

Imagining London, 1770–1900

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INSTABILITIES IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

Imagining London, 1770–1900

Alan Robinson

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For Perdita, for Chloe, for Käte, with love

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Earlier versions of some material in Chapters 5 and 6 were published in *Anglistentag 1990 Marburg. Proceedings*, ed. Claus Uhlig and Rüdiger Zimmermann (Tübingen, 1991); *Bild und Text im Dialog*, ed. Klaus Dirscherl (Passau, 1993); and *Aspects of Modernism: Studies in Honour of Max Nännny*, ed. Andreas Fischer, Martin Heusser, Thomas Hermann (Tübingen, 1997).

Preface

Combining a unique overview of metropolitan visual culture with detailed textual analysis, this interdisciplinary study offers an interpretation of how Londoners sought to make sense of the social transformations of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It argues that they lived in two cities simultaneously: the actual spaces of the metropolis, which can be analysed into a socially stratified and gendered topography; and an imaginary 'London', an interior world constructed from personal sensory and imaginative experience but also from verbal and visual representations, which both reflected and shaped their understanding of the 'real' metropolis and influenced their actions in this 'real' environment.¹

By insisting that London's culture must be located in the physical spaces and practices of the city, I oppose the self-reflexive trend in recent literary history of examining discursive representations in isolation from the material contexts in which they originated and were embedded. Equally, in discussing changing constructions of 'London', I have also made a conscious break with the models which currently dominate literary studies by choosing to analyse not just social 'discourses', but what might be described as the idiosyncrasies of individual 'idiolects'. In my view, the influence of structuralist Marxism, of Foucauldian discourse theory and of the Lacanian concept of the 'symbolic order' has led to a disproportionate emphasis on social 'structure' to the exclusion of subjective 'agency'.² To redress this imbalance, literary studies would need once again to take seriously what, in the fullest sense, is meant by the literary *imagination*. Criticism would be required not just to place a text within the cultural materialist context of social practice, or within the ideological context of competing discourses, but also to treat it as authored by an individual with a unique personality, bearing physically, linguistically and psychologically the traces of a distinctive history, and engaged in complex perceptual interaction with his or her environment.

My assumption is that the experiential world we inhabit is formed by both introjection and projection. In other words, what we take to be reality is an unconscious fusion of external stimuli, mediated and structured by internalised cultural frameworks of interpretation and expectations that are to some extent susceptible of sociohistorical reconstruction; and of mental representations, i.e. 'imagos', 'objects', whose subjective distortions invite a complementary psychoanalytical approach.

Inevitably, my survey cannot be comprehensive. What I have done is to combine the panoramic (indicating changing patterns in representational modes and conventions) with an insistence on the particularity and complexity of individual imaginings of 'London'. My focus is consciously

restricted to the perspective of the middling sort, later the middle classes, who, as producers and consumers, frequented printers and galleries, and subscribed to the periodicals and circulating libraries through which ideological attitudes were disseminated.

Two interconnected leitmotifs run through my exposition. The first is the role of money in London's free-market economy and the kinds of social relations which unregulated capitalism encouraged or produced. Although the book's main focus is on Victorian London, my decision to extend its chronological range to the late eighteenth century challenges the orthodoxy in recent literary studies that late Victorian London saw the emergence of a 'commodity culture'. In fact, with the rise of the 'monied interest', which followed the Financial Revolution of the 1690s, the consequences of the new commercialism had drawn comment since the 1720s, as the historiography associated with John Brewer, Roy Porter, Paul Langford *et al.* has emphasised.

As consumption ceased to be regulated by legal or religious prohibitions, the 'world of goods' offered material and symbolic resources to all with the requisite purchasing power to choose and construct identities and lifestyles which destabilised the social order. The emergence of capitalist market exchange in London was thus a crucial factor in the evolution of a 'post-traditional society' characterised by the absence of any indisputable cultural authority or value.³ In tracing some features of this 'modernising' London, the themes I have highlighted are the fear of insubordination from the 1770s to the 1880s among London's vast influx of migrants, and the effects on class relations of the capitalist transformation of the labour and housing markets, transportation, and the City of London.

Recent accounts have emphasised the growth of consumer culture following the Great Exhibition and the emergence of department stores. Less attention has been given to the equally significant influence of the financial markets on the character of later Victorian London. The mid-1840s witnessed a remarkable take-off in speculative share dealing and financial fraud, which was further stimulated by the *laissez-faire* permissiveness of the company legislation passed between 1855 and 1862. The emergent plutocracy made their money through credit transactions often 'secured' only by elaborate cross-holdings of bills of exchange. Financial scandals suggested that, at its worst, this credit system was what deconstructionists would now term one of deferral, marked by the absence of any tangible underlying to the alarmingly proliferating futures contracts, or to the eagerly promoted share issues in companies with no paid-up capital. In any case, sceptics were right in recognising that this world of virtual reality, and the self-sustaining networks of social exchange-values which, correspondingly, reflected one's worth in an increasingly market-mediated society, marked a relativistic departure from earlier value systems. My narrative examines how this was reflected and represented in fiction and painting.

