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# Metaphors of London Fog, Smoke and Mist in Victorian and Edwardian Art and Literature



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Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
at the  
University of Kent at Canterbury  
by  
Christine Linda Corton  
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<sup>1</sup> Illustration from *Punch*, 17 (1849), p. 194.



## Abstract

Julian Wolfreys has argued that after 1850 writers employed stock images of the city without allowing them to transform their texts. This thesis argues, on the contrary, that metaphorical uses of London fog were complex and subtle during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, at least until 1914. Fog represented, in particular, formlessness and the dissolution of boundaries. Examining the idea of fog in literature, verse, newspaper accounts and journal articles, as well as in the visual arts, as part of a common discourse about London and the state of its inhabitants, this thesis charts how the metaphorical appropriation of this idea changed over time. Four of Dickens's novels are used to track his use of fog as part of a discourse of the natural and unnatural in individual and society, identifying it with London in progressively more negative terms. Visual representations of fog by Constable, Turner, Whistler, Monet, Markino, O'Connor, Roberts and Wyllie and Coburn showed an increasing readiness to engage with this discourse. Social tensions in the city in the 1880s were articulated in art as well as in fiction. Authors like Hay and Barr showed the destruction of London by its fog because of its inhabitants' supposed degeneracy. As the social threat receded, apocalyptic scenarios gave way to a more optimistic view in the work of Owen and others. Henry James used fog as a metaphorical representation of the boundaries of gendered behaviour in public, and the problems faced by women who crossed them. The dissertation also examines fog and individual transgression, in novels and short stories by Lowndes, Stevenson, Conan Doyle and Joseph Conrad. After 1914, fog was no more than a crude signifier of Victorian London in literature, film and, later, television, deployed as a cliché instead of the subtle metaphorical idea discussed in this thesis.



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# Introduction

## I

In 1840, the versifier Peter Styles wrote: 'London fogs are made up | Of strange and monstrous things, which Nature, scorning to receive | Back on the city flings.'<sup>1</sup> Even at this time, as these verses suggest, it was widely recognized that London fog was not an entirely natural phenomenon. But what exactly were the 'strange and monstrous things' that it contained? This thesis will argue that one way of understanding them is to treat them as discursive and metaphorical. Fog itself was appropriated in cultural terms.

Fogs, of course, occurred in many towns and cities apart from London in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but their association with the capital grew so close that fog in the end became London's unique signifier. In the early twenty-first century, a television drama or film only has to show a foggy street, with an old-fashioned street-lamp struggling faintly to illuminate the murk, to establish that the setting for what is to follow is Victorian or Edwardian London. This association began in the early Victorian era. Fog became a metaphor for the condition of London itself. Representations of fog, it will be argued in this thesis, varied and changed not merely in accordance with the purposes of individual writers and artists, but also on a more general level, as cultural understandings of, and sociopolitical discourses on, the state of the nation's capital, and through it, the condition of society at large, changed over time. It is a central purpose of this thesis to establish these connections and to explain them.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Styles, Gentleman, *The Bachelor's Walk in a Fog* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1840), v. 22, p. 8.

## II

Fog's most obvious effect was, and is, to obscure sharp outlines and render clear shapes formless. Georges Bataille writes of the word 'formless' that it 'is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world'.<sup>2</sup> The built environment of a great city such as London is full of sharply defined forms, clear outlines, definable shapes, geometrical structures. Fog blurred them all, levelling them down to an undifferentiated vagueness. Fog means formlessness. Artists such as Turner, Whistler and Monet painted fog as a swirling mass without clear form; its effect on the solid buildings and people around is to render them fluid and without contours. Thus fog could signify the dissolution of London under the weight of population growth, commercialisation, and social tension. Fog represented social chaos: the mob becomes a formless rabble in times of civil unrest. It blurred social distinctions, erased individuality, and levelled everyone down by obscuring the outward signs that differentiated them socially from one another.

Fog represented metaphorically the dissolution not only of the physical and the social but also of the moral order. It replaced light with darkness, signifying the immorality and corruption of London. In the Victorian era, fog is often described as diminishing or hiding the dome of St Paul's, a symbol of the national religion and of the city of London, thus battling against the fog that has become a symbol of the moral and religious dissolution of the great city. Some later Victorian and early Edwardian writers coupled the representation of fog with an apocalyptic scenario depicting London's total annihilation, an equivalent of another, later gaseous phenomenon, the twentieth-century mushroom cloud. Others used it as a metaphorical

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. by Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 31.



exploration in various ways of crime, terrorism, espionage, and the threat posed to the moral order by the alien and the transgressive. This dissertation will explore how fog's creation of formlessness impacted on writers and artists from Dickens to Doyle, Monet to Markino.

### III

One of the key literary concepts relevant to a discussion of fog is the 'sublime'. Edmund Burke (1729-97) is credited with the first philosophical treatise on the topic, in his writings *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). He defines the essence of 'sublime' feelings in the following terms:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>3</sup>

This has an obvious relevance to the representation of London fog in later decades. Nicholas Taylor argues that the 'ways in which the Victorians argued about the environment of their cities [...] were rooted in categories defined by eighteenth-century authors' such as Burke.<sup>4</sup> He lists those aspects of industrialisation – factories, viaducts, gas-works, railway termini, dark tunnels – which were seen as 'exciting and "awful" in the true sense of the word.'<sup>5</sup> As Carol Bernstein notes:

Some cities have always figured as the polar opposite to the natural but urban writers, whether from a culturally induced nostalgia, or a desire to control the city by distancing it, or an ideological denial of the city's material pressures, have often invoked the natural. Nature is a sublime metaphor that links cities with forests and floods, with anything vast and threatening. Grand schemes of

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<sup>3</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Taylor, 'The Awful Sublimity of the Victorian City: Its aesthetic and architectural origins' in *The Victorian City*, 2 vols, ed. by Jim Dyo and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge, 1973), I. pp. 431-447, p. 431.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 434.

natural history make asphalt and brick into flora and fauna; rivers and dust heaps frame cityscapes.<sup>6</sup>

In the second part of his *Enquiry*, Burke deals with the qualities of the 'sublime'. They include astonishment, 'that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror'. They also include terror: 'Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not.'<sup>7</sup> Both emotions might be associated with fog.

But the 'sublime' is most appropriate when discussed with obscurity. Burke writes:

To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger [...] all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree.<sup>8</sup>

As well as obscurity, Burke further lists among the sources of sublimity other areas of sensory and emotional isolation and deprivation: '*Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence*.'<sup>9</sup> This linking of terror with obscurity meant, in one view, that writers 'sought symbols that would represent the private, shadowy recesses of the human imagination'.<sup>10</sup> In his book *Landscape and Western Art*, Malcolm Andrews writes of the experience of the sublime:

The experience of the Sublime is, almost by definition, one that subverts order, coherence, a structured organization. [...]. It bypasses the rational mind and concentrates its force directly on the emotions. The conditions favourable for inducing the experience of the Sublime appear to be wholly inimical to the values associated with the so-called Age of Reason in which it was enthusiastically articulated. Obscurity and darkness, the near loss of visual and intellectual control over one's environment, are strange properties to celebrate

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<sup>6</sup> Carol L. Bernstein, *The Celebration of Scandal: Toward the Sublime in Victorian Urban Fiction* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Burke, p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, pp. 54-5.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Charles Seigneuret, *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs* (London: Greenwood, 1988), p. 1248.



in the *Enlightenment*; but these are undoubtedly the attractions of the Sublime as Burke proposed in his *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [...].<sup>11</sup>

Yet, fog does not fit into Burke's pattern of sublime exactly. The position of being both the spectator and the potential victim is crucial to the full experience. There is a need to be close to disaster whilst retaining a sense that one is not actually in danger.

As Andrews notes:

In all these cases, if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine, or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions.<sup>12</sup>

Here lies a key problem of associating the experience of fog with the 'sublime'. Generally urban fog is experienced from within. A foggy day in the countryside, observed from the vantage point of a hill, might fulfil aspects of the 'sublime', but being enveloped by a London fog is too immediate an experience to be considered totally 'sublime'.

Even in the memorable opening passage of *Bleak House*, the 'sublime' experience of viewing the fog from above is denied, as the people are surrounded by it: 'Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.'<sup>13</sup> Even when fog is experienced from a position of safety, it does not induce feelings of terror, but feelings more of well-being, security and comfort. In George

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<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 49. All references are from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

Gissing's *Isabel Clarendon* (1886), Vincent Lacour sits in his living-room experiencing feelings of gratitude that he is not forced to go out into the fog.<sup>14</sup>

The 'sublime' does however reveal a difference between literature and the visual arts. It had been possible to see the smoky 'urbanscape' as 'sublime' by painters earlier in the nineteenth century. Turner sees the industrial landscape in terms of the 'industrial sublime' in his painting of Dudley.<sup>15</sup> It reveals Turner's fascination with the changes made to the landscape by industrialisation. Andrew Wilton says of this picture:

It is a work alive with activity, a fully-realised transcript of the life of industrial man as seen by the generation of artists for whom these scenes were novel and immensely stimulating experiences. Turner chooses night-time because it was by night that the industrial glare was most vivid, as Joseph Wright and others had done before him in the late eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

But it is also a view seen from the outside. The spectator looks at the scene from the river but does not feel part of the smoky landscape. The smoke from the chimneys is even curling *away* from the viewer.

However, London's special atmosphere could be seen in terms of the 'sublime' especially by painters. Benjamin Robert Haydon wrote: 'So far from the smoke of London being offensive to me, it has always been to my imagination the sublime canopy that shrouds the City of the World. Drifted by the wind, or hanging in gloomy grandeur over the World.'<sup>17</sup> But this view is from outside: 'Often have I studied its peculiarities from the hills near London, whence in the midst of its drifted clouds you catch a glimpse of the great dome of St Paul's, announcing at once

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<sup>14</sup> George Gissing, *Isabel Clarendon* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1886), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> See R. Wallis (1794-1848), after J. M. W. Turner, *Dudley, Worcestershire* (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, 1835), B1977.14.13436.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime*, (London: British Museum Publications Ltd, 1980), p. 169.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, Historical Painter, from His Autobiography and Journals*, ed. by Tom Taylor, 3 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans), I, p. 49.



civilization and power.’<sup>18</sup> In W. D. Hay’s short story of a black fog which kills the inhabitants of London (discussed in chapter 4 on ‘Fog and Social Tension’) sees the fog in terms of the ‘sublime’, linking it to fear induced by the presence of Nature, an emotion that was

no common sense of fear. It was that overwhelming, all mastering dread which men alone can know who are on a sudden taught their own immeasurable littleness; who are witnesses of some stupendous event, whose movement shows the hand sublime of Nature, the supremacy of offended God!<sup>19</sup>

In the end, it is not the fog or smoke which is sublime but nature, as created by God. The ideas of fear and terror linked to the sublime run through this dissertation, and provide a link between representations of fog and the emotions with which they can be considered, emotions that underpin the various metaphorical dimensions of smoke, fog and mist that this dissertation explores.

#### IV

There are five chapters in total. The first chapter will look at the different ways fog was defined, and how its formlessness had a linguistic dimension. It resisted any single term of description, thus encouraging its metaphorical appropriation. The various terms used in attempts to pin it down are discussed as well as the associations that arose from these. Fog also formed the object of political and legislative discourse, but a discussion of successive legislative attempts to clean up London’s air and reduce the number of unpleasant fogs shows how fog remained, while other urban nuisances were cleared up. The chapter finishes with references to works which have influenced

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> William Delisle Hay, *The Doom of the Great City; Being The Narrative of a Survivor, Written A.D. 1942 in British Future Fiction: The End of the World*, ed. by I. F. Clarke (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001), pp. 17-68 (p. 52).

this thesis, and ways in which the subject is approached, defining some of the principal concepts and methods adopted.

The second chapter concentrates on the writings of Charles Dickens. The analysis sets the well-known metaphorical representation of fog in *Bleak House* (1852-3) in the broader context of Dickens's works as a whole, looking at them chronologically: *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens's fogs are far more than a cultural legacy to Victorian and Edwardian representations of London. The legacy is there ("Dickensian") of course, but the exploration of his fogs shows far more subtlety, complexity and variety than previous commentators have believed. In particular, Dickens's use of fog as a metaphorical representation of London changed subtly over time, reflecting his own increasingly negative view of the condition of the capital. Other authors, as later chapters show, also used fog in more or less subtle and sophisticated metaphorical ways, but none used it so frequently or extensively; hence the need to treat Dickens's work at greater length than that of other writers.

The third chapter examines the work of British painters, including Constable, Turner and John O'Connor, and foreign artists like Monet, Whistler and Yoshio Markino. The chapter asks why so many foreign artists travelled to London to study a phenomenon which was largely viewed as a nuisance by British artists, who either avoided depicting it or fled to sunnier parts to obtain a clearer light. By the turn of the century, American photographers, like Alvin Langdon Coburn could not ignore the special atmosphere of London. The chapter sets the work of these artists in the context of their social and political purposes, their personal views and the nature of the art market of the day, and explores the extent in which it too could be regarded as capable of metaphorical interpretation.



Chapter four discusses how the relationship between terrifying images of strangulating smoke-fog and biological or racial decline interacted with and reinforced one another from the 1870s to the 1900s, generating an astonishingly powerful set of deeply pessimistic environmental discourses. It begins with the disaster of the 1873 Smithfield Cattle Show and follows through anxieties on the impact of lack of sunshine and natural light caused by the general haze hanging over London, as well as frequent dirty fogs, on the health of Londoners and the possibility that a degenerate race of beings was being produced. A look at several novellas and short stories, as well as Henry James's novel, *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), illustrates this anxiety about the state of the atmosphere. The chapter argues that fog becomes a signifier of a perceived threat to social and political order in the late Victorian era, expressing widespread anxieties about rising social tension in the capital.

