

# *Dickens, Haussmann, and the Transformation of Paris*

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*I*n this essay, I have drawn on the sizeable amount of writing on Paris in both *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, as well as in *A Tale of Two Cities*, in order to examine Dickens' and his contributors' evolving attitude to the transformation of Paris between 1853 and 1870, and to explore some of the contradictions at work in both the political and personal realms. It's a complex problem, and one with many gray areas and blank spots, and occasionally contradictory evidence. But this much seems certain: Dickens' understanding of the Paris improvements, and urban transformation more generally, reflects his hope for urban renewal as well as his anxieties over the cost of modernization. He valued the advance in rationalized design and organization, and improvements to the flow of people and goods, and seems to have appreciated the tendency toward geometrical abstraction inherent in the changes. At the same time, the changes presented a considerable problem. The much-discussed speed of construction and the magnitude of the transformation were underwritten by an autocratic polity that Dickens found uncongenial and by a political leader that he personally detested. Dickens and his writers typically negotiate this tension by drawing distinctions and reworking connections, and by refiguring the terms of the contemporary debate about metropolitan improvements. This paper will examine these distinctions and reformulations, as well as the rhetoric used to sustain and interrogate them. It will also explore, and try to explain, the evolution of Dickens' thought on the subject. Whereas Georges-Eugène Haussmann's improvements were initially portrayed in positive terms in *Household Words* and represented

as a wholly beneficial model for the Corporation of London, by the early 1860s they were characterized in a more variable manner in *All the Year Round*, and sometimes in openly derisive terms. Much of this apparent change of attitude, I believe, can be attributed to changing circumstances. Over time the social costs of Haussmann's improvements became more apparent and immediate, as was the steep toll that the massive public investment was taking on the French budget. It is also true that, by the late 1850s and early 1860s, Dickens' personal animus toward Napoleon III seems to have intensified, in light of his increasingly bellicose foreign policy and threats of a French invasion of England.<sup>1</sup>

In one important respect, Napoleon III, Emperor of France from 1852 to 1870, was the key to it all. On 29 June 1853 he commissioned Haussmann, the newly appointed Préfet of the Seine, to rebuild and renovate large portions of the capital city. He even provided his Préfet with a map that served as a blueprint for the changes. Over the next seventeen years, Haussmann razed slums, constructed grand boulevards, straightened and broadened streets, enhanced perspectives, added green spaces, and developed the Bois de Boulogne, and in the process created a healthier and more rationalized urban landscape. His most impressive achievement, and the most widely admired, was his construction of massive underground sewers. In contrast to London, which had developed piecemeal and at a snail's pace, and which in the 1850s had little overall logic or contributed to some comprehensive vision of urban renewal, Haussmann's changes were coordinated, and of a piece, and had taken place with startling speed. In the view of many modern scholars, they brought coherency to Paris, making it one of the first truly "legible" cities. Public life was emphasized over private, streets over monuments, circulation over blockage, uniformity over variety, and right angles over the curve.

Though the improvements received considerable praise at first, they also attracted sometimes fierce criticism, which intensified as the years passed. Critics complained that Haussmann had obliterated some of Paris's oldest and most historical neighborhoods and had uprooted

thousands of poor people. They complained as well about the counterrevolutionary implications of the improvements: working-class neighborhoods had been subdivided, and streets had been widened to facilitate the rapid deployment of government troops and to prevent the erection of barricades. They also feared that the improvements, which employed thousands of laborers, would make Parisians politically passive, by attaching them "so securely to [Napoleon III's] regime that they would not want to revolt or even resort to violent outburst" (Jordan 190; Pinkney 37). Ironically, supporters of the Emperor had the opposite worry: "that the concentration of a prodigious number of workmen whose employment could last for only a certain time, would be a huge foundation for disturbance, when the work was done and the workmen discharged" ("Paris Improved," *HW* 12.364). Haussmann's improvements were also phenomenally expensive, and the worry was, perhaps ruinously so.

Dickens was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the Paris improvements, as is evident in a letter he wrote to his wife in 1853, just two days before Haussmann received official word of his appointment:

Paris is very full, extraordinarily gay, and wonderfully improving. Thousands of houses must have been pulled down for the construction of an immense street now making from the dirty old end of the Rue de Tivoli. [...] It will be the finest thing in Europe. The quays by the riverside are Macadamized and as clean as Regent Street. Indeed, the general improvement in the essential articles of what is to be seen and what is to be smelt, is highly remarkable. (22 June 1853; *Letters* 7:163)

Dickens' manifest excitement at the improvements, and particularly at their speed and salubrious effects ("the general improvement in [...] what is to be smelt"), seems to outweigh concern about the effects on the displaced lodgers, as evidenced by the abrupt shift from "Paris is [...] wonderfully improving" to "Thousands of houses must have been pulled down." In his defense, though, it should be noted that he is at one remove

from the reality of the actual demolition and displacement – he is looking at the new street being constructed and not the old buildings being demolished – and is basing his judgment on inference (note the word “must”) and not on first-hand observation. The anticipated improvements to health and sanitation would have been more immediately evident to Dickens than the effects on the people who were forced to move. It is also true, though, that he forestalls any kind of imaginative engagement with the broader social costs.

