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### *Staging the city: London at the fin de siècle and the crisis of representation*

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*Staging the City: London at the fin de siècle & the Crises of Representation*

Victorian London was not only haunted by the ruins of its past, it was also possessed by dystopic visions of its future...a strong and stable modern metropolis...was...an impossible goal, for the future itself was already adulterated with spectres of collapse and loss.

Lynda Nead

A yellow pall of fog had suddenly descended on London...

Marie Belloc Lowndes

How might one free oneself from the cowardliness pressing upon social convictions of the present, subjugated as they are to reactive, mimetic, and regressive posturings?

Avital Ronell

I

A moment of whimsy, for which I hope I'll be forgiven: my second epigraph is taken from *The Lodger*, first published in 1913.<sup>1</sup> There are two readings at least in this line, two *inventions* to be observed. Nothing new is created, but something is found, hence *invention*. What is found is within, *and yet* other than the obvious reading; as such, it is necessary that we read this if we are to see through the fog. *First reading*: the descent of the fog provides an atmospheric and mood-inducing setting. In anticipation of horror, of that which should not be witnessed, the curtain

descends on the stage of the city. At the same time however, the city is ‘staged’ in this gesture. Written two decades at least after the canonical fin de siècle texts of Wilde, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, and others, *The Lodger* has recourse to *invention*, to unearthing the correct register, the appropriate discourse, for a fictionalized account of the Ripper murders. The image with which this line toys is clearly a potent one: *The Lodger* might be said to travel back, back into time, even as, it may be suggested, this novel—published when Modernism was well underway if not in full swing—appears to be haunted by the ghosts of both older texts and older Londons; which phantoms can be glimpsed all the more plainly, albeit paradoxically, because of that yellow pall of fog. *The Lodger* plays on what Iain Sinclair calls, with reference to *Dracula*, ‘doctored memory, describing the past in the excited prose of a contemporary observer’ (LO 404). There is an act of conjuration here, a kind of magic to borrow from J. Hillis Miller’s definition of the work of literature as the opening up of a virtual reality.<sup>ii</sup>

The magic involves also a process of communion, and in this invention takes place; *The Lodger* does not merely time travel or open itself to a past London, it *invents* that London, a city of ‘mists and miasmas, busy streets and quiet courtyards’ (Sinclair LO 404); the novel finds the city within itself, as other than itself, and, in so doing opens also the performative within the constative, in such a fashion that the former exceeds the latter. *Second reading*: this has already been arriving for some time in this paragraph, becoming imperceptibly more visible with each passing remark. The line from *The Lodger* is available as a performative summary of fin de siècle fiction, on that fiction’s power to obscure the city, to consume it, and to distort both its heterogeneous realities and the literary reception of those realities. In much fiction of the late nineteenth century (we might read) London disappeared from view, shrouded as it was in a threatening, disquieting and disorientating miasma: a prose seeing nothing in seeing the same

everywhere, and seeing everywhere in the city as the same, as a series of endless manifestation of fear and horror.

## II

*Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens* examined the various manifestations of the poetics and rhetoric of London by writers in the first sixty-seventy years of the nineteenth century, tracing a trajectory from the apocalyptic and encrypted to the ineffable and undecidable. This trajectory was complicated and compromised from the start. Encryption and ineffability, apocalypse and undecidability are not poles connected by the historical line pursued through the chapters of *Writing London*. Instead, they are intertwined figures returning repeatedly throughout the period in question.

The present volume takes up particular threads from *Writing London*, seeking to explore how writers of the last seventy or so years seek to inscribe the city's images and resonances beyond the modes of perception and techniques of articulation that are considered in the earlier study. If, as I argue in that book, after Dickens many texts referring to or representing London draw on a limited range of repeatable images and tropes of urban identification, how (in what ways) does the language of city writing re-imagine or affirm itself anew, or otherwise come to be given radically different forms of expression or articulation? I have already given a brief intimation of certain possibilities through reference to Ford Madox Ford in the introduction. But before such questions are imaginable, it might be asked: is it even possible, after Blake and Dickens, to produce different discourses in differing registers of or on London? What, if anything, can be said after Dickens (to use this formula once more), if *all that can be said* is that

the condition of the city is ineffable, any writing having to respond by bearing witness to the fact that one can say nothing except to address this ineffability?<sup>iii</sup> While there are exceptional and singular texts such as *Archimago* (1864) and Ford's *The Soul of London*, it remains the case that transformative acts of writing that irrevocably change the perception and reception of London's landscape remain few and far between, many still caught in the language of the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. Thus, between *Writing London* and *Writing London (again)* as it were, between, for arguments' sake, *Our Mutual Friend* and the earliest short stories of Elizabeth Bowen, there is a gap to be addressed. Clearly, the popularity of the fin de siècle text's images of London is undeniable. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is published in 1907, Lowndes' *The Lodger* in 1913; even T. S. Eliot—even Eliot—invokes urban mystery in *The Waste Land* in 1922, as a brown fog descends on London Bridge, transforming London into an 'Unreal City', through the appearance of this trace of the Baudelairean spectre.<sup>iv</sup> And, more than a century after, the Ripper myth persists, not least in the Hughes Brothers' film version of Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell*,<sup>v</sup> the success of which attests to the persistence of the fin de siècle's most obvious and enduring tropes, images and motifs. It is to such figures, their violent force and equally violent muting of other possible representations of the city to which this chapter turns. Without wishing to be whimsical again, it is as if, that which haunts us from the fin de siècle has never gone away; it is as if each and every manifestation of the revenant merely serves to announce that it is always there.

Here, then, in the force of the trope, its insistent return, and its phantasmic hold over the imagination, is the predicament, perhaps more accurately the crisis, which I take to be at the heart of writing the city in urban fictions of the fin de siècle. This hold appears from one perspective and in certain lights to produce a violent hiatus in the writing subject who, in thrall to

such force can see nothing other than variations of the same image repeatedly. It is a crisis of representation to which I argued in the introduction to *Writing London*. In that volume, my charge was largely polemic; revisiting this argument here as a means by which to move on, it is doubtless necessary that I substantiate such claims, or at the very least complicate them through this examination of certain late Victorian tropes and motifs of urban figuration. In one sense, the explanation for the preponderance and persistence of the penumbral, the chimerical, the crepuscular and threatening within the limited range of urban representations, is all too obvious, at least with regard to the city. The network of images has been given ample, convincing analysis by Richard Maxwell, who summarizes his own arguments concerning novels of urban mysteries, as he defines them. The metropolis, Maxwell remarks, is for the novel, an ‘artifact whose inhabitants cannot seem to grasp what it is they have made’.<sup>vi</sup> In order to understand the mystery of the city, Maxwell argues (through discussion of Dickens and Hugo), allegorical figures are employed (*MPL* 292). Allegory might appear a strangely anachronistic mode in the modern city until, following Walter Benjamin, we recall that the ‘roots of modernism and modernity can be traced to the Christian Middle Ages and to classical antiquity’.<sup>vii</sup> It is precisely in the modernity of the nineteenth century that the traces of medievalism and the modern conjoin in a struggle resulting in the dialectical image, an image that is itself allegorical for Benjamin. Indeed, the modern is the ‘time of hell’ for Benjamin (*AP*544). Urban modernity is always this underworld, this eternal nightmare, because everything everywhere is always the same, and always new; and ‘to determine the totality of traits by which the “modern” is defined would be to represent hell’ (*AP* 544). The ‘allegorical significance of the descent’ (*PH* 206) into the urban underworld is, argues David Pike, the ‘framing motif’ of the *Arcades Project*, providing a ‘narrative framework’ that ‘informs every register of’ Benjamin’s project in his efforts to express the

‘present day experience of the city’ (*PH* 205). How may we perceive this, at least initially, in novels of the late nineteenth century? In much fin de siècle fiction the narratives of which take place in London, the descent into hell involves the traversal of the city from west to east, or from north, across the river to the south. The determination of the modern in such narratives involves a constant repetition of a rather limited number of traits, with a number of variations on the hellish theme, in order that the descent be achieved all the more rapidly; and the passage to hell always involves a transition from familiar, well lighted scenes to the squalor of dark streets and obscure back passages, in areas of the city where travel in fiction hardly, if ever, takes place.

