

“When I went to Lunnon town sirs”: Transformation and the Threshold in the Dickensian City



BEN MOORE
Manchester University

This essay aims to consider the nature and function of the threshold, understood in a broad sense, in Dickens's London, taking *Great Expectations* as its focus. Of particular interest are the ways in which thresholds can operate as areas of intensity; places where transformation between opposing or contradictory states occurs. A good point of entry into thinking about the threshold is offered by a comic song learnt by the young Pip in the early part of *Great Expectations*. This song comments on the apocryphal fate of the person from the country who is made a fool of in the city. Pip informs the reader that the opening two lines are “the only coherent part” of the rhyme; they run as follows:

When I went to Lunnon town sirs,
 Too rul loo rul
 Too rul loo rul
 Wasn't I done very brown sirs,
 Too rul loo rul
 Too rul loo rul. (109; ch. 15)

As F. S. Schwarzbach has observed, songs like this, which typically praised country life and warned of the perils of the city, were common in England between the 1820s and 1860s. Schwarzbach offers as an example a rhyme which is very close to Pip's: “Be cautious in great London town, /Or, in trying to do, you'll be done” (22). The movement from country to city in both songs involves the crossing of a threshold, a transition from one social framework and set of reference points to another. But Pip's song, unlike the latter, also forms a threshold between sense and nonsense: it descends into incoherence after its first two lines, rendering Pip unable to learn any more of it, while even the avowedly “coherent part” is interspersed with the

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seemingly nonsensical refrain “too rul loo rul.”

Pip comments on this refrain: “I thought (as I still do) the amount of Too rul somewhat in excess of the poetry” (109; ch. 15). What Pip does not recognize is that the song is part of a ballad tradition in which such refrains were common. The popular mid-to late-nineteenth century rhyme “The Ratcatcher’s Daughter,” for example, ends each verse with the line “Doodle dee, doodle dum, ri, da, doo, da, di do” (Shepard 152). “The Ratcatcher’s Daughter” is a typical example of a “broadside ballad,” a massively popular type of publication that consisted of folk-songs, often with topical themes, that were printed on large single sheets of paper (sometimes folded into chapbooks) and sold in the towns and cities of Britain from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Pip’s song, bought by Bidley for “a half-penny” (109; ch. 15), is probably a broadside ballad, perhaps purchased on a trip to London or from a traveling “chapman.”¹ In his book on the subject, Leslie Shepard identifies the topic of the “*Countryman in London*” as one of the common themes for humorous broadside ballads (75), with titles including “A Countryman’s Ramble to London” (76). Shepard notes that Dickens was familiar with Seven Dials, the poverty-stricken area of London at the center of broadside production, which is described in *Sketches by Boz* as the “region of song and poetry,” of “penny magazines” and “penny yards of song” (Shepard 79). Dickens mentions by name the infamous printer James Catnach, renowned for inventing the “catchpenny” broadside, a method of increasing sales that involved printing false or misleading headlines in order to attract naive customers (Shepard 81). Bidley appears to have been caught by just such a “catchpenny” technique (that is, “done very brown”) when she bought the song, whose opening lines operate in the same way as a false headline, promising an entertaining (and coherent) narrative which the rest of the ballad fails to deliver.

However well Dickens might have known the conventional form and style of the broadside ballad, which he seems to be satirizing here, from Pip’s point of view the refrain is *excessive*, both because it is repeated one time too many (surely one “too rul loo rul” is enough) and because it seems to have no meaning, to add nothing to the song. Despite the apparent incoherence of these syllables, however, it is possible to search them for elements of meaning. The words “rural” and “rule” seem to be suggested. Is the refrain telling us that the man from the country is “too rural” for the city? Or perhaps it is commenting on the competing desires of countryside and city

1 A particularly nineteenth-century term for the chapman, or itinerant dealer, is “colporteur,” a term imported from France to refer to hawkers of books, magazines and religious writings. *OED*, *colporteur*, n. Walter Benjamin connects this practice to the modern experience of urban space through the figure of the flâneur: “The ‘colportage experience of space’ is the flâneur’s basic experience” (*Arcades* 418).

