, deciding instead to try to reclaim his family's estate in Northumberland. As he starts out on the Great North Road he hears the "admonitory 'Turn again,' erst heard by [the] future Lord Mayor" (23; ch. 3), but he takes no notice. Dickens must have remembered this passage when, in *Barnaby Rudge*, he shows Joe Willet sitting on "many stones and gates" around Highgate, but hearing no message in the bells:

> Since the time of noble Whittington, fair flower of merchants, bells have come to have less sympathy with humankind. They only ring for money and on state occasions. Wanderers have increased in number; ships leave the Thames for distant regions, carrying from stem to stern no other cargo; the bells are silent: they ring out no entreaties or regrets; they are used to it and have grown worldly. (237; ch. 31)

Here the silence of the bells is an index of Dickens's great theme of the moral corruption of capitalism. Most telling is the novelist's somber allusion to the crowded emigrant ships of the 1840s, leaving London for more distant Eldorados. Joe Willet, seventy years earlier, takes the King's shilling to fight against the American colonists, and it was to the United States that Dickens would soon be sending his hopeful young protagonist Martin Chuzzlewit in search of fool's gold.

The mercantile ambitions symbolized by the Whittington legend are, then, as tarnished for Dickens as they are for Scott. Both writers favor what Franco Moretti calls the "recognition-inheritance" plot (205) by which a protagonist such as Martin Chuzzlewit finally gets his reward. In Scott, the hero's inheritance takes the form of land ownership, and the fictional ethos is aristocratic rather than mercantile. Dickens's aim in his early novels is simply to

give his male protagonists an income sufficient to make them gentlemen of leisure. (The "aristocracy" and the criminal classes may be closely allied in plotting the hero's downfall.) In both Dickens and Scott it is the just distribution of existing wealth, not the creation of new wealth that matters. Surprisingly, perhaps, the Whittington story can be made to fit such a recognition-inheritance pattern.

The Whittington legend is one of the founding myths of British mercantile capitalism, yet its values – compared, say, to the story of Robinson Crusoe – are not the values of hard work and ambitious foresight associated with the self-made man. Nor does the legend reflect how money was actually made in the City. In *The Gentle Craft* (1597) the early novelist Thomas Deloney tells the story of Simon Eyre, a north-country shoemaker who rose to become Lord Mayor and founded the annual Lord Mayor's feast. Eyre is a quick-thinking confidence man who, while still a penniless apprentice, manages to trick the master of a foreign ship into selling him his whole cargo on credit. He sells the cargo at a profit and the foreign captain has no reason to regret the transaction. This has the authentic ring of City of London mercantilism. Dick Whittington, by contrast, is the "drooping Boy" who turns his rags into riches thanks to good luck and predestination. The cat that makes his fortune is as magical as the bells. Moreover, by marrying his master's daughter Dick plays his part in the dynastic succession of an established merchant family, the Fitzwarrens. The folk hero has first been recognised by Bow Bells, and then has come into an inheritance.

Almost every Dickens novel from *Oliver Twist* (1838) to *Bleak House* (1853) contains a direct allusion to Whittington. The allusions may mark a boundary location, as in *Oliver Twist* where Bill Sikes in his attempted flight from London passes the Whittington stone on Highgate Hill. Or they may signify a character's ambition (or supposed ambition). In *Bleak House* Richard Carstone muses on his "namesake Whittington" (60; ch. 6), while Harold Skimpole slimily predicts that Jo the crossing-sweeper may have a future as Lord Mayor. It is significant, however, that Dickens steers clear of any Whittingtonian allusion in the early parts of *David Copperfield* (1850), where for once his hero nurses the ambition of becoming a "learned and distinguished man" (155; ch. 11). David, as it happens, is constantly travelling the road to Highgate, and his early experiences as a "ragged way-worn boy forsaken and neglected" (863; ch. 62) are never forgotten. It is not until he has become a world-famous novelist that his domestic "page," later to be transported for theft, is identified as a kind of Whittington (691; ch. 48). *David Copperfield* is sufficiently autobiographical for any direct identification of David himself with Whittington to have been awkward and embarrassing.