The final chapter looks at the relationship between fog and transgression. Fog came to be used as a signifier of individual criminal or moral deviance, as well as signalling confusion and indecision in the minds of these characters (notably detectives) whose job it was to solve the mystery and apprehend the perpetrator. Beginning with a look at representations of the 'Jack the Ripper' murders, the chapter examines *The Lodger* (1913) by Marie Adelaide Belloc Lowndes, which builds on this horrific phenomenon. The chapter also discusses Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes's stories. Fog forms a key metaphor in all of these works, but in very different ways. The chapter concludes by exploring how fog became a dominant metaphor for the twentieth century when portraying Victorian London and especially Victorian crime.

This dissertation encompasses many forms of representation, including, not only high art and literature, but also journal entries, articles from *The Times*, *The Lancet* and other non-fiction journals, as well as literary texts, cartoons and paintings. This wealth of sources provides the potential for meaningful dialogues between texts so that the significance of London fog for artists and writers of many kinds, not just the 'great', can be explored. In this sense, this thesis takes a New Historicist position, which argues for what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt have called 'the mutual embeddedness of art and history', with art taken in a general sense of all types of cultural production.<sup>20</sup> Written and visual traces of London are taken as a network of interlinked and 'mutually intelligible' signs, in which paintings, drawings and cartoons share a single cultural space with newspaper articles, magazine essays, scientific reports, memoirs, diaries and, last but not least, verses, poems, short stories and novels.<sup>21</sup> These all come together in this thesis to form a complex and multifaceted but in the end single and interrelated set of discourses about London fog.

Fog was an obvious metaphorical device since it was so much part of London life. It both horrified and fascinated; it was a phenomenon that people were eager to see removed but which was also adopted by Londoners as their 'unique signifier.' Fog signified the dissolution of the city into formlessness, as well as being the basis for apocalyptic scenarios tapping into anxieties of moral and social depravity, and fears that regressive elements might, like the fog, move into the wealthier parts of London and destroy them. Conversely, both writers and artists imagined the impact of fog as a thing of beauty as it dissolved the solid lines of London into a more ethereal world.

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<sup>20</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practising New Historicism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.



Fog became a universal metaphor for London as the height of its commercial success, but it was also so much more, as this thesis will demonstrate.

## Chapter 1: Definitions, Histories, Approaches

### Introduction

The formlessness of fog lent itself to a wide variety of representations and metaphorical usages, perhaps even more so than other, comparable phenomena like mud or dust. Its obvious origins not just in nature on the one hand, or human agency on the other, but in a synthesis of the two, encouraged representations that pitted nature against culture, as in Peter Styles's verse with which the Introduction opened, or exploited fog as a metaphor for the dissolution of contour and form in human society, the moral order, and the urban world. Fog's dissolution of clarity and definition also had a linguistic dimension. Fog, mist, haze, smoke could merge into one another, defying easy categorization. The first section of this chapter explores attempts to pin down fog in language, arguing that its very indefinability opened up a linguistic space which writers could fill with metaphorical appropriations.

Unlike other aspects of environmental pollution in Victorian and Edwardian London, such as sewage, and excrement, or dirt and dust, or slum dwellings and 'rookeries', fog also defied attempts at control and removal; and the second part of this chapter surveys social and political discourses on fog, showing how there was no atmospheric revolution to go with the sanitary, hygienic and housing revolutions of the era, leaving fog as a uniquely tangible and visible signifier of the negative aspects of urban, and especially London life.

Other, similar phenomena have also attracted the attention of historians and literary critics alongside fog, and the third section of this chapter sets previous attempts to write the history of London fog alongside exploration of the metaphorical representation of railways, mud and dirt, to outline the approach taken to the cultural history of fog in the present thesis.



## Definitions

### I

Fog was not only formless, it was also indeterminate and indefinable. The terms 'mist' and 'smoke' were used interchangeably with 'fog'. Debate on the contents of London fog began early in the nineteenth century. Dr George Leman Tuthill, a medical doctor from Soho Square, told a Select Committee of the House of Commons on Steam Engines and Furnaces in 1819 that he '[c]onceived that the fog peculiar to London, so different in its sensible properties from any fog in the country, depended upon the smoke of the metropolis, and was prejudicial in many diseased states of the lungs'.<sup>1</sup> In 1880, another doctor acknowledged to the 'Smoke and Fog Committee'

that the fogs were of two descriptions, those which arose in the atmosphere and those which came from the earth or river-generated mists. The mists were not peculiar to London; but the peculiar noxious character of London fogs was owing to the atmosphere being charged with particles of carbon which escaped combustion in domestic and other fires.<sup>2</sup>

Yet in a meeting of the Kensington Vestry, reported in the same article, Major-General Boileau 'doubted whether a London fog was smoke'.<sup>3</sup> Until such dilemmas could be resolved, the problem would appear insoluble. This debate has even trickled through into the twenty-first century, as exemplified by a headline on the front page of *The Guardian* of 6 August 2008: 'Pollution over Beijing? Don't worry, it's only mist, say officials.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Abstract of Evidence and Reports made by a Select Committee of the House of Commons, on Steam Engines and Furnaces*, in Charles Frederick Partington's *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Steam Engine ... with An Appendix of Patents and Parliamentary Papers connected with the Subject* (London: J. Taylor, 1822), p. 48 (of Appendix).

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 12 November 1880, p. 6, col. g.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2008, p. 1.

Before the nineteenth century, 'fog' was in fact very much synonymous with 'mist'. John Kersey's *English Dictionary* of 1702 substitutes tautology for definition by describing fog as 'A fog or mist' and mist as 'A mist or fog'. In the same dictionary, smoke is detached from both fog and mist, being defined purely as 'Smoke, and to smoke'. But later, Francis Grose (1731?-1791) in his 1785 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, equates fog with smoke, although under 'smoke' there is no mention of 'fog'.<sup>5</sup> Slightly later, in Humphrey Potter's (1747-1790) *New Dictionary of all the Cant* (1795) 'fog' is also defined as 'smoke'.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century 'fog' and 'mist' were used indiscriminately:

A few days ago we had a real *fog* – a specimen of November weather, as the people said. If November wears such a mantle, London, during that sober month, must furnish a good idea of the gloom of Hades. The streets were wrapped in a veil of dense *mist*, of a dirty yellow color, as if the air had suddenly grown thick and mouldy.<sup>7</sup>

In 1819 William Frend (1757-1841) treated 'smoke' and 'fog' as synonyms in his treatise on 'deleterious vapours' in London: 'I believe, that, if the smoky atmosphere of this great city was exchanged for a purer air, none of the inhabitants, or the occasional visitors of the metropolis, would lament the loss of their black fog.'<sup>8</sup> So the linguistic confusion continued. As a consequence, because of the continuing uncertainty about precisely what was meant by 'fog', 'smoke' or 'mist', writers grasped for more vivid, more metaphorical, or more precise terms: 'pea-souper,' 'London particular', 'London ivy', or 'smog'.

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: S. Hooper, 1788), under fog.

<sup>6</sup> Humphrey Tristram Potter, *A New Dictionary of all the Cant & Flash Language* (London: J. Downes, 1795), under fog.

<sup>7</sup> J. Bayard Taylor, *Views A-foot; or, Europe seen with Knapsack and Staff*, 2 vols (London: Wiley and Putnam, 1847), II, p. 383. [My italics].

<sup>8</sup> William Frend, *Is it Impossible to Free the Atmosphere of London, in a very considerable degree, from the Smoke and Deleterious Vapours with which it is Hourly Impregnated?* (London: Charles Wood, 1819), p. 62.



## II

The first use that the modern *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes of the expression 'pea-souper' with its meaning of a very thick, yellow fog, is, surprisingly, a mid-century citation from the American writer, Herman Melville in 1849-50.<sup>9</sup> This is taken from his *Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent*: 'Upon sallying out this morning encountered the oldfashioned pea soup London fog – of a gamboge color. It was lifted, however, from the ground & floated in mid air. When lower, it is worse.'<sup>10</sup> Another reference to the phrase appeared in 1871 in *The New York Times*: 'London, particularly, where the population are periodically submerged in a fog of the consistency of pea soup'.<sup>11</sup>

'Pea soup' has indeed become a popular metaphorical representation of fog, and its use extended well into the late twentieth century. Yet it is not included in any of the major dictionaries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites an example from *Good Words* in 1883, which extends the metaphor to fogs generally, referring to the "pea-soupy" character so distinctive of those whose advent we in cities so dread'.<sup>12</sup> In 1887, *The South Australian Advertiser* referred to 'a succession of "pea-soup fog" days' experienced by London a month or two previously.<sup>13</sup> Both America and Australia, of course, had direct ties to England and with a large migrant population from the mother country, so that the use of the term may have derived from visitors to or from London. 'Pea-Souper' has proved a durable euphemism. Thomas Cook, the travel company, used the term to promote winter

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<sup>9</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Herman Melville, *Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent, 1849-1850*, ed. by Eleanor Melville Metcalf (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1948), pp. 45-6.

<sup>11</sup> *The New York Times*, 2 April 1871, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Reference in *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. by James A. H. Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), under pea-soup *Good Words*, (London: Isbister and Company, 1883), p. 723, col. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 723.

cruises abroad in 1937. The advertisement urges people to go abroad: 'When London is groping its way home through a typical "pea-souper".'<sup>14</sup> References to 'pea-soupers' in *The Times* mostly date from the mid-twentieth century. In 1950 a story noted the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the National Smoke Abatement Society and the reduction of the 'real old-style peasouper'.<sup>15</sup> Although the article acknowledges that there is more to be done, it also represents 'pea-souper' as a thing of the past. Yet Melville, in his day, had also referred to the 'peasouper' as old-fashioned. Clearly, little had changed in the intervening century.

Melville's description of the colour of the fog as 'gamboge' highlights its yellowness. *The Oxford English Dictionary* also refers to pea soup 'chiefly in reference to its usual dull yellow colour and thick consistency'.<sup>16</sup> A cookery book from the 1820s indicates that pea soup should be green and warns that the soup should not be allowed to boil, 'or the green colour will deaden and become a tawny yellow'.<sup>17</sup> Other sources insist that a green soup is one from fresh peas, whereas a yellow soup is from dried peas. Pea soup was a simple dish, very much associated with poverty. In a pamphlet on 'Means of providing cheap food', published in Dublin the year after the potato blight of 1845, there are several recipes on variations of pea soup.<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hardy underlines the combination of aristocratic lineage and present poverty in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) by having Tess refer to an old silver spoon marked with the family's heraldic symbol: 'But it is so worn that mother uses it to stir the pea-soup.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 12 August 1937 and 19 August 1937. After these two appearances the advertisement was dropped.

<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 25 March 1950, p. 5, col. c.

<sup>16</sup> *OED*, XI, p. 405. Reference under 'pea-soup'.

<sup>17</sup> C. I. Johnstone, *Cook and Housewife's Manual* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1827), p.144.

<sup>18</sup> Anon, 'Means of Providing Cheap Food', Commissariat Relief Office (Dublin: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1846), pp. 3, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 80.



Some people appear to have had a distinct notion of what constituted a pea-souper and what did not. A real 'pea-souper' had to be thick and impenetrable. As J. Payn noted in 1890: 'The fogs we have had this year have been made too much of – perhaps because they were our first fogs; but, like the efforts of a certain famous yet obscure poet, you could see something in them if you looked long enough, which is not the case of a genuine Peasouper.'<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, London fog was often represented as a form of unwanted sustenance. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) referred to it in 1833, comparing it to the smoke of Auld Reekie, the name for Edinburgh. London fog had 'that horrid flood of Spartan black-broth one has to inhale in London; fogs and mud therefore we happily consider as left behind'.<sup>21</sup> *Punch* uses the image of pea soup but expands the notion to include a thicker version of this dish in its 1850 volume, in the *Almanack* which looks forward to the following year, and includes a description of November: 'March is said to come in like a lion, and go out like a lamb; but of November, on account of its fogs, it may generally be said, that it comes in like a basin of pea soup, and goes out like a plate of peas pudding.'<sup>22</sup>

A couple of years later, Thomas Miller (1807-1874) also decided to opt for the thicker version: 'It is something like being imbedded in a dilution of yellow peas-pudding, just thick enough to get through it without being wholly choked or completely suffocated. You can see through the yard of it which, at the next stride, you are doomed to swallow, and that is all.'<sup>23</sup> Its thickness, substance and carbon smell gave it the tangible quality of food - but always food clearly associated with poverty – pea

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<sup>20</sup> J. Payn, *Notes from the News* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1890), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. by Charles Richard Sanders (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1977) in 34 volumes, From T.C. to John Stuart Mill, Vol. VI, pp. 300-1, 12 January 1833.

<sup>22</sup> *Punch's Almanack for 1851*, included with *Punch*, 19, (1850), in unnumbered pages at beginning.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Miller, *Picturesque Sketches of London: Past and Present* (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852), p. 243.

soup, pease pudding or black broth – suggesting that fog was another sign of poverty. And indeed, fog was indeed more likely to be experienced in the poorer districts of the capital. The prevailing wind direction in London from west to east meant that the poorer areas in the east were directly affected by the smoke generated in the wealthier areas in the west of London; much of the smoke was also generated within the industrial eastern part of London itself. The East End had the highest density of factory chimneys, as well as houses packed tightly next to each other, all with their own domestic chimney-pots puffing out smoke. In addition, its low-lying position, especially near the river, meant that the smoke was not easily dissipated. But, like the disease found in Tom-all-Alone's in *Bleak House*, fog could affect other parts of London as well. There was no way to guarantee immunity from it, and many newspaper reports commented on how it would settle in one small area although other parts of London could be clear.

