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## Modern London (1820-2020)

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### Two Strands: Topographic and Visionary

‘London fascinates’, E. M. Forster wrote in *Howards End*:

One visualizes it as a tract of quivering grey, intelligent without purpose, and excitable without love; as a spirit that has been altered before it can be chronicled; as a heart that certainly beats, but with no pulsation of humanity. It lies beyond everything: Nature, with all her cruelty, comes nearer to us than do these crowds of men. A friend explains himself; the earth is explicable—from her we came, and we must return to her. But who can explain Westminster Bridge Road or Liverpool Street in the morning—the city inhaling—or the same thoroughfares in the evening—the city exhaling her exhausted air. (Forster [1910]: 79-80)

In this passage is topographic reference (‘Westminster Bridge Road’, ‘Liverpool Street’), but also metaphor (‘the city inhaling’). This combination is found throughout London writing produced in the two centuries after 1815. Research into London literature is lively (e.g. Manley 2011; *Literary London Journal*; *London Fictions* website and publications) but the field has rarely been surveyed as a whole.

There are two long-lasting ways of understanding and representing London in literature. The first strand is the comic-realist-moralist-topographic, its most influential contributor Charles Dickens, the second the visionary-historical-mythic. Broadly, the first of these is oriented towards the present and the second towards the past, the first towards London localities and the second towards ideas of city totality. The visionary-historical strand becomes established as the canonical means of reading London thanks to the influence of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). Yet Eliot and before him Forster drew on the toponymic-

topographic tradition in London writing: indeed, they both seem to find it indispensable in talking about London. Much of the London writing that follows Eliot's binds the two together in varied ways.

More than in the literature of Paris or New York, London literature often confers on its subject the combination of a frequently aggressively capitalist and rapidly changing present with echoes and remnants of an unfathomably deep past. Such a combination can be detected in Forster's idea of a 'spirit that has been altered before it can be chronicled' in London, which he combines with the idea that this city in particular 'lies beyond everything'. In this, a better comparison point than New York and Paris proves to be Cairo (Mehrez 2011). In both London and Cairo writing there is surprisingly little evidence of the iconic central buildings and sites of the city, with the city largely conceptualized around representative and obscure localities, lost in the wilderness of a vast, polycentric city containing part-hidden traces of its ancient past.

Literature is one of the forces of 'dirt, degradation and disorder' which, Ben Campkin (2013: 1) claims, contribute to 'the "cityness" of cities'. If researchers in architecture, design, urban planning and human geography are paying more attention to cultural sorts of messiness, then creative writers and academic theorists speculating about the nature of the city, in a parallel way, have new materialities available to them. Iain Sinclair writes up his preoccupation with Hawksmoor and the mystical geometries of once-desolate inner east London in *Lud Heat* (1975: 15): 'Eight churches give us the enclosure, the shape of the fear; – built for early century optimism, erected over a fen of undisclosed horrors, white stones laid upon the mud & dust'. Since the 1970s Sinclair and other trailblazers such as Maureen Duffy (*Capital*, 1975; see Groes 2011: 17-142) have been followed by others, labelled psychogeographers, who use walks through a city labelled with thousands of toponyms and filled with stories of past lives, in an effort to get close to London. Encouraged by writing

such as Sinclair's, archaeological investigations have taken place in areas such as St Giles and Spitalfields which might be understood as having dark, buried pasts (e.g. Anthony 2011; Harwood, Holder and Jeffries 2015). Their findings tell less hyperbolic stories, in part precisely because archaeologists cannot recover what Sinclair aims to: feelings. These include those of people died horrible deaths in squalid lodgings or were subject to corporal punishment on the military land where the Spitalfields suburb was built from the sixteenth century on.

Beyond the topographic and visionary strands lies another modern tradition in London writing. This associates London, often directly opposed to Paris as in works by Henry James (*The Princess Casamassima*, 1886) and George Orwell (*Down and Out in Paris and London*), with boredom and lack. It is detectable in the lovelessness and the absence of the 'pulsation of humanity' of Forster's tract of quivering grey. Nineteenth-century visitors and incomers including Dostoevsky and James spotted alongside the city's immense size and commercial orientation a quality of staleness or greyness. Twentieth-century writing on London includes Stevie Smith's poetic prose of boredom, shuttling by Underground between a sedate suburb and the duller and more official portions of the centre (*The Holiday*, 1949), and Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), recent arrivals trying to amuse themselves in a profoundly drab, workaday city. Throughout the period between the 1870s and the 1970s, a view of London as boring, sterile, repetitive, grey and small-minded appears more often than a contrary one in which it is colourful and varied, the latter recurring in the last quarter of the century in Michael Moorcock, Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi. The 'boring London' view ranges from the emptiness of Leonard Bast's world in Forster (Bradshaw 2007; Finch 2011: 259-70), to London as mere staging post on the way to the continent in James; from the desperately unsexy West End nightclubs of Evelyn Waugh (*Vile Bodies*, 1929), the desperate suburban

lives of William Sansom (*The Body*, 1949; see Bergonzi 1993: 90-92) and the bleakly peripheral extremes of Gerald Kersh (*Fowler's End*, 1957).

### **Recurring Motifs and Figures: Discovery, Money, the Immigrant**

Other more general motifs and imaginative sites stand out in London's modern literary history. Firstly, there is the conceit of the discovery of a portion of London that no one hitherto knew. "Silver fork" writers like Theodore Hook (his *Sayings and Doings* of 1824 referring to "the recesses of Bloomsbury and the wilds of Guildford Street") and W.M. Thackeray (*Vanity Fair*, 1848; see White 2007: 89) in the first half of the nineteenth century joke that Bloomsbury's defeat in the battle of the new speculative suburbs has been so complete that no one any longer remembers where it is (see Copeland 2015; Ashton 2012: 138-40). In a related way, the East End in the second half of the nineteenth century is repeatedly – and facetiously – claimed by writers to be an unknown country. In the early twentieth century, writers on South London sometimes claimed to be showing readers a formerly unknown world across the bridges; so at the end of that century and in the early twenty-first did Kureishi (*The Buddha of Suburbia*, 1990), Iain Sinclair on the M25 motorway (*London Orbital*, 2002) and Zadie Smith in the portion of inner suburbia she created using the Londoner's familiar label of the postcode in *NW* (2012).