Nevertheless, David is identified by Uriah Heep as a fellow "upstart" (760; ch. 52), and David succeeds where Uriah fails in marrying their respective masters' daughters, Dora Spenlow and Agnes Wickfield. Moreover, David eventually takes Agnes for his second wife while Uriah languishes in prison. By becoming a novelist, David manages to achieve his ambition of becoming "learned and distinguished" while remaining wholly within the sphere of domestic life; Dickens does not show him as being in any respect a public figure. Micawber, another potential Whittington thanks to his eternal faith that something will turn up, finally strikes gold and achieves public recognition in small-town Australia. David, however, comes back to England after three years abroad and realizes that (despite Tommy Traddles's advancement in the law) the career open to the talents is no longer to be had there. Neither Whittington's luck nor a military campaign such as Pendennis's could make any impression on the inner circles of the capital. He thinks: "both England and the law appeared to me to be very difficult indeed to be taken by storm" (822; ch. 59).

It is, in fact, the "master's daughter" theme that becomes all important in Dickens's rewriting of the Whittington story, while the aspiration to become Lord Mayor is in his early fiction a kind of joke, though later on (as we shall see) it is no joke. The potential complexity of the "master's daughter" can be seen from the case of Estella in *Great Expectations* (1861): initially identified as the stepdaughter of Pip's "mistress" Miss Havisham, she is secretly a "daughter" to two of his "masters," Magwitch (her father) and Jaggers (who lives with her mother). The Dickens novel which returns most insistently to the Whittington story is *Dombey and Son* (1848), which adopts the perspective of the master's daughter rather than the male outsider and, moreover, tackles a City mercantile theme head-on.

If we cast a cool eye on the extraordinary melodrama surrounding Mr. Dombey's misplaced hopes in his son Paul and his cruelty to his daughter, we can say that the City merchant is foolishly disregarding the collective experience of the very entrepreneurial capitalism of which he is apparently a figurehead. It is, after all, a truism – and one clearly hinted at in the folk-tale – that, in the words of Whittington's Victorian biographers Walter Besant and James Rice, "The children of successful men are rarely as energetic as their fathers" (Besant and Rice 87). Had Dombey been alive to the need for new blood in his family firm, he would have understood Florence's value as the conduit for a potential son-in-law. Carker, who is Dombey's rival and would-be successor, is as blind as his master in that he targets his illicit desires at the latter's wife rather than his daughter. Carker for most of the novel seems a much more serious proposition than Walter Gay, the adopted son of the "old-fashioned" (that is, near-bankrupt) shopkeeper Sol Gills. Walter's "Whittingtonian hopes" (135; ch. 10) reflect the parental expectations of Gills and his friend Captain Cuttle, rather than his own more modest ambitions. The fiction that he might be a future Lord Mayor is, as Anny Sadrin says, "shamelessly repeated" whenever his future is discussed or Florence's name is mentioned (Sadrin 51). Moreover, the legend is twinned with a second, much more banal story, that of the coal whipper who married the "lovely Peg," daughter of the master of a Newcastle collier. As an office-boy at Dombey and Son, Walter naturally falls in love with Florence although he is aware of the legend's apparent absurdity. But Dombey and Carker ship him off to the Caribbean in the ironically-named Son and Heir, removing him from the action for a large part of the novel; and Dickens's original plan, in any case, was to disappoint all Walter's hopes in the manner of the Richard Carstone plot of *Bleak House* (Gissing 78). Dickens relented, at first allowing Walter to marry Florence once she had been cut out of the patriarchal succession, and then letting him succeed both in winning recognition as Dombey's son-in-law and (apparently) in rebuilding the shattered family "Edifice" (877; ch. 62). The problem here is that, like Nicholas Nickleby earlier, Walter has moved with his wife to the country while somehow controlling a new business in the heart of the city; indeed, he has more than his love of Florence in common with the unworldly Paul Dombey. The ending of *Dombey and Son* reveals Dickens's extraordinary difficulties in reconciling his attachment to the Whittington theme with his hatred of a commercial enterprise culture. Nevertheless, he continued to produce ever more complex transmutations of the Whittington story until his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).