It is clear from several pieces in *Household Words* and its monthly supplement, *The Household Narrative of Current Events*, that both Dickens and his writers were aware of these social costs, at least at some level. But it is also clear that they hoped (or expected) the costs would be remedied by quick governmental action. In “Our House,” published on 27 March 1852, and thus one of the first pieces in *Household Words* on the subject, Henry Morley praises the recent street improvements in Westminster in London: “The Board of Health and the Improvement Commission [...] have cleansed [‘our district’] and ventilated it. They have made drains, and cut in all directions with broad long streets.” His next comment expresses a hope and sounds a warning: “For every foul hut pulled down, there ought to be a fair one built, or other lodging space provided for the miserable people ‘cleared away.’ If not, of course we only aggravate the misery which we affect to put more out of sight.” This hope, however, is expressed only as a hypothetical (something that “ought to” happen) and is immediately followed by an utterly unconvincing and self-undermining assertion: “How the case may be in this respect, as regards our street, I do not know, but in itself it is a great improvement” (*HW* 5:41).

About a year later, in its description of the construction in Paris, *The Household Narrative* makes a similar observation: “recent improvements have driven the poor from their old haunts, and have so increased rents as to amount to great oppression on the workmen.” Readers are assured – more confidently than in “Our House” – that the “great oppression” is temporary and that a solution is at hand: “The French Government has determined to erect commodious lodging-houses for the workmen of Paris,

apparently after the British model" (*Household Narrative of Foreign Events*, May 1853, 118). Neither piece really engages with the social consequences any more than Dickens did in his letter to Catherine, and in one case there is an attempt to plead ignorance and quickly change the subject ("How the case may be in this respect, as regards our street, I do not know, but in itself it is a great improvement"). Some of the uncertainty and hesitation can be attributed to contemporary ignorance about the magnitude and severity of the problem.<sup>2</sup> Some, too, may reflect an honest expectation, at least in the case of Paris, that working-class housing could be constructed with expedition,<sup>3</sup> and in large enough numbers, to mitigate the problem. But it is also true that the writers tended to minimize the difficult choice thrust upon them by the competing demands of modernity: on the one hand, the desire to improve the health of the people and, on the other, the social consequences that attend such improvement.

The most substantial treatment of the issue of urban improvement to appear in *Household Words* is "Paris Improved," published on 17 November 1855. The article was written by Dickens' sub-editor, W.H. Wills, and was conceived by Dickens as a piece of unalloyed advocacy and as a direct rebuttal to the Corporation of London.<sup>4</sup> This is seemingly a more confident endorsement of wholesale urban improvement, at least as it is being realized in Paris. Wills begins the piece by praising the speed of the improvements, and the "solidity" and "splendor" of the new buildings, "not easily conceivable," he says, "in this our city of bricks and stucco." There "have been swept away many narrow crooked streets," he adds, "which reeked with open streams of fœtid refuse; which were without side pavements" (*HW* 12:361). As characterized by Wills, the Parisian improvements have been effected using democratic means and with public input. What matters is expertise and the fact that the regulations have legal backing: they are underwritten by "the astonishingly far-seeing and comprehensive Code Napoléon – a code which Britain [...] has some cause to envy" (*HW* 12:362). Wills also praises the fiscal soundness of the improvements ("the work is paid for when it is finished") and the general reasonableness of the process to compensate proprietors and lodgers

(“Upon the whole, our inquiries led to the belief that the sums awarded are fair”) (12:362).

As in “Our House” or *The Household Narrative*, the social consequences of the construction are noted, though at greater length and much more vividly:

The consequence of the sudden sweeping away of habitations, caused shelter to become uncommonly scarce. Enormous rents were, for a time demanded, even for the meanest garrets and the dampest cellars; and the poorer and industrious classes suffered intensely. Ejected families, in a most piteous plight, were seen in the streets, following the tumbrils or the handcarts in which their household appliances were piled, unable to find a roof to cover them. Many were obliged to remain out of doors in the midst of frost and snow, until the government caused certain waste places to be hutted, in which they gave the houseless shelter, free of charge. After a time, new houses were ready, and these inconveniences disappeared. (*HW* 12:363)

The past tense makes all the difference: what was expressed as a hope in “Our House” and an expectation in *The Household Narrative* is now presented as a fully accomplished fact. What is revealing, though, is the disjunction between the vivid characterization of the “ejected families” as outcasts and the single minimizing word “inconvenience.” Wills seems to be trying to convince himself that it is all no big deal – and that the intense suffering is now entirely a thing of the past. Even more telling is the unexpected inversion that puts concerns about the social costs in the mouth of a feckless London administrator, the “Deputy for the ward of St. Vitus’s Backlane”: “France, sir, is a despotic country. There, your house is not your castle: you can have it pulled down about your ears at a moment’s notice, merely to promote public convenience. Our government cannot, with one stroke of a pen, [...] depopulate a neighbourhood to have it built up again.” The Deputy concludes, “the boasted Parisian improvements

have been made [...] at the single will of the Emperor, and against the several wills of thousands of ousted tenants and ruined landlords." Wills defiantly responds that the Deputy's claims are simply not true:

Not a jot of private right was invaded; [...] every stone in Paris which formerly stood on the area of improvement was paid full value for [...] every owner and occupier was fairly compensated, not only for loss and removal of property, but for damage done to his business [...] by juries selected from his own class. (*HW* 12:362)

