Representation and knowledge
Charles Dickens was one of the first English novelists to explore the modern city as a central theme of his fiction. Dickens’ brand of urban realism gives form and shape to a vision of an entire world, but raises fundamental issues in a crisis of representation – artistic as well as political after 1832 – that underlies Victorian debates about the city and the nation. Who is reading the city and how it is being read are questions that reveal as much about epistemology of the city as about perceptions of the rapid changes that were transforming the city beyond recognition, especially since modernisation was making conventional forms of representation inadequate.¹

The debate over London’s place as the urban centre of cultural production occupied the best talents in art, literature, and the theatre. They set the taste for the literate public in an age of declining patronage but held opposing views on whether, as some romantics believed, urban civilisation was corrupt and produced what Wordsworth deplored (in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) as an artificial culture. The nation’s capital was vaunted as a world metropolis at the heart of an empire, but not all shared Robert Vaughan’s confidence in *The Age of Great Cities* (1843) that the imperial project necessarily improved arts and literature.

on the model of Greece and Rome. Modernity itself was in question, as in Robert Southey’s derogatory sense of the modern in his *Colloquies* (1829), and the enlightenment discourse of progress and prosperity was countered, in apocalyptic warnings by missionaries and conservative die-hards, by images of a new Babylon of corruption and vice.

These debates are reflected in a proliferation of books and pamphlets that (unlike engravings and guidebooks celebrating London’s neo-classical architecture) investigated the *terra non cognita* of the modern city, of which London was the paramount archetype: mammoth and boundless, the city had merged into the suburbs beyond the eighteenth-century boundary of the New Road. Its character was multifaceted and multicultural, transgressing boundaries of class, creed and race. London lured the curious in search of knowledge of the human character, utilitarians in search of statistics, and missionaries in search of lost souls. Anyone requiring intelligence of the present condition of society had to walk the streets. The city’s streets were a health hazard, often identified with the poor and racialised Irish, yet their danger was tantalisingly inviting; the question was whether the knowledge they yielded could contain the problem of poverty.

Dickens’ writing should be seen in this polemical context, which was dominated by the utilitarian insistence that only a scientific observation based on statistical representation could bring about the necessary surveillance and policing of the urgent urban problems of poverty, disease, and crime. London had a long reputation of crime and danger, evidenced in *vade mecum* books such as Ward’s *London Spy* and their imitations and parodies (the most famous being Gay’s *Trivia*).\(^2\) Dickens, however, resists a utilitarian discourse by presenting the subversive gaze of the observer who walks the city streets and whose imagination evades police surveillance, thus resisting the discipline of rational inquiry.

Dickens’ *Sketches by Boz* began to appear in newspapers and magazines from 1833 and several of them can be placed in the genre of the Hours, the round the clock tour of the capital. They had to negotiate the social status of a parliamentary reporter seeking to transform

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