The Phantom Merchant

IN MODERN TIMES, Dickens had written in *Barnaby Rudge*, the bells only ring for money and on state occasions; but there are no state occasions in his novels, nor does he show much

interest in the idea of the bells ringing for money. In chapter 76 of *Barnaby Rudge* it is not Bow Bells but the bells of St. Sepulchre Without Newgate that ring for Dickens's Londoners. St. Sepulchre's bells, as a London historian writes, tolled "with appalling frequency as the condemned from Newgate passed on their way to Tyburn" (Piper 386). Their message to the condemned man is not "Turn again!" but rather an incessant reminder that he is about to be, as Dennis the hangman would say, "turn'd off." That the bells tolling for ragged pilgrims to the metropolis might be those of St. Sepulchre is clearly known to Harriet Carker, who in *Dombey and Son* watches helplessly as "the stragglers [come] wandering into London," passing her house at the city's edge on the Great North Road:

> Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always, as she thought, in one direction – always towards the town. Swallowed up in one phase or other of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the river, fever, madness, vice, and death, – they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost. (480; ch. 34)

This passage seems almost out of place in *Dombey and Son*, evoking as it does the somber worlds of *Oliver Twist*, *Barnaby Rudge*, and Dickens's last novels. The figuration of London as a cannibalistic "monster," like the Minotaur at the heart of the labyrinth, suggests that those who enter the city do so only to become sacrificial victims. There is no escape, since the wanderers creep past in one direction only. As early as *Oliver Twist*, Dickens had shown the murderer Bill Sikes's inability to get away from the city. He goes quickly northward as far as the Whittington Stone, but no sooner has he passed the legendary boundary than he becomes "unsteady of purpose, and uncertain where to go" (424; ch. 48). His progress which was once linear becomes loitering, zigzagging, and circular: "Morning and noon had passed, and the day was on the wane, and still he rambled to and fro, and up and down, and round and round, and still lingered about the same spot" (425; ch. 48). Dickens's prose, too, loses its confident itinerary and becomes repetitive and circular. Eventually, having reached St Albans about twenty miles away, Sikes turns back as we know he must. Jacob's Island where he finds his last refuge is the heart of the criminal underworld, "the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London" (442; Ch. 50), and it is here that, venturing out onto the rooftops and looking down at the mob baying for his blood, he makes his fatal slip and strangles himself without waiting for the hangman. Fagin by contrast is last seen in the condemned cell at Newgate. If *Oliver Twist* can be regarded as the "one novel which [Dickens] wrote over and over again" (Sadrin 146), then he had embedded the Whittington theme, not merely in the pilgrimages of Oliver himself (who like the legendary hero is bullied by a kitchen-maid) and of Noah Claypole to London, but in the story of Sikes. Moreover, in key scenes Dickens had already set his inimitable stamp on the idea of London's inner and outer boundaries. The images of the "sad heart" of the city in later novels – Newgate and Chester's room in the Temple in *Barnaby Rudge*, Newgate and Little Britain in *Great Expectations*, the Court of Chancery and Tom-All-Alone's in *Bleak House*, the Marshalsea and the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* (1857) – are all developments of this basic urban topography.

Dickens was famously obsessed with pacing the London streets. Bill Sikes's usual "rapid strides" (204; ch. 21) are something he has in common with his creator. Dickens's friend George Augustus Sala noted that he preferred to take his exercise on the city's "exterior