Wills is using the Deputy to rehearse a common argument made by conservative defenders of the status quo in London in the early and mid-1850s: that the disorder in the heart of the city and the multiplicity of its competing administrative bodies spoke to the strength of British institutions and democratic values, and that the speed and size of Haussmann's improvements in Paris were only possible under a highly authoritarian form of government. In effect, order was despotic and disorder democratic. Wills responds to this argument with heated overstatements: he says that there was nothing at all despotic about the improvements, that in every case property rights were respected, and that all changes were validated by public participation and French law.<sup>5</sup> The important point is this: at Dickens' evident behest (again, he commissioned the piece), and with a considerable amount of anger and defensiveness, Wills draws what he sees as an essential distinction between two things that were, in fact, closely related: Haussmann's improvements and Napoleon III.<sup>6</sup> This is an abiding concern of Dickens because eight years later, in "Some Recollections of Mortality," he will make a similar distinction – though more obliquely:

The subject of my meditations<sup>7</sup> was the question whether it is positively in the essence and nature of things, as a certain school of Britons would seem to think it, that a Capital must be ensnared and enslaved before it can be made beautiful: when I lifted up my eyes and found that my feet, straying like my mind, had brought me to Notre-Dame. (*AYR* 9:276)

Like Wills in “Paris Improved,” Dickens is attacking the London magnates who rationalize their own inaction and make excuses for their delays in renovating the worse parts of London. Like Wills, as well, he is implying a distinction between centralization and despotism.

This distinction has important implications for the treatment of Haussmann’s improvements in Dickens’ journals. Since the seventeenth century, Paris had been associated with royal absolutism and political tyranny (Higonnet 163). The maintenance of order, which was an instrument of repression under French monarchs of the eighteenth century, under Napoleon Bonaparte, and to a slightly lesser degree, under Napoleon III, is frequently refigured more positively in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* as a form of salubrious and aesthetically pleasing city planning, and is rendered as distinct from an autocratic political agenda and its repressive ruler. This rhetorical shift makes it possible for the apparent successes of French organization to be applicable to more democratic regimes, such as the one in England, and, more immediately, to the Corporation of London, with responsibility for the health of its citizens. Wholesale improvements, in other words, depend less on the will of an absolutist ruler, or an authoritarian government, than on the character of the French people and on their legal system.<sup>8</sup>

A narrative that stresses French patience, orderliness, and efficiency may be partly an inheritance of the rationalist sensibility of the Enlightenment. But it is at sharp odds with one of the most commonly purveyed stereotypes of the French people: that they are mercurial and dissatisfied – and endlessly revolutionary. In Dickens’ journals, representations of Parisian order take many different forms and occur in many different contexts. Some predate Haussmann’s work, which serves as the *ne plus ultra* of the larger concept. In “Streetography” (14 December 1850), one of the short notes (“Chips”) that appeared in *Household Words*, W.H. Wills remarks that “In France it is always possible for a stranger to find his way to any street; and to know its name when he is in it.” Wills compares this to “the inestimable confusion of metropolitan topography” in London, which he mainly blames on the “knots of well-fed wisdom

Corporations" (275). "The details of municipal management in France," he concludes, "are infinitely superior to the arrangements made for the English townspeople" (275). The streets of Paris are legible, we are told, because its street signs are rationalized and made for the convenience of the public. In "Common-Sense on Wheels" (12 April 1851), Dickens, Wills, and Grenville Murray claim that "In all things our nation are bad systematisers; abroad, they beat us hollow in sumptuary and municipal regulations and little public facilities and conveniences. In France, for instance, public conveyances are infinitely better managed" (61-66). In "Dead Reckoning at the Morgue" (1 October 1853), Dudley Costello anticipates the orderliness of the morgue on the Île de la Cité: "I ventured to suppose that where everything was so methodically ordered, some approximation as to the cause of the numerous suicides [...] had been arrived at in the establishment" (115). In John Oxenford's piece, "A French Audience" (11 June 1853), the message is much the same. The French are more orderly, and respectful, and take their theater seriously. Of particular note is the orderliness of the crowds, waiting patiently in barricaded lines to enter the theater: "But the French are rigid in their preservation of a line, not above two feet deep; and, as each fresh couple arrives, it is content to take its place behind its predecessor" (351). In "Paris Upon Wheels" (2 December 1854), William Blanchard Jerrold is especially impressed by the rationality and organization of the cab system in Paris. The omnibuses have dials at the back that are used to count the number of passengers in the coach, and there is a system of regulations, procedures, and fines. Inspectors are liable to visit the conductors "at any moment." "There no less than four hundred omnibuses plying about the streets of Paris. [...] These vehicles all work harmoniously together; and by their system of correspondence, a passenger can go from any point to any part of the capital." A system of numbering in the waiting room, a "regular rotation," and a carriage that contains good light and ample space, all make for a pleasant experience. It's clear, though, that this is a regimen that very much depends on surveillance: "in Paris the hackney carriages are under the vigilant eye of the police. The horses are inspected; the

cleanliness of the vehicles is insured. [...] Thus Paris on wheels includes a thoroughly regulated body of people; and is drawn by well fed if not elegant horses" (10:384).