“to rule” each other, with the country and its inhabitants destined, by the time Dickens was writing in the 1860s, to be subsumed by the dirt and pollution of the city’s growing industries, to be literally “done very brown”? Whether or not there is sense to be found in the refrain, meaning dissolves completely after the opening lines as, despite Pip’s profession that he read and learnt everything Bidy could give him (108–09; ch. 15), he is unable to understand the rest of the song. Such inability to make meaning is the threat that London presents to the rural visitor. Pip’s song, in enacting this collapse of interpretability, becomes a threshold text, a site where the excess of nonsense over sense overwhelms comprehension. The song is positioned on the edge of language, the region where structure meets chaos; this is the place where transformation occurs and people are “done very brown.”

The approach to the threshold I am taking here is influenced by Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, his great work on nineteenth-century Paris. Benjamin suggests that thresholds should be understood as rites of passage, giving as examples the ceremonies traditionally associated with birth, death, marriage and puberty – ceremonies that modern society tends to erase. According to Benjamin: “The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* [threshold] is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses” (294). Although Benjamin may be incorrect in his etymology,² he offers a compelling interpretation of the threshold. From Benjamin’s point of view, the threshold is not primarily a physical structure (a gateway, passage or other liminal space – although all of these are important) but what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari might describe as a zone of intensity. Deleuze and Guattari want to move away from talking about the single and unitary (the subject, the object) to talk about “libidinal, unconscious, molecular, intensive multiplicities” (37). Following this line of thought, the threshold becomes a mode of experience, a kind of “swelling” which, through its intensity and its capacity for transformation, disrupts and dissolves identity in favor of the unconscious and the multiple. When Joe visits Pip in London for the first time, in chapter 27, he describes him in these terms: “‘Which you have that growed,’ said Joe, ‘and that swelled, and that gentlefolked;’ Joe considered a little before he discovered his words; ‘as to be sure you are an honour to your king and country’” (219). Pip’s transformation into a gentleman is a *swelling*, a word which here becomes highly ambiguous, suggesting not only the growth of Pip’s fortunes but also the growth of his pride, and of his alienation from Joe. This swelling indicates the disruption of Pip’s identity, so that Joe has to “consider a little” how to describe him; no longer able to pronounce with absolute confidence that

2 Eiland and McLaughlin’s note suggests that the German word *schwellen* derives from “board” or “structural support” rather than “swell” (*Arcades* 991).

they are “[e]ver the best of friends” (49; ch.7) – that is, to recognize Pip as a particular, intimate individual – Joe can only offer the generic platitude that Pip is a credit to his king and country.

A swelling then, is a kind of threshold that is dangerous or unstable, one which viewed in another way might become a diminishing. Such threshold experiences are productive of narrative, emphasizing transition over stasis, dissolution over unity. As Richard Lehan has noted, “[t]he narrative flash points in Dickens’s fiction occur where water and land meet, or where the country and city intersect, or where the past and present converge” (44). These “flash points” are zones of intensity; threshold regions where opposite categories are simultaneously connected and divided. A threshold of this type can be thought of as a “hyphen” – the mark of punctuation that connects and divides a word in the same gesture³ – in which case the threshold forms part of the structure of language, even as it marks the region of that structure’s failure. The “too rul loo rul” refrain in Pip’s song plays this role by simultaneously connecting and dividing the lines of verse that precede and follow it.

In *Great Expectations*, as in all of Dickens’s novels, the word “threshold” is used sparingly but suggestively. In chapter 2, at the point when Pip has concealed a piece of bread-and-butter down his leg to take to the convict in the marshes, Joe marks his surprise at its sudden disappearance from the table by stopping “on the threshold of his bite” to stare at Pip (11). This threshold marks a fracture in Joe and Pip’s relationship; it is the point when Pip first deceives Joe, by pretending that he has eaten the food he intends to give away, a deception which sets the tone for their relationship throughout the novel. As a suspended bite, the threshold threatens a (potentially castrative) cutting off; it lies on the border between unity and division. This is a point of intensity, a suspended incision that is also a *decision* (a word that used to mean separation or cutting off):⁴ will Joe recognize Pip’s crime? Will Pip be punished for his deception? In this moment, the threshold takes the form of a suspended judgment, a punishment held in abeyance. It is a moment that contributes to producing the pervasive guilt which, according to critics such as Julian Moynahan and David Hennessee, drives the novel’s narrative.⁵

3 Or perhaps, following Jacques Derrida, a “hymen.” The hymen is used by Derrida as a term for something which is paradoxically neither boundary nor passage: “the hymen is neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor the unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside” (quoted in Spivak, lxxii).

