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Victorian Investigative “Slumming”

Out of Thomas Carlyle’s impassioned warnings about the “signs of the times” in the 1830s and Disraeli’s description of Britain’s division into “two nations” in the 1840s, a genre of social exploration journalism emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century to report upon the living conditions of the metropolitan poor. The OED gives a late-nineteenth century definition of “slumming” as the visitation of slums “for charitable or philanthropic purposes, or out of curiosity, esp. as a fashionable pursuit” (*slum* v. 4.a). Such touring of late-Victorian slums by those who “commanded resources entitling them to gawk at or help the poor” is the subject of Seth Kovan’s *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Kovan [2004](#): 10). As it was first developed by Henry Mayhew, Charles Dickens, and other journalists variously designated as “special correspondent” or “secret commissioner,” however, investigative “slumming” was designed to provide an early form of sociological inquiry uncovering the social, domestic, and working lives of the poor for readers who could thereby experience a vicarious “descent” into “unknown London” from the comfort of their armchairs. It was devoted to the exposure of social deprivation, crime, and institutional mismanagement or failure and sought to provoke readers, through its vivid first-hand reports, into calls for legislative or economic change.

In the preface to the first volume of his republished and expanded reports on London labor and the London poor (originally serialized in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849–1850), Mayhew invoked the image of the social explorer, describing himself as “the traveller in the undiscovered country of the poor,” “supplying information concerning a large body of persons, of whom the public had less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth” (Mayhew [1861](#): 1, iii). His commitment to first-hand accuracy of observation and reportage – “to publish the history of a people, from the lips of the people themselves – giving a literal description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their own ‘unvarnished’ language” (Mayhew: 1, iii) – became a distinguishing feature of social exploration journalism. The method he devised for reporting his interviews with street-folk was designed to provide a mimetic transcription of voice so as to convey an effect of communicative immediacy and authenticity.

Such qualities were also in view when Walter Bagehot famously credited Dickens with the ability to describe London “like a special correspondent for posterity” (Bagehot [1858](#): 394). The exposure of immiseration and crime among the urban poor remained an abiding concern for Dickens in his journalism (as, of course, in his fiction), first in *Sketches by Boz* and later in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. His investigative forays into the east end of London in the company of Inspector Charles Field are a case in point. Visiting a series of low lodging houses in “On Duty with Inspector

Field,” the shifting narrative perspective employed throughout establishes a structure of feeling in which readers are made first-hand witnesses to the conversations exchanged in these criminal haunts, albeit from the safety of their armchairs. But as he spies the inscription on the sheets in one lodging house, designed to prevent theft of linen, he is led to imagine the kind of subjectivity produced by this disciplinary culture:

To lie at night, wrapped in the legend of my slinking life; to take the cry that pursues me, waking, to my breast in sleep; to have it staring at me, and clamouring for me, as soon as consciousness returns; to have it for my first-foot on New-Year’s day, my Valentine, my Birthday salute, my Christmas greeting, my parting with the old year. STOP THIEF! (Dickens, 14 June [1851](#): 268)

It was this capacity to enter into the experiences of others so as to provide a vivid first-hand report that Dickens sought to cultivate among those roving contributors to *Household Words* who came to be known as his “Young Men.” John Hollingshead was one of these apprentices, later claiming that two of his contributions to *Household Words* – “Riding the Whirlwind” and “All Night on the Monument” – were recognized as “an early, if not the earliest effort, of ‘Special Correspondence’ or ‘Graphic Reporting’” (Hollingshead [1895](#): 1, 96). Indeed, the *Times*’s 1904 obituary described him as “practically the inventor of ‘graphic reporting’” (“Mr John Hollingshead,” 11 October [1904](#): 8). This was overstating his role. Nevertheless, when Hollingshead was commissioned by the *Morning Post* in 1861 to investigate the distress suffered by the London poor during an exceptionally harsh winter, his reports attracted widespread public attention. They ran from 21st to 31st January 1861 under the title “London Horrors” and were excerpted in both the provincial and continental press. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, for example, hailed the appearance of the first of this “series of pictures drawn from close personal inspection of the present social condition of the metropolitan poor” (“London Horrors,” 23 January [1861](#): 2), emphasizing both their graphic quality and eye-witness veracity. As the *Examiner*’s reviewer of Hollingshead’s republished correspondence noted of the authenticity of his reportage, “[i]t is the result of close and direct study of life in the regions it describes, and bears to the country trustworthy witness of facts that it ought to know” (“Ragged London,” 18 May [1861a](#): 310). The vivid, pictorial quality of Hollingshead’s series may be seen in his description of Somers Town, near Kings Cross:

It is filled with courts and alleys; it puts forward a gin-palace built in the true Seven-dials’ style, even to a clock in the wall near the roof; and is crowded with cheap china-shops, cheap clothiers, and cheap haberdashers. Its side streets have a smoky, worn-out appearance; the gas-lamps project jauntily from the walls, the iron-posts at the end lean towards each other as if for mutual support; every

street-door is open; no house is without patched windows; and every passage is full of children. Back views of dingy public-houses make the scene more dismal; and wherever there is a butcher's shop it contrives to look like a cat's-meat warehouse. ("Near King's Cross," 26 January [1861](#): 5)

The impoverishment and dinginess of the neighborhood are underlined as features of its built environment – “jaunty” gas-lamps and sociable “iron-posts” – take on a vitality altogether lacking in the human inhabitants.

While Hollingshead's “London Horrors” series earned praise for its “dramatic intensity” (“Our London Correspondent,” 2 February [1861](#): 2) and “graphic and circumstantial accounts” (“Ragged London in 1861,” 4 May [1861b](#): 418), later practitioners of investigative slumming sought more sensational effects by using an incognito for the purposes of their social exploration. Seeking to boost the circulation of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in [1866](#), Frederick Greenwood recruited his brother James to visit the Lambeth Workhouse in the guise of a “casual” seeking overnight shelter and to report upon his experiences. The series, entitled “A Night in a Workhouse,” was published on 12, 13, and 15 January 1866 under the pseudonym “The Amateur Casual” and lifted circulation of the *Gazette* “to over 9000 for the first time” (Donovan and Rubery [2012](#): 103). The opening of the first instalment relies upon the techniques of forensic detail typically found in the sensation novel of the 1860s to launch a gripping narrative:

At about nine o'clock on the evening of Monday, the 8th inst., a neat but unpretentious carriage might have been seen turning cautiously from the Kennington-road into Princes-road, Lambeth. The curtains were closely drawn, and the coachman wore an unusually responsible air. ... From [the carriage] door emerged a sly and ruffianly figure, marked with every sign of squalor. He was dressed in what had once been a snuff-brown coat, but which had faded to the hue of bricks imperfectly baked. ... This wretched garment was surmounted by a “birdseye” pocket-handkerchief of cotton, wisped about the throat hangman fashion; above all was a battered billy-cock hat, with a dissolute drooping brim. Between the neckerchief and the lowering brim of the hat appeared part of a face, unshaven, and not scrupulously clean. The man's hands were plunged into his pockets, and he shuffled hastily along in boots which were the boots of a tramp indifferent to miry ways. In a moment he was out of sight; and the brougham, after waiting a little while, turned about and comfortably departed.

This mysterious figure was that of the present writer. ... (“A Night in a Workhouse,” 12 January [1866](#): 9)

Greenwood's disarming use of the third-person is abandoned as the "Amateur Casual" goes on to record his conversations with the workhouse authorities; his stripping at the behest of the warder "Daddy" in order to bathe in a filthy liquid "like weak mutton broth"; and the impossibility of his sleeping in a room crowded with men squashed three to a bed, many of whom were smoking and expectorating. As Kovan observes of the report's sensationalism and suggestions of sexual transgression, Greenwood's "entry into the mutton-broth bath signals his willingness to violate, at least for one night, bourgeois taboos concerning hygiene, the body, and modesty" (Kovan: 39–40).

Greenwood's exposé regarding conditions in the Lambeth workhouse inaugurated a tradition of undercover investigative reporting that grew with the expansion and commercialization of the popular press in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1883, for example, George R. Sims employed undercover strategies to "record the results of a journey with pen and pencil into a region which lies at our own doors – into a dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General Post Office" (Sims [1883](#): 151–152). His tour of slum tenements was serialized as "How the Poor Live" in the *Pictorial World*. In 1885, pioneer of the New Journalism and newly appointed editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, W.T. Stead, began an undercover investigation into juvenile prostitution in London, publishing his findings in a sensational series entitled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon." Women, too, joined the tradition of investigative slumming as they began entering the profession in greater numbers. In 1893, Elizabeth L. Banks published a series of reports in the *Weekly Sun* describing her experiences masquerading as a parlor-maid in order to expose some of the conditions of those working in domestic service. Alongside these journalistic practices, other social investigators – like Charles Booth and Beatrice Potter – were adapting the role to develop a late-Victorian form of empirical sociology based upon surveys and statistical accounts. Notwithstanding these late century developments, the investigative slumming of those mid-Victorian journalists who pioneered the social exploration narrative was crucial in shaping the conventions of the genre into the next century and beyond.

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