This approving characterization of the French as a "thoroughly regulated people," with its emphasis on forcing, regimentation, and control through surveillance, might seem, on first glance, to contradict Dickens' frequently expressed admiration for French idiosyncrasy and freedom from convention, and his general faith in democratic openness. This emphasis on surveillance and inspection may seem to recall, as well, Bentham's Panopticon, with its "total, permanent, and architecturally enclosed overview of a single space and its occupants" (Otter 74). In fact, though, this is something very different. The ideal of urban regimentation that typically finds expression in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* is not a single disciplinary gaze intended, in Panopticon-like fashion, "to fix bodies or to control their motions" but rather a type of rationalized space that "stimulate[s] organized, but free, movement and circulation" (Otter 73-74).<sup>9</sup> Jerrold makes this clear in "Paris Upon Wheels," when he distinguishes between the restricted routing of hackney cabs in London, which limits movement from one predetermined point to another predetermined point, and the fluid and accommodating routing prevalent in Paris. Here, centralized organization does not mean control and restriction, and the fixing in place, but its opposite: the expansion of choice and liberation from a set itinerary, and movement in vehicles with good light and ample space. Dickens and his writers typically conceive of Paris, not as a static city, the kind of "royalist and reactionary dream city" found in Balzac, the "neo-Catholic utopia" that would have been "perfectly organized" and "changeless," but rather as a fluid city in motion.<sup>10</sup> He doesn't look to the conservative past, but to the liberal future.

Here and elsewhere in Dickens there is a need to distinguish between a single autocratic authority – whether this is Napoleon III or Baron Haussmann or the City Corporation in London – and an efficient administrative system that works "harmoniously together," apart from this

authority. While it is true that Dickens possessed in himself certain authoritarian impulses, and valued order, regimentation, and regular inspection in his private life, it is also true that in his public discourse he effectively de-authorized these values, distinguishing them from the authority that made them possible. The types of authority that attracted Dickens are usually not in the form of a single presiding focal point, but are typically de-centered supervisory spaces. They are more likely to be policemen on the beat, and on the move, than a centralized and fixed disciplinary gaze. This distinction between authority and management finds its parallel in Dickens' treatment of administrative reform at the time of the Crimean War in the mid-1850s. As I have noted elsewhere (Philpotts, "Civil Service"), Dickens supported administrative reform but was skeptical about the wholesale reform of the civil service. Administrative reform implicated the temporary and usually aristocratic political appointees who headed the departments and who would be replaced with a change of political party. The civil service, on the other hand, referred to the more knowledgeable clerks and managers who populated the middle ranks. Dickens believed that reform should begin at the top and not in the middle.

This emphasis on order and system has other implications as well. As described by Wills in "Paris Improved," Haussmann has produced a geometrically refined city: "every part of the city has been more or less improved in detail. Streets of moderate width have their narrow entrances enlarged; sharp turns have been squared, and corner houses made to form double, instead of single angles – so that these widened cross-roads are never crowded, and seldom obstructed" (*HW* 12: 361). It's very much the city as experienced on the ground, with the emphasis on the flow of traffic – but also the abstract and schematized city as seen from above – rendered as a matter of right angles, squares, and straight lines.<sup>11</sup> As Richard Sennett, Lynda Nead, and others have observed, modernity is a matter of movement – of flow and circulation, of the unimpeded passage of people and goods. "Progress was expressed by the free flow of capital. Movement, circulation – and the same vocabulary was used by business

as for public hygiene – was healthy; stagnation was unhealthy. The straight line was simultaneously the metaphor and the instrument of urban beauty, health, and commerce” (Jordan 171). This is exactly the kind of thing alluded to in “Paris Improved”: “these widened cross-roads are never crowded, and seldom obstructed, [...] convenient thoroughfares have been opened through blind blocks of buildings which separated one quarter from another” (*HW* 12:364). Over the next decade or so, Dickens’ journals would carry numerous articles that praised Haussmann’s improvements, and the transport system in particular, for just this: for facilitating freedom of movement.

The Haussmannization of Paris takes many forms in Dickens’ journals and not all of them have to do with the streets, sewers, and buildings. Even Parisian advertising bespeaks the kind of rationalized use of space associated with Haussmann, and again London is the whipping boy: “There are some few things we might copy with advantage as regards the [Parisian] theatres. That gathering together of all the play ‘posters’ on one large sheet, at several fixed points, in the same type, livery, and colour, commends itself at once” (“Birds-Eye Paris” 33). This is Haussmannian rationalization writ small: “a gathering together” at “fixed points,” “in the same type, livery, and colour.” Excessive complexity has been eliminated for the sake of simplification, convenience, and clarity. In the same piece, the writer praises the newly constructed Parisian houses – “the new stone palaces” built by Haussmann – for their “rich indistinction of detail – luxury of windows, balconies, flowers, tracery, and golden inscriptions” (31). The building details exist, he acknowledges, but from a distance they appear only as categories of objects, with the oxymoron “rich indistinction” suggesting the blurred sameness at the heart of the enterprise. This rationalization extends to ticket-selling in Paris as well: playgoers can buy theater tickets by looking at “open models, three or four feet high, of every theatre in Paris”: “the name of every class of seat is visible, the number of every seat is marked, and the play for the night is pasted up over head.” The bywords of this arrangement are “open” and “convenient.” Everything is ticketed and in its place, regulated and alike, and reminds us that Haussmann had given numbers to

all his houses. And because of this regularity and predictability, everything is in motion and flows.