4 The *OED* cites examples for this meaning from the 16th and 17th centuries. *OED*, *decision*, n.4.

5 See Julian Moynahan, “The Hero’s Guilt: The Case of *Great Expectations*” and David Hennessee, “Gentlemanly Guilt and Masochistic Fantasy in *Great*

This pervasive guilt makes the novel itself a threshold text, situating it, like Joe's suspended bite, on the border between crime and (real or imagined) punishment.

The only other use of the word "threshold" in *Great Expectations* also occurs at a point of heightened intensity and involves a moment of suspension. It is in chapter 49, when Pip has returned to Satis House to ask Miss Havisham for the money he needs to help Herbert Pocket, just before the sudden eruption of the fire which leads to her death. Pip is leaving the grounds through the garden door, of which Dickens writes "the damp wood had started and *swelled*, and the hinges were yielding, and the *threshold* was encumbered with a growth of fungus" (401, my emphasis). As he passes this swelling threshold, Pip describes how he "turned my head to look back," at which point "[a] childish association revived with wonderful force in the moment of the slight action, and I fancied that I saw Miss Havisham hanging to the beam" (401). Pip pauses on the physical threshold of the garden gate before this vision of a symbolic threshold, in which the literal suspension of hanging is perceived as a suspension between life and death. It is a vision that repeats the one Pip had as a child at the end of chapter 8, when he saw a figure hanging by the neck from a "great wooden beam" (64). The figure was dressed "all in yellow white, with but one shoe to the feet; ... the faded trimmings of the dress were like earthy paper, and ... the face was Miss Havisham's" (64). The "wonderful force" of Pip's childhood association is like a hyphen that both connects him to and severs him from his childhood, the events of which he seems to be repeating but to which he can never return. It is this vision which causes Pip's impulse to check whether Miss Havisham is "as safe and well as I had left her" (401), thereby leading to his presence at the fire that consumes her. Again, the threshold is a point of decision, but one over which the subject does not have full control. The threshold seems to suspend, or hold in abeyance, the subject's agency, and therefore his or her very identity, which may be reconstituted in a new form (as with Pip's move from country to city) or destroyed completely, as in the case of hanging, drowning or consumption by fire.

Such a suspension of identity can be found in *Our Mutual Friend*, in the moment when the boatman Rogue Riderhood is recovered from the water of the Thames, on the verge of death after being run down by a foreign steamer. Riderhood's life hangs in the balance, and in doing so becomes an object of fascination for the crowd of onlookers, as the narrator describes:

See! A token of life! An indubitable token of life! The spark may smoulder and go out, or it may glow and expand, but see! The four rough fellows, seeing, shed tears. Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the

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other, could draw tears from them; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily (440; bk. 3, ch. 3).

Riderhood, otherwise detested, gains a sacred allure when positioned on the threshold between life and death, his identity temporarily suspended. The river, which for Jeremy Tambling evokes Derridean “life death,” serving as a “reminder that every concept contains its other” (248), is a symbol of the threshold, which it brings into the heart of London. Walter Benjamin, quoting Ferdinand Noack, indicates how such thresholds located within the city can function to erase crime and infamy, observing that when a Roman general passes through a triumphal arch (the classical world’s most visible and significant threshold): “Every defilement, all guilt for the murderous battle [...] is removed from the commander and the army; it remains ... outside the sacred gateway” (96). For Riderhood, the erasure of guilt is not permanent, but takes place only while he is suspended on the threshold. As soon as it becomes clear that Riderhood will live, “[t]he short-lived delusion begins to fade [...] As he grows warm, the doctor and the four men cool. As his lineaments soften with life, their faces and their hearts harden to him” (441; bk. 3, ch. 3). Riderhood’s body provides a glimpse of the identity of opposites (life and death, guilt and innocence, the sacred and the profane) that can only be revealed on the threshold.

Such a revelation, which suspends normal perception, is part of what Benjamin means by the term “dialectical image.” For Benjamin:

The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast – as an image flashing up in the now of its recognisability. The rescue that is carried out by these means – and only by these – can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is already irretrievably lost (*Arcades* 473).