The idea of fog as food meant that it was something ingested, or as Carlyle suggests, inhaled. This reflected early Victorian concepts of the miasmatic causes of illness, in which fevers and epidemics were thought to have originated from the poisoned air created by decaying matter and rising from the ground. This theory highlighted the danger of fog to the lungs, especially of those who were already vulnerable, like the very young or very old, asthmatics or people prone to bronchitis. Towards the end of the century, observers began to note a link between a sudden increase of deaths and foggy weather. Yet many writers still commented, not on the danger of fog, but of its reassuringly nutritional quality. The Canadian writer Sara Jeanette Duncan (1861-1922) emphasised these aspects in her novel *An American Girl in London* (1891): 'It was no special odour or collection of odours that could be distinguished – it was rather an abstract smell – and yet it gave a kind of solidity and nutriment to the air, and made you feel as if your lungs digested it. There was comfort



and support and satisfaction in that smell.<sup>24</sup> Whether nourishing or debilitating, fog appeared to many, therefore, as a thickening of the air so intense as almost to turn it into a liquid.

### III

In representing fog as a kind of food, Miller describes fogs which are yellow in colour, whereas Carlyle describes them as black. This locates another problem of definition that arises because of the range of colours that the mixture of fog and smoke could produce. Joseph Ashby-Sterry (1836(8?)-1917), a poet, wrote succinctly: "Tis sometimes yellow, sometimes brown. A London Fog!"<sup>25</sup> A writer, the Italian, Giuseppe Pecchio (1785-1835) who wrote of his time as an exile in England, was both terrified of the constant darkness through the smoke and fogs but also could not help but admire its potential beauty. His description of London's atmosphere is almost as if he were an artist:

An eternal cloud of smoke which involves and penetrates every thing; a fog which, during the months of November and December, now grey, now red, now of a dirty yellow, always obscures, and sometimes completely extinguishes, the light of day, cannot fail to give a lugubrious and *Dantesque* air to this immeasurable and interminable capital [...] In fact, for several days the sun only appears in the midst of the darkness visible, like a great yellow spot.<sup>26</sup>

A German tourist also perceived a greater variety of colours, finding it 'grey-yellow, of a deep orange, and even black'.<sup>27</sup> Claude Monet saw even more colours than this in 1901 when he commented that

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<sup>24</sup> Sara Jeannette Duncan, *An American Girl in London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1891), p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Ashby-Sterry, *The Lazy Minstrel* (London, 1887), p. 41. Cited in *OED*, V, p. 1130, reference under 'fog'. I have been unable to locate actual citation.

<sup>26</sup> Giuseppe Pecchio, *Semi-serious Observations of an Italian Exile during his Residence in England* (London: E Wilson, 1833), pp. 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Max Schlesinger, *Saunterings in and about London*, trans. by Otto Wenckstern (London: Nathaniel Cooke, 1853), p. 84.

London is the more interesting that it is harder to paint. The fog assumes all sorts of colors; there are black, brown, yellow, green, purple fogs, and the interest in painting is to get the objects as seen through all these fogs. My practiced eye has found that objects change in appearance in a London fog more and quicker than in any other atmosphere, and the difficulty is to get every change down on canvas.<sup>28</sup>

This variation of colours also added to the difficulties of pinning fog down precisely in linguistic terms. Writers thus grasped for a further range of metaphorical terms.

Dickens coined the term 'London ivy' in *Bleak House* to describe the sooty particles left clinging to the nameplate on the law stationer's premises of Peffer and Snagsby. The fact that Peffer had died, leaving Snagsby the sole proprietor, is conveyed by the metaphorical representation of smoke (or fog) as 'London ivy': 'For smoke, which is the London ivy, had so wreathed itself round Peffer's name, and clung to his dwelling-place, that the affectionate parasite quite overpowered the parent tree.'<sup>29</sup> Dickens's metaphor is characteristically complex and ambiguous. 'Affectionate' the smoke may have been, but in Dickens's sentence it becomes a metaphor of clinging, suffocating death. The verb 'wreathed' encourages the reader to think of a funeral wreath, often made using ivy. 'London ivy' was also used by other writers to denote smoke and fog as threat. In 1889 *Sporting Life* referred, for example, to 'a very severe cold caught by nine hours contact with London ivy'.<sup>30</sup> Here we seem to have a cold fog, rather than smoke as originally suggested by Dickens's use of the metaphor. According to *The Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang* 'London ivy' was, however, associated with dust, especially by cockneys, emphasising its origins in particles

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<sup>28</sup> Emma Bullet, 'Macmonnies, The Sculptor, Working Hard as a Painter', *Eagle* (Brooklyn), 8 September 1901, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 179.

<sup>30</sup> *OED*, VIII, p. 1120. Reference under 'London'.



deposited by smoke or fog.<sup>31</sup> Here too, therefore, people failed to find a clear and unambiguous metaphorical term for fog.

'London particular' seems to have been the more widely used. Dickens first employed it in an article which appeared in *Household Words*. The article, co-written with W. H. Wills, describes conditions in Spitalfields, an area of East London, known for its clothing industry. One manufacturer complained: 'The blacks (London genuine particular) got into the white satins, despite the best precautions of the workpeople, and put them into an ugly, foxy, unsaleable half-mourning, sir.'<sup>32</sup> A few months later Dickens used it again in *Bleak House*. Esther describes 'a dense brown smoke that scarcely anything was to be seen' as if 'there was a great fire', revealing once more the problem of reaching a specific definition of smoke or fog and their refusal to be linguistically categorised. Guppy, the cockney swell, replies that it is only a 'London particular'. Esther views the phenomenon as smoke but Guppy describes it as a fog.<sup>33</sup>

The term 'London particular' encapsulates various ideas and images. It conveys a familiar intimacy. In their 1902 dictionary of slang, John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley cite 'London Particular (or London Ivy)' as commonly used terms meaning: 'A thick yellow or black fog, the product of certain atmospheric conditions and carbon: formerly peculiar to London, now common in most large manufacturing cities situated near water and lying low.'<sup>34</sup> Farmer and Henley also suggest that a 'particular' was another name for a mistress. Certainly this sense that fog, both enjoyed and detested

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<sup>31</sup> *The Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang*, ed. by Eric Partridge and Jacqueline Simpson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

<sup>32</sup> Charles Dickens and W. H. Wills, 'Spitalfields' in *Household Words*, 5 April 1851. From *The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Harry Stone, 2 vols (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1968), I, p. 231.

<sup>33</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> *Slang and its Analogue, Past and Present, A Dictionary Historical and Comparative of the Heterodox Speech of all Classes of Society for more than Three Hundred Years*, ed. by John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, 7 vols (London: [n.pub.], 1890-1904), V (1902).



by Londoners, and hanging on to London almost illicitly, would make its likening to a mistress appropriate. More importantly, however, a 'London particular' was a special quality of brown Madeira wine imported solely for the London market. References to 'London particular' wine are found at least as early as the 1790s, and the term became extended to brown London fogs by analogy.<sup>35</sup> Both terms implied a uniqueness to the capital city. Fogs of this colouring and density were not to be found elsewhere, not even in the most polluted cities of the Midlands and the Industrial north. The term was used in this print:



Fig 2: *A thoroughbred November and London particular*<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Mark Staniforth, *Material Culture and Consumer Society: Dependent Colonies in Colonial Australia* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003), p. 82.

<sup>36</sup> M. Egerton, (artist), *A thoroughbred November and London particular*, engraved by George Hunt (London: Satirical Print Collection: Guildhall Library Print Room, 1827), p. 540998.



In the background is a melée of people who are being led through the fog by various link-lighters, boys or men who carried lighted torches with them. They would offer to light the way through the fog for a charge. One of them is pointing his torch to the ground, to allow the people who have engaged him to avoid treading in puddles. The yellow handkerchief that the gentleman in the foreground is holding to his mouth indicates his concern to protect himself from the diseased and polluting atmosphere. His clothes are those of a Regency-style dandy, but he is paying no attention to the oncoming horses and carriage and is obviously in danger of being run over. Perhaps he cannot see them through the fog. The print gains its satirical edge from the contrast between the world of fashion and the grubbiness of a grimy, foggy and dirty city.

The expression 'London particular' was quickly adopted as a word for the combination of fog and smoke, but as in the case of pea soup, it was also quickly viewed nostalgically. As early as 1855, *The New York Times*, describing a home-grown American fog, wrote that it had 'nothing of the characteristics of our "old London particular" except density.'<sup>37</sup> The possessive suggests that the writer was a homesick ex-Londoner. In 1884, in a lecture on storm-clouds and plague winds, Ruskin wrote:

You are all familiar with one extremely cognizable variety of that sort of vapour – London particular; but that special blessing of metropolitan society is only a finely developed and highly seasoned condition of a form of water vapour which exists just as generally and widely at the bottom of the air as the clouds do.<sup>38</sup>

He then goes on to discuss the peculiar clouds and plague-winds brought about because of modern society's lack of honesty and moral decency. He sees it in terms of

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<sup>37</sup> *The New York Times*, 2 April 1855, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> John Ruskin, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1904), vol. xxxiv, pp. 14-5.

a punishment from God. His thesis highlights the difference between the meteorological phenomenon of the plague winds and the man-made 'London fog [where] the air itself was pure, though they chose to mix up dirt with it and choke themselves with their own nastiness'.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that Ruskin describes a 'London particular' without reference to the sooty dirt within it and then goes on to describe a 'London fog' with all the dirt mixed up in it, implies that he saw a 'London particular' as a natural phenomenon individual to London because of its low-lying ground and close proximity to marshlands. This taps in to a major debate which occurred throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as to whether the fog was a natural factor of London's geographical position or was caused solely by the pollution being pumped out through factory and domestic chimneys. H. A. Des Voeux was very concise as to what he considered a 'London particular' in 1904 and whether it could be diminished or modified:

I think that it is essential to recognize that we are discussing two things which are in their essence entirely different. The essence of one is moisture, the essence of the other smoke [...] and to-day the true "fog" has shifted away from London, and we are suffering especially to-day, from what is know as the "London particular," which I should like to name "smog," to show that it consists much more of smoke than of true fog.<sup>40</sup>

'London particular' and 'pea-souper' were brought together in the twentieth century by a recipe called 'London particular' which is, in fact, not surprisingly, a traditional pea soup. The recipe is accompanied by a picture of an open book, which is, appropriately enough, *Bleak House*. The page opened is the illustration of Guppy and Jobling discovering the smouldering remains of Krook's body after the episode of spontaneous combustion, as the illustration below shows.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, xxxiv, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, 27 December 1904, p. 11, col. a.

<sup>41</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 510.





Fig 3: 'London Particular' Soup.<sup>42</sup>

#### IV

A series of letters in *The Times* in 1953 indicated that the linguistic issue remained a continuing topic of debate, even though the word 'smog' – a blend of smoke and fog – was meant to put an end to this. 'Limerick' wrote to the Editor to demand: 'Why "smog" the urban atmospheric issue? Mist consists of droplets of water. Fog is the addition of coal smoke to that. So why add verbal redundancy to physical discomfort?'<sup>43</sup> The General Secretary of the National Smoke Abatement Society, Arnold Marsh, however, argued that 'the words "mist" and "fog" usually suggest two different degrees of visible water vapour or droplets in the air, but, as any mariner will confirm, neither word implies the presence of smoke'.<sup>44</sup> In fact, general usage of these words had meant that fog and mist were often interchangeable, with smoke being seen as an isolated problem apart from fog, even though the fog complained of had a large

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<sup>42</sup> *Farmhouse Cookery: Recipes from the Country Kitchen* (London: Reader's Digest, 1980, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> *The Times*, 11 November 1953, p. 9, col. d.

<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, 13 November 1953, p. 9, col. d.



quantity of smoke in it. J. B. Sanderson wrote that it was significant that 'the use of the word "smog" seems to have increased greatly during 1953. "For smoke abaters, this word was a valuable addition to the political vocabulary; "fog" is almost a natural phenomenon, "smog" is an evil to be eliminated.'"<sup>45</sup>

Smog later began to refer to a more specific type of air pollution, namely that of the photochemical 'smog' experienced in Los Angeles. Smog in this context is used in similar metaphorical ways to that of London fog, although mainly through American novels. In Alison Lurie's *Nowhere City* (1965) the smog of Los Angeles not only provides the main character with a reason for being unable to settle down to life in LA but also explores the relationship between the smog and a general social disorientation and lack of boundaries.<sup>46</sup> American smog is especially associated with novels set in 1930s Los Angeles. The Raymond Chandler detective stories use it to express the dark mystery the hero has to solve.

Although the phenomenon of fog proved difficult to pin down linguistically, London has often been viewed in the terms of this, its major pollution problem. It became known colloquially as the 'smoke', or the 'great' or 'big' smoke, especially by country people. The first reference to this usage is from John Hotten's (1832-1873) *Slang Dictionary* of 1874. The earlier editions of the dictionary do not include a reference to the 'smoke' but his text indicates earlier, and frequent, usage: 'Country-people, when going to London, frequently say they are on their way to the SMOKE, and LONDONERS, when leaving for the country, say they are going out of the

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<sup>45</sup>J. B. Sanderson, 'The National Smoke Abatement Society and the Clean Air Act' (1956) in *Campaigning for the Environment*, ed. by Richard Kimber and J. J. Richardson (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 27-44 (p. 36).

