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Metropolitan Travel Writing

Catherine Waters

Metropolitan travel writing emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a sub-genre of the urban sketch – a literary and journalistic mode designed to articulate the new kind of modern consciousness associated with living in large cities. According to Lynda Nead, it developed in response to the primacy of visual experience in Victorian London: the concept of “speaking to the eye” (Nead [2000](#): 57). As the late nineteenth-century sociologist Georg Simmel explained, “interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the ear” (qtd. Benjamin [1983](#): 38). The new metropolitan subject, he argues, has a psychological basis “consist[ing] of the *intensification of nervous stimulation* which results from [...] the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions” experienced in the city. “These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates” (Simmel [1997](#): 175). The *flâneur*, described by Charles Baudelaire in “The Painter of Modern Life” as the passive but passionate spectator of metropolitan life, emerged as the paradigmatic figure of urban modernity. As theorized by Walter Benjamin in his later study of Baudelaire, he was a journalistic and literary type who reassured middle-class readers that the urban crowd was legible. Offering a vicarious tour of the metropolis, the *flâneur* represented the city in his writing as spectacle for consumption (Benjamin, 1983).

Reviewing John Timbs’s *Curiosities of London for Household Words* in 1855, George Augustus Sala observed that “There is scarcely a writer at the present day, I believe, connected with the periodical press, but who has written picturesque, humourous, or descriptive sketches upon the sights, characters, and curiosities, moral and physical, of the Great Metropolis, the Great Wen, the Modern Babylon, the World of London, the Giant City, the Monster Metropolis, the Ninevah of the nineteenth century” (Sala, 23 June [1855](#): 497). Urban spectatorship was indeed a popular topic for many Victorian writers. But the intrinsically fragmented mode of the periodical and newspaper press, with its variety, flexibility, open-endedness, and ephemerality, made it a peculiarly apt vehicle for mapping the complexity and contingency of modern urban life. Metropolitan travel writing created an urban geography and a particular mode of perception, fashioning a new urban consciousness.

The form had its antecedents in the French *feuilletons* and *physiologies* of the 1840s, which sketched city life from the perspective of a strolling observer, in Charles Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz* of the 1830s and in the earlier writings of Hazlitt, Lamb, Hunt, and De Quincey for such journals as the *London Magazine*, *New Monthly Magazine*, and *Examiner*. They in turn looked back to

Addison and Steele who had exercised their wit on the eighteenth-century metropolitan scene. Steele's essay 454 on the "Hours of the Day and Night" in London, for example, anticipates the round-the-clock adventures of Tom and Jerry in Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1823) and George Augustus Sala's account of a day in London – *Twice Round the Clock* – originally serialized for Henry Vizetelly's weekly, *The Welcome Guest*, in 1858 and subsequently republished in volume form (Sala [1971](#)).

Sala was one of the century's most prolific contributors of metropolitan travel writing, serving his apprenticeship on Dickens's *Household Words* before he went on to earn his greatest renown as special correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* from 1858 onwards. He was *Household Words*'s preeminent *flâneur* and could rightly claim, alluding to three of his earlier sketches for the journal, to "have had the key of the street, and have known the secrets of the gas, and have communed with the paving-stones" (Sala [1855](#): 499). "The Key of the Street" was his inaugural piece for Dickens and describes a "nocturnal misadventure" in which he was locked out of his lodgings in Upper Wellington Street and forced to wander the metropolis until morning (Sala, 6 September [1851b](#): 567). Exploring the spatial and temporal dynamics of the city by night, Sala maps his movement from Covent Garden to Drury Lane to Bow Street and onwards before finally settling down alongside a tramp on a bench in St James's Park, to offer a compelling analysis of urban alienation. Many of his articles for *Household Words* provide a similarly vivid experience of imaginary *flânerie*. In "Down Whitechapel Way," he declares "I am of the streets, streety. I love to take long walks, not only down Fleet Street, but up and down all other streets, alleys, and lanes" as he transports his readers "[o]n, by Cheapside, the magnificent, where rows of dazzling gas-reflectors illumine shop-fronts, teeming with yet more dazzling stores of watches, rich jewellery, and bales of silver spoons and forks" (Sala, 1 November [1851a](#):126). Perambulating Regent Street – "the only boulevard of which London can boast" – in "Music in Paving-Stones" he remarks the levelling effect of this crowded sidewalk where "the celebrities of wealth, nobility, and the mode, do not disdain to descend from their carriages, and tread the flags like ordinary mortals. Science, Literature, and Law, walk arm-in-arm three abreast. Dethroned kings, expatriated generals, proscribed republicans, meet on a neutral ground of politics, and paving-stones" (Sala, 26 August [1854a](#): 37). "Every street in London has its character," he declares in "Play". "There are wealthy street, starving streets, pious streets, comic streets, mortuary streets, proud streets, slavish streets, drunken streets, thievish streets, shameful streets, shameless streets" (Sala, 25 November [1854b](#): 358), and writers of metropolitan travel narratives, like Sala, mapped them assiduously.