The second leitmotif is gender relations in London's patriarchal society. In discussing these, my aims were to trace changes in both the actual situation of women and the interdependent constructions of femininity and masculinity throughout the period. Over the last sixteen years an awareness of gender has become axiomatic in urban historiography. Influential studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s (by Lynda Nead, Deborah Epstein Nord) analysed representations of women in relation to medical and legal discourses and sanitary reform. Foregrounding the emblematic figure of the fallen woman, their emphasis on the threat of physical and moral 'contamination' melodramatised the situation of women in London. Subsequently (inspired by Amanda Vickery), the ideological model of 'separate spheres' has become increasingly questioned, together with the view (advanced by Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, Elizabeth Langland) of bourgeois women as unreflecting instruments of a Foucauldian disciplinary power.⁴ Instead, emphasis has shifted to investigation of the possibilities of mobility and agency which had been tacitly acknowledged by Poovey. Although this revisionist approach is salutary, in my view its concentration on West End consumers and the exceptional achievements of the intellectually gifted and socially privileged has tended to underplay the drastic financial and legal discrimination which continued to hamper women until the late nineteenth century. My own analysis accordingly places two different emphases.

First, I stress the economic and legal constraints on women and the similarities rather than the differences between prostitution and its 'respectable' counterparts: the marriage market and marital 'coverture'. Second, I use object relations psychology to complement Poovey's cultural materialist analysis of 'social formations' and Nead's Foucauldian analyses of mid-Victorian visual culture. As the historian John Tosh commented in 1994:

Masculinity . . . is both a psychic and a social identity: psychic, because it is integral to the subjectivity of every male as this takes shape in infancy and childhood; social, because masculinity is inseparable from peer recognition . . . Most patriarchal forms in history have arisen from psychic needs combined with a perception of the material advantage to be derived from power over women. Tracing the inter-connections and weighing their social impact is clearly a major task for historians.⁵

My discussions aim to further this debate.

The structure of the book is chronological. Chapters 1 and 2 are devoted to representations of late Georgian London. Thematically, Chapter 1 analyses forms of commercial capitalism, while Chapter 2 establishes the analytical framework for subsequent discussions of gender. Chapter 3 then offers a sociohistorical account of the transformations which capitalism effected in the Victorian metropolis. Building on this foundation, the remaining chapters are devoted to detailed discussions of three novelists – Dickens,

Trollope and James – whose writings offer chronologically successive cross-sections of Victorian London, and to a complementary survey of painting from the 1850s to the 1890s. In introducing their edited collection of essays on *English Art 1860–1914* (Manchester, 2000), David Corbett Peters and Lara Perry noted a lack ‘in the art-historical literature’ of ‘any developed understanding’ of how ‘English art was woven into the cultural history of which it was a part’. Chapters 5 and 6 on the evolution of Victorian paintings of London address this issue by offering a contextualised account of the relationships between ‘modern’ English painting, its French counterparts, and cultural modernity.

The overall picture which emerges is one of continuity in London’s increasingly commercial and service-oriented economy and of disconcerting upheavals in the physical fabric of the city, in working practices and social mores, in constructions of femininity and masculinity, and in the stylistic conventions of the artefacts which represented these. As readers thread their way through the bustling imaginary city of the following pages, I hope that they will come to share my fascination with the Stones of London.

Abbreviations

In footnotes and parenthetically in the text the following abbreviations are used:

- A *Autobiography*, ed. F.W. Dupee (Princeton, 1983)
AA *The Awkward Age* [1899, 1908] (Harmondsworth, 1976)
BH *Bleak House* [1852–3], ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth, 1974)
BI British Institution
CTW *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*, ed. Richard Howard (New York, 1993)
CY *Can You Forgive Her?* [1864–5] (Oxford, 1973)
DC *David Copperfield* [1849–50], ed. Trevor Blount (Harmondsworth, 1971)
DS *Dombey and Son* [1846–8], ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth, 1976)
ED *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* [1870], ed. Arthur J. Cox (Harmondsworth, 1975)
EuD *The Eustace Diamonds* [1871–3], ed. Stephen Gill and John Sutherland (Harmondsworth, 1977)
GE *Great Expectations* [1860–1], ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford, 1994)
L *Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1974–84)
LC1 *Literary Criticism*, vol. I. *Essays on Literature. American Writers. English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York, 1984)
LC2 *Literary Criticism*, vol. II. *French Writers. Other European Writers. The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York, 1984)
LD *Little Dorrit* [1855–7], ed. John Holloway (Harmondsworth, 1974)
Life John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols. (1872–4; rpt. Philadelphia, 1886)
MC *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1843–4] (Oxford, 1951)
N *Novels 1886–1890*, ed. Daniel Mark Fogel (New York, 1989)
NB *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (1947; New York, 1961)
OCS *The Old Curiosity Shop* [1840–1], ed. Angus Easson (Harmondsworth, 1972)
OMF *Our Mutual Friend* [1864–5], ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth, 1976)
OT *Oliver Twist* [1838], ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford, 1966)

- PE *The Painter's Eye*, ed. John L. Sweeney (1956; rpt. Madison, Wis., 1989)
- PF *Phineas Finn, The Irish Member* [1867–9], ed. John Sutherland (Harmondsworth, 1977)
- PP *The Pickwick Papers* [1836–7], ed. Robert L. Patten (Harmondsworth, 1972)
- PR *Phineas Redux* [1873–4] (Oxford, 1973)
- RA Royal Academy
- SB *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People* (Oxford, 1957)
- SP *The Spoils of Poynton* [1897, 1908] (Harmondsworth, 1975)
- T *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, 12 vols. (1962–4)
- VS *Victorian Studies*