From De Quincey to Caryl Churchill (*Serious Money*, 1988) and John Lanchester (*Capital*, 2012) among modern writers on London, via the 'islands of money' on which Forster's Schlegel sisters sit in *Howards End* (see Delany 1988), the brutality and transformative power of money plus the cushioning it can provide in surroundings that for others are hostile, are another recurring concern. Spectacular financial gains and losses, and the modifications in social class identity they bring about are frequent plot instruments for writers on London: Gissing's Biffen (*New Grub Street*, 1891) is isolated among the slum-dwellers of Marylebone

because he has declined from a higher class, while Smith's Keisha Blake in *NW* renames herself Natalie as she engineers a transformation from council-estate daughter of West Indian immigrants to wealthy barrister.

Thirdly, the figure of the immigrant has also been a recurring one in London literature for many centuries. A high proportion of London writers have in some sense or another been migrants to the city, whether they were born there with immigrant parents from other parts of the world, or whether they moved to the city to make a career as a writer, and be that from the provinces, from overseas, or from London's own suburbs. London writing is more broadly and in a more complex way immigrant writing than has so far been understood. Work on explicitly multinational London writing of the contemporary era (e.g. McLeod 2004) has an application to earlier periods.

### **Key Imaginative Loci and Movements: River, Park, Lodging House, Periphery**

The literary London of the modern era is less dangerous and less filled with spectacular display than in previous eras (Gatrell 1994; Kekäläinen 2012). It is frequently described in terms of horror and alienation but it is, perhaps, less horrific and alienating than it had been in earlier centuries. It is also less knowable, more inhuman, as Forster grasps. This side of it is grasped in the endless 'night-walking' through districts of Dickens and others (Beaumont 2015; Slater 2004; Humpherys 2011: 232-33), as well as in the move just mentioned in which a writer claims to be discovering hitherto unknown worlds within London.

Any study of the key literary locales of London should begin with the River Thames. Sometimes the focus is on the water itself, encountered in boats or even swum in works by Ainsworth (*Jack Sheppard*, 1839), Dickens (*Our Mutual Friend*, 1865) Iris Murdoch (*Under the Net*, 1954), at other times on the bridges over it and its embankments (Forster, *Howards End*; Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933)). Another such locale is the park. In

earlier times the interconnected Royal Parks today known as Hyde Park, St James's Park, Green Park and Kensington Gardens were often thought of collectively as 'the Park'. This park was a site of high fashion and fashionable display. In mid-twentieth century literature, the Park, as in earlier centuries, is where acts of display and inter-class sexual encounters happen: in Thackeray (*Vanity Fair*); William Plomer (*The Invaders*, 1934); Samuel Beckett (*Murphy*, 1938); Selvon (*The Lonely Londoners*); Alan Hollinghurst (*The Swimming-Pool Library*, 1988). It is where one retreats from the buzz and dirt of the city (Murdoch, *Under the Net*), but also a site in which political conflicts are staged (Simon Blumenfeld, *Jew Boy*, 1935). There, different social classes can interact. In the period after 1880, some of the characteristics of the park earlier than that were extended to outlying parks and green lungs of the city including Hampstead Heath (Will Self, Zadie Smith) and Epping Forest.

Another key spatial environment is the obscure London living environment. From Mayhew to Arthur Morrison (*A Child of the Jago*, 1896) to the bedsit house of William Plomer (*The Case Is Altered*, 1932) Samuel Beckett (*Murphy*, 1938), Norman Collins (*London Belongs to Me*, 1945), Lynne Reid Banks (*The L-Shaped Room*, 1961), Harold Pinter (*The Caretaker*, 1960) and Alexander Baron (*The Lowlife*, 1963); the private hotel of Patrick Hamilton (*Hangover Square*, 1941) but also Thackeray's haut-bourgeois Russell Square in *Vanity Fair* (1847) and Lytton Strachey's 'filth packets' in 'Lancaster Gate' (1922). Other works to mention here are by Arnold Bennett (*Riceyman Steps*, 1923), Selvon again (*The Housing Lark*, 1965; *Moses Ascending*, 1975) and Maureen Duffy (*That's How It Was*, 1962). There are numerous and varied other depictions of drab and unglamorous home life lived in environments other than the bedsit including the gentrified and semi-gentrified middle-class house (Kingsley Amis, *Jake's Thing*, 1978; Smith, *NW*) and various sorts of flat, council and other (Martin Amis, *London Fields*, 1989; Moorcock, *Mother London*, 1988; Smith, *NW*). This is to speak only of the post-Second-World-War decades but such an analysis has been

extended into the topography of accounts of life in slum and semi-slum regions (e.g. Cuming 2013; Finch 2015).

As well as locales there are acts of movement. A key one crosses and re-crosses a boundary separating London and what is not London. Here is the young Dickens:

And now, he approached the great city, which lay outstretched before him like a dark shadow on the ground, reddening the sluggish air with a deep dull light, that told of labyrinths of public ways and shops, and swarms of busy people ... the noise swelled into a louder sound, and forms grew more distinct and numerous still, and London—visible in the darkness by its own faint light, and not by that of Heaven—was at hand.’