<sup>46</sup>Alison Lurie, *The Nowhere City* (London: Penguin, 1977).



smoke.’<sup>47</sup> This would be appropriate to a city which was often obscured by the dense cloud of smoke which hung over it. In a similar way writers often described London, especially from a distance, as purely a vapour – rendered to almost obscurity by its polluted haze. In *Barnaby Rudge*, Charles Dickens refers to London as ‘a mere dark mist – a giant phantom in the air’.<sup>48</sup> The great Babylon of noise and smell becomes insubstantial from afar, dissolved by its own foggy mist.

The linguistic problems encountered when trying to name the fog associated with London reflected other problems of trying to grasp its causes and thus control or destroy it. In the nineteenth century, as new industrial towns began to develop and suffer from their own smoke problem, the desire to name London fog as something quite special to London and quite different from other smoke problems became more acute.

## Histories

### I

Formless and indefinable, metaphorically ambiguous, fog also proved impossible to control by legislative action or government fiat. Discourse on the pollution of London’s air antedated the Victorian era by centuries. Queen Elizabeth I confessed ‘herself greatly grieved and annoyed with the taste and smoke of sea-coales’.<sup>49</sup> Thomas Shadwell (c.1640-1692) used the London smoke problem metaphorically as an image of London’s wickedness in his play *Epsom-Wells*: ‘I go to *London!* I am almost sick at Epsom, when the wind sits to bring any of the Smoke this

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<sup>47</sup> John Hotten, *The Slang Dictionary: Etymological, Historical, and Anecdotal* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1874), p. 298. Earlier editions date from 1859 and 1860.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 308.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Brimblecombe, *The Big Smoke: A History of Air Pollution in London Since Medieval Times* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 30. For more detail of attitudes to smoke pollution even earlier than Tudor times, see Peter Brimblecombe *Writing on Smoke* in *Dirty Words: Writings on the History and Culture of Pollution*, ed. by Hannah Bradby (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 1990), pp. 93-113.

way [...] There's Pride, Popery, Folly, Lust, Prodigality, Cheating Knaves, and Jilting Whores'.<sup>50</sup> Awareness of the problem led to attempts to legislate. An Act to forbid the use of sea-coal in breweries was passed by the House of Lords in 1623. The Act also forbade the use of sea-coal within one mile of any house which His Majesty's Court or the Court of the Prince of Wales was habitually held. But it was unenforceable, so nothing happened.

In 1651 the diarist John Evelyn (1620-1706) referred to London being obscured by 'such a cloud of sea-coal, as if there be a resemblance of hell upon earth, it is in this volcano in a foggy day: This pestilent smoak'.<sup>51</sup> Ten years later he expanded this concern in a pamphlet entitled: *Fumifugium: Or the Inconvenience of the Aer, and Smoak of London Dissipated*. This was the most important discussion of the topic to date. He complains of 'Clouds of Smoake and Sulphur, so full of Stink and Darknesse' which envelop the 'Glorious and Antient City'.<sup>52</sup> He blames specific industries for this pollution, namely 'Brewers, Diers, Lime-Burners, Salt and Sope-boylers, and some other private Trades, One of whose *Spiracles* alone, does manifestly infect the *Aer*, more than all the Chimnies of *London* put together besides'.<sup>53</sup> Evelyn follows the science of Kenelm Digby (1603-65) who applied an atomic theory to air pollution in which the atoms of coal smoke were perceived as sharp and pointed.<sup>54</sup> These atoms damaged people's lungs as well as having a corrosive impact on buildings and furnishings:

This is that pernicious Smoake which sullyes all her [London] Glory, super-inducing a sooty Crust or Fur upon all that it lights, spoyling the moveables, tarnishing the Plate, Gildings and Furniture, and corroding the very Iron-bars

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas Shadwell, *Epsom Wells*, ed. by Juan A. Prieto-Pablos, Maria José Mora, Manuel J. Gómez-Lara, Rafael Portillo (Spain: University of Seville, 2000), I, i, pp. 17, 18.

<sup>51</sup> John Evelyn, *A Character of England* (London: John Crooke, 1659), p. 27.

<sup>52</sup> John Evelyn, *Fumifugium: Or the Inconvenience of the Aer, and Smoake of London Dissipated* (London: National Society for Clean Air, 1961), pp.12, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, p. 18.

<sup>54</sup> Brimblecombe, *The Big Smoke*, pp. 43-47 for more on Sir Kenelm Digby and Margaret Cavendish.



and hardest Stones with these piercing and acrimonious Spirits which accompany its Sulphure; and executing more in one year, than exposed to the pure *Aer* of the Country it could effect in some hundreds.<sup>55</sup>

Evelyn's proposal to avert the evil of smoke was to remove all the smoke-producing industries outside London, and to provide a circle around London of sweet-smelling plants and hedges so that their delicious scents could waft into London and dispel the fumes. The pamphlet was formally addressed to the King, Charles II, and to the Parliament. According to Evelyn's own diary he presented his tract to the king, 'who was pleased I should publish it by his special Command; being much pleas'd with it'.<sup>56</sup> Later in his diary Evelyn mentions the drafting of a bill by Sir Peter Ball against the smoke nuisance, though nothing more was heard of it.<sup>57</sup>

*Fumifugium* was reprinted in 1772, when the editor Samuel Pegge the elder (1704-96) reported on how conditions had worsened in his own time. He notes the increase of 'glass-houses, foundries, and sugar-bakers, to add to the black catalogue', and singles out specific sources of pollution like 'the fire-engines of the water-works at London Bridge and York Buildings'.<sup>58</sup> He concedes the impossibility of moving all smoke-producing works outside the city, as Evelyn had suggested. But he also wonders if the building of further works to do with sugar, glass, brewhouses, etc. within the town should be forbidden by law. They should be only be set up at a certain distance from the town. Other suggestions made by Pegge include the charring of sea-coal and the building of chimneys 'much higher into the air [...] to convey the smoke away above the buildings, and in a great measure disperse it into distant parts, without its

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<sup>55</sup> Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. by E. S. De Beer, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), III, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1666, p. 296.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>58</sup> Evelyn John, ed. by Samuel Pegge, *Fumifugium: Or, the Inconvenience of the Aer and Smoake of London Dissipated. Together with some Remedies humbly proposed*, (London: B. White, 1772), p. iii.

falling on the houses below'.<sup>59</sup> This idea of high chimneys was taken up by William Frend in his *Is It Impossible to Free the Atmosphere of London in a very considerable degree, from the Smoke and Deleterious Vapours with which it is Hourly Impregnated?* (1819).

*Fumifugium's* single printing in the nineteenth century was as part of a collection of miscellaneous writings. In the introduction the editor remarked on the recent publication of *Evelyn's Diary and Correspondence* and the need to provide some of his works together in print. The report thus had little to do with its relevance to the debate on the smoke issue.

In 1822, however, an article appeared in the *The Quarterly Journal of Science, Literature, and the Arts* on *Fumifugium* linking Evelyn's proposals to the problem of smoke pollution in the early part of the nineteenth century. One of the reasons for its appearing at this time was no doubt a committee which had been set up by the House of Commons 'to inquire how far it may be practicable to compel persons using steam-engines and furnaces in their different works, to erect them in a manner less prejudicial to public health and public comfort'. The article compared 'the grievances occasioned by the smoake of London 160 years ago, when the metropolis was not one-sixth its present extent, with those which are now matter of complaint'; and proposed to enquire 'how far the evil was then, and is now, susceptible of diminution, or removal'.<sup>60</sup> The writer questioned the efficacy of parliament in such matters, for 'as soon as parliament is prorogued, and the smoke-burners out of town, we relapse into our pristine fuliginosity, and the pretty-behaved chimneys upon the river-side, which

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. v.

<sup>60</sup> 'Analysis of Scientific Books', in *The Quarterly Journal of Science, Literature, and the Arts* (London: John Murray, 1822), XII, pp. 343-54 (p. 344).



awhile seemed to have forgotten their office, again evolve their wonted columns of sable smoke'.<sup>61</sup> 'The smoke of London, 'always grievous, is now scarcely tolerable'.<sup>62</sup>

Evelyn's pamphlet provided a template for arguments developed in the following centuries in the battle against smoke and fog. Evelyn put the blame for the smoke problem firmly on industry. The objectionable smoke was emitted, he wrote, 'not from the *Culinary* fires, which for being weak, and lesse often fed below, is with such ease dispelled and scattered above, as it is hardly at all discernible'.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, the author of the 1822 analysis claimed that it was 'folly to ascribe any sensible influence upon the great mass of London smoke to some few steam-engine chimneys, while every house is busy in the work of contamination'.<sup>64</sup> This debate continued throughout the nineteenth century. It was one of many reasons why action to combat air pollution was stalled, since no-one could agree on who was to blame.

Evelyn did not accept that the geographical situation of London was particularly unhealthy: 'For first, the City of *London* is built upon a sweet and most agreeable Eminency of Ground.' He exonerated 'the *Fumes* which exhale from the Waters and lower Grounds lying Southwards, by which means they are perpetually attracted, carried off or dissipated by the Sun, as soon as they are born, and ascend'.<sup>65</sup> Pierre-Jean Grosley (1718-85), one of many foreign travellers to complain of London's smoke, disagreed with Evelyn's assessment of the position of London, by seeing the damp atmosphere, on his visit to London in 1765, as part of the problem:

If we add to the inconveniency of the dirt, the smoke, which, being mixed with a constant fog, covers London, and wraps it up intirely, [...] This smoke,

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>63</sup> Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> 'Analysis of Scientific Books', p. 353.

<sup>65</sup> Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, p. 16.

being loaded with terrestrial particles, and rolling in a thick, heavy atmosphere, forms a cloud, which envelopes London like a mantle; a cloud which the sun pervades but rarely.<sup>66</sup>

This theme was picked up by the author of the 1822 article:

Lastly, we come to the most absurd portion of the speculations of theoretical smoke-burners, namely, the improvement of the atmosphere of the metropolis [...] there might be some amelioration of the atmosphere, although our locality and climate always render it turbid and misty, independent of adventitious effluvia.<sup>67</sup>

By this time, the rapid expansion of London into areas which were more marsh, had made the natural dampness of London's climate more of a problem.

Evelyn also looked at the impact of the smoke on the health of London's inhabitants concluding that it 'causeth *Consumptions, Phthisicks*, and the Indisposition of the *Lungs*, not only by the suffocating abundance of *Smoake*, but also by its *Virulency*; For all *subterrany* Fuell hath a kind of *Virulent* or *Arsenical* vapour rising from it'.<sup>68</sup> Evelyn describes London's 'Inhabitants [who] breathe nothing but an impure and thick Mist, accompanied with a fuliginous and filthy vapour'.<sup>69</sup> And later, he complains of the fumes from the lime-kilns which poison 'the *Aer* with so dark and thick a Fog'.<sup>70</sup> Evelyn's language reveals the same flexibility regarding smoke, mist, fog or vapour, which is shown in the writings of the nineteenth century.

Evelyn's tract was reprinted several times in the twentieth century; twice in 1930, one of these being a reaction to a request from *The Times* when it was printed as part of a debate regarding the site of Chelsea power station in 1930.<sup>71</sup> Five further

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<sup>66</sup> Pierre-Jean Grosley, *A Tour to London: or, New Observations on England, and its Inhabitants*, trans. by Thomas Nugent, 2 vols (London: Lockyer Davis, 1772), I, 47-8.

<sup>67</sup> 'Analysis of Scientific Books', p. 353.

<sup>68</sup> Evelyn, *Fumifugium*, p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> *The Times*, 29 November 1929, p. 20, col. d. Also see 10 April, 1929, p. 13, col. a.



printings were produced and it became a standard reference for the National Smoke Abatement Society, which reprinted it in 1933. The later edition, published in 1961 by the Society's successor body, the National Society for Clean Air, came with an introduction by Arnold Marsh, the secretary of the National Smoke Abatement Society.<sup>72</sup>

Evelyn's document laid the foundations for much of the debate on the smoke problem in the following centuries. It also provided an early example of seeing smoke as metaphorical opportunity. In his article on 'The Politics of London Air: John Evelyn's *Fumifugium* and the Restoration', Mark Jenner suggests that

smoke can be seen as a metaphor of the political disorder of the Interregnum and the proposals both as a means of preventing their recurrence and a panegyric to the new regime [...] More generally, the monarch was [...] identified with light, the light of truth, of justice and knowledge as opposed to the darkness of falsehood, injustice and ignorance, which was in turn often represented as a dark and malodorous cloud, sometimes a cloud of soot or smoke.<sup>73</sup>

As we shall see, the metaphorical use of smoke and fog did not always preclude a simultaneous desire to contribute to an ongoing environmental debate as well.

## II

It was during the Victorian period that energetic efforts were made to clean up London's air, both through legislation and education. Just as hygienic and sanitary revolutions cleaned up houses and streets, with sewage disposal systems, clean water supplies, street sweeping services, waste disposal regulations, wash-basins and water closets, so too the Victorians sought an atmospheric revolution, making the urban air

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<sup>72</sup> The *National Smoke Abatement Society* became the *National Society for Clean Air* in 1958. John Evelyn's portrait adorns their magazine.