This combination of movement and abstraction is one of the constituent aspects of modernity for Dickens and is central to his view of certain types of technological improvements – particularly train travel. Two of the things that most impress Dickens about train travel are, first, that it frees travelers from responsibility and allows for dreaming, and, second, that it makes places, and the movement to those places, more abstract. It frees travelers from the tyranny of the landscape and any meaningful engagement with place. It eliminates the very thing that gives life to his imagination – individual and vividly observed detail. But, by implication, it is this individual detail that also has the potential to constrain his imagination and that prevents the kind of dreaming made possible by train travel. In a piece he wrote for *Household Words* in 1856, "Railway Dreaming," Dickens insists, "I am coming from somewhere, and going somewhere else. I seek to know no more" (*HW* 13:385).<sup>12</sup> Just as he submits to the charms of Haussmann's rationalized improvements, where things flow freely, so he submits to the charms of rail travel, a form of technology that takes things out of his hands, and which allows him to move rapidly and escape, in however fleeting a fashion, from the pressures of engagement. As Dickens says, "I seek to know no more." This assertion marks a refusal of engagement that is generally uncharacteristic of Dickens and of his wonderfully engaged imagination. But it is also a form of withdrawal that, as Richard Sennett has argued, was an important aspect of travel in the mid-nineteenth century and after: "The technology of the nineteenth century gradually made movement into such a passive bodily experience. The more comfortable the moving body became, the more also it withdrew socially, travelling alone and silent" (338). Or put a different way: abstraction in one sense (meaning generalization) is implicated in abstraction in two other senses: as abstraction (or withdrawal) from the landscape, and abstraction (or reflection). It provides Dickens with a sort of welcome detachment. This same kind of detachment is motivated not simply by his view of modern life but also by pressures that seem to have

been accumulating at home and in his personal life, as is evident in “Railway Dreaming.” When walking the streets of Haussmann’s Paris, he confides to the reader, “I sometimes like to pretend to be childless and companionless” (*HW* 13:386). It’s not just the spectacle of Paris that fascinates Dickens, its shops, and lights, and bright surface appearance. It is also, doubtlessly, the erotic opportunities that Paris streets presented to a well-to-do man walking by himself. Like the railway, the streets are a potentially liberating force. Although in “Railway Dreaming,” he soon pulls back and validates domestic and paternal pleasures, and the pleasure of engagement, it’s also obvious that he very much enjoys contemplating (and perhaps experiencing) alternatives.

Richard Sennett has remarked on what he sees as the complex relation between freedom and bodily experience. As he writes about the revolutionary festivals in Paris of the 1790s,

Freedom which seeks to overcome resistance, to abolish obstacles, to start afresh with a blank slate, freedom conceived like a pure, transparent volume, dulls the body. It is an anesthetic. Freedom which arouses the body does so by accepting impurity, difficulty, and obstruction as part of the very experience of liberty. (309-10)

While it’s certainly true that Dickens’ imagination is animated by “impurity, difficulty, and obstruction,” the kind of complications and elaborations most commonly found in a crowded urban environment, it is also true that in the 1850s he sometimes took great pleasure in the opposite, in the clean, abstract, and simplified that betokened a kind of hygienic freedom. This is not something that dulls his imagination, but rather something that liberates it. If Haussmann’s rationalized improvements took much of the “mystery” out of Paris,<sup>13</sup> they also created space to think and to move – and for Dickens these actions are often the same (“my feet, straying like my mind, had brought me to Notre-Dame” [“The Uncommercial Traveller” *AYR* 9:276]). This is, I think, the kind of experience that Elisabeth Jay remarks upon: “Repeatedly the reader of Dickens’ Parisian pieces is invited to participate in a state of suspended

reality, to collude in 'the delicious traveller's trance which knows no cares, no yesterdays, no tomorrows, nothing but the passing objects and the passing scents and sounds!'" (77).

In at least two of Dickens' novels, *Dombey and Son* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, it is the blockage of free movement as a result of traffic congestion in a major metropolis that motivates the main narrative action. Early in *Dombey*, young Florence is almost run over by a carriage and nearly trampled by a "mad bull." She screams, runs, and gets lost. The threat of the carriage and the mad bull leads to her abduction by Mrs. Brown, her rescue by Walter, and many of the other plot developments. A similar situation occurs in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and again it is danger of the streets, and in this case their lack of sidewalks, that contributes to a major motivating incident: the death of a young child, run over by the carriage of "Monsieur the Marquis" Evrémonde. As the narrator bitterly observes, "in the narrow streets without footways, the fierce patrician custom of hard driving endangered and maimed the mere vulgar in a barbarous manner" (113-14). In *A Tale of Two Cities*, in fact, revolutionary Paris is defined mainly by its dark, dirty, and congested streets – poorly paved and without sidewalks – which are much more vividly rendered than its buildings or interior spaces. We are told of the "rough, irregular stones of the street, pointing every way, and designed one might have thought, expressly to lame all living creatures" (31). And of a "narrow, winding street, full of offense and stench, with other narrow winding streets diverging" (33). And of the "crippling stones of the pavement [...] [which] had no footways, but broke off abruptly at the door" (33). We are told that Charles Darnay passes through "one narrow, dark, and dirty street" (263), the Defarges pick their way "through the black mud and offal of the streets" (183), and that Sydney Carton traverses "several dark and dirty streets." The narrator then remarks, "for the best public thoroughfares remained uncleansed in those times of terror" (324). This last phrase ("those times of terror") would have inevitably reminded his first readers that these conditions were a thing of the past and that there now existed an improved Paris, one that has been made clean. On the very last pages of