(Dickens [1841]: 71)

Sixty years later, a similar porosity of boundaries remains important in Ford’s *The Soul of London* (1905) and Morrison’s *To London Town* (1899). In the latter, the lack of butterflies in contemporary Epping Forest is attributed to

some subtle influence from the great smoky province that lay to the south-west. For London grew and grew, and washed nearer its scummy edge of barren brickbats and clinkers. It had passed Stratford long since, and had nearly reached Leyton. And though Leyton was eight miles off, still the advancing town sent something before it—an odour, a subtle principle—that drove off the butterflies. The old man had once taken the Emperor Moth at Stratford, in a place long covered with a row of grimy little houses; now the Emperor was none too easy to find in the thickest of the woodland. (Morrison 1899: 15)

This anticipates the London ‘creeping’ across the fields of Hertfordshire with which Forster’s *Howards End*, written a few years after *To London Town*, closes. The passage across such a boundary is important again in Jewish and Caribbean immigrant writing of the mid-twentieth century, from Blumenfeld in the 1930s through to Selvon and George Lamming (*The*



*Emigrants*, 1954) in the 1950s. Earlier the entrance is classically by road, later by boat and train; in Colin MacInnes (*Absolute Beginners*, 1959) and Monica Ali (*Brick Lane*, 2003), it is already starting to happen by plane. Earlier the city impresses with its immensity, later it is merely drab and extensive.

### **1820-1870: Visions and Topographies Intertwined in De Quincey and Dickens**

Two writers who had a powerful impact on those who took on London as a subject later in the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth are Thomas De Quincey and Charles Dickens. Between them they road-tested and launched two metaphors for London which have endured through the subsequent two centuries: that of it as a giant and incomprehensible animated being, a new Leviathan; that of it as a great aggregation of numberless different little worlds each with its own geography, languages and characteristic inhabitants.

De Quincey grasps the gigantic new London he encountered as a teenager through a sense of its vastness and magnetism. Memorably, he describes seeing huge droves of cattle ‘upon the great north roads, all with their heads directed to London’ (De Quincey 1876: 204). This leads him to conceive of London as a vast mechanism like a wheel sucking things into its centre. A view from the same era was Cobbett’s of London as parasitic on its surroundings; De Quincey, like Forster, is horrified by London but yet attuned to its peculiarity in a way that the bluntly partisan and anti-London Cobbett never is:

A suction so powerful, felt along radii so vast, and a consciousness, at the same time, that upon other radii still more vast, both by land and by sea, the same suction is operating, night and day, summer and winter, and hurrying forever into one centre the infinite means needed for her infinite purposes [...] crowds the imagination with a pomp to which there is nothing corresponding on this planet, either among the things

that have been or the things that are. Or if any exception there is, it must be sought in ancient Rome. (De Quincey 1876: 204)

De Quincey sought metaphors for the new London that he encountered. Ancient Rome is one that would recur in writers of the period around the First World War. Elsewhere he writes that ‘the stream of London charity flows in a channel which, though deep and mighty, is yet noiseless and underground; not obvious or readily accessible to poor houseless wanderers’ (De Quincey [1821]). These two images, of a mighty ‘suction’ along ‘radii’ that are ‘vast’ and the ‘channel’ of London charity, are both redolent of engineering, and specifically of the canals and docks which were at the forefront of London’s technological advances in the early nineteenth century.

Other writers of the era were more likely to prefer investigation of pasts hidden within this changing London, as Charles Lamb was in an essay like ‘Christ’s Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago’ or concentrate not on the radii of the wheel but on still-rural-seeming locales connected to the centre, as when Leigh Hunt ([1815]) praised Hampstead with its ‘serene’ and agricultural ‘southern face’ and ‘Nature’s own ground’ to its north at a time when, as Gregory Dart (2012) has shown, to be a cockney often meant not to be a working-class denizen of inner London but someone with an indeterminate class identity mobile in London and its environs.

De Quincey’s conception it is, of ‘this mighty wilderness, the city — no, not the city, but the nation — of London’. Dickens ([1839]: 450) applies this directly in Chapter 35 of *Nicholas Nickleby* when Nicholas refers to ‘this wilderness of London’ almost as something proverbial in expressing his surprise at the friendliness of a stranger. This identification of the city as wilderness is then instantly confirmed by the stranger, a prosperous old man, who connects this identity to the act of immigration: ‘It *is* a wilderness. It was a wilderness to me once. I came here barefoot. I have never forgotten it.’ De Quincey it is who begins, this is to

say, a tradition of talking about the protagonist as lonely and alienated from his surroundings. De Quincey foreshadows twentieth-century urban walkers by aligning himself with waifs and strays more than with the ordinary, routine lives of masses of others in the city.

After De Quincey came a whole tradition of documentary or reportage writing by writers who went undercover. This began with James Greenwood in the 1860s (see Koven 2004) and continued at least as far as Ada Chesterton (*In Darkest London*, 1926) and George Orwell (*Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933) in the 1920s and 1930s. The differences are as important as the similarities. These later investigators do not, like De Quincey, employ large-scale, even epic, metaphors. And De Quincey portrays himself as someone with advanced powers of reflection. He concludes the haunting story of his relations with the young prostitute Ann who revived him with ‘a glass of port wine and spices’ when he was fainting from hunger in the streets, by falling into the reverie of a ‘tender’ urban memory associated, as the mystical qualities of the streets sometimes are in Gissing (*The Unclassed*, 1884), with the sound of a street musician. Alongside these reflective or visionary qualities, however, De Quincey deploys a vivid and precise toponymy of pedestrianism resembling that of the younger novelists Dickens and Ainsworth, as he names ‘Swallow Street’, ‘Golden Square’ and ‘Sherrard Street’ narrating his last walk with Ann ‘through a part of the town which has now all disappeared, so that I can no longer retrace its ancient boundaries’ before he leaves town on foot through ‘the tumult and blaze of Piccadilly’. (De Quincey 1821).

More than of De Quincey, anyone since the 1850s consciously trying to be a London writer has been aware of Dickens. As Michael Slater (2004) puts it,

The general concept of Victorian London derives in great measure from Dickens's elaborate, haunting descriptions of labyrinthine courts and alleyways, quaint old buildings, fogs, gaslight, and teeming street life; and tourists still come to the capital from all over the world eager to discover and experience ‘Dickens's London’.

