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Sambudha Sen’s goal in this book is to trace the development of what he calls the “Dickensian aesthetic,” or sometimes the “urban aesthetic,” which he sees as marking out Charles Dickens’s fundamental difference from realist writers of the mid-nineteenth century. In this respect, William Makepeace Thackeray acts as a foil to Charles Dickens throughout, his writing providing an example of the middle-class realism from which Dickens departs in favor of a radical and popular means of expression. Sen is wary of this comparison becoming a means of denigrating Thackeray, however: “I have no interest,” he says, “in constituting Thackeray as Dickens’s discredited other” (11). The distinction Sen makes between the two writers is, though, expressive both implicitly and explicitly of a basic class difference between them, with Thackeray taking the internal world of the English middle-classes as the proper and natural subject of the novel in a way Dickens does not. This is despite Thackeray’s own involvement with radical satire in the pages of *Punch*: evidence, Sen notes, of his “deeply divided relationship with the print market” (6). Thackeray is willing on the one hand to defend magazine writing as a necessary means of earning a living, while on the other hand maintaining a belief in the aesthetic superiority of “the sentiment of reality” (7) that he sought to capture in his novels. This is markedly different from Dickens’s novelistic
technique, which provoked a snobbery that can be identified in the mid-Victorian quarterly press, and which Sen reads as a sign of anxiety among “the educated and the cultivated” (61) about Dickens’s introduction of radical forms of print and visual culture into the novel. Dickens refuses, in effect, to separate out different forms of writing; just as, according to Sen’s later chapters, he refuses to neatly separate out the different parts of the city.

Sen’s argument about the development of a Dickensian aesthetic falls into two main strands. The first, which covers the opening two chapters, builds on Sally Ledger’s *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (2007) to analyse the ways in which the radical political tropes of the early nineteenth century, as found in the satirical output of William Hone, William Cobbett, Douglas Jerrold, and George Cruikshank, find their way into Dickens’s writing of the 1840s and 1850s. The second, and more substantial part, is pursued in chapters three to six, which consider how a popular tradition of visual representations of London going back to Hogarth is of central importance to Dickens’s portrayal of the capital.

Chapter One examines the “language of radicalism” in the London of the 1810s and 20s, suggesting that many satirical and caricatural attacks on the political establishment during this period—such as Hone’s *The Political House that Jack Built* (1819) or Cruikshank’s portraits of George IV—were articulated not as realistic depictions of individuals, but as ways of drawing distinctions between different social groups and classes, and especially of highlighting the arbitrary nature of symbols of power. In one of the most suggestive parts of the chapter, Sen teases apart two contradictory tendencies in English dissident thought: the first, dating back at least to Thomas Paine, a “suspicion that icons and emblems, metaphors and figures were vehicles of mystification” (22), and the second the use of an “allegorical mode” (23) of satire which turned such icons and emblems into tools for radical critique. Sen finds both tendencies at work simultaneously in Jerrold’s story of the “Woky Poky Indians,” an allegorical tale whose purpose is to point to the arbitrary nature of
the symbols that legitimize political power (23). Chapter Two extends this discussion, looking particularly at the divergent ways Dickens and Thackeray positioned themselves in relation to characterization and political and literary language. Thackeray opined that though the upper classes could (and should) be criticized, this critique must never come at the cost of the lifelike delineation of character—a distinction that necessitated engagement with, and often a sympathetic understanding of, the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. As a result, Sen suggests, Thackeray always used the language of the political insider in his novels, while Dickens, like Cobbett or Hone, did not. Like such radical figures, who spoke from the margins, Dickens is always willing to turn the symbols of power into caricature as a tool of social critique, a process Sen analyses in relation to Little Dorrit (1857) and Bleak House (1853). In Dickens’s depiction of the Court of Chancery, for instance, “emblems are never allowed to blend discreetly among the other details of the real but are, on the contrary, wrenched out of their naturalizing context” (53). As Sen emphasizes throughout these first two chapters, he is not claiming that Dickens uses the same arguments as earlier radical writers and artists, but that he redeployed the literary and representational strategies that Cobbett, Hone, and others had pioneered by introducing them into the alternative form of the novel.