In this chapter then (and with the allegorical condition of urban modernity in mind), I seek to unpack in an exploratory fashion dominant, recurring fictional figures of the urban, as these map an underworld that is not merely one aspect of London. Rather, for the writers in question, it can be said that hell *is* London. In sketching the contours of hellish urban modernity, I am not offering readings of particular novels but am instead working with a few passages chosen from particular writers of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. I focus solely and closely on the passages in question in order to stress what is shared in common in their representations of London, whether their writing is considered sensationalist or naturalist, whether it is driven by social concern, the market demands of genre fiction, or interests in aesthetic experiment. I do so in order to situate a departure point for the present volume, also recalling that gap between *Writing London* and the present volume, and speaking to that impasse first addressed in the earlier book. While there are many novelists from whom to choose—and, it could be argued, I have ignored two of the most prominent writers, George Gissing and H. G. Wells—, I have limited myself to a number of passages from a few writers, as exemplary of what I term acts of urban misreading and non-reception. Misreading takes place because the city is not



read on its own terms. Instead, particular traces of the city are gathered in acts of writing that function primarily through ontology and mimesis as twin modalities of delimiting expression, while at the same time allegorizing everything as a London that is everywhere alike.

### III

There can be no question that ontological and ontic structures rely for the success of their effects on mimetic and imitative abilities on the part of the thinker. The operation of such structures and their untroubled reception implies a more or less unproblematized ability to eradicate or ignore that which is apparently surplus or irrelevant to the delineation of any manifestation of being or identity, or which is otherwise at odds with that identity considered as an undifferentiated totality. At work in this scheme also is the assumption of an adequate imitative depiction of real existence (so-called), along with the implication that the fidelity of the copy to the real bears in its apparent faithfulness a direct relationship to reality. Any discussion therefore of the 'nature', 'identity', or 'being' of a phenomenon such as a city in ontico-ontological terms requires the possibility that definition take place according to such representational, discursive, or epistemological adequation; also implied in this discussion is the appearance through such adequate means of full, simple presence or identity. The adequate in this understanding is that point reached in representational verisimilitude where the ideologies of representation and ontology are mystified, and where the 'truth' of an image becomes accepted, the ontological question coming to rest. As we have remarked with regard to the representation of the city, such adequation is reliant on the illusion of an unremitting homogeneity: the self-same everywhere, and everywhere the signs of the same in an allegorical harmony of elements in the service of the

representation of that totality which is also modernity (to recall Benjamin). Speaking of the specific example of London at the fin de siècle, modernity *qua* hell must be implied as the totality of the city.

This is achieved in the texts in question not simply through the representational proximity or conflation of spatial elements; it occurs also through the enfolding of different temporal instances within the same image, even as they produce it. What is modern for the writers discussed in this chapter is the appearance within the new of the signs of primal, atavistic monstrosity as that which renews at every turn the modern city. The translation of the atavistic and primal into the perception of modernity reveals the ideological prejudices as well as the historicity of the ontological inquiry's formulation in the present example of late Victorian London. The politics of the ontological apropos of the modern city are unveiled at the close of the nineteenth century through the insistent image of a city allegedly in crisis. The presuppositions of fin de siècle texts are clearly in place, yet something does not quite function, and a fissure between representation and the ideology of ontology and representation opens. Tropes, figures, images, and motifs take over from within representation, their endless recurrence a sign of representation's failure to articulate the city; hence that sense of crisis, which, in being unable to cast a reflective eye on the act of representation, is displaced in turn on to the condition of the city itself, as being merely the reception *of* London, and the answer to the ontological interrogation: 'what is London?' Yet, paradoxically it is exactly in recourse to the primal, the monstrous, in short to all those allegorical elements employed to totalize the city, that writers of the fin de siècle expose the limits of writing London when explored ontologically.

Likewise, mimesis, considered as the possibility of representation whereby the empirical world is imitated faithfully, functions through an implicit suppression of difference, and of the

heterogeneous, if not also of the other. This is not to say that a mimetic representation *does* effect the exclusion of alterity or of difference, or that difference or the other are not at work in the representation. Indeed, it is in the reading of mimesis that the repressed often returns with surprising results. Some of the most interesting, albeit violent readings of explicitly mimetic texts are those which inadvertently or deliberately expose the work of difference and the traces of the other within any supposed representational totality considered as a homogeneous whole. However, the problematic paradox of the mimetic act in art is that, all too often, the reader is expected to assume, from a single scene or image, that the representation being read *is or points to* everything, that the apparent completeness of representation is, at the same time, a complete and homogeneous, self-sufficient figuration of the real. We are taught to read any mimetic image, not only as self-sufficient and all-inclusive (which gesture supposedly brings reading to a halt), but as a metonymy or synecdoche for everything else, by which understanding we therefore judge the writer or artist as successful or skilled. No single scene, no single image of the city, to address the specific example with which I am presently concerned, can make us *see* the city as such or as it is. Yet the function of mimetic verisimilitude in late-nineteenth-century novels (and many others also) is precisely this: to make the reader *see* in a certain fashion.

Mimesis therefore functions on behalf of particular ideological interests that extend beyond the borders of genre. In this way, many novels of the *fin de siècle* are complicit in a crisis of representation (as already averred), even as they are tyrannized by it. Caught in a hermeneutic fever, acts of writing the city produce a miasma of representation that is inaccurately read as the inherent in the community of signifieds, not the processes of signification. Not only can they not figure the city in its truly inaccessible, ineffable totality, but, in limiting violently its condition to a totality of closed semblance and equivalence through the constant reiteration of a few key

images pertaining to horror, abjection, the marginal and the monstrous, they also fail to receive the city; so there is generated and imposed a certain symptomatic non-reception on the reader. In this, mimesis assumes a psychoanalytic purpose, one which the word already acknowledges, yet which is hardly ever admitted, if at all, in discussions of aesthetic or representational matters. In a psychoanalytic and medical register, mimesis is the psychosomatic, symptomatic occurrence or manifestation of conditions in an otherwise healthy body. Thus, in the novels of the fin de siècle, the mimetic symptoms of misrecognizing the city occur everywhere. Trying to understand, trying to accommodate adequately everything that one sees in London without acknowledging fully the impossibility of so doing is potentially injurious to the subject, as is the assumption that only one mode of representation or one discourse is adequate to the process. With its power that attempts to arrest reading through recourse to the mysticism of allegorical totalitarian transcendence, mimetic ideology in the fin de siècle operates through a brutal suppression of difference in the attempted suspension of historical and material transformation through the projection of an ontology of London as *the only ontology of the city*.

#### IV

The mimetic and allegorical representation of London in the late-nineteenth century as 'Babylon', as 'Sodom and Gomorrah', or as a purgatorial labyrinth inclining towards an abyssal inferno, is symptomatic, then, not so much of the city itself but of a somewhat pathological reception, which, as I describe it above, a non-reception. We can, however, locate other instances of late Victorian representations of the city, which, while refraining from the more obviously allegorical, nonetheless register crisis. It is instructive to observe one such example, in order to

suggest how pervasive is the restrictedness of urban representation in the effort to address—or indeed, fail to address—what cannot be grasped. Though not usually a novelist associated with the fin de siècle, Wilkie Collins is a writer of urban mysteries, to employ Richard Maxwell’s phrase. As a mystery writer, Collins might be considered a transitional figure in the act of writing London, and thus he offers a provisional point from which to depart in this consideration of the problematic that persists in writing the city towards the end of the century. As will be observed, the transition in representation, a transition that remarks the historicity of urban description takes place in a language caught between the assumption of control over the subject of representation and the failure of control. ‘Confronted with a discourse [the heterogeneity that is London] that it cannot transform into an object’ the language of representation ‘forfeits control’,<sup>viii</sup> retreating into a restricted, telegraphic discourse. In doing so, it discloses its own anxiety through its adumbrated manifestations of ‘*displacement* and *condensation* limited by considerations of *representability*’ (JJ 22). In this commentary on narratorial commentary, Colin MacCabe draws a telling connection between the processes of the psyche on the one hand and mimesis on the other.