<sup>73</sup> Mark Jenner, 'The Politics of London Air: John Evelyn's *Fumifugium* and the Restoration,' *The Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), 535-551 (pp.540, 543).



clean and safe for all to breathe. The idea of forbidding the use of coal as a fuel, as had been attempted in earlier times, was obviously no longer practical, since the industrial age relied on coal as its main fuel. Legislation tended to demand cleaner smoke by ensuring that as much fuel was burned as possible so that less was wasted in the smoke escaping from the chimneys. Initial attempts to introduce legislation were directed against factories and steamships which generated energy through the burning of coal. Factory owners, especially, proved resistant to supporting any legislation since they were concerned to avoid the expense of updating existing furnaces or installing new ones, or providing better training for stokers. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-5) the first sight of the industrial town, Milton, where most of the narrative takes place, is of the factories 'puffing out black "unparliamentary" smoke'.<sup>74</sup> This reflects the passing of the 1844 Act for the good government of Manchester, in which it was demanded that 'every Furnace in any Mill shall be constructed so as to consume the Smoke arising from such Furnace'.<sup>75</sup> The novel's industrialist and hero, Mr Thornton, explains that he has converted his chimneys to make their use of fuel more economic, and not because he is being forced by parliament.

Michael Angelo Taylor (1757-1834), the MP for Durham, managed to achieve the passing of a bill which required furnaces of steam engines to consume their own smoke in the early 1820s.<sup>76</sup> This bill was based on new designs of furnaces which were being introduced to show that it was possible to reduce smoke. But there was no real force behind the act in terms of punitive or financial penalties to make any difference. Later, William Mackinnon (1784-1870) began a campaign to introduce laws to reduce smoke pollution. His eight-year campaign began in 1843, when he chaired a

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<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 96.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 532, (fn. 1, Ch. 7).

<sup>76</sup> *Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons) 1821*, 434, II.



committee to inquire into the *Means and Expediency of Preventing the Nuisance of Smoke arising from Fires or Furnaces*. This convinced MacKinnon that action needed to be taken. His six attempts to introduce some kind of Bill were all successfully opposed by those representing industrial interests. Some industrialists defended the dirty atmosphere by suggesting that this meant a healthy economy. One writer explained: ‘Thank God, smoke is rising from the lofty chimneys of most of them! For I have not travelled thus far without learning, by many a painful illustration, that the absence of smoke from the factory-chimney indicates the quenching of the fires on many a domestic hearth, want of employment to many a willing labourer.’<sup>77</sup>

Many industrialists pointed the finger at the domestic chimney as a source of smoke pollution, but it was difficult to interfere with the right of the householder to use coal for heating and cooking, and there were no satisfactory alternative sources of energy. Mackinnon had, however, achieved a greater public recognition of the problem and a greater awareness that through improved technology in the design of furnaces, boilers and steam engines less smoke would be produced.<sup>78</sup>

Sir John Simon (1816-1904), the Medical Officer of Health for the City of London, managed to achieve the insertion of a smoke clause into the City of London Sewers Bill which became law in July 1851. This only covered the city of London but it was hoped by the anti-smoke lobby that if successful it would be adopted by the rest of the metropolis. The next important stage was brought about by Lord Palmerston (1784-1865), in his role as Home Secretary. In 1853 he achieved the passing of the Smoke Nuisance Abatement (Metropolis) Act.<sup>79</sup> But this too was ineffective. It was not

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<sup>77</sup> William Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (London: Duncan and Malcolm, 1842), pp. 21-2.

<sup>78</sup> See Brimblecombe, *The Big Smoke*, pp. 101-3 for more detail on nineteenth-century legislation.

<sup>79</sup> See Eric Ashby and Mary Anderson, *The Politics of Clean Air* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 15-19 for more on Palmerston Acts.



until 1914 that air monitoring systems were introduced which worked on a standard basis. London fog, smoke, soot and dirt were thus increasingly recognised as problems and repeatedly debated during the nineteenth century; yet no practical solutions were found, and the problem grew worse with the continued expansion of the capital, with home fires, factories and machines producing ever-greater quantities of pollution into the atmosphere. The scene was thus set for fog's entry into the world of the imagination.

### III

Fog turned day into night. In his recent book *Night in the Big City*, Joachim Schlor notes: 'The regular succession of day and night, night and day, belongs among the most secure commonplaces of our existence. Such recurring and predictable basic structures form our everyday, everynight life to a greater extent than we would think.'<sup>80</sup> Fog turns this predictability and reality upside down. Fog denies both artificial and natural light. In 1829, *The Times* commented that at midday, 'the neighbourhood of the Royal Exchange was nearly in midnight gloom', although some were lucky enough to accept the loss of the day by pretending that it was really the evening.<sup>81</sup> In Gissing's *Isabel Clarendon*, Vincent Lacour has the financial means to accept the loss of the day through the fog, noting that 'with a blazing fire and drawn curtains, it was just possible to counterfeit the cheerful end of day'.<sup>82</sup> Henry James, on his first visit to London, also contemplated reversing the diurnal clock when he was tempted to take to his bed during the day because of 'the pea-soup atmosphere of

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<sup>80</sup> Joachim Schlor, *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London, 1840-1930*, trans. by Pierre Gottfried Imhof and Dafydd Rees (London: Reaktion, 1998), p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> *The Times*, 21 November 1829, p. 2, col. e.

<sup>82</sup> George Gissing, *Isabel Clarendon* 2 vols (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1969), II, p. 2.



Piccadilly'; but, he added: 'Then I remember how bad my bed is and stay put.'<sup>83</sup> In the latter part of the nineteenth century, designers were even coming up with ingenious decorative windows which could fake sunlight on a foggy day using electric light (see illustration below). But even Gissing's character realises that turning morning into evening is not a reasonable solution for most people and he muses on how others 'go to business even such mornings as this'.<sup>84</sup>

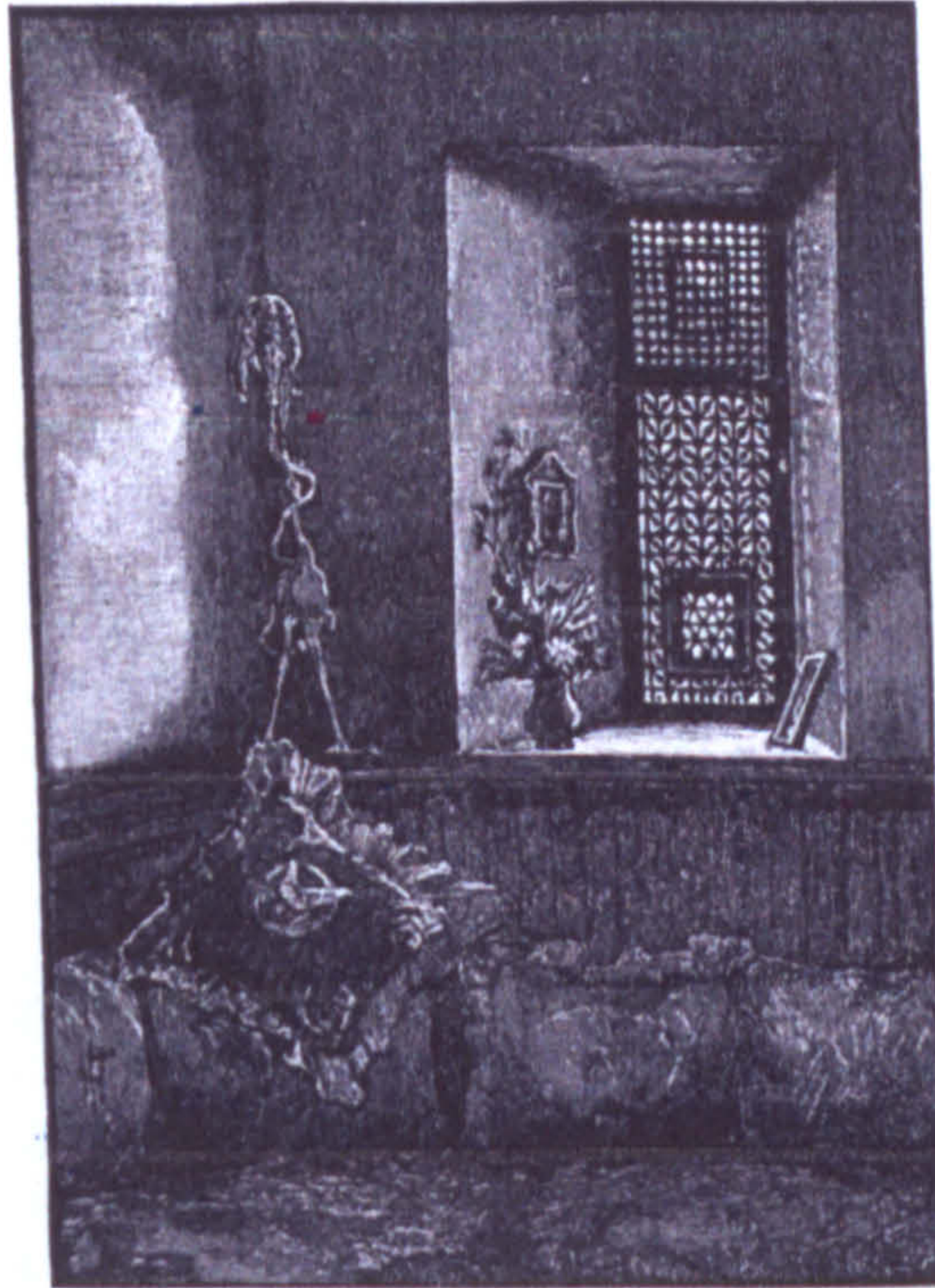


Fig 4: 'Imitation Sunlight.'<sup>85</sup>

For many Londoners it had indeed to be business as usual. In order to achieve this, they had to rely on more efficient lighting in shops, in houses and on the streets. It was accepted that artificial light was required to compensate for the lack of natural light in a fog. During a fog of 1818, *The Times* reported that within doors 'it was

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<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Fred Kaplan, *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius. A Biography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), p. 177.

<sup>84</sup> Gissing, *Isabel Clarendon*, II, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Mrs. J. E. H. Gordon, *Decorative Electricity* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1891), p. 99. A powerful electric lamp is hung outside in the balcony, 'with a dark side to the street, and painted white inside'.



impossible to read without a candle'.<sup>86</sup> Luke Howard reported on the gloom cast by thick fog in January 1826: 'Lamps and candles were lighted in all the shops and offices'.<sup>87</sup> Often these newspaper reports were used obliquely to provide a measure as to how thick the fog actually was: 'For the greater part of the day it was impossible to read or write at a window without artificial light.'<sup>88</sup>

A report from *The Times* in 1829 was typical in its perception of London's reliance on lighting during foggy days: 'The shops were lighted the same as at night', emphasising the extent of the darkness and how the day has become the night.<sup>89</sup> As Peter Ackroyd says in another context: 'It is entirely appropriate that in these [...] accounts of London's brightness the shops, the centre of trade and commerce, shine brightest of all.'<sup>90</sup> It was important to the newspapers of the day to insist that it was business as usual during a fog, and not only in shops. Many institutions attempted to carry on their daily work as efficiently as possible and to control their own environment through the use of artificial light, from 'the city offices and warehouses' which in 1842 were 'enveloped in a dense fog, rendering it necessary to use artificial light' to 'churches and chapels' in 1844 where 'it was necessary to have the lamps lighted to enable the clergymen to proceed with the service.'<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *The Times*, 2 January 1818, p. 2, col. e.

<sup>87</sup> Luke Howard, *The Climate of London deduced from Meteorological Observations, made in the Metropolis, and at various places around it*, 3 vols (London: Harvey and Darton, 1833), III, 207.

<sup>88</sup> *The Times*, 11 January 1812, p. 3, col. c.

<sup>89</sup> *The Times*, 15 December 1829, p. 2, col. c.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), p. 442.

<sup>91</sup> *The Times*, 7 December 1842, p. 3, col. e; 30 December 1844, p. 7, col. g.



## Approaches

### I

The most significant previous secondary work in the area of fog is by the chemist Peter Brimblecombe, whose book *The Big Smoke* (1987) charts the history of air pollution in London from medieval times up to the twentieth century. Brimblecombe notes: 'Painting and poetry can be as informative as a scientific description when trying to understand the complexities of environmental problems'.<sup>92</sup> He attempts to explore fog in a multi-disciplinary way, looking at its influence on some literature and painting; but his is an empirical historical account, written primarily from the point of view of the environmental scientist and historical climatologist; his treatment of literary and visual representations of fog is cursory at best. Nevertheless, Brimblecombe's work does provide a point of reference for the more extensive exploration of cultural representations of fog in the present thesis.

Other commentators with a more literary perspective have discussed fog, though not as their central theme. Two particular books have been influential in the writing of this thesis. Julian Wolfreys's *Writing London* concentrates on writings on London from the beginning to the middle of the nineteenth century, in order to pursue 'the intimate sense of the spirit of the modern metropolitan space.'<sup>93</sup> He is not concerned to convey the real, or to connect the writings to a sense of reality because, as he says:

The meaning of the city is not (yet) fixed in place, either *for* or *by* the writers in question [...] Their acts of writing respond differently in every example. What they share, though, is a development of a heterogeneous rhetoric and poetics

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<sup>92</sup> Peter Brimblecombe [online]. University of East Anglia, updated 2007 [accessed 18 March 2009]. Available from <http://www.uea.ac.uk/env/people/facstaff/brimblecombep>

<sup>93</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 4.



of the modern city which has continued to impress itself as the often spectral *imprimatur* of the city on writers from the 1850s to the present day.<sup>94</sup>

Wolfreys stresses the importance of nineteenth-century London not only to its inhabitants but to people everywhere. It maps itself onto the text 'so that the text assumes in a variety of ways the shape, the contours, the architecture and the "ebbs and flows" of the city [...] The writing of the city is at once real and more than real. The city text imposes on the reader a reconsideration of what is meant by the "real".'<sup>95</sup> Because of the ever-changing nature of the city, each writer produces a different London from that of his contemporaries, even though they begin from a similar base.<sup>96</sup> The writers with whom Wolfreys is concerned in his book are 'fascinated with exploring London itself through the written trace, whereas those who come after Dickens tend to employ stock images of the city without necessarily allowing it to transform their texts.'<sup>97</sup> In other words, the earlier writers of London have so successfully absorbed and reproduced images of London that it becomes difficult for later writers to move away from them.