From Chapter Three onwards Sen moves to a closer engagement with the urban fabric of London, focusing on how the relation between its interiors and its streets was depicted from Hogarth to Dickens. Sen’s discussions in this section owe a debt to a range of recent studies of nineteenth-century modernity and the city by critics such as Catherine Gallagher, Sharon Marcus, and Pam Morris. Chapter Three, built around an intriguing discussion of Hogarth’s well-known Industry and Idleness prints (1747), argues that there is a basic tension in the images between the moral interior and the immoral exterior (that is, the streets of London), which, however, cannot be consistently maintained. In this way Sen identifies
conflicting drives at work in Hogarth: one aiming to segregate respectable from disreputable spaces, and the other working “toward bringing urban disparities together in relationships of tense simultaneity” (78). Chapter Four then looks at the different ways in which this urban aesthetic, associated with Hogarth, and also with Pierce Egan’s Life in London (1821), is developed in Bleak House and Vanity Fair (1848). In Bleak House, Sen finds a large degree of circulation, and frequent transgression of social and spatial boundaries, pointing in particular to Lady Dedlock’s movement across London that ends at Hawdon’s grave. In contrast, Becky Sharp’s trajectory, though carefully plotted, does not exceed “the limits of social behaviour” (104) determined by the semi-aristocratic world in which she moves. In a neat summary of this difference, Sen suggests that “Thackeray’s characters develop not horizontally but vertically in space” (105), giving them depth but not breadth. Chapter Five, which looks at selfhood in the city, takes Great Expectations (1861) as its focus, placing it alongside Pendennis (1850) in order to compare the depictions of subjectivity in the two novels. Pip’s experience, Sen argues, is marked by divergence and homelessness on the one hand, and by “unexpected intersections” (128) on the other—effects related to the drives Sen identified in Hogarth’s prints. In Pendennis, the trope of mésalliance, so destabilizing in Dickens’s writing, is always ultimately re-contained, as in the case of Pen’s aborted passion for Fanny, since it does not fit within the basic orientation of Thackeray’s novel, which Sen describes as the “nuanced presentation of life as it unfolds in upper- and middle-class interiors” (131). In the final chapter Sen turns his attention to Our Mutual Friend (1865), reading it as the text in which Dickens develops his urban aesthetic most fully. Sen explores instances of fragmentation, disorientation, and the crossing of social boundaries in the novel, looking at Bradley Headstone’s dual existence in the book’s latter chapters, where he is a respectable schoolmaster in the daytime and a disreputable, roaming figure at night. Headstone’s final death in the arms of Riderhood suggests that the separating, segregating
drive has ultimately lost out to the drive that seeks to cross boundaries and infect respectable social spheres with “the chaotic and immoral ‘other’” (156).

Sen’s careful analysis offers a convincing picture of how Dickens’s literary aesthetic diverged from the realist tradition by drawing on both radical culture and popular modes of depicting London. A distinction is noticeable, when reading the book, between the chapters that focus on radical culture and those that look at London. This raises the potential reservation of whether these two elements are really so closely aligned as to form one cohesive argument, or whether the differences between them might be worth considering in more detail. Nonetheless, this is a subtly argued, thoughtful book that offers an account of Dickens’s position in London, and London’s position in Dickens, which is at once comparative, historically informed, and theoretically minded.

**Biographical Notice:**

Ben Moore is a PhD candidate in his final year at the University of Manchester. He is working on a thesis which discusses architecture, vision, and space in the city in the work of Nikolai Gogol, Elizabeth Gaskell, Friedrich Engels, Charles Dickens and Émile Zola.