Such manifestations are witnessed in the following example, taken from Wilkie Collins’ ‘*I Say No*’ (1885). Collins initially appears to identify difference as a constituent factor in the constitution of the city’s identity, in this example in specifically economic terms, and in a manner that refuses to separate economic groups into local areas but which, instead, acknowledges the city as a place of difference’s endless flow and interanimation:

The metropolis of Great Britain is, in certain respects, like no other metropolis on the face of the earth. In the population that throngs the streets, the extremes of wealth and the

extremes of poverty meet, as they meet nowhere else. In the streets themselves, the glory and the shame of architecture—the mansion and the hovel—are neighbours in situation, as they are neighbours nowhere else. London, in its social aspect, is the city of contrasts.<sup>ix</sup>

Contrast and comparison are repeatedly brought together in this short passage, while, as a counterpoint to the repetition, there is another reiterated rhetorical gesture—that of negation, which serves in this instance to effect an apparently paradoxical intensity of focus on the intimacy of social extremity. That such effects are not stable and do not remain separable is emphasized shortly after, through the motion of a cab ride:

...the cab passed—by merely crossing a road—from a spacious and beautiful Park, with its surrounding houses topped by statues and cupolas, to a row of cottages, hard by a stinking ditch miscalled a canal. The city of contrasts: north and south, east and west, the city of social contrasts. (*I* 51)

The passage concludes with that echo and therefore with a reiteration *and* amplification, the one being, in this case, a form of the other. This doubling echolalia is of the words and effect ending the paragraph already cited, which opens Chapter 12, Book Two of *'I Say No'*—'In London'. The insistence on contrast is redoubled, intensified, in the labouring of the phrase beginning and ending the final sentence. In this fashion, Collins constructs an inescapable recirculation—and an economy also, if you will—given further emphasis in the implication of all-encompassing topographical co-ordinates. Compass point encrypts the social and economic range being telegraphed, while the condition of the city is implied as an experiential totality. The passage is

performative, for the movement of the cab journey is traced in the progression of the sentence itself. Moreover, there is a traversal that is also indicative of the architectonics of social inequality *and* proximity. This is structured by the motion of an implied gaze, from high to low, both socially and in terms of elevation, from the architectural detail of the rooftops, to the anonymous ‘sameness’ of housing for the poor, and beyond, into the abject, but equally constructed image of the canal. Indeed, we can also suggest, in the play of contrasts and, so to speak, the passage of, across the passage, the comparison between park and canal, as urban architectural reconfigurations, reinventions, of ‘the natural’.

In a sense, Collins’ brief representations are wholly familiar, recognizable, and, today, even clichéd perhaps. We see this in the figure of circulation. As its motion is economic, it is also corporeal; the city is organic, a mappable body, its lifeblood being both its economic vitality but also its destructive poison, circulation being already contaminated, the flow ending in the ‘stinking’ canal. Following the discussion of the obvious shared features of fin de siècle texts, above, Collins’ brevity might be understood as being partially, if not wholly, consonant with the symbolic structures of urban textual generation pertaining to urban social degeneration that are read in the texts already considered. However, in this singular instance the apparent lack of development might lead the reader to overlook the ways in which the two extracts work. What seems necessary to read here is that brevity, rapidity, velocity even, is possible for Collins in the latter years of the nineteenth century because by this time particular images of London have become so familiar; urban imagery has become so exhausted, and repeated because so obviously ‘true’ from certain perspectives and within particular ideological formations, that any act of representation has become caught up in the repetition of dominant tropes. In one way, this offers the urban writer a kind of freedom: playing on, *with*, accepted tropes, images, commonplaces,

the writer is freed to focus on narrative as though this could be divorced from setting or context. On the other hand, and as a result of what I am here describing provisionally as ‘freedom’, the writer’s text is informed by an urban myopia, if not blindness. Relying on the stereotypes of representation, the city is no longer seen clearly, if at all. Or, to put this another way, what is ‘seen’ is nothing other than the limits of a certain kind of representation, of a certain way of looking at London. Thus, there is a double bind to be read here: mastery and entrapment. A modality of representation is mastered, and so too, concomitantly, is the subject of representation, in this case the city. At the same time, it is the act of writing the city which becomes entrapped, not in opposition to any sense of mastery but, rather, as that which emerges from within the illusion of control over representation, hence the perception of crisis.

However, what is also fascinating in Collins’ descriptions is the absence of cause and effect, the direct attribution of conditions to location; there is not readable any psychologistic or anthropomorphic relativism, as is evident in other texts, to be considered momentarily. London, in Collins’ writing, just is this concatenation and proximity of the economic, regional and the architectural extreme. The passages describe a bare materiality of existence in a materiality of language from within the limitations of mimetic representation by which particular manifestations of urban analytic prose had become caught at the close of the Victorian era. It is noticeable, as a sign of the performative materiality of Collins’ language, that adjectival colouration and the aesthetic ideology on which this draws is restricted, limited to the park and canal, to the figures of an appropriated nature. Collins renders the city as immediately as is possible without the reader encountering the event of the city itself, so that material extremity is materially re-enacted in the adumbrated severity of discursive telegraphing. Through the bare use of comparison, Collins invokes the overflow of one region onto another, so that no location ever



remains separable or self-contained in its identity. In this, all London is reduced to the monotonous monstrosity of the self-same, the endless reflection of modernity, the ineluctable temporality of hell. Thus, *'I Say No'* intimates the appalling horror of the city, and in doing so through the merest of sketched and suggestive figures, reveals that the symptoms announcing such monstrosity are not simply allegorical of course even though they are phantasmic, symptomatic, as the play on the notion of circulation makes apparent. They are also traces of an otherwise indiscernible materiality and historicity. However, that the symptoms *are* so pervasive is understood if we recognise the endless transmission and amplification in many other novels of the period. And the signs are everywhere, across very different texts, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*, or Walter Besant's *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*.

V

Indeed, we need not even compare different writers but merely allude to two novels by Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* and *The Hole in the Wall*. Despite the fact that the former is a quasi-documentary revelation of the appalling living conditions of the working-class poor in the East End of London, owing much to naturalism, and the latter a criminal adventure set in London's docklands, both draw for their mimetic figuration of the city on similar tropes, images, and atmospheric effects. This, I would argue, should not be construed as an indication of Morrison's 'limited' abilities as a writer. Instead, it is indicative, once again, of the symptomatic overdetermination of the urban writer, as well as being a sign of both the text's cultural and historical interpellation and the crisis of representation that arises in the face of the otherwise

ineffable nature of London. Response lags behind the material force of phenomenal imposition, and the act of writing the city is revealed to us as inadequate. It is not that the city is truly unspeakable; it is rather the case that discourse, within the bounds of mimetic and ontological adequacy, is being forced historically to confront the experience of the aporetic. Catachresis and analogy are the appropriate terms in which to apprehend the city, not metaphor or mimesis. Writing the city is no longer a question—if it ever was—of presentation but appresentation and, moreover, an appresentative act that is performative, which gives us to receive the city as other, in its own terms, as a gift that shapes and haunts our responses. Writing the city is, or rather becomes, in particular, singular examples in the twentieth century and beyond, a double act: of endless reading as response to that which arrives, and of writing otherwise, through what I would like to call *apophatic poiesis*: an act of making which causes the arrival of an impression through the indirectness of the figural. Which is merely to say writing in a manner open to the reception of all traces, rather than attempting to imitate or copy selectively, according to the acceptance of a limited and necessarily distorted number of unquestioned simulacra and phantasms.

Chief amongst such phantasmic projections of London at the *fin de siècle* considered ontologically is that of the city as monstrous, devouring entity (as already implied), and there are countless, obvious examples of such imaginary mapping of the city. Occasionally anthropomorphised, certainly organic, London, or particular parts of London, chiefly the East End, the docklands area, other working-class districts and those populated by immigrants (which are often the same areas as those of extreme poverty), are depicted as the source of anxiety, contagion, monstrosity once again, and thus in constant need apparently of surveillance and policing. From these concerns, it is easy to understand how ‘literature is considered to be inextricably entangled with the health of the polis’,<sup>x</sup> even if, in this entanglement, the medium of

representation displays symptoms that are more problematic than those of the location it claims to represent, that is if the symptoms are more psychosomatic than material. Certainly, this is can be read across publications of the late Victorian period, whether the textual imperative is one of voyeurism and vicarious thrill-seeking literary tourism, or, more immediately politically, a liberal or conservative impulse to unveil the squalor and degradation that is at once so intimately close to the centre of the Capital (and hence the centre of the Empire), and yet so remote for some as to appear a foreign land.