Riderhood’s physical rescue is also a rescue in Benjamin’s sense: it brings to light what seemed lost; it shows, if only for a moment, the boundary between life and death not as a barrier but as a kind of decision (or incision) that suspends subjectivity – that is, as a threshold. Benjamin emphasizes that any such revelation or rescue always takes place in a zone of intensity, writing that the dialectical image “is to be found [...] where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest” (*Arcades* 475).

In most cases where a reconstitution of identity takes place in Dickens, a rise or fall in fortune is the medium of transformation. Such transformations are often associated with entering the city, such as when Pip goes to London to begin life as a gentleman. Other examples of transformation through money include the Dorrit family, who enter London (despite being already

inside it) when they exit the Marshalsea prison in grandeur following the discovery of their riches, as well as Montague Tigg in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Tigg's reversal of fortune after arriving in London is mirrored by the reversal of his name, which he switches from Montague Tigg to Tigg Montague on becoming Chairman of the fraudulent "Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company" (430; ch. 27). Dickens links Montague's transformation with money when he writes that,

though changed his name, and changed his outward surface, it was Tigg. Though turned and twisted upside down, and inside out, as great men have been sometimes known to be; though no longer Montague Tigg, but Tigg Montague; still it was Tigg; the same Satanic, gallant, military Tigg. The brass was burnished, lacquered, newly stamped; yet it was the true Tigg metal notwithstanding. (427; ch. 27)

The appearance of the "Tigg metal" has been altered but, as with a forged coin, Montague remains brass, a base metal, rather than genuinely transforming into gold. His change is ultimately nothing more than an alchemist's trick. The link between money and reversal made here is echoed in Karl Marx's *Economic and Political Manuscripts* of 1844 (the same year that saw the conclusion of the serial publication of *Martin Chuzzlewit*). Marx states that "Since money, as the existing and active concept of value, confounds and exchanges everything, it is the universal *confusion* and *exchange* of all things, an inverted world" (379).

For Pip, such inversion serves only to return him to the point he sought to escape. Pip's name is a palindrome, so that to reverse it is to bring him back to where he started, just as the narrative of *Great Expectations* returns Pip inexorably to Magwitch and the marshes. Pip is legally bound by the conditions of his benefactor to keep his single name, a name which contains a threshold within its very form – the "i" which stands like a cut, or a mirror, between the two "p"s. What Jaggers calls the "easy condition" of always bearing this name is what gives Pip access to his expectations (138; ch. 18), but it also means that any transformation can never provide an escape from the past. Pip's fate is that he can never fully cross the threshold between forge and city, past and present: the threshold, like the "i" in his name, is the point about which his transformation turns and which, being itself a cut, cannot be severed or removed. In Lacanian terms, the "i" in his name is the bar which constitutes Pip as a subject, but only by barring him from knowledge of parts of himself from which he nevertheless cannot escape (that is, from the unconscious). This might be denoted P/p, in the same way as Lacan uses the notation S/s.⁶ In being constituted by the threshold (that

6 Lacan draws this form of notation from Ferdinand de Saussure. In his essay

is, by the hyphen between conscious and unconscious, or between sense and nonsense) Pip carries his fate within him like a tragic hero. According to Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, tragic existence “acquires its task only because it is intrinsically subject to the limits of both linguistic and physical life which are set in it from its very beginning” (114). Pip’s name operates like this linguistic and physical limit which is set within the tragic hero. In Benjamin’s account the limit which constitutes the tragic hero’s identity is death, so that the hero “shrinks before death as before a power that is familiar, personal, and inherent in him. His life, indeed, unfolds from death, which is not its end but its form” (114). Similarly, the form of Pip’s life is found in his palindromic name, so that the novel ends as it started, with a little boy named Pip, who in this case is Joe and Biddy’s child (481; ch. 59).

The duality of the threshold as something both marginal and central (or to use Derrida’s term, *parergonal*)⁷ is recognized by Walter Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*, where he notes that border gates and triumphal arches share the same features, even though one lies at the edge of the city and the other at its center (a nineteenth century example of the latter being Paris’s *Arc de Triomphe*, completed in the 1830s). Benjamin observes that “[o]ut of the field of experience proper to the threshold evolved the gateway that transforms whoever passes under its arch” (86–87). The transformational power of the border gate passes in symbolic form to the arch at the city’s heart, so that two spaces which are in reality co-terminus, both part of the same city, become radically different.