The origins of this invention, ‘Dickens’s London’, lie in Dickens’s own walks and observations in those portions of London which reformers and improvers were embarrassed about and wanted to remove in the first half of the nineteenth century, chunks of an ‘Old London’ which only became appealing in Dickensian retrospect (White 2007: 30-87). Dickens’s London writing is powered by toponyms. As Anne Humpherys (2011: 232) points out, Dickens’s novels are ‘full of street names’. ‘Old London’ as it was conceived in the first half of the nineteenth century enters Dickens’s writing in his habitual interest in sites like the ‘faded tumble down street’ in Soho where Newman Noggs lodges in *Nicholas Nickleby*, or the ‘shady little square’ near the Bank of England where the Cheeryble brothers of the same novel have their offices (Dickens [1839]: 160, 451), or the rookery Tom All Alone’s and the house of Mr Krook in *Bleak House*, or the ‘old brick house, so dingy as to be all but black, standing by itself within a gateway’ where Arthur Clennam lodges early in *Little Dorrit*. All of these points within London, whether prosperous and clean or filthy and impoverished, are understood as survivals of the past, as chunks of the past in the present.

While large-scale, governing images become more important in it as time goes on, Dickens’s London, from *Sketches by Boz* in the 1830s through to *Our Mutual Friend* in the 1860s, extremes of invention combine with extremes of faithfulness to observed detail. Dickens always focuses on individual localities within the massive city (from the Scotland Yard of *Sketches by Boz* to the Smith Square and the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters pub in Limehouse of *Our Mutual Friend*), pushing subsequent writers towards a habitual assumption: that London is a city of hundreds of villages rather than a single orderly whole. Such an assumption is present in the Clerkenwell of Bennett (*Riceyman Steps*), and the ‘NW’ which Zadie Smith (*NW*, 2012) establishes as her own territory, to take an example from the 1920s and another from the 2010s, both novels which take a district or segment (smaller in

Bennett's case, larger in Smith's) as a microcosm for a London which at some level is itself understood as a microcosm of the whole world.

Dickens lovingly recreates and manipulates corners of 'Old London', but he is not much interested in medieval dates, old chronicles and antiquarian surveys or architectural history. This distinguishes him from a side of London writing which is very interested in a specifically antiquarian and archaeological view of it in which its multiple presents are simultaneously occupied, even haunted, by different pasts. Dickens's past, let us remember, is a recent past, often dwelling on the post-1815, pre-railway era of his own childhood and in his two historical novels, *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, reaching only a single generation further back, into the last decades of the eighteenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century the 'Old London' tradition, concerned with the city's own myths of itself, can be traced through the fictions of Ainsworth (*Jack Sheppard; The Tower of London*, 1840; *Old Saint Paul's*, 1841) and Douglas Jerrold (*The History of St Giles and St James*, 1845). In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the 'Old London' tradition emerges in non-fictional writings. It is to be seen in the publications of the London Topographical Society including its journal the *London Topographical Record* which, spurred by large-scale demolitions of older houses, began appearing in 1901. Between the 1880s and the 1920s it can be traced in the antiquarian strands of books such as *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* by Besant (concerned with the East End), *The Soul of London* by Ford (1905), and *Riceyman Steps* by Bennett. The 'Old London' strand surfaces in T. S. Eliot and stays prominent in later London writers such as Emanuel Litvinoff (*Journey through a Small Planet*, 1972), Duffy (*Capital*), Moorcock (*Mother London*), Sinclair (*Lud Heat; Lights out for the Territory*, 1999). It stands in contrast with essentially present-focused London writing by the likes of Selvon, Baron (*Rosie Hogarth*, 1951; *The Low Life*) and Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*, 2000; NW).

Most of the worthwhile scholarship on Dickens and London (e.g. Fanger 1965; Collins 1987; Tambling 2009) lends support to the idea that Dickens is basically a writer of London details, someone who knew the nooks and crannies. Future work could build on this by paying attention to mobility and dynamism, focusing on moves across the borders of London. A richer understanding of London in the nineteenth century would work to grasp what its edges, where it ended, meant to those who used it (e.g. Ameel, Finch and Salmela 2015; Finch 2016: 49-63), taking in beyond Dickens writing like Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*, George Borrow's magnificently weird *Lavengro* (1851) and looking forward to the perspectives surveyed in Ford's *The Soul of London*.

### **Late Victorian and Edwardian: Alienated Topographies**

The era between Dickens's death and the First World War is dominated by topographically precise London writing. But where Dickens, especially earlier in his career, provides integrative and coping strategies for the giant metropolis which threatens to be incomprehensible and contains other dangers (Henkle 1980: 112; Furneaux 2007) much of this writing shares De Quincey's alienated positioning in relation to the urban mass.

In the words of Bart Keunen and Luc De Droogh (2014: 108-09), this is a phase in the writing of the metropolis that combines 'sociology' with a fixation on 'the monstrous' with a frequent and controversial influence detectable from contemporary writing, notably that of Zola. This is also writing which comically mimics demotic voices a way reminiscent of the music hall stage. Here belong works by Gissing (*Workers in the Dawn*, 1880), James (*The Princess Casamassima*, 1886) and Margaret Harkness in the 1880s to Shaw (*Widowers' Houses*, 1892), Morrison (*A Child of the Jago*) and Maugham (*Liza of Lambeth*, 1897) and Clarence Rook (*The Hooligan Nights*, 1899) in the 1890s, and after 1900 W.Pett Ridge (*Mord Em'ly*, 1901) and, as late as 1915, Thomas Burke (*Limehouse Nights*). In a specifically

London and even Dickensian fashion such writing lays an emphasis on locality and topography (with toponyms ever-prominent), and on picturesque vigour. Oddities and cranks are emphasized, from the charm of Pett Ridge's girl street urchin protagonist, to the vigorous swearing and fighting of Morrison's Jagos in their odd anti-London rookery, and the gallows humour with which Gissing handles the Clerkenwell slum and its parasitic London strands as *The Nether World* (1889). Gissing also portrays pedestrianism along axes and chords cutting through and across central London in his stories of impoverished aspirants to literary success including *New Grub Street* (1891) and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), walked routes which are perhaps surprising forerunners of the means by which the specifics of London are encountered in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

A postscript to this trend is Sherlock Holmes. Afterwards, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the idea of late-Victorian London, one of fogs and hansom cabs, gentry and street-urchins, was derived from an atmosphere associated with Conan Doyle's uncanny detective. The street environment of late-Victorian London was recreated as a fantasy world in repeated cinematic representations of London at the end of the previous century from the black-and-white era (c. 1915-55), which themselves had a powerful impact on other cultural forms including comics. Sherlock Holmes combines a taste of realist and naturalist fiction, with echoes of its more speculative and fabling counterpart to be found in writings by Robert Louis Stevenson (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 1886) and Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1890), with the figure of the detective as mystical key to the city, someone able to provide meaning in an environment to others inexplicably multiple in which meanings are repeatedly lost. Holmes is specifically post-Dickensian in that his clearest antecedents are Dickens's Inspector Bucket (*Bleak House*, 1853) and Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone* (1868) by Dickens's associate Wilkie Collins.