Walter Besant's *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882) provides us immediately with disorientating co-ordinates of the foreign within London. In this novel, Besant describes the East End of London as 'that region of London which is less known to Englishmen than if it were situated in the wildest parts of Colorado, or among the pine forests of British Columbia...' (*ASCM* 28). Immediately, the reader is confronted with a landscape which, though within the nation's capital, could hardly be less familiar. The East End, remarks Besant, is 'an utterly unknown town', an 'immense, neglected, forgotten great city'. So occluded is this part of London, that its own inhabitants do not comprehend either the condition of their city or their own abject marginalization, for they are those 'who have never yet perceived their abandoned condition' (*ASCM* 28-29). A remarkable line, it brings to a climax the articulation of a relationship between space and subjectivity. Almost completely abject, London's east, a city in its own right in the author's imagination, is figured through an accretive series of negatives, lacks, and absences—'They have no institutions of their own to speak of, no public buildings of any importance, no municipality, no gentry, no carriages, no soldiers, no picture-galleries, no theatres, no opera—they have nothing' (*ASCM* 28). The East End, this other London, 'has little or no history' according to Besant (*ASCM* 29). Specifically, what is missing in the East End is a

network of textual reflection on the materiality of place. There is no architecture, no culture, no social hierarchy, nor any of the other material manifestations of ideological and hegemonic structure which serve simultaneously to make visible one particular London, and to figure exclusively the communal identity or ontology of a certain middle- and ruling-class Londoners to themselves, taken as a group.

More than this, though, even the graveyards of the East End are filled with ‘citizens as obscure as those who breathe the upper airs above them’ (*ASCM* 29). The anonymous living and the dead people Besant’s urban landscape. A shadowy double, an other of London, it appears—and this is perhaps not too much an exaggeration—as a chimera in the writer’s imagination, composed from the fleeting traces of chimeras. The East End is a place overflowing with shadows and lives to which no names can be appended; hence, its appearance all the more phantasmic, in that it can be sketched at all. Unlike other descriptions of the East End from the period in question, this is not some orientalised savage landscape but an unquiet topography offering no knowledge about itself and not encouraging interest: ‘nobody goes east, no one wants to see the place; no one is curious about the way of life in the east’ (*ASCM* 29). Nothing, arguably, could be in greater contrast to the usual late-nineteenth-century obsessive fascination with the figure of the east, however that comes to be troped and transformed in discourse. At the same time though, there is that sense of possession, figured in the comparison with ‘British Columbia’. The East End is an imperial territory, and yet wild for all that; it is, moreover, ‘an utterly unknown town’, despite its population in the 1880s of two million, to which statistic Besant draws our attention (*ASCM* 28). There is a curious effect here in the tension between statistic and the absence of knowledge, the anonymity of place. The East End cannot be rendered except through the abstraction of a number or the lack of history, awareness, or cultural memory

by which it could be said to be as much London as any other district. It thus comes to hover as a liminal and negative site due to the insistence on its ineffable condition, a place for which no language will quite do, even though there is a certain apprehensive familiarity about it.

If considered in the context of other fin de siècle representations of London to which I shall turn shortly, where the city is menacing, threatening, monstrous and uncannily gothic in its *Grand Guignol* effects, Besant's passage is strangely at odds in its assertion of nothingness. We might respond to Besant's urban nothingness by borrowing what could be taken as a criticism from an interview with Jean Baudrillard, who asserts that 'we can't begin with nothing because, logically, nothingness is the culmination of something.' However, continuing from this Baudrillard announces an interest in the radicality of space but admits that 'the true radicality is the radicality of nothingness', continuing to ask 'is there a radical space that is also a void?'<sup>xi</sup> I would propose, as a partial response to Baudrillard's question, that the East End is precisely, in Besant's imagination precisely such a radical space and, simultaneously, a void. In the light of Baudrillard's comments, we can read that what Besant makes plain is that the condition of abject London is not merely a condition of poverty:

It is the fashion to believe that they are all paupers, which is a foolish and mischievous belief.... Probably there is no such spectacle in the whole world as that of this immense, neglected, forgotten great city of East London. It is even neglected by its own citizens, who have never yet perceived their abandoned condition. They are Londoners, it is true, but they have no part or share of London; its wealth, its splendours, its honours exist not for them. They see nothing of any splendours...the city lies between them and the greatness of England. They are beyond the wards, and cannot become

aldermen; the rich London merchants go north and south and west; but they do not go east. Nobody goes east, no one wants to see the place; no one is curious about the way of life in the east. Books on London pass it over.... If anything happens in the east, people at the other end have to stop and think before they can remember where the place may be. (ASCM 28-29)

Belief, perception and sight punctuate the passage, but these offer nothing; rather they offer the absence of truth, image, and understanding. Here we read the ‘radicality of nothingness’, a nothingness that is marked through negation and the figure of the ‘beyond’, as well as through the absence of access to the possibilities of power from within the East End, and the invisibility of this area and its inhabitants from the outside. Other Londoners do not even hold the East End in active memory; a cultural amnesia maintains the erasure of the other London’s remnants and reminders. Thus, Besant is forced to work with absence, with otherness, with all that is beyond what might be described as the everyday networks of signification. In Besant’s passage, the nothingness by which the text gets underway is arrived at through the culmination of misperception and non-reception. There is thus a registration here of a kind of abject-sublime. Inexpressible not because wonderful or terrible, but because it exists beneath the barest limits of figuration, this other London is awful and inexpressible in any positive sense precisely because it is so terrifyingly anonymous at the level of the everyday. In this, Besant’s text usefully demonstrates for us the limit—and, undoubtedly, the crisis—that representation of London has reached, at least in terms of the languages deployed to map and figure the city.

This, the earliest example on which I wish to draw clearly does not produce an obviously malevolent or malignant London. Equally clearly, there is a development in the discourse of the

city from that found in the work of either Mayhew, with its sentimentalized, personalized depictions of poverty, or that of Engels, in which a phobic response driven by anxiety in the face of the incomprehensibility of 'size' determines the distortions of a largely numerically or statistically oriented representation. Besant works with languages of the urban which open a view of social space as void, all the more terrible for the possibility that one is thereby afforded a screen onto which to project the worst aspects of the other city. More than this though, with regard to urban representation, Besant's language gives the lie somewhat to other literary and documentary projects of social revelation and witness, such as Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1864) or Andrew Mearns' *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), which rely for their ideological efficacy on the belief that 'to write truthfully about the city seems to entail a commitment to the visible'.<sup>xii</sup> At its limit then, narrative projection becomes a kind of pragmatic performative (to borrow a phrase of Jean-Luc Nancy's<sup>xiii</sup>), where, in the absence of knowledge, an absence of narrative, memory, history or representation, London's other becomes the place without place, where from the comfort of known London, the city's refiguration takes place. That this occurs serves several purposes, at least. On the one hand, if, in the textual, public, or ideological imagination, the East End can be made to assume a khora-like function, by which, in being a mutable shape, it can come to be shaped by anything that comes to fill it, it can become the place where anything and everything that is monstrous can and does happen. (We need only consider in passing the power of the Jack the Ripper narratives, or that of the Ratcliffe Highway Murders,<sup>xiv</sup> both during their times, and subsequently down to the present day, to understand such performative persistence.)

On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence of the maintenance of the East End's 'non-existence' as Besant perceives it, the work of the pragmatic performative narrative is to

generate a phantasmic topography of the city. Such a topography occludes, marginalizes, and erases the quotidian realities and horrors of poverty, of working-class and immigrant experience. Such mystification throughout the last twenty years or so of the nineteenth century clearly authorizes a resistance against the comprehension of London's others. Simultaneously, it also may be read as making possible the promotion of countless phobic discourses having to do with class, race, foreignness, and sexuality, to name but a few; anything in fact which can be read, or rather misread, as being a potential threat to the 'proper' urban self. Such a threat is always about incursions into community and the erasure of corporeal and psychic limits, whereby the not-self, in this case the East End Londoner always holds the power of transgressive incursion into and through the propriety of individual and collective London identity. And identity is at stake because, despite the absences of which Besant speaks, the reader knows only too well that it is the space and place known as 'London' that is always at stake, always up for grabs. Transgression and disruption of identity are always closer than we think, for they are never truly separate but always a part of us.