Fog is one of those 'stock images' of London to which Wolfreys refers. Yet although it gained currency from Dickens onwards, it was, this dissertation will argue, at least until the end of the Edwardian period, not a 'stock image' at all, but used and transformed by many writers in new and different ways. In this context, fog as a signifier can give an insight into this adaptability of the image. Taking the idea of fog as a trope of the city, this thesis explores the ways in which writers and artists used it to grasp the essence and ever-changing nature of London.

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, p. 210, note 10.



Wolfreys views fog as ‘one disorganizing trope among many within the city.’<sup>98</sup> Through it, the space of London is transformed into something unknowable. Wolfreys’ views on Dickens and fog are further explored in the chapter on the writer in the present dissertation. However, a focus on Dickens alone is far too narrow. This thesis takes the image of fog far beyond Charles Dickens while at the same time accepting his influence on all those who followed. In taking formlessness, or disorganisation and dissolution, as the central theme in cultural representations of fog, this thesis hopes to show how the visual arts as well as the novel, crime fiction, apocalyptic fantasy and factual reportage all contributed in different ways to the establishment of fog as the paramount signifier of London by the First World War. After this, fog became much more of a cliché in its guise as a signifier, reflecting in particular the growth of the cinema as a means of conveying image.

The approach adopted in this dissertation has also been influenced by Jeremy Tambling’s *Lost in the American City*.<sup>99</sup> His starting-point is Dickens’s experience of American prisons, especially the Philadelphia Penitentiary; he argues that the prison became a trope not only for Dickens’s American experience but also for the American city in general. He suggests that Dickens’s reading of American cities structures his sense of London. Many other novelists, not only Dickens, James and Kafka, but also Mrs Trollope, Wells and Thackeray are discussed. Tambling’s discussion of prison as a metaphor of the city has informed my own use of fog as urban metaphor. He writes extensively about urban fog, not only in *Bleak House*, but also in Russian novels as well as in Baudelaire’s poem, ‘Les Sept Vieillards’.<sup>100</sup> He points to the symbolism of the yellow colour of the fog, and argues that fog, although insubstantial, ‘nonetheless acts

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<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>99</sup> Jeremy Tambling, *Lost in the American City: Dickens, James and Kafka* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.



as a barrier, defining space'.<sup>101</sup> 'The fog confounds the distinctions that architecture makes between inside and outside, and creates a vertiginous sense of "hanging," of being between places.'<sup>102</sup> This dissertation builds on these insights to explore how authors use the changing perceptions of space and the city within the fog, until London takes on the shape of vapour itself, becoming 'the big smoke'.

Not only fog but also other culturally processed phenomena have been approached in ways that have exercised an influence on the present thesis, and helped to set its agendas. In *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* Michael Freeman looks at railways from the focus of railways as a cultural metaphor.<sup>103</sup> He perceives the railway as 'deeply embedded in the evolving structures of Victorian society. It both echoed those structures and interacted with them. It had educational, intellectual, emotional and psychological dimensions.'<sup>104</sup> In a similar way fog was transformed to reflect Victorian society and, without doubt, it had an 'emotional and psychological dimension' in the way it impacted on society and its view of itself. Freeman notes how the railway 'was enmeshed in the spirit of the age, an undiminishing zest for bigger and better [...] and, in concert, a perpetual fascination with a sense of becoming, of living in an age of transition, in anxious and sometimes fearful contemplation of what the future held'.<sup>105</sup> Urban fog betrayed a similar desire for achieving industrial supremacy at any cost but it also played into fears of what this might lead to. Images of fog-ridden London led writers like Charles Dickens to see the future in terms of a regression to the primeval swamps of the past; other writers could see it only in terms of London's ultimate destruction.

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<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale, 1999).

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.



David Trotter's book *Cooking with Mud* employs the idea of mud and mess as metaphor in far-reaching ways.<sup>106</sup> He discusses both good messes and bad messes and associates both types of mess with chance, across both the literary and the visual. Mess is nobody's fault: it just happens. Even when culpability can be assigned, there is always a sense of bad luck attached to it. Mess disillusion, from the failure to feel that one is in complete control of the situation, to the spot on one's dress which shatters the illusion of perfection. Trotter is concerned with the 'part mess plays in the dialectic of illusion and disillusionment'.<sup>107</sup>

Mess as disorder can mean sterility and lack of warmth. Casaubon in *Middlemarch* is the example quoted. Good messes need greater explanation. In the same novel, Mr Brooke's muddle leads to the chance meeting of Will Ladislaw and the widowed Mrs Dorothea Casaubon. 'Mr Brooke can muddle, and still be *good* Mr Brooke.'<sup>108</sup> Trotter goes on to look at the example of the painter Francis Bacon, an artist noted for clutter in his studio but not in his work: 'Bacon incorporated his affinity with mess into his technique; he would hurl paint at the canvas, and then develop systematically the marks first made at random.'<sup>109</sup> David Trotter articulates his intention

to give some standing, in discussions of the history of modern culture, to the 'idea' of mess. By 'idea', I mean something at once less distinct than a concept and more distinct than an experience: a phenomenology, a way of thinking and feeling, an emergent self-awareness. Writers and artists tend not to say what they understand by mess, or why they value it, or disvalue it. But there is an understanding and an evaluation at work in the idea they have of it.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.



Fog, unlike mess, was and is a tangible and physical phenomenon. It was breathed in and waded through. Its tangible qualities made it greasy and moist to the touch. It left an indelible black deposit on the exterior of buildings. It left its own mark on clothes and within doors, on furniture and curtains. It was scientifically analysed and broken down into its chemical parts. It transforms one's experience of oneself, and others, and of the environment in which we exist. Through its metaphorical appropriation fog becomes an idea, in the sense used by Trotter, 'less distinct than a concept and more distinct than an experience'.

## II

Fog's ambiguity lent it considerable power not merely as an idea, in the sense of thinking or feeling about London, but more precisely, as metaphor. William Empson, in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, sees metaphor as the first, or simplest, type of ambiguity, one in which 'a word or a grammatical construction [is] effective in several ways at once.'<sup>111</sup> This ambiguity is, of course, the essence of fog as the object of description. It also lacks depth and is too fluid to grasp physically. There is no doubt that the nature of metaphorical construction can often be ambiguously read, especially by different readers who come with different knowledge or from varying backgrounds.

Empson's positive assessment has not been universally shared. A subsequent account, indeed, noted that

many twentieth-century positivist philosophers and others either state or imply that metaphors are frivolous and inessential, if not dangerous and logically perverse, by denying to them (1) any capacity to contain or transmit knowledge; (2) any direct connection with facts; or (3) any genuine meaning.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953), p. 2.

<sup>112</sup>Ted Cohen, 'Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy', in *On Metaphor*, ed. by Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 1-10 (p. 3).



Perhaps philosophers are uneasy with ambiguity and prefer single, unambiguous meanings. The American philosopher, Ted Cohen, who has written much on the subject of metaphor, argues:

The central, fundamental question concerns meaning. Does a metaphorical statement possess, in addition to its literal meaning (with respect to which the statement will be, typically, absurd or false or pointless), another (metaphorical) meaning wherein resides its capacity to be true as well as to provide the twist of insight we derive from some good metaphors? Or is the magic of metaphors not a matter of the meaning of their words, but a feature of the contexts of their use, of their “pragmatics”?<sup>113</sup>

This thesis subscribes to the ‘cognitive content’ of metaphor. Metaphors can not only add aesthetic beauty to a phrase, and arouse a greater emotional response, they can also transmit greater understanding of the object under scrutiny.

In her *Illness as Metaphor* Susan Sontag (1933-2004) looks at the power of the metaphor especially in terms of cancer and the ways in which it is described metaphorically.<sup>114</sup> She derides metaphor as a myth used to disguise or evade the subject of illness, a myth that even encourages cancer sufferers to regard themselves as evil, or at least, shameful. This leads, she claims, to people denying their illness or delaying their treatment, with deadly consequences. ‘The purpose of my book’, she wrote, was ‘not to confer meaning, which is the traditional purpose of literary endeavor, but to deprive something of meaning: to apply that quixotic, highly polemical strategy, “against interpretation,” to the real world this time.’<sup>115</sup> While denying that any illness has any intrinsic meaning to those who suffer from it, she nevertheless explores its many-faceted cultural construction through its transformation into metaphor – the primary purpose of the present thesis.

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>114</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99.



In his book *I May Be Some Time*, a cultural history of our obsession with ice, Eskimos and polar expeditions, Francis Spufford (1964- ) discusses the importance of metaphor and its dangers:

Many metaphors, many fragmentary perceptions informed the explorers' attitudes to their labours. But among them, buried when the work was successful, revived when it was not, was a consistent conviction of the perversity of being where they were, a sense, worthy of Charlotte Brontë, that their presence might be dangerous to themselves, and not just physically. The explorers moved through landscapes conventionally used to signify psychological extremes.<sup>116</sup>

This thesis is concerned with the use of fog and smoke as metaphorical signifiers of psychological states, social tensions and anxieties, feelings of imprisonment and other moral conditions which impact on literary and artistic works. It seeks to establish the widespread and astonishingly varied use of fog in Victorian cultural representations.

In a recent edition of *The Guardian*, Jon Henley wrote 'that the whole point of a metaphor is that it paints a vivid image that speaks powerfully, memorably and unambiguously to everyone'.<sup>117</sup> Yet ambiguity was often central to the use of fog as metaphor. Representations of London urban fog varying in colour and density would appear, on first sight, not to be the basis of a stable metaphorical image. Adding to this instability were the problems of definition as to what exactly atmospheric pollution could be called, often meaning that fog, smoke and mist would be used indiscriminately. Was it yellow, black, white or green? Was a fog a natural aspect of London and smoke artificial? Was fog an alien, threatening intrusion into daily life, or did Londoners have an almost affectionate feeling of ownership, expressed through the use of terms like 'London particular'? How far did the metaphorical uses of fog

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<sup>116</sup> Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 15.

<sup>117</sup> *The Guardian*, in section two, 6 August 2008, p. 3.



change over time, and why? How were these changing uses connected to broader social, cultural and political changes?

Fog supplied a metaphor which needed very little scientific or esoteric knowledge to understand. Almost immediately a fog is introduced by an author, we know that the world that is being described is dark, frightening and confusing. For many it would have seemed as if London had become an underground world, for others it appeared as a return to a primitive age. Often, there would have been a strong smell of sulphur from the coal, for many a reminder of Biblical Hell. Lord Byron (1788-1824) used the image of the fog as a canopy over London in *Don Juan* (1822), highlighting the relationship between the canopy and its cause –‘sea-coal’.

[...] a wilderness of steeples peeping  
On tiptoe through their sea coal canopy,  
A huge, dun cupola, like a foolscap crown  
On a fool's head - and there is London town!<sup>118</sup>

Here is an image of polluted nature: the black smoky atmosphere of London is like the level top of a forest, the steeples the higher trees breaking through; but the forest colour is dirty brown rather than a natural green. It is ‘sea-coal’ that has wrought the change. And the atmosphere also seems like a cupola, a rounded vault or dome, as often found supported on columns over a tomb. The use of cupola also picks upon an earlier line: ‘A little cupola, more neat than solemn|Protects his dust [...]’.<sup>119</sup> Byron’s ‘dun cupola’ confines the dust or smoke within London under its heavy canopy. These metaphors were to recur repeatedly

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<sup>118</sup> Lord George Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. by T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan and Willis Winslow Pratt (London: Yale University Press, 1982), X, 82.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, IV, 104.



## Chapter Two: Dissolution or Redemption: Fog in the Works of Charles Dickens

### Introduction

Dickens's influence on the presentation of London in literature is summed up by Nicholas Freeman: 'Both in his writing and in its accompanying illustrations, Dickens created a powerfully mythic locale, one to which visitors almost inevitably compared the actual city, rather than vice versa.'<sup>1</sup> More precisely Dickens became for many the creator of London fogs. 'The very atmosphere' wrote George Gissing, 'declared him: if I gasped in a fog, was it not Mr Guppy's "London particular"?'<sup>2</sup> In *The London Life of Yesterday* (1909), Arthur Compton-Rickett comments of London's beginnings: 'Even at this period London fog attracts attention, though from the account of the Roman Historian we should adjudge it less obnoxious than the "London particular" so feelingly described by Dickens.'<sup>3</sup> Everyone is familiar with the famous opening passage of *Bleak House*, where fog is used in virtuoso manner as a metaphor for the obfuscation of the law. Fog had become 'Dickensian'. This chapter will set *Bleak House* in a wider context by looking at Dickens's use of fog in other novels as well.