Another sort of post-Dickens London writing can be found in highbrow, stylistically experimental fiction, such as that of George Meredith (*The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, 1859) George Eliot (*Daniel Deronda*, 1876) and James himself, whose *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) is a somewhat hesitant venture towards Zolaesque territory but whose *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) belong squarely here. This trend draws on the witty novel of high-society's fringes of Thackeray and the earlier 'silver-fork' novels of Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton. This writing often portrays the London social 'season' between Christmas and high summer, focused on the western parts of the city, in dialogue with moves between London and elsewhere according to the rhythms of moneyed society.

Not so clearly descended from Dickens – if at all – is another tradition of late-nineteenth-century literary considerations of the city. This is the early apocalyptic and science-fiction writing in which a – utopian or dystopian – future after the city is imagined (see Ameel, in this volume). Vitally presaging twentieth and twenty-first-century London writing by the likes of George Orwell, J.G. Ballard and Will Self is the work on post-London of Richard Jeffries (*After London*, 1885) and William Morris (*News from Nowhere*, 1890).

The section has concentrated on fiction at the expense of poetry. Victorian poetry is not often descriptive of London. Leading Victorian poets who were Londoners, notably Christina Rossetti, kept London almost entirely hidden in their writing (see Finch 2016: 45-49). It may have an implicit London setting on occasion, as in some decadent lyrics and James Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night* (1874). But poetry in this era largely represents the moves made by wealthier Victorians towards suburbs and rural settings in which they benefited from the amenities of transport centred on city hubs (like the radii of De Quincey) but, in shrubberies and behind tall hedges, tended to deny that there was anything urban about their lives.



Nor has much mention been made here of journalism or of other sorts of creative non-fiction including letters, diaries and the like, let alone the investigative journalism filled with miniature narratives of people's lives, of Henry Mayhew (*London Labour and the London Poor*, 1851) or the social research of Charles Booth (*Life and Labour of the People in London*, 1889-1903) best known for its cartographic presentation of a London divided by wealth, with wealthy gold streets, 'semi-criminal' black streets and layers of red and blue middle-class and working-class respectability in between. This was an era in which a vast quantity of journalism was produced, greater than ever before, and one area that developed, also often post-Dickensian, from George Augustus Sala through G.R. Sims even to Ford Madox Ford, was that of the London specialist, the writer who is an 'aficionado' of the city, as Gabriel Pearson ([1979]) describes the persona Dickens himself projected. From the same mould, district experts such as J. Hall Richardson whose 1920s recollections of the liveliness and 'horror' of Whitechapel in earlier decades, like those of Thomas Burke (*London in My Time*, 1934) in the 1930s (Vansittart 1992: 153) speak to Londoners seeking echoes of a past which is part-remembered, part-dramatized and part never-was.

### **Perspectives and Analogies in the Era of Modernism: Ford, Woolf, Eliot**

The London writing of both Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot is built around the experience of moments, experience which contains memories. Thinking about social hierarchies, Woolf's London descends from that of the 'silver fork' writers while also being crucially gendered as female: her Clarissa Dalloway (*Mrs Dalloway*, 1925) is the privileged flaneuse missing from the nineteenth century when in literature at least women tend to remain either confined indoors or represented as threatened and needing an escort when using the streets. Ford in *The Soul of London* (1905: 70; cf. Freeman 2007: 86-88; 138-39) points out that usually 'the man who expresses himself with a pen on paper sees his London from the west. [...] His London

of breathing space, his West End, extends from say Chiswick to say Portland Place. His dense London is the City as far as Fenchurch Street, his East End ends with what he calls “Whitechapel”. Changing ‘the man’ to ‘the woman’ and ‘His London’ to hers, this applies very well to Woolf.

Woolf’s treatment of London is enriched by its comprehension of spatialized moment in time. In moments such as when a car backfires near Clarissa Dalloway or when Jacob Flanders walks through a scruffy Bloomsbury street at evening, the massively simultaneous multiplicity of urban experiences comes into view, so that people in numerous different stages of different socially positioned lives are seen just happening to intersect in this precise temporal and spatial conjunction. An essay such as ‘Street Haunting’ ([1930]) proposes ‘walking half across London between tea and dinner’ but the pedestrianism it recounts seems instead to take the specifics of Bloomsbury as the representative ‘London street’ and ‘London square’: it would not be worth walking far from here, because an explorer who did so would not find anything essentially different from these ‘islands of light’, these ‘long groves of darkness’ all bordered by an ‘iron railing’, only a reduced or messier version of the same. And so there is in Woolf a strong sense of a capital within a capital, that there is only a relatively small portion of London that actually matters, which is a continuance of Thackeray and James.

But there were contemporaries of Woolf’s who looked from the east rather than from the west and so, turning to Ford again, looked primarily ‘along the line from Blackwall to Fenchurch Street’ and to whom the ‘quarter of large, almost clean, stone buildings, broad swept streets and a comparative glare of light’ around Piccadilly Circus, ‘is already a foreign land’ and who perhaps like Ford’s viewer from the east, did not even imagine the existence ‘further west’ of ‘another enormous London’ (Ford 1905: 71). Among them was Thomas Burke (*Limehouse Nights*, 1916; *London in My Time*, 1934). Burke moved from

sensationalizing yet aestheticizing portrayals of what he indicated as the exotic and multi-ethnic riverside dock district of Limehouse, to recollections of an old, grimy inner London largely to the east of Ford's boundary line at Portland Place.