We see this in the extracts from my next well-known example, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).

It chanced on one of these rambles that their way led them down a bystreet in a busy quarter of London. The street was small and what is called quiet, but it drove a thriving trade on the weekdays...

Two doors from one corner, on the left hand going east, the line was broken by the entry of a court; and just at that point, a certain sinister block of building thrust forward its gable on the street. It was two storeys high; showed no window, nothing but a



door on the lower storey and a blind forehead of discoloured wall on the upper; and bore in every feature, the marks of prolonged and sordid negligence, blistered and distained.

(*JH* 6)

A typical feature of fin de siècle urban writing is that sudden entrance onto a 'bystreet' or passageway, inevitably quiet but intimately adjacent to a busy district. The alley leads, equally typically, to a courtyard. The projection of the building into the courtyard, the wall described as a 'blind forehead', and the stained and blistered aspect: all are resonant for those familiar with Dickens' later descriptions of city architecture, particularly those in *Our Mutual Friend*. However, it is not only a certain intertextual reference or formal reiteration which is at work. (Were it only this, one could equally address Thomas Hardy's representations of buildings in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.) As with other late-nineteenth-century architectural representations of the less salubrious areas of cities, the quasi-anthropomorphised figuration is obviously suggestive of moral corruption and sexual disease. That I am saying nothing not already well known and acknowledged serves to illustrate two issues. On the one hand, the language of urban representation is undeniably exhausted; on the other hand, this has less to do with representation of or response to the condition of London as such, than with the generation or projection of a particular effect.

We witness Stevenson deploying yet other all-too-familiar tropes in the following passage in another section of the narrative: here in a description not of the East End as had been the case with Besant's novel, and as is to be read in *Dorian Gray*, but in a location much closer to the London of authority, society, culture and power, Soho:

It was by this time about nine in the morning, and the first fog of the season. A great chocolate-coloured pall lowered over heaven, but the wind was continually charging and routing these embattled vapours; so that as the cab crawled from street to street, Mr Utterson beheld a marvellous number of degrees and hues of twilight; for here it would be dark like the back-end of evening; and there would be a glow of a rich, lurid brown, like the light of some strange conflagration; and here, for a moment, the fog would be quite broken up, and a haggard shaft of daylight would glance in between the swirling wreaths. The dismal quarter of Soho seen under these changing glimpses, with its muddy ways, and slatternly passengers, and its lamps, which had never been extinguished or had been kindled afresh to combat this mournful reinvasion of darkness, seemed, in the lawyer's eyes, like a district of some city in a nightmare....

As the cab drew up before the address indicated, the fog lifted a little and showed him a dingy street, a gin palace, a low French eating house, a shop for the retail of penny numbers and twopenny salads, many ragged children huddled in the doorways, and many women of many different nationalities passing out, key in hand, to have a morning glass; and the next moment the fog settled down again upon that part, as brown as umber, and cut him off from his blackguardly surroundings. (*JH* 23)

In this description of Soho, the drifting fog, incongruously rendered as both chocolate in colour and akin to a funeral shroud ('pall' might possibly recall or be haunted by Blake's 'London'), moves wraith-like around the streets, the city becoming transformed. The fog not only obscures the city, *it becomes it*: neither material nor immaterial, neither transparent nor opaque, neither wholly there nor not there, yet all of these simultaneously, London is translated from within

itself. It is phantomized performatively through the very language that articulates it. Nothing is fixed in this representation, the image being one of ruins and traces, a series of ‘changing glimpses’, wherein all identity is unfixed and the Soho appears to Utterson ‘like a district of some city in a nightmare’. The phrase, ‘mournful reinvasion of darkness’ captures both the funereal aspect intimated by other words in the passage and also captures the precarious condition of the city’s identity. It is worth noting that the passage appears to waver between empirical description and phenomenological reception, channelled through the figure of the lawyer. Is this a sign of writing’s historicity? Are we witnesses to a moment of inscription caught between modalities of perception and representation? Or is this an oscillation that belongs to that pragmatic performativity, whereby the mutability of the city is such that it pervades not only the act of representation but also passes from the external world of the narrative to the mind of Utterson? This is not clear. But in a manner, we hardly need to provide an answer; for both gestures are equally telling, with regard to question of what London imposes on the text at a given moment. What should be noted is that the passage seems so inescapably familiar, all too predictable in fact.

The second paragraph maintains the work of the overworked trope, but adds to this in typically fin de siècle manner. There is an explicit adumbration of poverty, the foreign, the sexual, addiction, the other, with the references to the ‘low’ French restaurant, the women of different nationalities in search of habitual drink—the reference to the ‘morning glass’ would appear to confirm this. But how do we know that they are of different nationalities? This assertion is, I would argue, all the more violent for being imposed so swiftly, so arbitrarily, and there is in Stevenson’s gesture an assumption of shared knowledge concerning the identity and condition of Soho. The scene is disturbing, however, not for what it reveals; that is too banal, too

familiar. The discomfort it imparts is due in large part to the way in which it is so clearly stage-managed, with the fog lifting like a curtain at the pantomime just long enough to reveal all the hidden threats at the heart of the city, before descending once more.

The nightmare city, the city of endless crepuscular hallucination is also captured in the work of Henry James, even though there are no obvious horrors stalking the streets of James' London (with the possible exception of Hyacinth Robinson and the anarchists of *The Princess Casamassima*):

There is a certain evening that I count as virtually a first impression — the end of a wet, black Sunday, twenty years ago, about the first of March. There had been an earlier vision, but it had turned to grey, like faded ink, and the occasion I speak of was a fresh beginning. No doubt I had mystic prescience of how fond of the murky modern Babylon I was one day to become. (L 241)

From an essay entitled 'London' produced in 1888, written just six years after Besant's novel, and two after *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, James' text arrives with an inescapable sense, if not of *déjà vu*, then of *déjà lu*. The distinct sense in these three brief sentences—brief for James, that is—is one of an unwilled and fleeting image impressing itself on the mind's eye. The revenant impression, one in a series, is recalled across time to arrive on the page from that 'wet, black Sunday'. The visitation, one which is not originary but is itself the trace of that earlier trace, a memory of an impression, conjures for James another 'vision'. As James writes, he does so not only of the imprint of the city but also of a particular translation effect at work in this phantasmic inscription. Anamnesis returns the representation not as itself but as 'faded ink'; a fresh writing

is employed to delineate an older mark, even as the ghost of that mark haunts the present act of writing. This multiplies the oscillation already at work between the double memory of what can be counted effectively as two 'first impressions' and the gesture of staying the passage of anamnesis' traversal across the writing subject in the process of retrospective rapport with both the impressions and the effect engendered within the younger, other self. This is so because the writer is, of course, also a reader, doubled, doubling and dividing himself. That there are two 'first visions', the one less significant because less distinct, is itself significant inasmuch as James appears to admit that one can assign no originary moment or source for the arrival of the city's phantasm and the response it produces in one. Teleological retrospect authorizes the gesture of doubling and division thereby signalling the work of difference in the performative dimension of writing, memory, and the projection of, in this case, the urban subject. As a result, in an instant of temporal disorder as fleeting as the impressions of the 'murky modern Babylon' there can be made the claim, however belatedly, of 'mystic prescience'. I would argue that the prescience and implied temporal disorder offer a self-conscious gesture, authorizing the writer to produce an image of himself as a distinctly London figure, as belonging to, written by, the strangeness of the city.