This process of symbolic transformation can be seen in action in *Little Dorrit*. In the same way that “[t]he Roman victory arch makes the returning general a conquering hero” (87), Mr. Dorrit, on leaving the Marshalsea Prison (whose gate he has not been allowed to pass for over twenty years) is transformed into a kind of modern-day conqueror, as symbolized by the burning of his old clothes in favor of a new fashionable outfit (445; ch. 36). Whereas the title “Father of the Marshalsea” previously appeared a sad and hollow pretence, with the reversal of his fortunes the pretence becomes a reality and Mr. Dorrit begins to seem “like a baron of the olden time” (447; bk. 1. ch. 36). While his two older children follow Mr. Dorrit’s

“The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Lacan takes S to stand for signifier and s for signified, stating that the algorithm S/s (that is, signifier over signified) defines “the topography of [the] unconscious” (428).

7 Derrida sees the *parergon* (the frame) as a “supplement,” that which is necessary for a structure but which conceals its own necessity to appear as marginal: “I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper, and that Kant calls *parergon*, for example the frame. Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end” (Derrida 63).

example, Amy, significantly, does not, remaining in what Fanny calls her “ugly old shabby dress” until the family leaves the prison (452; ch. 36). Amy’s crime in the eyes of her sister is that she refuses to recognize the symbolic transformation which takes place at the prison gate, a transformation which matches the family’s elevation from poverty to riches.

This radical change *is*, however, recognized in the form of *Little Dorrit*, in its division into two books, “Poverty” and “Riches,” the first of which concludes with the Dorrit family leaving the Marshalsea in a carriage. The last sentence of “Poverty” describes their departure: “The attendant, getting on between Clennam and the carriage-door, with a sharp ‘By your leave, sir!’ bundled up the steps, and they drove away” (452; ch. 36). This bundling up of the steps is more significant than it first appears. Benjamin includes, in Convolute C of the *Arcades Project*, an extract from an 1856 work by Théophile Gautier in which Gautier makes the following comments on the “running board,” the step found along the side of a carriage:

Between those who go on foot in Paris and those who go by carriage, the only difference is the running board [...] It is the point of departure from one country to another, from misery to luxury, from thoughtlessness to thoughtfulness. It is the hyphen between him who is nothing and him who is all (93).

Benjamin prefaces this quotation with the statement: “On the theory of thresholds” (93). The running board is a threshold, and is the equivalent of the carriage steps which must be bundled up in order to drive the Dorrit family away from the Marshalsea. The steps are the “hyphen” that connects the worlds of poverty and riches, and must be severed in order to make the transition between the two irreversible. This passage from Gautier makes wealth and class difference fundamental to the experience of the nineteenth-century city; it is perhaps only the city that brings together such wildly divergent classes in such close proximity, with the threshold positioned as the dialectical jump that turns one into the other. Bundling up the steps demonstrates the paranoia of wealth – the desire for the abolition of a porous boundary that threatens without warning to overturn a fortune as quickly as it has been made. For the same reason, the carriage which Pip travels in when he first enters London has not only room for licensed servants, but also “a harrow below” to “prevent amateur footmen” (163; ch. 20). In both cases the threshold becomes a barrier, enforcing divisions of class and wealth.

Richard Sennet’s book *The Conscience of the Eye* describes the history of the city in similarly paranoid terms, as a process of establishing progressively more and stronger barriers between inner and outer. For Sennet, the structure of the modern Western city develops out of the medieval city’s

stark division between the religious, inner world, signified above all by the precision of the Gothic cathedral, and the secular, outer world, which was allowed to grow chaotically and haphazardly beyond the cathedral's walls. Such church complexes, Sennet notes, were often surrounded by a parvis, or enclosed courtyard, which he describes as "transition zones, the outside that was yet withdrawn from the city, creating silence at the center [sic]" (17). Such transition zones are thresholds, spaces which protect religious buildings as privileged locations for aid and charity, but which leave the secular world beyond as "amorphous, violent, undefined" (17). Sennet argues that, through establishing this division, medieval Christianity produced a "corrosive dualism between the inside and outside" (18), a dualism which persists in a modified form into the nineteenth-century, as the Victorian fetishism of the domestic interior. Sennet explains this modern tendency with a quotation from Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*:

This is the true nature of home – it is the place of peace: the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division. [...] [S]o far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the ... hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold it ceases to be a home; it is then only a part of the outer world which you have roofed over and lighted a fire in. (20)

The threshold here is not a free and open passage, but a barrier to be ceaselessly guarded in order to protect the inner world. A dualism of inner and outer is established in order to protect the illusion of the domestic interior as an undivided space, and therefore the true home of the undivided subject, who risks dissolution if he or she crosses the threshold. Steve Dillon is one critic who has explored the vital role of such secure domestic spaces for nineteenth-century subjectivity in his essay "Victorian Interior".