As the century wore on, it would become less and less possible to say that as Ford does that a writer typically looks at London from the fashionable, inner-western side. There were cliques of well-connected writers associated with fashionable districts including Bloomsbury, Chelsea and Hampstead, the latter producing novels by the likes of Margaret Drabble (*The Millstone*, 1965) and Frederic Raphael (*The Limits of Love*, 1960; see Sicher 1985: 127-29). But in the spirit of supposed discovery which led Victorian writers to present Bloomsbury as unknown territory or boast of their walks to the east of Aldgate Pump, much twentieth century London writing looks in at the centre and the fashionable districts from elsewhere, as when the working-class Islington-dwelling protagonist of Baron's *Rosie Hogarth* (1951) ventures into Russell Square in search of the well-connected title character, or when Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* sally forth from damp basements in the decayed, once-grand inner western suburbs, to meet Londoners of the other colour and the other gender in Piccadilly or Hyde Park. From the many other writers of novels of non-smart London could be assembled a varied list including Collins (*London Belongs to Me*), Lynne Reid Banks (*The L-Shaped Room*, 1960); Muriel Spark (*The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, 1960), John Sommerfield (*Trouble in Porter Street*, 1939), Bennett (*Riceyman Steps*), Baron (*The Low Life*) and more recently Ali (*Brick Lane*), Gautam Malkani (*Londonstani*, 2006) and Irvine Welsh (*Skagboys*, 2012).

In *The Soul of London*, Ford grasps the experiential qualities of a new London of the twentieth century as De Quincey did for the pre-railway early nineteenth-century Metropolis. This is the idea of a Greater London extending well beyond the smoky built-up area governed after 1900 by the London County Council. For instance Ford proposes that 'nowadays [...] London begins where tree trunks commence to be black', sketching a perimeter which

extends far to the east of London down the Thames into Essex and Kent. The notion of a rapidly ‘spreading’ London powered by relatively quiet and peaceful electricity in the shape of the tram gives way between the two World Wars to accounts of London’s environs increasingly choked by motor traffic, bemoaned by some as ‘the Octopus, (Matless 1998), but with a stake in literary accounts including Orwell’s *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (1934) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939), Priestley’s *English Journey* and T.E. Lawrence’s *The Mint* (written in the late 1920s, published in 1955).

*The Waste Land* dances in scattered toponyms between urban peripheries and ancient, central sites. It can be read as a London poem or as a poem in which London stands for something else: for example Rome at the time of the apogee of its Empire, or indeed any candidate for the title of capital of the world (‘Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal’). Eleanor Cook ([1979]: 81, 83) reads the poem as one in which ‘a vision of Rome and the Roman Empire lies behind Eliot’s vision of London and the British Empire’. Cook’s reading has the virtue of forcing London writing, often so localist and topographic, to become part of the broader stream of city writing. To write about a city is to be aware of the concept of a city and of other cities, just as an understanding of the concept of the city emerges from the experience of topographies, of portions of actual cities as they have been at particular moments (Malpas 2006: 314). Cook also valuably highlights the more precise geopolitical context of Eliot’s London as imperial capital in the era of Great Power rivalries and the Scramble for Africa and the aftermath of this era in the First World War and the various political and financial crises that triggered. As Cook ([1979]: 86) points out, the London-Rome comparison was something of a literary commonplace at the turn of the twentieth century, used as a conceit from which to launch Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and James’s *The Golden Bowl* (1904).

In the first section of *The Waste Land*, ‘The Burial of the Dead’, London toponyms, and specifically those of a very small portion of the City of London, appear suddenly and even unexpectedly after 60 lines (Eliot 1974: 61-86). Section II, ‘A Game of Chess’ appears to get into London late on, in the pub dialogue that closes it (‘Hurry up please its time’). The lexis contains nothing at all specifically or demonstratively London, since it lacks any toponyms and the characters while clearly vulgar (‘It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said’: *them* for *those* is a feature of demotic London speech, true) do not ostentatiously drop aitches Sam-Weller fashion and nor are there any London toponyms in this passage. Section III, ‘The Fire Sermon’ refers, indexing Edmund Spenser, to the ‘Sweet Thames’ alongside ‘the waters of Lemane’ (Lake Geneva). This reiterates the sense in the poem of London as just one somewhere. Here are ‘the loitering heirs of City directors’ (the capital *c* making this specifically a London reference). Both are toponymic.

‘The Fire Sermon’ contains further localized markers of London. First is ‘the Cannon Street Hotel’, site of the rendezvous offered by ‘Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant’ and several lines later in the group of lines focused on precisely the same neighbourhood immediately north of London Bridge in the City of London as the commuter walk of ‘The Burial of the Dead’. In Mr Eugenides – presumably a Greek from what would become modern Turkey in the tumult following World War One, speaking ‘demotic French’ as a lingua franca – another boundary-crossing migrant appears, but his ‘pocket full of currants / C.i.f. London’ (or in other words destined for London with cost, insurance and freight there included in a price paid by a merchant elsewhere), he connects with the longstanding mercantile history of London which features in Dickens in the Cheerybles of *Nicholas Nickleby*, who trade with Germany, and the international trade of an unmentioned sort carried out by the house of Dombey and Son.

‘The Fire Sermon’ then fades away through music and water, and finally fire. The movement enacted by lines 258 to 311 begins down on the streets of London, this time approaching the hub of the area of the City of London immediately north of London Bridge from the west (‘along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street’), the words ‘O City city’ staking Eliot’s claim to be the poet of the city as well as the City (of London), past ‘a public bar in Lower Thames Street’ and ‘the walls of Magnus Martyr’, in the most toponymically concentrated portion of the poem with its suggestions of mystical lines in the routes on foot (recalling Gissing’s light-headed, impoverished staggerers through the city’s streets). It then snakes along the river, ‘down stream’ towards Greenwich from the City, from the ‘Oil and tar’ of ‘barges’ in the Pool of London between Tower Bridge and London Bridge, an area repeatedly aestheticized from *Our Mutual Friend* through Andre Derain and Thomas Burke, as short lines sometimes only one or two words long move back in time to the moment of ‘Elizabeth and Leicester’ in the sixteenth century, and a disappearance in ‘bells’, ‘White towers’, and a cry that is unidentifiable but more Eastern in the sense of Asian than of the East London streets (‘Weialala leia’). A voice enters, that of a fallen woman seemingly from an indifferent, middling background (‘Highbury bore me’), her existence scattered around London from central districts including once-disreputable Moorgate on the northern fringes of the City to the outlying riverine suburbs of Richmond and Kew on the south-western perimeter mentioned as the sites which ‘undid’ her.