boulevards," and claimed to have seen him "striding as with seven-leagued boots" in such suburban locations as Haverstock Hill, Kensal New Town, the Highgate Archway, and the Seven Sisters Road at Holloway (Sala 11–12). Moreover, Dickens "knew all about the back streets behind Holborn, the courts and alleys of the Borough, the shabby sidling streets of the remoter suburbs, the crooked little alleys of the City, the dank and oozy wharfs of the water-side" (Sala 27). Several of these locations occur in *Our Mutual Friend*, where R. Wilfer walks every day from suburban Holloway to and from his job as a City clerk, while the novel begins at night on the river between Southwark Bridge and London Bridge – offering us a new, ever-changeful, and entropic definition of the city's sad heart – and brings us ashore at the "oozy wharfs" of Limehouse Hole. Wilfer's daily walk takes him through the area of the dust-heaps at Battle Bridge just north of King's Cross, a "tract of suburban Sahara, where tiles and bricks were burnt, bones were boiled, carpets were beat, rubbish was shot, dogs were fought, and dust was heaped by contractors" (42; bk. 1, ch. 4). Battle Bridge is a no man's land separating inner London from its suburbs, but it also marks a boundary in another sense, being the dumping point for the waste that the city continually produces but cannot expel. This waste is figured variously as dust, ashes, human bodies (found not on the dust-heaps but in the river), rags, bones, and waste paper. That it is the source and the medium of old Harmon's wealth indicates how far London, in the proliferation of its opulence and luxury and the burgeoning of its people, has grown beyond its traditional role as a simple mercantile centre.

Nevertheless, *Our Mutual Friend* presents Dickens's most intricate transmutation of the Whittington theme at the same time that it redefines London's outer and inner boundaries. We have seen that in earlier Dickens novels the "sad heart" was, as in Scott, a massive architectural construction such as a prison, a government department, the Dombey "Edifice," or a court of law. But in *Our Mutual Friend* this metropolitan architecture is on the point of collapse; much of it has already crumbled into ruin or been washed away. The lawyers, Lightwood and Wrayburn, have little or no work; fortunes are built out of dust; the upstart City merchant Veneering (who like Sir Richard Whittington becomes a member of Parliament) is a man of straw; and the novel's only "prison" is the home of the dust-heaps, popularly known as Harmony Jail. It is as if Dickens had adopted his own "onion skin" theory of the metropolis, with nothing at its center but (as we shall see) a phantom or nonentity. The novel's last chapter is called "The Voice of Society," but Society in effect has no voice.

With its array of small and large businesses, including a bone shop, a dolls' dressmaker and a crooked money lender, *Our Mutual Friend* constitutes a return to the mercantile city. But the novel's two large concerns, the "drug-house" of Chicksey, Veneering, and Stobbles and old Harmon's dust-contracting business, are both eventually sold off. The principal (Harmon) plot hinges on disguise, multiple identity, and the confused destination of the Harmon fortune. The "master's daughter" theme undergoes extraordinary complications, and the novel can be read as, like the Whittington legend, a quest for the city's gold. The question of what exactly London's streets are paved with is the subject of Mr. Podsnap's interrogation of the "foreign gentleman": Podsnap thinks the streets might be paved with evidences of the British Constitution, but all that his French guest can find there is horse manure, yet another component of the waste that has made Harmon's fortune (136; bk. 1, ch. 11). The British Constitution, notoriously unwritten, is a kind of gold standard for Podsnap: it applies everywhere, even though the Frenchman (and, by implication, Dickens) can find it nowhere. The city's gold, however, has been turned into paper, another incipient waste-product. Old

Harmon's fortune is tied up in legal documents of doubtful worth – neither the will that has been made public nor the one that Wegg and Venus find on the dust-heap is actually valid. Bella reads (significantly, in her evening paper) of gold being "taken to the Bank" (666–67; bk. 4, ch. 4), but the City's actual financial medium is now "scrip" or share certificates and receipts. Dickens's narrator grandiloquently informs us that "traffic in shares is the one thing to have to do in this world" (118; bk. 1, ch. 10). Veneering's business success earns him a place among the "Fathers of the Scrip-Church" (610; bk. 3, ch. 17), a company doubtless including actual and future Lord Mayors. The original dictionary meaning of "scrip" is scrap or waste, as in a scrap of paper, and the city's scrip is constantly turned into scrap, producing "[t]hat mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows" (147; bk. 1, ch. 12).