The most extreme example of this closure of the domestic threshold in Dickens is Wemmick's house at Walworth, the top of which is "cut out and painted like a battery mounted with guns" (206; ch. 25), symbolically defending it from the external world of the city. Wemmick describes to Pip how he turns the threshold into a barrier: "After I have crossed this bridge, I hoist it up – so – and cut off the communication" (206; ch. 25). For Jeremy Tambling, this defensive stance puts the house in relation with Newgate prison, one of the first parts of London encountered by Pip (198). Newgate, as its name suggests, stood "on a site in the wall of London, where from Roman times a gate had stood" (Evans 1). As late as 1750, according to Robin Evans, "[d]espite being the most recognizable and most infamous gaol in the country, [Newgate] was to all appearances no more than it always had been – a city gate" (1).

At the time when *Great Expectations* is set, Newgate's role had altered from being a point of entry into the city (a role it still plays to some extent for Pip, since he goes there directly after arriving in London (166; ch. 20)) to being a building that restricted and prevented free movement, though still retaining the suggestion of its former function. Wemmick's house similarly operates both as a barrier (cutting off communication) and a threshold (in the sense that Ruskin uses the word, as a marker of the domestic sphere into which Wemmick can escort his bride, Miss Skiffins (454–55; ch. 56)). The home and the prison operate as dialectical images of each other: both mark a boundary where the city ends and another space begins, but one seeks to protect the inner world of the family while the other marks out within the city the space of crime and death. The prison's function as a threshold between life and death is made clear when Pip is shown the yard in Newgate where the gallows is kept, as well as "the Debtors' Door, out of which culprits come to be hanged" (166; ch. 20). For Richard Lehan, making a similar comparison, Wemmick's castle imitates the feudal estate, seeking to stand for life in opposition to the corrupting primality of the city, which, with its condemned prisoners and the blood of the Smithfield market (45; ch. 7), stands for death. The threat to be "done very brown" in the city here takes on a much more menacing aspect, suggesting a corruption and degradation of the subject who, in domestic or rural space, is by implication white, whole and pure.

Benjamin suggests a way in which the fetishism of the domestic interior displayed by Wemmick might, in Paris at least, respond to the exterior world differently, not by denying but by absorbing it:

The bourgeois who came into ascendancy with Louis Philippe [after 1830] sets store by the transformation of nature into the interior. In 1839, a ball is held at the British embassy. Two hundred rose bushes are ordered. "The garden," so runs an eye-witness account, "was covered by an awning and had the feel of a drawing room. But what a drawing room! The fragrant, well-stocked flower beds had turned into enormous *jardinières*, the graveled [sic] walks had disappeared under sumptuous carpets, and in place of the cast-iron benches we found sofas covered in damask and silk." (*Arcades* 220)

The ball described here reverses the defensiveness of Wemmick's castle, turning it into an assault on the city that surrounds it. The interior spills out to colonize the exterior, negating the need for the compartmentalization of the domestic. At its heart though, this dreamlike world of the ball remains paranoid; it suppresses the very concept of an outside by over-running it wherever it can. The arcades of Paris, as the playground of the bourgeoisie, perform a similar function. Glass ceilings and gas lights were among their

most distinctive features, so that, in Ruskin's terms, the arcades "roof over" the street and "light a fire in" it; they are an outside posing as an interior.