So, James' text, though not a story belonging obviously to the late-Victorian gothic or sensation genre, nonetheless does have recourse to the language of such genres, while also playing in specific phenomenological and psychological registers that can be associated with much London writing during the period in question. His representation of the city and its spectral power is in evidence further on in the same essay, as James describes the generation in him of a sense of anxiety or abjection, possibly the uncanny even:

A day or two later, in the afternoon, I found myself staring at my fire, in a lodging of which I had taken possession on foreseeing that I should spend some weeks in London. I had just come in, and, having attended to the distribution of my luggage, sat down to consider my habitation. It was on the ground floor, and the fading daylight reached it in a sadly damaged condition. It struck me as stuffy and unsocial, with its mouldy smell and its decoration of lithographs and wax-flowers — an impersonal black hole in the huge general blackness. (L 244)

While obviously used in a quotidian manner in the context of the passage as a whole, and certainly with reference to the earlier notion of ‘mystic prescience’, ‘foreseeing’ takes on an especial resonance here (as, it might be averred, does ‘possession’). The impression is disquietingly unfixed: daylight fades, mould grows, and the flowers are mere imitations. There is a sense of apparitional motion, and of being caught in some liminal moment and space, between life and death, between one state and another, while the room, with its lack of identity, darkness, and its being a void of sorts, is presented as merely a synecdochic figure for that greater ‘general blackness’ of London in general. James continues:

The uproar of Piccadilly hummed away at the end of the street, and the rattle of a heartless hansom passed close to my ears. A sudden horror of the whole place came over me, like a tiger-pounce of homesickness which had been watching its moment. London was hideous, vicious, cruel, and above all overwhelming; whether or no she was ‘careful of the type’, she was as indifferent as Nature herself to the single life...It appeared to me that I would rather remain dinnerless, would rather even starve, than sally forth into the

infernal town, where the natural fate of an obscure stranger would be trampled to death in Piccadilly and have his carcass thrown into the Thames. I did not starve, however, and I eventually attached myself by a hundred human links to the dreadful, delightful city. (L 244-45)

From the first line of the passage immediately above, it is apparent that James' room is situated in one of those alleys off busy thoroughfares so popular in late Victorian London texts. The noise is oppressively intimate in the opening sentence, the alliteration of 'heartless hansom' curiously forceful, especially given its imagined quasi-living state. In the delineation of horror and anxiety that—uncannily—anticipates the considerations of fear, dread, and the process of the uncanny within being, James juxtaposes the monstrosity of London with the ferocity of jungle animals. He does so in order to transform the city into an unnaturally natural location, where the condition of the city is to be, as nature, 'red in tooth and claw', to recall Tennyson's Darwinian echo, which returns here, in the late 1880s, with social-Darwinian overtones, with London becoming the impersonal, all-devouring abyss. The horror of place is related closely to the uncanny, at least in the Freudian sense of that word, because the abject sensation of the subject produces the corollary of homesickness, through the startling illumination that the city could not be less familiar, less comforting. What then follows is no less violent, though perhaps somewhat more surreal; the jungle-city becomes a hellish landscape where the anonymous individual is obliterated, 'trampled to death' and disposed of in the river, all of which is related as though this were an everyday occurrence.

However, London is not simply place, not only a Dantesque stage, even if the city's modernity is hellish for James in its totality. Indeed, neither is it assignable a stable ontological

determination, nor is it reducible to a single representation, whether mimetically or analogically, as we see in the passages above, where the figure of ghostly locale gives way to that of jungle, before, in turn, being transformed into a dream-like purgatory. Not one identity, both less and more than this, London exceeds and overflows both itself and the power of adequate representation, so that all that can be said of it is that it is, at one and the same time, 'dreadful, delightful'. The Jamesian recognition of the city's sublimity is then acknowledged again, in the same essay, when it is remarked that a 'small London would be an abomination, as it fortunately is an impossibility, for the idea and the name are beyond everything an expression of extent and number' (L 245). One cannot 'know' or comprehend London as a totality, and James, of all the writers of the fin de siècle being considered here, begins to perceive the necessity of an other language—or a language of the other—if it is possible to write London in response to that which the city imposes, that demand and call articulated by London. James is not Besant; he does not proceed by negation, as if working through some gesture of quasi-Kantian apprehension of the sublime. The very idea of the city, its proper name, both signify that which cannot otherwise be signified in directly representational, mimetic, logical, mathematical or ontological terms. 'London' stands in as the name for what cannot otherwise be articulated directly, and one apprehends the city if at all only through a kind of indirect approach, through the spectral poetics of indirection of which we have already spoken.

In *The Sign of Four* (1890), Arthur Conan Doyle has no such intimation of the necessity or possibility of another language, his urban discourse being somewhat similar to that of Stevenson's in its atmospheric and topographical troping. Concerning the Strand in Chapter Three, we read of the 'dense drizzly fog [which] lay low upon the great city' (SF 21). In an image reminiscent of the opening page of *Bleak House*, the mud-coloured clouds and mud-



covered streets suggest an undifferentiable landscape. The lamps are 'misty', their light 'feeble', the pavement 'slimy'; the air is 'vaporous', and there is a semi-fluid 'shifting radiance' about the entire scene. The crowds moving through the strand are spectralized, undifferentiated and endless; they move 'eerie and ghostlike' in and out of shade and light (*SF* 21). The motion of the cabs is a 'continuous stream' and so echoes the motion of both the anonymous, inhuman crowds and that of the almost palpable air. As Utterson, the lawyer, had seen the procession of the nightmare city from a cab in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, so Dr Watson also observes the city's endless, ghoulisn parade from the safety of a hansom. Thus the individual subject is subject in part to the terrors of fluid impersonality, where all dissolves into everything else in a constant, unstaunchable flow, transgressive in its suggestion that every being, every identity, every ontology or representation is subject to an excess which erases the boundaries of the discrete or the proper. However, it is important to note that the individual subject witnesses the monstrous, apparently organic flow of London from within the relative safety of the cab, the horror of the megalopolis, its endlessness being apparently containable by the frame of the cab's window.

The city is thus both threatening and partially containable, the intimation being that the subject can be thrilled and terrified by the grotesque illimitable pulsation of the city space, and yet maintain a voyeuristic distance *and* proximity, as if being involved in some private peepshow. Indeed, one might even posit the cab window as analogous with a screen, across which move successive, uncanny tableaux, all of which are all the more fascinating *and* terrifying because they intimate for the voyeuristic traveller a not-quite human world. The registration of the city's phantasmagoria through the movement of the cab-screen attests to an increasingly common mode of attention in the second half of the nineteenth century, one in

which ‘perception is fundamentally characterized by experiences of fragmentation, shock, and dispersal’.<sup>xv</sup> In addition, it has to be acknowledged that with this scene, as with all the others addressed in the chapter, a strange act of reading in ruins is taking place through which, ‘it is possible to see one crucial aspect of modernity as an ongoing crisis of attentiveness’ (Crary *SP* 14). This crisis, I would argue, is but one aspect of the crisis of representation and also the crisis *in* representation. The reading of such scenes offers a threat to the subject, whose eye is the medium of transference, but who is barely there otherwise, and who is placed under the threat of erasure by the plenitude and velocity of the city’s heterogeneous traces. James is anxious about his possible obliteration: Utterson is only his ‘lawyer’s eye’, his professional identity being that which both authorizes his journey and protects him from the otherness of Soho; anything may, indeed, must be witnessed in the legal eye, and in the name of the Law. In Conan Doyle’s narrative, Watson, the professional medical man, is reduced to utilitarian technological function, becoming a mere recording device for forensic detail, almost at a loss to hold on to representation, given the rapidity of movement registered through the cab window.

Watson’s function is not exhausted however, and Conan Doyle acknowledges the specificity of location through a shift in representation when the doctor’s cab crosses the river, going south. Obviously enough to anyone familiar with the topographical and economic divisions of London, this means a change in what one witnesses. South of the river, we are on what Iain Sinclair calls, in his introduction to another Holmes tale, *A Study in Scarlet*, the ‘dark side of the Thames’.<sup>xvi</sup> If the Strand had offered the city as phantasm, a place of ghosts and also a disquieting illusion within the mind’s eye, South London is rendered in a more material, yet no less monstrous manner:

We had...reached a questionable and forbidding neighbourhood. Long lines of dull brick houses were only relieved by the coarse glare and tawdry brilliancy of public-houses at the corner. Then came rows of two-storeyed villas, each with a fronting of miniature garden, and then again interminable lines of new, staring brick buildings —the monster tentacles which the giant city was throwing out into the country. At last the cab drew up at the third house in a new terrace. None of the other houses was inhabited, and that at which we stopped was as dark as its neighbours, save for a single glimmer in the kitchen-window. On our knocking, however, the door was instantly thrown open by a Hindoo servant, clad in a yellow turban, white loose-fitting clothes, and a yellow sash. There was something strangely incongruous in this Oriental figure framed in the commonplace door-way of a third-rate suburban dwelling-house. (*SF* 23)