It has been noted many times how well Dickens knew London. He had spent much of his childhood there and had walked the streets, rather than take horse-drawn cabs, because of the economic hardships his family experienced. He was a part of London and London was a part of him. It is true to say that London had a mythic aura for the young Charles Dickens before he even realised this. The solid reality of London streets and buildings was second nature to him. Yet, several times when he

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Freeman, *Conceiving the City: London, Literature, and Art 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> George Gissing, 'Dickens in Memory', in *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, ed. by Pierre Coustillas, 3 vols (Surrey: Grayswood Press, 2004-5), I (2004), pp. 47-51, (p. 50).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Compton-Rickett, *London Life of Yesterday* (London: Constable and Co., 1909), p. 18.



views London from afar, he sees it as quite insubstantial, quite formless. In *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) London is 'a mere dark mist – a giant phantom in the air'.<sup>4</sup> In *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) London, on first viewing is 'a city in the clouds'.<sup>5</sup> In *David Copperfield* (1849-50) London appears as a vapour: 'I saw all London lying in the distance like a great vapour, with here and there some lights twinkling through it.'<sup>6</sup>

Dickens's view from above in *Bleak House* reveals a London which is impenetrable because of the fog which covers it. Dickens has a 'sense that the very dimensions of the modern city dwarf the individual, threaten to subvert the exercise of human agency'.<sup>7</sup> The barriers of time appear to have disintegrated. London harks back to the primeval days of the megalosaurus, which so famously stalks its streets in the opening of *Bleak House*. For Dickens London became more unknowable as it increased in size and complexity throughout his life, and this breakdown of knowledge is signified increasingly in the way London dissolves and becomes formless within the fogs which he made so famous.

Many critics have noted a gradual change in Dickens's view of London as he grew older. They distinguish between the optimism of the earlier works and the pessimism of the later ones. In his introduction to a recent edition of *Our Mutual Friend*, Andrew Sanders notes: 'The tired, dreary, sprawling London in which the novel is located is not the vibrant, dismaying, multifarious city of Dickens' early fiction. The

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<sup>4</sup> Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 308.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 180. All quotations from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 350.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 54.



metropolis [...] now seems fatigued by its inexorable pursuit of wealth and jaded by excess.<sup>8</sup> As Robert Alter remarks:

The key to Dickens's searching vision of the cityscape is his use of figurative language. After Shakespeare, he is probably the greatest master of metaphor in the English language. Through the radical originality of his metaphors [Dickens] registers a profound perception that the mushrooming metropolis of the nineteenth century constitutes a fundamental, and worrisome, alteration of the nature of urban existence, that the growth of the city may be running out of control.<sup>9</sup>

The chapter will explore the changing metaphorical significance of fog through four major novels, discussed in chronological order: *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), *Bleak House* (1851-3), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5).

### *The Old Curiosity Shop*

#### I

In chapter 67 of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) Dickens introduces a fog which does not fit into the pattern of the artificially intensified vapour so often associated in people's minds with Dickens, because it is natural. It revolts against Quilp, the novel's central villain, who in this work is a symbol of industry, commerce, usury and evil, which, to Dickens's mind, were suffocating positive, natural human values. In the novel Quilp persecutes the innocent characters, notably Little Nell, the sweet heroine of the story, who represents these natural human values.

Quilp is associated in the novel with all types of man-made smoke – cigar-smoke, pipe-smoke, chimney-smoke. He shares the characteristics of the polluting industrial town. Chimney smoke does not cause him the discomfort people usually experience; in fact, he appears to enjoy it:

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Sanders, 'Introduction', in Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, Everyman Library (London: David Campbell, 1994), p. xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Alter, p 48.



Mr Quilp once more crossed the Thames, and shut himself up in his Bachelor's Hall, which, by reason of its newly-erected chimney depositing the smoke inside the room and carrying none of it off, was not quite so agreeable as more fastidious people might have desired. Such inconveniences, however, instead of disgusting the dwarf with his new abode, rather suited his humour; so, after dining luxuriously from the public-house, he lighted his pipe, and smoked against the chimney until nothing of him was visible through the mist but a pair of red and highly inflamed eyes, with sometimes a dim vision of his head and face, as, in a violent fit of coughing, he slightly stirred the smoke and scattered the heavy wreaths.<sup>10</sup>

Quilp is constantly trying to impede vision through his smoke and through his tricks. Here he uses the smoke to make himself virtually invisible. Quilp even pits one form of smoke (the coal smoke) against another (his self-produced cigar smoke), creating an 'atmosphere, which must infallibly have smothered any other man'. Quilp's association with smoke emphasises his devilish, almost supernatural qualities. Later in the book, the night fog has the same effect on the light from Quilp's counting-house as the smoke had on Quilp's eyes; it makes the house seem 'inflamed and red [...] as though it suffered from it like an eye'.<sup>11</sup>

Quilp is indelibly associated with tobacco. His use of it reinforces the essential evil of his character. He uses smoke in a diabolical way to discomfort other people - especially Samuel Brass who, we are told, has the drawback 'that tobacco-smoke always caused him great internal discomposure and annoyance'.<sup>12</sup> This fact has obviously not escaped Quilp's attention: 'Quilp looked at his legal adviser, and seeing that he was winking very much in the anguish of his pipe, that he sometimes shuddered when he happened to inhale its full flavour, and that he constantly fanned the smoke from him, was quite overjoyed and rubbed his hands with glee.'<sup>13</sup> In Dickens's novels there is a recurrent theme of evil characters being linked to smoke.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Malcolm Andrews and Angus Easson (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 469-70. All references from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 562.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 139.



In this novel, it is also true of fog. Quilp sleeps 'amidst the congenial accompaniments of rain, mud, dirt, damp, *fog*, and rats'.<sup>14</sup>

Quilp's symbolic representation of the polluting horrors of industry is made explicit by Dickens's description of a city dominated by 'tall chimneys, crowding on each other and presenting that endless repetition of the same dull, ugly form, which is the horror of oppressive dreams, poured out their plague of smoke, obscured the light, and made foul the melancholy air'.<sup>15</sup> Quilp's ugly, smoke-emitting form may not be tall like the chimneys; but he too is the stuff of 'oppressive dreams', as Nell, the innocent heroine of the book, finds out when she tries to sleep after having caught sight of him near Mrs Jarley's caravan: 'she could get none but broken sleep by fits and starts all night, for fear of Quilp, who throughout her uneasy dreams was somehow connected with the wax-work, or was wax-work himself, or was Mrs Jarley and wax-work too'.<sup>16</sup> In the same way as the chimneys crowd 'on each other', Nell feels 'as if she were hemmed in by a legion of Quilps, and the very air itself were filled with them'.<sup>17</sup> The smoke from the chimneys obscures the light, just like the smoke from Quilp's chimney and cigar. Quilp's threat to 'blaze away all night' till the end of his cigar has gone 'a deep fiery red' is associative of the factory chimneys in chapter 45 whose 'smoke was changed to fire' at night.<sup>18</sup>

The factory described in this chapter of the book is seen as a hell-like environment: 'In this gloomy place, moving like demons among the flame and smoke, dimly and fitfully seen, flushed and tormented by the burning fires [...] a number of

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 472 (my italics).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.424.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 278-9.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 82, 424.



men laboured like giants.<sup>19</sup> Nancy K. Hill suggests: 'The industrial, material thrust of the changing society seems in *The Old Curiosity Shop* to be turning many into grotesques. The new industrialism forces men to act like giants, to work in situations scarcely human.'<sup>20</sup> The dwarf, Quilp, whose 'head and face were large enough for the body of a giant', belongs to this world of grotesques.<sup>21</sup> Like the 'burning fires' of the factory, he too torments his victims. Just as the factory workers move 'like demons', Quilp is likened to 'an evil spirit' earlier in the book, and later he seems 'like some familiar demon invisible to all eyes but Kit Nubbles's'.<sup>22</sup> Quilp displays the same restless, smoky and diabolical energy as the industrial environment. If Quilp does represent the uncontrolled and manic face of the new industrial society, then it is only right that Quilp should be destroyed by forces unleashed by nature, as indeed he eventually is.

## II

The events in chapter 67 of the book are concerned with retribution visited on Quilp for his crimes. The evil dwarf has plagued the lives of his own family, as well as of Nell and her grandfather. He has caused Kit to be sent to prison on a trumped-up charge of theft. Kit is a close friend of Nell's. Quilp's malevolence towards him is largely unexplained but enhances the sense of diabolical evil which Quilp exhibits. Quilp is finally brought to justice, not from the legal proceedings of the state, but from two great natural elemental forces – the water of the River Thames and the fog of London. Retribution is made complete through fire, another natural element. As E. D. H. Johnson states in his introduction to Dickens's novels: 'Increasingly, the natural

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 417.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy K. Hill, *A Reformer's Art: Dickens' Picturesque and Grotesque Imagery* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 159, 454.



world is pictured as embodying principles of moral order which do not so much reflect as stand in judgment on human activities.<sup>23</sup> In the end, the unnatural Quilp is thoroughly punished by the elements of the natural world.

The chapter opens with a direct reference to the fact that justice, pursued through the state, is about to be done: 'It was the day next after Mr Brass's confession, and consequently that which threatened the restriction of Mr Quilp's liberty.'<sup>24</sup> But Quilp has 'no intuitive perception of the cloud which lowered upon his house'.<sup>25</sup> The cloud is a reference to a passage in Shakespeare's *Richard III* referring to 'all the clouds that lour'd upon our house | In the deep bosom of the ocean buried'.<sup>26</sup> Parallels between Quilp and Richard III are made throughout the novel. Both are characters deformed in body, and each is determined 'to prove a villain' of himself.<sup>27</sup> They both delight in evil, for its own sake as much as for material gain. Both are bestial, with Richard III often described as a rooting hog, and Quilp screeching and howling like an animal to vary his 'monotonous routine'.<sup>28</sup> Within the Shakespearian text the clouds are buried in the ocean, but might re-emerge at any time. The link between vapour and water runs through Dickens's representation of Quilp as well.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, retribution for Quilp's crimes is brought about both by the water of the Thames and by the cloud of fog which covers London: 'The day, in the highest and brightest quarters of the town, was damp, dark, cold and gloomy. In that low and marshy spot, the fog filled every nook and comer with a thick dense

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<sup>23</sup> E. D. H. Johnson, *Charles Dickens: An Introduction to His Novels* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 612.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>26</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, ed. by E. A. Honigmann (London: Penguin, 1968), I. 1. 3.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, I. 1. 30.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, I. 111. 228.



cloud.’<sup>29</sup> Although fog was seldom reported in the press as affecting high ground, Dickens insists in *The Old Curiosity Shop* that it covers both the highest and the lowest areas of London: no one could escape retribution for his sins. Given the atmospheric conditions usually necessary for fog or mist, –a temperature inversion in which high ground is in clear sunlight, and the water vapour is trapped in a layer nearer the ground – it seems on the face of it implausible that the high ground could have been ‘damp, dark, cold and gloomy’.<sup>30</sup> The gloom has to be taken as metaphorical. Its thickness and density add to the idea that there is no escape. The use of cloud here alludes once more to the passage in Shakespeare’s play, and underscores a natural quality to the phenomenon.

Dickens builds up the atmosphere of an extremely foggy day around the river:

Every object was obscured at one or two yards’ distance. The warning lights and fires upon the river were powerless beneath this pall and but for a raw and piercing chillness in the air, and now and then the cry of some bewildered boatman as he rested on his oars and tried to make out where he was, the river itself might have been miles away.<sup>31</sup>

The ‘warning lights and fires’ are not only powerless because of the density of the fog but also because Quilp does not heed their message, unlike his almost instant reaction to the note from Sally Brass which leads him to his death. The obscuration of the fog and the deception it creates over distances alert the reader to the possibility of an accidental drowning in the river. We are told that ‘the river itself *might* have been miles away’.<sup>32</sup> Indeed it proves to be all too near. But the obscuration also supplies the tension in the chapter. A foggy day could give thieves and pickpockets freedom to

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<sup>29</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 613.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 613 (my italics).



work, allowing them cover to escape should they be discovered. Will the fog be used by Quilp to escape justice?

Up to this point, both fog and cloud are viewed interchangeably. In the next paragraph, the fog changes to mist, as it takes on a personal, spiritual and supernatural character: 'The mist, though sluggish and slow to move, was of a keenly searching kind. No muffling up in furs and broad-cloth kept it out. It seemed to penetrate into the very bones of the shrinking wayfarers, and to rack them with cold and pains.'<sup>33</sup> The metaphorical allusion to justice is here suddenly intensified. Justice has not been particularly speedy in its pursuit of Quilp. After all, we are told that it is already 'the day next after Mr Brass's confession'. But Dickens assures us that justice always wins through. There is no escape because it is 'of a keenly searching kind'. Just as, earlier on, both the highest and lowest quarters are subject to its power, so neither the furs of the rich nor the broad-cloth of the poorer classes can be used as a shield from it. The rack, an instrument of torture, causes 'pains' in an obvious metaphor that is virtually a cliché; but behind it is a second meaning, unavoidable in this context, for the verb, to rack, also refers to 'clouds driven before the wind in the upper air as well as a driving mist or fog'.<sup>34</sup> The supernatural quality of the mist is intensified because it causes such a chill to the bones. Ghosts traditionally made the viewer shiver; in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Scrooge feels 'the chilling influence of its death-cold eyes' when he sees Marley's ghost.<sup>35</sup>

The only antidote to the mist and fog is the hearth. It is 'the warm blaze alone' which defies the fog. When Kit Nubbles is freed and returns to his family, his home is

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>34</sup> *OED*, XIII, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol', in *The Christmas Books*, Everyman, ed. by Sally Ledger (London: J. M. Dent, 1999), pp. 1-85 (p.19).



described as containing 'lighted rooms, bright fires, cheerful faces, the music of glad voices, words of love and welcome, warm hearts, and tears of happiness'.<sup>36</sup> To reinforce the idea of the hearth as a place of protection as well as a source of family companionship, Dickens tells us that Quilp, who is 'by no means insensible to the comfort of being indoors', prefers 'to have a fireside to himself'.<sup>37</sup> Quilp perverts Dickens' own image of the hearth through his selfishness in trying to deny his wife the comfort of his fire, so concerned is he to protect himself.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout this chapter there are portents of death. Tom Scott wails like the banshee whose shrieks traditionally foretold death. The fog is a 'pall' – a cloth spread over a coffin, usually black or purple. Later, the cloud has '*shrouded* everything from view'. On reading the news of Brass's disclosures to the authorities, Quilp threatens the traitor with drowning. His description of Sampson Brass's death prefigures his own at the end of the chapter: 'Drowning men come to the surface three times, they say. Ah! To see him those three times, and mock him as his face came bobbing up, – oh, what a rich treat that would be!'<sup>39</sup>

The 'dense mist' is seen 'to thicken every moment', 'the fog had so much increased'.<sup>40</sup> The imagery gives the chapter a sense of Quilp being resolutely hounded down before the authorities actually arrive on the scene. The cloud has been 'lowering', the fog has been 'filling in' and the mist 'is of a keenly searching kind'. All of these verbs anthropomorphise this image of justice and indicate a physical boxing-in of their quarry. The association with 'cloud' suggests that the fog is not created by

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<sup>36</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 622.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 613, 615.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 616.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 617, 618.

the pollution of Victorian London but is part of the natural world. The term 'mist' is almost supernaturally directed.