In "Arcadia", Sala provides an ethnography of London arcades, contrasting the Burlington – where the goods and services are devoted to pretension, for "scarcely a fashionable vice, an aristocratic frivolity, or a Belgravian caprice but had (and has) a representative [there]" (Sala, 18 June [1853](#): 376–7) – with the Lowther, which is "resonant with the pattering of feet, the humming of voices, the laughter

of children, the rustling of silk dresses” (379) and the commodities on sale are within the reach of “my pretty tradesman’s daughter, my humble milliner or sempstress, even my comely cook, housemaid, or damsel of all work” (381). While for Benjamin, the arcades were the milieu of the *flâneur* who could dupe his readers with innocuous portraits of urban social types, Sala is a much more critical strolling observer.

Dickens’s metropolitan travel writing is similarly characterized by a level of social engagement that distinguishes his perspective from that of the detached and dispassionate consumer of urban spectacle critiqued by Benjamin. In the guise of *The Uncommercial Traveller*, he blends the non-purposive walking of the *flâneur* – “objectless, loitering, and purely vagabond” (Dickens, 26 May [1860](#): 156) – with the moral and social purpose that marks his fiction. In *The Uncommercial Traveller* essay subsequently published as “Night Walks”, for example, he reprises the trope of the homeless wanderer used earlier by Sala in “The Key of the Street” to recall the expeditions he made during a bout of insomnia brought on by his father’s death. Recording a series of encounters with those unnamed others who share with him the sole object of getting through the night, the essay maps the city and yet at the same time estranges it. The narrator heads toward Waterloo Bridge, seeking “a halfpennyworth of excuse for saying “Good night” to the toll-keeper, and catching a glimpse of his fire” (Dickens, 21 July [1860](#): 349); “[u]nder a kind of fascination, and in a ghostly silence suitable to the time” he eyes a furtive figure standing in the shadows of a doorway, before they part “mutually suspicious” (349); he visits the Bethlehem Hospital, imagining an equality between the sane and the insane by night: “Are not all of us outside this hospital, who dream, more or less in the condition of those inside it, every night of our lives?” (350). The ambivalence of his role as urban observer is underlined when his “amateur experience of houselessness” (348) is confronted by the real “thing” on the steps of Saint Martin’s Church: “Suddenly, a thing that in a moment more I should have trodden upon without seeing, rose up at my feet with a cry of loneliness and houselessness, struck out of it by the bell, the like of which I never heard” (351). The uncanny creature returns his look before vanishing. For *The Uncommercial Traveller*, the episode is a deeply unsettling engagement with the object of his gaze that distinguishes his perspective from that of the detached *flâneur*. Like Sala and other practitioners of metropolitan travel writing, Dickens studied the “macademized page” (Sala, 6 September [1851b](#): 566) to provide readers with a vicarious tour of the metropolis by day and night that was part of his reformist social vision while at the same time rendering the city as spectacle for consumption.

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