Whereas motion had unseated the stability of representation in the earlier scene, here it is the repetitive, somewhat brutal anonymity of regimented terraced housing that is read as 'forbidding'. The banality of domestic dwellings is contrasted to the 'coarse glare and tawdry brilliancy' of the public houses, a description suggestive of a relationship between illumination and morality. It might be said that the illumination is double: both literal and figurative, it serves to illustrate and throw in dramatic relief the 'human condition' through the employment of those judgemental adjectives, 'coarse' and 'tawdry'. What takes place here precisely is an illustration of the invisible, through that implied relationship between lighting and morality (or the lack thereof). The houses are therefore impersonal, indistinguishable forms that stand in for the anonymity of those who live within them, whose only 'notoriety' is illuminated, in turn, through the sketch of the public houses. A graphic representation is forced through the spectral trait of

the words, of what works within them, upon the reading subject. A generative force is at work, which, while never presenting or representing as such, nonetheless puts into effect an economically situated commentary. The lives of the Londoners in such a scene are never addressed directly, but a presumed aspect of such life is opened for us, as if such life were too terrible to represent on the page. And this, I would argue, is performative rather than constative, or certainly more than merely constative. The limitation of representation allows for a performative gesture that overdetermines location, without giving the reader access to sufficient information to read for him- or herself. Having none of the hallucinatory quality of the earlier scene, the present moment relies on a telegraphing stroke that tells us how to read the city in this particular place. That so much of this area of South London is 'third-rate', 'dull', 'interminable', produces a somewhat violent contrast to both the image of brick buildings which stare and the description of the area as being only the most recent result of the spread of London's 'tentacles'. In this latter image, London clearly becomes a monster or, perhaps, a disease, reaching out, touching and leaving its demoralizing traces everywhere. Finally, the reader and narrator encounter the singularly 'incongruous' figure of the Asian servant, whose bright clothing and origin so clearly sets him apart, and yet whose presence serves as another reminder that this is an other London, and one which cannot be read easily, or with any assurance.

Of course, the disquiet engendered by 'this grey monstrous London of ours' in the minds of certain of its subjects is not always fearful; or, if fearful, then at least tinged with an uneasy pleasure of sorts, having, as Oscar Wilde remarks through Dorian Gray, an 'exquisite poison'. Dorian has a 'passion for sensations' (*PDG* 73) and London provides a surfeit of these, being very much a world of the sensory and sensual. In Chapter Four of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, London is its people, some of whom 'fascinate', while others 'filled me with terror', though all

encourage a ‘mad curiosity’. London is comprised of ‘myriads of people, its sordid sinners, and its splendid sins...’ (PDG 73). In the language of some voyeuristic ingénue, Dorian continues:

I went out and wandered eastward, soon losing my way in a labyrinth of grimy streets and black, grassless squares. About half past eight I passed by an absurd little theatre, with great flaring gas-jets and gaudy play-bills. A hideous Jew, in the most amazing waistcoat I ever beheld in my life, was standing at the entrance smoking a vile cigar. He had greasy ringlets, and an enormous diamond glazed in the centre of a soiled shirt. (PDG 73)

Once again, the movement of the subject in fin de siècle London writing is to the East End of London, to a world of almost hypnagogic illusion, where nothing is real. It is this quality of irreality that four years after Wilde’s novel, Arthur Machen in *The Three Impostors* describes as a world of ‘chiaroscuro that had in it something unearthly’, in which crepuscular London ‘casual passers-by...flickered and hovered in the play of lights’, rather than standing out as ‘substantial things’, while lights appear in windows with ‘semi-theatrical magic’ (TI 9). However, Wilde’s theatrical, unreal city is notable in its description for that impression of intertextuality, playing as it appears to do—or are these merely more phantasmic traces within the phantasmic urban location? —between the disquieting, gaudy theatre reminiscent of Wordsworth’s groundless London of *The Prelude* and the dirty Jew, a figure belonging equally to Dickens or Du Maurier (to identify only the most obvious texts) whose monstrosity is figured through the play of synecdochic elements: the waistcoat, the cigar, the ringlets, the diamond and the soiled shirt. Wilde’s passage is remarkable for nothing so much as its play on cultural, racial and urban

stereotype. It plunders shamelessly the register of anxieties of middle-class Victorian Londoners in its performative projection of a groundless London ‘tainted’ by strangeness and foreignness. While in previous passages cited it had been the French, women, and a ‘Hindoo servant’, here we have that archetypal figure of otherness, the Jew.

The singular specifics aside, it is important to note that Wilde’s writing, like that of the others already discussed, engages in a performative gesture, and this can be read from the intertextual and stereotypical dimensions. For again, we are not reading a constative representation so much as we are being asked to imagine a phantasmic London projected into our minds (as is the case in Conan Doyle’s text), which, in its predictable literary and cultural recognizability, produces the appropriately programmed frisson of delight *and* terror akin to that felt by Dorian in his voyeuristic observation. The city is monstrously, potentially abyssally absurd only because the traces from which it comes to be generated are so familiar from other literary models. Reading London in Wilde’s case suggests not reading the city but reading onto some imaginary space a network of textual tropes. Tangible, material effects are produced because the reader is placed between texts, and projected onto in this positioning as the subject of an absurd urban formation. The structure of urban representation in the 1890s is absurd precisely because it engages in what we can now, following Baudrillard, describe as a hyperreal play of simulacra, or what Rainer Nägele has called ‘the phantasmatic instrumentalization of language...[which] produces as its complement the phantasm of “real presences”’.<sup>xvii</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not so much an example of the ways in which a writer will draw on prior texts, as it is an example, albeit a highly singular one, of a text locating itself as one nodal location within an already existing network of texts performing monstrous and absurd, often abyssal London.

Arthur Machen captures London's phantasmic absurdity in his novel already mentioned, *The Three Impostors* (1895). Somewhat more engagingly perhaps than Wilde's narrative, here urban strangeness is projected through the counterpoint of street music and street sounds: 'the runs and flourishes of brave Italian opera played a little distance off on a piano-organ seemed an appropriate accompaniment, while the deep-muttered bass of the traffic of Holborn never ceased' (*TI* 9). The city clearly both joins in with the music and produces its own melodic effects. Machen renders the oddity of effect economically through the rendition of opera on a piano-organ. However, Machen's text is not merely concerned with the production of comic effects, so much as it can be read as partaking in the by-now familiar disruptive juxtapositions in which fin de siècle city writing partakes repeatedly, as the following passage demonstrates:

I got into one of those quiet places to the north of Oxford Street as you go west, the genteel residential neighbourhood of stucco and prosperity. I turned east again without knowing it, and it was quite dark when I passed along a sombre little by-street, ill-lighted and empty. I did not know at the time in the least where I was, but I found out afterwards that it was not very far from Tottenham Court Road. I strolled idly along, enjoying the stillness; on one side there seemed to be the back premises of some great shop; tier after tier of dusty windows lifted up into the night, with gibbet-like contrivances for raising heavy goods, and below large doors, fast closed and bolted, all dark and desolate. Then there came a huge pantehnicon warehouse; and over the way a grim blank wall, as forbidding as the wall of a gaol, and then the headquarters of some volunteer regiment, and afterwards a passage leading to a court where wagons were standing to be hired; it was, one might almost say, a street devoid of inhabitants, and scarce a window showed

the glimmer of light. I was wondering at the strange peace and dimness there, where it must be close to some roaring main artery of London life... (TI 10)

The quotation functions for the reader through a dependence on familiarity with the echoes from that network of particular London texts, such as those to which I have already referred. There is the sudden entrance onto quiet locations devoid of the signs of human life, yet still intimately close to busy main streets, stereotypically described as ‘arteries’, in a partial translation of the city into a gigantic body. There are the architectural accents and details—the gibbet-like contrivances, the grim blank wall—suggestive of prisons and punishment. The still and quiet is not simply this, but is remarked on, and thereby rendered performatively, as strange. Interestingly, the passage maps the streets and their features as the narrator walks through them, so that the narrative figures as it traces a topography, but one without precise co-ordinates. For, despite the naming of principal streets, which run, respectively, East-West and North-South, the narrator remarks that ‘I did not know at the time in the least where I was’. Here is an act of mapping that is all the more strange for being both partially locatable *and also* disorientating.