the novel, Dickens drives his point home when he predicts that “a beautiful city” will eventually rise from the revolutionary “abyss” (389), again a nod to the improvements. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Haussmann’s Paris exists in prolepsis, as a sort of light and clean photographic positive to the dark, dirty, and dangerous Paris of the French Revolution. And it is the condition of the streets that is most revealing. If blockage motivates the plot, movement brings about its resolution.

It’s not clear when Dickens changed his mind about the improvements, or even to what degree. Michael Hollington suggests that the change occurs in late 1855 and early 1856 and attributes it, rather vaguely, to “the passage of time, and prolonged firsthand exposure to the Haussmann process,” particularly as it manifested itself in the “sea of mud” that inundated Paris in January of that year and that Dickens experienced firsthand (203). It is true that Dickens believed that the mud in Paris during this very rainy period had been made worse by the removal of cobblestones and the use of macadam for pavement: “It is difficult to picture the change made in this place by the removal of the paving stones (too ready for barricades) and macadamization,” he complained. “It suits neither the climate nor the soil. We are again in a sea of mud. One cannot cross the Champs Elysees here, without being half over one’s boot” (*Letters* 8:33). But other evidence suggests that the mud was only a temporary inconvenience, and not a lasting concern. Just eight months later, George Augustus Sala claimed in *Household Words* that “Our shops, our horses’ legs, our boots, our hearts, have all benefited by the introduction of Macadam” and argued that the newly transformed Paris was “rapidly surpassing our vaunted London City in excellence of pavement,” contrasting it with the French capital during the *Ancien Régime* with its “mud-cataracts [rolling] between rows of palaces [...] and boulevards so badly paved” (“A Journey Due North” 422). In “Insularities,” which was written by Dickens almost immediately after the mud episode, Paris is still used as a positive point of comparison. Even as late as August 1863, in “The Boiled Beef of New England,” Dickens contrasts the ugliness of London to the beauty of the renovated Paris: “The

meanness of Regent-street, set against the great line of Boulevards in Paris, is as striking as the abortive ugliness of Trafalgar-square, set against the gallant beauty of the Place de la Concorde. London is shabbier by daylight, and shabbier by gaslight. No Englishman knows what gaslight is, until he sees the Rue de Rivoli and the Palais Royal after dark" (*AYR* 9:588). In June 1868, the writer of "Birds-Eye Paris" remarks on the relative ease with which Haussmannian Paris can be kept clean, a cleanliness that is depicted as an integral part of the newly rationalized and sanitized order. He predicts that "these endless miles of new stone palaces [...] will grow dark and grimy like the old dungeon streets of the Pre-Adamite Paris," but that these buildings will undergo constant cleaning by "huge steam-engines" and men using "hoses and nozzles" who "scrub and scrape." Haussmann's buildings are said to have "quite a healthy glowing air after this wholesome toweling," which represents a lesson to be learned "for the dark skins and faces of certain London streets, grim with the dirt of a century" (31).

In fact, it is not until the early 1860s that Dickens' journals turn against Haussmann, and then only in a fitful and partial way, as we have seen above. And it is probably not mud, but politics that played the major role. After about 1859, Haussmann's critics both in France and England became more vocal, and the early enthusiasm for the improvements had started to fade. His projects had come to seem grandiose and exorbitantly expensive, and Parisians and visitors alike were tired of having their life disrupted. "The entire city had been a building site for nearly two decades," one of Haussmann's modern biographers has observed, "and there was no apparent end. The original aim, the renewal of central Paris, had been achieved. The remaining projects appeared designed to embellish only privileged, bourgeois Paris" (Jordan 297). In 1860, as well, Paris was enlarged, and more than 200,000 people were added to the city. This made housing and crowding worse, and intensified popular resentment (Jordan 286-87). Dickens' changing attitude toward the improvements was probably also influenced by his increasing, and widely shared, anxiety about the political situation in France, and the growing hostility toward the

French Emperor, Napoleon III. In the aftermath of Felice Orsini's attempt on the Emperor's life in 1858, there was "a drastic heightening of the police state aspects of his regime." French newspapers were suppressed and there were additional penalties for subversive activity (Bierman 179-80). Napoleon III's behind-the-scenes maneuvering and his interference in Italian politics infuriated English politicians and, in 1859, led to an unnecessary war between France and Austria. *The Saturday Review* referred to this period as "the universal disquietude" and blamed the policies of Napoleon ("The Effects of Despotism" 506).