Among the other products blown about by the wind are "sawdust" (147; bk. 1, ch. 12), and, very likely, "bran." Dickens refers to the Veneerings as "bran-new" (17; bk. 1, ch. 2) rather than "brand-new," probably because of the dictionary sense of "bran" as "muck, excrement, filth." Then, no doubt, there are rags, since, as Mortimer Lightwood puts it, "everything wears to rags" (96, bk. 1, ch. 8). Since rags and sawdust are used in paper making it is no coincidence that the novel contains a paper mill, close to Plashwater Weir Mill Lock on the Thames. The rural reaches of the Thames ought to be well outside the city's reach, but they are not, since, as we are told, the towpath prowled by Bradley Headstone is marked out by posts bearing the City of London shield. The towpath is but an extension of the streets, while the paper mill helps to recirculate London's waste. Within this "beleaguered city" (147; bk. 1, ch. 12), is there any gold to be found? Dickens's plot prepares a fairy-tale answer to this question. Mr Boffin, known as the Golden Dustman, turns out to be true gold in every sense – he is the legal inheritor, not merely the guardian, of old Harmon's wealth, yet he gives it all back to Harmon's son – and John Harmon marries his master's adopted daughter, Bella Wilfer, who is a "most precious and sweet commodity that was always looking up, and that never was worth less than all the gold in the world" (667; bk. 4, ch. 4), The position of the master's daughter as a bargaining counter in what is essentially the process of commercial succession could not be more clearly put, yet Dickens's ostensible meaning is that Bella is anything but a commodity.

John Harmon's role, however, is a masquerade from the moment of his re-entry into the city in quest of his fortune. His change of clothes with George Radfoot attaches his "John Harmon" identity to a dead body or piece of waste that is fortuitously fished out of the Thames. Later he is married to Bella under a false name, raising doubts as to whether the marriage is actually legitimate, and spends years pretending to commute every day from suburban Blackheath to a non-existent "China house" in the City. Where Dick Whittington's future identity was known even to Bow Bells, John Harmon the phantom City merchant is not even known to his family lawyer. He is not so much a figure of doubtful identity as a virtual non-presence or nonentity, the perpetual third party or spiritual absentee implied by the phrase "our mutual friend" itself.

By the end of the novel, the dust heaps have been cleared away in exchange for a paper fortune, while the gold that was supposedly at the city's center has disappeared. Veneering, the potential Lord Mayor, is on the brink of bankruptcy and will be forced to flee to Calais and live off his wife's diamonds. In *Our Mutual Friend*, written at the culmination of Dickens's dazzling career and at the height of his powers, mercantile ambitions are dismissed as so much chaff and the novelist seems to revel in the integrity of idleness. John Harmon clearly

has no intention of engaging in business, so that his future existence is that of a gentleman of leisure like the briefless barrister Eugene Wrayburn. Neither man has reached or found the city's center, but each has miraculously escaped drowning in the river that forms one of its outer boundaries. After John Harmon's "downward slide" from the house at Limehouse Hole into the Thames, he tells us, "a heavy horrid unintelligible something vanished, and it was I who was struggling there alone in the water" (363; bk. 2, ch. 13). What has vanished at the end of *Our Mutual Friend* is the heavy, unintelligible weight of a city where the bells have "grown worldly" and the noble merchant of the Whittington legend has given place to a phantom.

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NOTES

1. See Rasmussen 121–23. In February 2003 what was formerly the New Road became the northern boundary of Central London as designated by Mayor Livingstone for the purpose of vehicle congestion charging.
2. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the villages immediately north of London had become desirable suburbs. However, the main thoroughfares leading through Holloway and Kentish Town to Highgate were not continuously built up until the 1830s. The fields between the main roads were built over some decades later.
3. Editors note that London, the city where Wordsworth had lived for several months, is superimposed on Bristol in this passage (Wordsworth 245–46n.).
4. In 1837, at least, the Cambridge mail-coaches terminated at the Bell and Crown. But there were more than 120 mail-coach termini in London (Gomme 30–31, Rasmussen 124).

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