## VII

This last sketch of Machen’s double gesture, simultaneously offering topographical co-ordinates in the form of street names and his narrator-subject’s sense of unfamiliarity, should, perhaps, give us pause in the conclusion of this chapter to ask some broader questions, which will refold back on the interests thus far articulated before proceeding. To put it bluntly, what is happening in fin de siècle London texts? What shared contours and processes can we discern with regard to



the act of writing the city? And why are these available as so many shared acts that remark the limit of a particular moment in urban representation? Let me trace possible answers through a series of formulae, all of which acknowledge the generation of a process from within particular acts of narrative construction. As a bare narrative minimum the London text relies on a relation between the delineation of location, the act of representation of that location, and commentary concerning what takes place within and as a result of the location, whereby representation produces a contextualized action as belonging to, part of location. Location as symbolic function determines the choreography of narrative action and the events of the narrative, in turn, serve to inform the reader as to the condition of location. Yet within each of these three figures there is discernible a shadow-function at work, which I give here as corollary *and* other-within. These figures can be traced as follows: location *and/as* dislocation; representation *and/as* misrecognition; commentary *and/as* proscriptive performativity. In each of these a series of tropes is deployed, along with motifs, images, and metaphors, whereby the familiarity of such figures, and of course the figures themselves, serve to stage a fictive city. For all that, it is so apparently recognisable, this metropolis is nonetheless neither a reception of nor a response to London, to that which the city can inscribe on the subject open to the arrival of the multiple traces of its otherness. Such performative staging as we see in fin de siècle writing prohibits through enactment the reader's reception of any other aspect of London. It enacts such a proscription because the motifs of proximal foreignness and intimate monstrosity are reiterated within a pervasive economy of self-replication and intertextual self-referentiality, all of which are suggestive that this is all there is to London and London is just this monstrous identity (a monstrous identity all the more uncanny in being so coherent). To borrow a phrase wholly out of context from Bernard Steigler, in such writing as I have considered in this part of the

introduction, 'everything is already identically the same' (*TT* 124) in these texts, so that no access to the city is possible. London does not write here and neither is it written, strictly speaking; it becomes—it is always already—written, if not, perhaps more accurately, overwritten, as the proper name, metonymy, and synecdoche, for the cultural anxiety and fear of the other, of others. The mapping of London is translated into a topography of terror, having more to do with giving location to that which haunts the cultural, historical psyche.

This is not to say anything new of course. Critics of the late Victorian period have known this for a long time. But what is fascinating is the way in which London as site, as stage, is so energetically, repeatedly produced, again and again, as both location and source, so that representation of the city is always misrepresentation in the service of ideological overdeterminations. London is rendered as the place par excellence of voyeuristic horror, whether economic and social, as in the case either of Besant or Morrison, or else phantastic, atavistic, or gothic, as in the other examples. (Not that the socio-economic and the gothic are absolutely separable, as I have sought to demonstrate.) While the terrors of the gothic were already well known, it is arguable that never before the end of the nineteenth century had a single site or topography so effectively served as the focal point for the exploration and expression of cultural anxiety, as had London. In this topographical and ideological intensity (and intensification), the language of representation comes to be revealed as reaching particular limits. Dread, fear, anxiety: all produce and translate alterity and heterogeneity as what, following Benjamin on the hell of modernity, I would term the *same-everywhere*. At the moment in which this happens, reading no longer takes place, representation admits to a paucity of the imagination, and language as response to the other begins to assume an inarticulacy in the insistence and frequency of its repetitions. In its repetitious reproduction of the same-

everywhere, such inarticulacy admits not so much to social atavism as the seemingly atavistic fear from within the (bourgeois male) subject in the face of that which appears all the more wholly other, because there is no language, no mode of representation or ontological framework by which to control it.

While I discuss such fears in Wordsworth, de Quincey, and Engels, in *Writing London*, it seems to me that fear or anxiety in the face of the city as other reaches fever-pitch by the end of the century concomitantly with the breakdown in mimetic or directly representational modes of discourse. This is particularly so with regard to London, precisely because what the city imposes is simultaneously in excess of any ontology, and so is irreducible to any mode of discourse intended to generate or convey a coherent meaning. Fin de siècle writers, such as those with whom we have been engaged, open themselves to an abyss of the not-self as the absence of their reflection anywhere in the city is allied to a voyeuristic impulse that drives the search for reflection further. This is a drive which reveals the impossibility of locating, in Derrida's words, 'a pleasure of the same...the mastery of the dissimilar...the reduction of the heterogeneous' (*TP* 113). Yet despite or because the recognition of representational failure, what takes place in the fin de siècle with regard to the production of stable meaning appears as an act of mechanistic urban reproduction. This is reminiscent—at least to this reader—of the masturbatory machinery figured in Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. Through such self-generating writerly technicity—whereby writing polices itself in its imaginary productivity and performativity rather than giving itself over to the reception of a *poiesis* of the other—, the city, controllable through the delimitation of its tropes, is maintained in the process of generating fear in response to its images. Such reproducibility—the reproducibility of the image, of the fear, of the component parts of a certain pre- and

overdetermined structure—is a process of stage-management effected insistently through occlusion and erasure. That which is obscured, denied, made invisible, is threefold—otherness, memory, and difference: otherness as non-threatening, memory as vital to community, and difference and heterogeneity as merely the conditions for the maintenance of the taking place that is the city's condition. The spectral memory and historicity of the city, its many ruined narratives, are suppressed in favour of a formal literary haunting denying the alterity and heterogeneity of a true London poesis, which it is the aim of this volume to open to analysis.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Marie Belloc Lowndes, *The Lodger*, (1913) int. Laura Marcus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 94.

<sup>ii</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 21.

<sup>iii</sup> Interestingly, one reviewer of the book, Isobel Armstrong, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, wondered, in passing, whether there was any pleasure in the city where all was so apparently ineffable. This is to assume that the ineffable is, in being literally inexpressible, close to the sense of awe or terror produced by the sublime. While I have no disagreement with the assumption of such a relationship, I do not believe that this rules out the possibility either that there is more than one aspect to the ineffable (or, to put it more radically, more than one ineffability), or that one's sense of the ineffable is not pleasurable in some manner. After all, there are those moments – perhaps 'events' might be the more accurate word more properly speaking – when, through sheer joy one is left speechless. The question is one, I feel, of whether one takes ineffability to be a condition of an empirical object or material location, or whether it is a matter of phenomenological response. That the city can produce both joy and fear as components of the ineffable is attested to in a number of texts, not least De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

<sup>iv</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, (1922) in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, (1963) (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 61-86; 65. Hereafter *WL*. Martin Rowson's comic book version (London: HarperCollins, 1990) admirably brings out Eliot's indebtedness to crime fiction, and to the urban mystery genre in general, in his employment of a hardboiled narrator-detective, Marlowe, a hybrid of high and popular culture, being both Conrad and Raymond Chandler's Marlowe.

<sup>v</sup> Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, *From Hell*, (1999) (Paddington: Eddie Campbell Comics, 2001).

<sup>vi</sup> Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 292. Hereafter *MPL*.

- <sup>vii</sup> David L. Pike, *Passage Through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 203. Hereafter *PH*.
- <sup>viii</sup> Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 21. Hereafter *JJ*.
- <sup>ix</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'I Say No', (1885) (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), 51. Hereafter *I*.
- <sup>x</sup> Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182.
- <sup>xi</sup> Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Object of Architecture*, trans. Robert Bononno, Foreword K. Michael Hays (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 3.
- <sup>xii</sup> Carol L. Bernstein, *The Celebration of Scandal: Toward the Sublime in Victorian Urban Fiction* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 29. Hereafter *CS*.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'«il y a» du rapport sexuel* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), 14.
- <sup>xiv</sup> The murders were committed in December 1811. Seven people in two families were butchered in their homes.
- <sup>xv</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, (1999) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 1. Hereafter *SP*.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Iain Sinclair, 'Introduction', in Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, (1887) int. Iain Sinclair (London: Penguin, 2001), vii-xxi; xii.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Rainer Nägele, *Echoes of Translation: Reading between Texts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 17. Hereafter *ET*.