London has largely been expunged from the poem at this point, apart from the reprise of ‘Unreal City’ in ‘What the Thunder said’. In *The Waste Land* is both topographic and symbolic London, the former ingested from the Dickensian tradition then smashed up into shards and scattered around, the latter more than any De Quincey or Ford (or even Blake) the origin of the pavement visionary ‘psychogeographic’ writing of the later twentieth and

twenty-first centuries, which takes Eliotian content out of poetry and puts it into more quotidian daylight meditations with coherent form.

### **Fire and Water: Symbol after Eliot**

Symbolic treatments of London endure into the twenty-first century. Among them are dystopias such as Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006), the narrative of which moves to and fro between a grimly realist account of the life of a taxi driver in early twenty-first-century London, and a dystopian future in which the descendants of survivors of an apocalypse which many generations earlier has flooded the river basin in which London grew occupy what were once the heights of Hampstead Heath but are now remain as small islands in an ocean. Vision and toponyms combine here because the London taxi driver is known as an expert on the streets of London, their precise names and layout.

Beyond dystopias such as this, enduring symbolic treatments of London indicate less science-fictional apocalypses in which a city is consumed by fire or water, with antecedents that are both Dickensian and Eliotian. In Dickens's *Bleak House*, Krook's rag-and-bone shop may seem in its raggedy, greed-driven variety somewhat close to a metaphor for London itself; it burns to the ground. In later Dickens, bodies are enveloped by water: Magwitch in *Great Expectations* emerging from the water in central London near Pip's chambers or the trade in the possessions of the drowned in *Our Mutual Friend*. In history London was a city which existed because of the crossing point of a river; which had its Great Fire in the seventeenth century and which had its second great fire in the infernos of the Blitz during the Second World War. Self describes a Ballardian drowned world as London's future while Eliot's *Waste Land* is filled with the destructive properties of fire and water, ending with an unpunctuated 'burning'. London writings by Murdoch (*Under the Net*) and Rose Macaulay (*The World My Wilderness*, 1950; see Anderson 2007) set in the aftermath of the Blitz treat

the effects of fire more matter-of-factly as what creates vast spaces of emptiness and disorder within what was before the war a cramped and grimy post-Victorian London of the sort evoked by Collins (*London Belongs to Me*). Later writing, notably Moorcock's *Mother London*, moves more explicitly towards the idea that the flames of the Blitz somehow cleansed London of the filth for which it had long been notorious, a layer of grime itself associated with the vast quantity of coal fires which burned in London between the eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries, giving it a nickname used by non-Londoners: 'the Smoke' (OED s.v. smoke, *n.* 1.d.).

Indeed, The Blitz became mythologized in later twentieth-century Britain as a time when the hitherto profound social class division by which the city had long since been riven, often dramatized in the twentieth century as East End versus West End but equally apparent in Virginia Woolf's account of late Victorian or Edwardian Covent Garden market in *The Years*, disappeared:

Men and women in full evening dress were walking along the pavement. They looked uncomfortable and self-conscious as they dodged between costers' barrows, with their high piled hair and their evening cloaks, with their button holes and their white waistcoats, in the glare of the afternoon sun.

Woolf, of course, died at the darkest point of the Second World War, looked at from a London point of view. After that, on one view, the flames forged Londoners as a unity, breaking down the binary opposition between Professor Higginses and Alf Doolittles marked out by Woolf (and Shaw) thinking of the decades immediately before 1900, creating in Moorcock at least the ghost of a new and socialistic Briton. *Mother London* has the Blitz at its heart, reaching it not via a conventional narrative ordering in chronological order or a story told by simple flashback, but a series of jumps between groups of decades. The whole of Eliot's 'Little Gidding', written in 1942 at the height of the Blitz, concerns the purifying



possibilities of fire. Most of its second section is a dream-like narrative by a speaker who is abroad at night in a specifically contemporary London (a city of ‘asphalt’ not cobblestones), yet here, even more than in *The Waste Land*, London is only an example of some somewhere in which humans are lost (Eliot 1974: 217).

### **After 1945: Immigrant and Post-Immigrant Writing**

Among other things, Eliot’s writing of London is an immigrant writing. Yet he in turn faced criticism from a Emanuel Litvinoff (2008: 194-95), a younger writer with an East End immigrant background for acting like ‘a god’ who ‘utters from Russell Square and condescends’, not least by allowing blatantly anti-Semitic passages in his earlier poems to keep being reprinted in later editions. Much London writing is, in a way highlighted by the Eliot-Litvinoff encounter, immigrant writing of non-identical sorts. London writing since the Second World War has oscillated between allowing immigrant voices to escape in their novelty and unconnectedness to London’s pasts, and following the established Dickensian and Eliotian paths. Thus Iain Sinclair’s writing on the frontiers of fiction and non-fiction, running from *Lud Heat* (1975) to *London Orbital* (2002), is the writing of a (British) incomer to London who interprets the city in a way that is distinctly Eliotian.