Benjamin describes the arcades (the enclosed shopping galleries established in Paris around the early nineteenth-century) somewhat differently: "Arcades are houses or passages having no outside – like the dream" (*Arcades* 406). The arcades are dreamlike for Benjamin both because they have turned the entire landscape of the city into an interior and because they have multiplied the threshold (which Benjamin tells us can be thought of as an experience of falling asleep or waking up) so that it becomes a condition of everyday life. The anxieties this produces are made clear in a passage where Benjamin comments on the unusual question of doors that fail to close in dreams. Benjamin specifically identifies a fear of "doors that appear closed without being so" (*Arcades* 409), describing a dream in which

while I was in the company of a friend, a ghost appeared to me in the window of a ground floor of a house to our right. And as we walked on, the ghost accompanied us from inside all the houses. It passed through all the walls and always remained at the same height as us. I saw this, though I was blind. The path we travel through arcades is fundamentally just such a ghost walk, on which doors give way and walls yield. (*Arcades* 409)

This dream-world, which Benjamin posits as the world of the modern city, is one that is filled with borders and barriers, but in which no boundary is solid, becoming instead a threshold between interior spaces. The fear of doors that are not really closed is the fear of this dissolution of boundaries into thresholds.

According to Sennet, segmented interior spaces multiplied in the nineteenth-century as the increasing division of labor brought about by the Industrial Revolution was applied to the realm of the family. Sennet describes how "interior domestic designs more and more separated the members of families and hid away the necessities of the body inside the house" (26). He draws attention, as an exemplifier of this "logic of division" (27), to the New York "railroad apartment" (27), which consisted of a series of rooms in a line, like a train carriage, usually with their doors leading onto a side corridor. Gradually, such apartments were "abandoned to the poor" (27) so that "each railroad flat became like a city of its own. The corridor became an internal street; families crowded into the individual rooms" (27). These streets of interior spaces are like the one the ghost walks through in Benjamin's dream. The city here becomes multiple, its image repeated across many separate apartments. This is an exact inversion of the case of the arcades or the British embassy ball, where the domestic interior multiplies itself throughout the city.

Like urban and rural, sense and nonsense, or home and prison, the city street and the domestic interior cannot be understood in isolation, but form a complex that attempts to maintain a strict delineation of inner and outer, life and death. To view the city as Benjamin proposes, as dialectical image, necessitates recognizing that this boundary is also, like the Debtors' Door in Newgate, or the gate of the Marshalsea, a threshold which can be crossed at any moment. To see the home as the prison and the prison as home – as Amy Dorrit does – is to see dialectically; it is to see the connection as well as the cutting. In this case, boundary and threshold are no longer distinct, but are two ways of perceiving the same phenomenon. Benjamin himself describes this best:

Nowhere, unless perhaps in dreams, can the phenomenon of the boundary be experienced in a more ordinary way than in cities. [...] As threshold, the boundary stretches across streets; a new precinct begins like a step into the void – as though one had unexpectedly cleared a low step on a flight of stairs. (*Arcades* 88)

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Contributors to this Issue



Ewa Kujawska-Lis has contributed to *Dickens Quarterly*, *Conradiana*, *Acta Neophilologica*, and *Prace Językoznawcze* [*Papers in Linguistics*]. Her current interest in theoretical and empirical research on translation focuses on Dickens and Joseph Conrad. Her *Marlow pod polską banderą. Tetralogia Josepha Conrada w przekładach z lat 1904–2004* [*Marlow under the Polish Flag. Joseph Conrad's Tetralogy in Polish Translations from 1904 to 2004*] (2011) is a comprehensive analysis of Polish translations of works featuring Conrad's narrator, Marlow. She has also written on the Reception of Charles Dickens in Poland.

William F. Long is Emeritus Professor in Biochemistry at the University of Aberdeen. He has written several articles for the *Dickensian* and *Dickens Quarterly* and contributed to the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*.

Ben Moore is a PhD student in English and American Studies at the University of Manchester working under the supervision of Jeremy Tambling. His thesis, "Architecture and the Nineteenth-Century City" looks at Manchester, London and Paris in the works of Gaskell, Dickens and Zola and is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Victor Sage is Emeritus Professor of English Literature in the School of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, author of *Dividing Lines* (1985), *A Mirror For Larks* (1993), *Black Shawl* (1995), and numerous essays and articles and other works on the Gothic. He has written on Dickens and Beckett, and Dickens and Darwin. Recent published work includes essays on Ludwig Tieck and Carl Gross; Scott, Maturin and Hogg; Scott and Hoffmann, HScottish Women's Gothic (Janice Galloway, Alison Kennedy and Louise Welsh), Ballard and Ishiguro. He is currently engaged in writing a book on European Gothic for Polity Press.