In May 1860, as well, Dickens was apprehensive about a possible war between the English and the French. He referred to "the vigorous state of preparation into which the Nation is getting [a reference to the formation of the Volunteer Rifle Corps]," and told W.F. De Cerjat, "I have not the slightest film of doubt, myself, that the gentleman in Paris will bring the two nations by the ears at last" (*Letters* 9:247). He emphatically reasserts the same point, nine months later: "That Louis Napoleon will force himself into collision with England at last, I do not in the least doubt and never have in the least doubted" (*Letters* 9:382). An earlier letter, dated 1 February 1859, attributes the most cynical of motivations to the Emperor. He was using the threat of war with England, in Dickens' view, to solidify his power and shore up his fading popularity at home: "Louis Napoleon's last great card for the temporary union and pacification of France is War with England" (*Letters* 9.21). What is telling, in all three letters, is the certainly of Dickens' opinion: "I have not the slightest film of doubt," "I do not in the least doubt and never have in the least doubted," and "I always believe." It may well be that his worry about Napoleon III's aggressive intentions, and his general detestation of the man, eventually became more powerful than his belief in the transformation of Paris.

An almost complete rejection of the improvements appears in "Dress in Paris," which was published in *All the Year Round* in February 1863. In a surprising shift, Haussmann's new houses are now portrayed as a sort of distillation of the worse aspects of the Second Empire. They are

superficial, ostentatious, and expensive – and coded as female: "The new houses display their coquetry to the street; their façade is adorned with sculptured embroidery." The writer then adopts a different metaphor, one that reflects the tawdriness of the Empire: the houses are empty baubles, all ornament on the outside and hollowness on the inside (AYR 9:8). Nor has the rebuilding succeeded at its primary task: it has not really "ventilated" Paris, and made it healthier, only hidden the problem and made it worse. The writer concludes, "public salubrity has lost rather than gained by the revolution of the trowel." The Second Empire is represented as utterly empty: luxury is said to reign supreme – "and nothing else" (AYR 9:12). An article published in 1864, "The Poor of Paris," takes a similar stance. The writer of the piece quotes an ironic comment in Blanchard Jerrold's book *Children of Lutetia*: "It appears [...] to have become the settled conviction of the Paris municipal authorities, that poverty can be obliterated by driving a boulevard through its head-quarters." For apparently the first time in Dickens' journals the phrase "Improvements of Paris" is marked with ironic quotation marks: "'Improvements of Paris' have been gradually depriving the very poor of shelter for a family" (AYR 12:249-50).

Even though, as we have seen, other writers in *All the Year Round* will make positive comments about certain aspects of the improvements well into 1868, the tide seems to have turned. The changing political situation in France is probably one important factor. But there is most likely another one closer to home. In the 1860s, there was a huge increase in the number of railway schemes and street expansions in London, many of these in the most congested areas of the city. In fact, the 1860s were said to be "the most destructive and most creative decade in the City's history since the Great Fire" (White 47). Dickens and his writers, I suspect, had begun to read Paris in light of what was happening in London, and their repeatedly expressed concerns about the displacement of the poor in the English capital. Paris, which had been repeatedly used by Dickens and his writers as a model for social change, and as a stick with which to beat London's leaders, was now believed to suffer from many of the same

faults. The displacement of the poor, which had once seemed a more distant concern (and one easy to push aside), had now come to seem central and immediate.

This changing attitude toward the improvements can be inferred from a brief passage in “Some Recollections of Mortality,” a piece that Dickens wrote in spring 1863. It’s an ambiguously worded passage, and one easy to overlook. A few hours after he had arrived in Paris, he strolled to the Île de la Cité and to the area immediately in front of Notre-Dame Cathedral. The Île was the medieval heart of Paris, and in the nineteenth century home to one of the poorest, filthiest, and most crowded slums in the city, with hundreds of old houses, and fifteen thousand working-class residents, all compressed into a warren of narrow and tangled streets. “No other neighborhood in Paris was so historically sacred,” David P. Jordan has written, “and nowhere else did he [Haussmann] so radically transform a neighborhood through demolition [...]. The physical isolation of the Île from Paris allowed him the opportunity, experienced nowhere else in Paris, to transform a neighborhood completely” (198-200). Dickens remarked of this area:

Notre-Dame was before me, but there was a large open space between us. A very little while gone, I had left that space covered with buildings densely crowded; and now it was cleared for some new wonder in the way of public Street, Place, Garden, Fountain, or all four. Only the obscene little Morgue, slinking on the brink of the river and soon to come down, was left there, looking mortally ashamed of itself, and supremely wicked.  
(*AYR* 9:276)

The force of the word “some” in “some new wonder” may well betoken a certain level of irony, as if he is wearied at the new “wonder,” and may well reflect his changing attitude. Nor does it seem to matter which “wonder” it is, as if they have all become interchangeable and perhaps largely meaningless. By this reading, the improved and rationalized system has become a victim of its own abstraction. There is, as well, a

crucial and revealing difference between this piece, written in 1863, and "Paris Improved," written by Wills in 1855, only two years after Haussmann was appointed Prefect. In "Some Recollections of Mortality," written as Dickens' enthusiasm for Haussmann's improvements had begun to wane, he is much less insistent on the democratic underpinnings of the improvements in Paris. Dickens wonders, "whether it is positively in the essence and nature of things, as a certain school of Britons would seem to think it, that a Capital must be enslaved and ensnared before it can be made beautiful" (*AYR* 9:276). The passage reminds his readers that Paris is "enslaved and ensnared" and underscores Dickens' contempt for the authoritarian regime of Napoleon III and perhaps by implication for Baron Haussmann, who was increasingly seen as having imposed his will on the French people – and placed a tremendous burden on the public coffers. In equal measure, though, there is contempt for the British politicians who associate comprehensive urban reform with political repression. Dickens, as we have seen, would clearly like to detach wholesale reform from despotism – the Paris improvements from Napoleon III – but in this passage he can only do so in this negative way, by implication and in the form of a question. The passage, in other words, embodies in abbreviated form many of the tensions, and uncertainties, that are at the heart of Dickens' view of Haussmann's "improvements."