Some of the best post-war London writing continues to excavate pasts in hidden Londons in a manner picking up on the earlier ‘Old London’ tradition. Iris Murdoch’s later writing has been described as occupying a ‘cosily circumscribed geography’ including, in the capital, only selected portions of West London (Ratcliffe 2015: 3), but *Under the Net* ranges wider, most evocatively in a run of chapters that are at the heart of the novel before it indeed decamps to Hammersmith and Shepherd’s Bush in its later stages. In this novel, London is a ludic site. Chapters 7 to 9 move from a fruitless search through multiple City pubs which somehow match or are the other side of the coin to Eliot’s City churches, some of them with

secret or hidden London associations of a mythic-archaeological sort (for instance the King Lud at Ludgate Circus), to a moonlit swim in the River Thames at the point where it flows with the City on its north bank, recalling both Eliot's 'Oil and tar' and the night-time trade of Gaffer Hexham (and Magwitch's river connections) in late Dickens, to resurface after this alcohol-fuelled night of loss and revelation in Covent Garden flower market, London's heart of social contradiction from Dickens to Shaw and Woolf, ending 'flat upon the grass' and finally fast asleep at noon in Hyde Park (Murdoch [1954]: 126), key locus for the displays and snubs of silver-fork fiction and Thackeray, and site of inter-class encounters in Plomer, Beckett (whose *Murphy* contains a vitally game-like portrait of London that seems, along with the wild wanderings of Céline, to underpin Murdoch's account) and Selvon.

In a parallel way, the searches through public toilets, the random sex encounters and the pursuit of them on the London Underground and elsewhere of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) create the grounds for random encounters; they render London as adventure site, with a meaning that is 'under London' in a different sense from that of Sinclair and his followers. The swimming pool and the Soho gay porn cinema where varied encounters take place are both literally underground in the novel, while the narrator, Will, moves around on the London Underground, the city's metro system, and is preoccupied in a way highly characteristic of London writing between the 1960s and the 1990s, with London's 'abolished' tube stations:

I did so regret it was the Central Line I used most. I couldn't get any kind of purchase on it. It had neither the old-fashioned open-air quality of the District Line, where rain misted the tracks as one waited, nor the grimy profundity of the Northern Line, nor the Piccadilly's ingenious, civilised connexiveness. (Hollinghurst 1988: 46)

A key word here is *quality*. The observation of London life here comes amid intense, raw – and comic – accounts of casual and less casual sexual encounters in the London environment.

However, there are alternatives. Post-war testimonial accounts like those of Litvinoff and Duffy (*That's How It Was*, 1962, the story of a cockney dragged up out of London) are powerful. These writers are largely free of the influence of either Dickens or Eliot. Such writing can give a radical otherness to life in the city: there have been, according to W. G. Sebald (*The Emigrants*, 1992), people who spend years in London thinking it is New York. For the title character of Simon Blumenfeld's *Phineas Kahn: Portrait of an Immigrant* (1937), it is survival and his family that counts, not what city he is in, and he must be working, travelling to and home from work or recuperating exhausted in some room. For him, matters like the night-time wanderings of Dickens, or even the half-starved pedestrianism of Gissing, poor but English and educated, and so able enter the higher echelons of society, or the Eliot or Rushdie sorts of privileged cosmopolitanism count for nothing. Kahn may have reached London from the Russian Empire via Vienna, but he has no notion of an 'Unreal city'. For Litvinoff's East Enders, remembered as they were in the 1920s by a writer looking back his own childhood across a distance of nearly half a century, it is not a matter of living in an Unreal city: the Jewish inner-city life he remembers has international dimensions unknown to Cockney neighbours but is utterly real, vivid with smells and sounds, from 'pieces of partly edible fruit' gathered from 'the rotting debris of Spitalfields Market' by a man no longer arrived from Eastern Europe, to the environment the struggling Jews must occupy amidst 'drunken mobs' of seemingly insane Cockneys with 'wild children'; 'a mad gypsy woman over the road who gave off a smell like a barrow-load of old rags' (Litvinoff [1972]: 22)

Voices which diverged from the Dickens-Eliot traditions emerged in the 1950s and did so by speaking explicitly for youth or the immigrant in a mimicking voice. MacInnes (see White 2010) is breathless, violent, personal, scruffy, and he wants to be true to the streets, to speak in their voice:

Then one of the scruffos turned and looked at his choice companions, and grinned a sloppy grin, and suddenly approached the two Sikh characters and hit one of them right in the face: with his fist pointed so that the top knuckles got inside the skull. (MacInnes [1959]: 192).

Drawing on American ‘hard-boiled’ urban fiction, MacInnes uses a partly personal vocabulary, the ‘spades’ of *Absolute Beginners* (slang for black immigrants to London in the 1950s) matched by the ‘jumbles’ or John Bulls of that novel’s predecessor in what is known as MacInnes’s London trilogy, *City of Spades* (1957). Later writers would go further than MacInnes in the direction of unknown, even alien voices, entering London. Rushdie hears a babble of voices of different origins, some unknown (*The Satanic Verses*, 1988), his London in the words of Homi Bhabha (1994: 169; cf. Groes 2011: 198-207) ‘tropicalized’, ‘grotesquely renamed Ellowen Deeowen in the migrant’s mimicry’.

### **Conclusion: Moving on from Dickens and Eliot**

The visionary and the topographic have kept combining and recombining in twentieth and twenty-first century London writing, with the literature of polyphonic mimicry emerging alongside them. Perhaps, as the mid-twenty-first century approaches, writers need to seek alternative models. Since 2000 writers such as Smith and Self have renovated the Dickensian and Eliotian paradigms. In Smith’s case this has been via an encounter with the post-colonial ‘voices’ writing of Selvon, Rushdie and Kureishi (see Groes 2011: 191-250; McLeod 2004); in Self’s it has been with Sinclair’s mystical-paranoid-topographic and with science fiction, notably that of Ballard. Future London writers need to go further. Perhaps heroes as diverse as Ainsworth’s Jack Sheppard, Blumenfeld’s Phineas Kahn, Baron’s Harryboy Boas and Maureen Duffy’s Paddy could point the way. They contain what Londoners of the newest

century need to understand and shape their existence there. Many of these new Londoners might be driving minicabs or riding buses to office cleaning jobs but also be swashbuckling and fearless in the face of risk, exclusion and adversity in precisely the way that these differently excluded protagonists of novels written between 1839 and 1963 are.

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