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For an additional take on Dickens and the transformation of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, I would recommend Michael Hollington's two-part article on "Dickens, 'Household Words,' and the Paris Boulevards." He focuses on a range of issues that I have left untouched here: the flâneur and the idea of Paris as spectacle, and Dickens' attitudes to these ideas, and he makes good use of the work of Walter Benjamin.

<sup>2</sup> H.J. Dyos has remarked of London, "Until the early fifties the real costs of metropolitan improvements were [...] unknown for the displaced

persons of Early Victorian England remained uncoun­ted and their migrations uncharted” (13).

<sup>3</sup> “The emperor [...] went so far as to subsidize the construction of a number of model residences for workers. One of these was the Cité Napoléon at 58, rue Rochechouart, with 86 apartments renting for 100-300 francs a year for a bedroom with a fireplace, a well-lit sitting room, and a small kitchen, with toilets and drains for waste water located ‘at the extremities of the building’” (Higonnet 183).

<sup>4</sup> Dickens wrote to Sir Joseph Olliffe on 26 August 1855: “I want to shew our ridiculous Corporation how improvements are made in Paris; and he is to get the materials for an interesting account of those now in progress there” (*Letters* 7:695). As John Edmondson remarks, this letter makes it clear that Wills was to go to Paris to collect information to support a view that Dickens already held (*Dickens on France*, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Fear of recurrent cholera epidemics explain, I think, Dickens’ repeated emphasis on the urgency and the speed of urban renewal, and why he valued wholesale and dramatic renovation over piecemeal and protracted tinkering. Wide streets and open spaces, it was thought, had profound practical consequences that transcended aesthetics, worries over the obliteration of historical neighborhoods – and even the uprooting of people. In 1831 and 1832, an outbreak of cholera in Britain had killed 32,000 people. A second outbreak in 1848-49 killed 62,000 people, and in 1853-54 the death toll from a third outbreak was 20,000. “For the Paris modernizers,” Patrice Higonnet remarks, “cholera was the AIDS of the day, ‘an Asiatic demon,’ according to Alexandre Dumas *pere*, a medieval survival of foreign origin, an alien, barbaric menace that had made its way from China and India through Eastern Europe, Poland, and Russia” (181). It was wrongly believed at the time that cholera was an infectious disease, and, as such, was propagated by a miasma, or effluvia, emanating from bodily exhalations and putrid organic matter, and made worse by crowded living conditions.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Napoleon was the prime motivator for the transformation of Paris, and its passionate advocate. To this end, he had presented

Haussmann a map of Paris that showed the new streets he wanted to have built, all marked in different colors, and that served, at the least, as an inspiration for the changes. Like most modern historians, David P. Jordan believes that "New Paris was a joint effort of Napoléon and Haussmann" (173).

<sup>7</sup> "Meditations" that inspired the quoted paragraph at the beginning of this essay.

<sup>8</sup> Inevitably, given the dozens and dozens of articles on Paris and France in both *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, and the large number of different writers, any such assertion has to be qualified and is true only in part. That said, the evidence is also plentiful.

<sup>9</sup> See Chris Otter's discussion of oligoptic space in *The Victorian Eye* (72-77), a term borrowed from Bruno Latour.

<sup>10</sup> Patrice Higonnet asserts that "Balzac was not alone. Until the dark years of the Vichy regime, one whole wing of French culture, and even of Parisian culture, shared his nostalgic sensibility. With the Great Revolution of 1789 converted into myth in 1830, and then with the expansion of 'machinism' and the railroads, French society divided between proponents of what people at the time called 'resistance,' on the right [...] and, on the left, advocates of 'movement' [...]. It was the past pitted against the future" (178). On very rare occasions, Dickens echoes the kind of regrets expressed by a variety of contemporary French writers who were wont to say that "they had lost the city, that it had been taken from them" (Clark 60). In October 1862, for instance, he tells Wills that several of the theaters on the boulevard du Temple "that used to be so characteristic" had been destroyed. Unlike these writers, though, Dickens and his writers were averse to romanticizing the past, and rarely thought of Paris in terms of loss.

<sup>11</sup> "To make the actual streets of the plan, Haussmann constructed tall wooden towers up which his assistants – whom he called 'urban geometers' – ascended, measuring out straight streets with compass and ruler to the old walls of the city" (Sennett 330).

<sup>12</sup> In *Hard Times*, the kind of abstraction associated with modernity is presented much more negatively. Dickens says of Coketown, “The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction” (27).

<sup>13</sup> Keith Tester writes: “the rationalization of the spaces in Paris; with rationalization, all mystery is removed from the city” (14).

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