The emphasis in the final part of this chapter is on the darkness and obfuscation created by the cloud: 'It was about eight o'clock; but the dead of the darkest night would have been as noon-day, in comparison with the thick cloud which then rested upon the earth and shrouded everything from view.' The passage has a biblical feel of retribution, reminiscent of the darkness that descended over the Egyptians in the book of Exodus.<sup>41</sup> Yet Quilp misinterprets the fog as an ally, just as earlier he had seen fog as congenial, remarking: "It will be a good night for travelling anonymous!"<sup>42</sup> But the blackness of the night proves to be as false a friend as Brass had turned out to be: 'A good, black, devil's night this, to have my friend here. If I had but that wish, it might, for anything I cared, never be day again.'<sup>43</sup> His wish is ironically granted, since he will indeed not see the day again. Quilp moves outside and darts forward 'as if into the mouth of some dim, yawning cavern'.<sup>44</sup> The simile emphasises the darkness created by the fog but also gives the passage a cannibalistic air through the personification of the cavern yawning, which reflects the savagery of Quilp's own eating habits, as well as his reluctant dismissal of cannibalism in himself: "I don't eat babies; I don't like 'em".<sup>45</sup>

In her book *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, Kate Flint refers to 'anxieties about the condition of England which were expressed through the dread of what lay under the earth'. She goes on to quote Patrick Brantlinger, who has commented in relation to late Victorian imperial Gothic fiction of 'the nightmare of

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<sup>41</sup> Exodus, Chapter 10, verse 22.

<sup>42</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 617.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 619.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 619.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 223.



being swallowed by the world's dark places' in which 'characters are swallowed up or temporarily entombed in chasms, tunnels, crypts, and caves'.<sup>46</sup> The image of fog creating a cavern-like environment can be perceived as a manifestation of this fear. Caverns are traditionally associated as a home for ogres and dwarves in fairy tales. To middle-class Victorians, this underground world housed the poorest and most dangerous people; there was a constant fear that this 'nether world' would move out from its underground dwellings and invade their own more respectable areas.<sup>47</sup> The ultimate literary expression of this phenomenon is in *The Time Machine* (1895) when the Morlocks emerge from their underground home to devour the Eloi – representatives of the élite. Dwarves were often associated with the Underworld and this included the dark recesses of the mind: 'Coming from it and remaining linked to it, they symbolize those dark forces which are within us and which can so easily take monstrous shape.'<sup>48</sup> Quilp, swallowed up by the fog, taps into Victorian psychological fears and reflects him being taken into the underworld.

His fall into the river is sudden. The death Quilp had promised for Sampson Brass becomes his own death. The final paragraphs are a dramatic description of a man fighting for his life in the water. They show Dickens's fascinated horror at the physicality of death. At the point of death, Quilp achieves a clear awareness and understanding of what is happening. He has enjoyed being the master of manipulation; he now understands that his actions are leading to his own death, for he realises that he has frustrated his only hope of being saved by having locked the gate to stall his pursuers. The fog, for which he had been so grateful earlier as a means of

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<sup>46</sup> Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 155-6.

<sup>47</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between classes in Victorian Society* (London: Penguin, 1984), see especially pp. 12-16.

<sup>48</sup> Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 321.

escape, will prevent him from being seen and rescued. This realisation is made more terrifying by the repetition and rhythm of the passage:

he could hear the knocking at the gate again – could hear a shout that followed it – could recognise the voice. For all his struggling and splashing, he could understand that they had lost their way, and had wandered back to the point from which they started; that they were all but looking on while he was drowned; that they were close at hand, but could not make an effort to save him; that he himself had shut and barred them out.<sup>49</sup>

Another portent of Quilp's death is in the knocking at the gate – the Shakespearean signal to so many of the significant deaths in Dickens' novels, like the porter in *Macbeth* who sees himself as a gatekeeper to hell.<sup>50</sup>

Retribution is heightened further by the elements, whose punishments parallel Quilp's own cruelty in life. The statement that 'the strong tide filled his throat' recalls his own lusty drinking habits and his repeated attempts to cause pain to people by making them drink spirits hot enough to scald.<sup>51</sup> His 'yell' and his 'wild and glaring eyes' all emphasise his grotesque animal character in life as well as in death.<sup>52</sup> Even when the river has given up toying with its catch, the notion of games, so enjoyed by Quilp in his life, is reinforced as his 'hair, stirred by the damp breeze, played in a kind of mockery of death – such a mockery as the dead man himself would have revelled in when alive'.<sup>53</sup> This reminds us of Quilp's heartfelt longing to mock Brass as he drowns 'those three times, and mock him as his face came bobbing up'.<sup>54</sup> Now it is the natural element of the breeze that is mocking him.

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<sup>49</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 620.

<sup>50</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1979), II, 3, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 620.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 620.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 620.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 616.



Another element, that of fire, destroys Quilp's hermitage. Again it is Quilp who caused this through his own clumsiness, when he left his favoured haunt and knocked over the stove. This is not entirely unexpected, since the reader has also been given signs that this might happen when earlier Quilp shows Sampson the figure-head, which he fancies looks like Kit Nubbles. The dwarf beats and pokes it with a red-hot poker, and threatens to burn it.<sup>55</sup> Just as Quilp's promise to drown Brass only ends up with his own death, so his threat to burn the figure-head turns upon himself.

The final few lines complete Quilp's punishment. The fog seems to have disappeared. It is as though the whole of nature has been revolted by his crimes: 'The sky was red with flame, and the water that bore it there had been tinged with the sullen light as it flowed along.'<sup>56</sup> Nature's revulsion also makes this a hell-like picture and indicates that Quilp is destined for the inferno. The red tinge of the scene shows the path to hell from sky to water. But it also recalls the 'lurid glare hanging in the dark sky; the dull reflection of some distant fire' in the earlier industrial scene.<sup>57</sup> On the point of death Quilp loses his identity as a human being – there is a repeated emphasis on 'corpse' and 'carcase'; his body is no more than 'ghastly freight' which is referred to, no longer as he, but as 'it', in a phrase reminiscent of Nell's first encounter with the kindly furnace stoker, who is degraded by the text into a thing: 'as if to show that *it* had no desire to conceal itself or take them at an advantage.'<sup>58</sup> Even when the form is shown to be a man, he is never given a name, as Nell shamefacedly recalls. The savage nature of Quilp's death is, of course, in direct contrast to the peaceful rest into which Nell falls three chapters later and which is not narrated directly but

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 566.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 620.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 620, 416 (my italics).

described in the past tense. Quilp's death is reported in the present, emphasising the horror of it. Nell's body is left as if she were still alive, Quilp's is a 'deserted carcase'.

### III

In his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Malcolm Andrews writes that when Quilp 'is eventually brought to heel he is punished not as a result of the inevitable logic of plot within the novel, but by an arbitrary end whose brutality can be seen as a part-reflection of Dickens' revenge for the death of Nell'.<sup>59</sup> But, as we have seen, Quilp's end is far from arbitrary. His death by drowning is foreshadowed by many indications in the text. His punishment and death, through the natural elements of fog, water and fire, is completely appropriate in thematic terms, since Quilp is so associated with man-made smoke and the industrial condition. As Andrews also states:

[Quilp] is in many ways a microcosm of Dickens' London, the city whose ferocious and destructive energy is at once repulsive and fascinating, and whose individual features become grotesquely disproportionate when assembled to make a whole entity. On these terms the novel might be read as an indictment of industrialization, its blighting influence on men and their environment.<sup>60</sup>

The death of Quilp in a natural fog shows nature reasserting itself by ridding the world of a particular pollutant.

The coroner's jury's final verdict of suicide on Quilp's death is surprising, however, because it does not reflect contemporary discursive linkages of suicide and drowning. In the contemporary press there were frequent reports of death by accidental drowning in the Thames during foggy weather. As Victor Bailey notes:

It is also possible that some suicides, particularly by poison, drowning, or falling, and where the deceased had not communicated the intention to anyone

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.



else, were masked, intentionally or otherwise, as accidents. Even when the deceased had threatened suicide, the jury could return a verdict of accidental death [...] They would go through the motions of asking witnesses if the deceased man's trouser fly was open, to rule out the possibility, presumably, that he had accidentally fallen in while urinating. They would investigate how deep the water was; whether the deceased's clothes were torn; or the body bore any marks of violence. However, on the legal principle that a death was accidental until proved otherwise, juries had little choice but to return an open verdict unless someone had seen the deceased jump into the water.<sup>61</sup>

So Quilp's death would have probably not have been judged as the result of suicide because of jurors' reluctance to pass such a verdict, especially when taking into account the density of the fog. He had also told Tom Scott, implicitly, that he would return: 'Don't come here to-morrow, for this place will be shut up. Come back no more till you hear from me or see.' He also tells his wife quite explicitly and with a certain malicious enjoyment that he will be back: "As for you," said the dwarf, addressing himself to her, "ask no questions about me, make no search for me, say nothing concerning me. I shall not be dead, mistress, and that'll comfort you."<sup>62</sup>

Plenty of evidence is presented in the novel, therefore, that he had not intended to drown himself. In addition accidental drownings were evidently not uncommon. A report in *The Times*, dated 18 December 1835, describes six drownings during a fog. Of the three where the inquest had been held, the verdict was, in all cases, that the people had 'accidentally drowned' with a strong recommendation that the dock areas where they had been drowned should be better protected against such incidents. Another report made it clear that there could be no question of suicide:

**FATAL ACCIDENTS DURING THE FOG** – On Saturday night five young men, tanners [...] amused themselves by playing leap-frog, and while doing so found their way to a narrow passage leading direct to the river, a few yards below Cherry-garden Stairs. While amusing themselves here, three of the young men, unconscious of being so near the water, owing to the dense fog which prevailed, walked into the Thames. Their companions, who were close

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<sup>61</sup> Victor Bailey, *This Rash Act: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 61-3.

<sup>62</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 617.

behind, on hearing the splash, turned back and called out loudly for assistance. Their cries were heard by the Thames-police, named White and Bennett, who were passing by the stairs in one of the police galleys at the time. They instantly rowed to the spot [...] and in about 20 minutes afterwards found the bodies and conveyed them shore to a public-house. The unfortunate young men have all left wives and families. They had been so long in the water when found by the Thames police, that there appeared no chance of restoring animation.<sup>63</sup>

If Dickens's novel had been congruent with this contemporary discourse, Tom Scott and Mrs Quilp's statements would have been heard at the inquest and it would have been much more likely that a verdict of accidental death would have been passed. Dickens would have been aware of jurors' tendency to record verdicts of 'accidental death' even where suicide had been a distinct possibility. Yet he reverses this common pattern. His narrative clearly shows Quilp's drowning as an accident, albeit one of his own making, while the coroner's court passes a verdict of suicide. This is another way of punishing Quilp; as a suicide, he would be damned. More profoundly, too, Quilp is indirectly responsible for his own death through his evil ways.

A recurring factor in the press reports of these drownings is the incidence of drinking and illegal activities undertaken by those victims before they drowned. The five young leap-frogging tanners in the above report from *The Times* were said to have been 'out on a "spree"' after 'receiving their wages'; they were accused twice of 'amusing themselves' and they had earlier caused a disturbance which had led to their imprisonment for a short time before they drowned. The tone of the report is one of condemnation: how could young men with wives and families behave in this way?

Nearly two years later, *The Times* wrote of a surveyor called Fox, who found

the body of a man lying on this bank in the mud, adjoining the Orchard-house-wharf, from which it is supposed he had walked during the fog into the water, which on the tide receding left him in the mud [...] and recognized it to be that of a man named John Higgins, *alias* Elliott, whom he had met coming out of the Orchard-public-house in Poplar, on Wednesday night.

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<sup>63</sup> *The Times*, 11 February 1834, p. 1, col. e.



Higgins resided for many years in Essex-street, Whitechapel, and has left a wife and seven children. He was known to be connected with some persons carrying on illicit distillation, and Fox discovered on his person two skins which had recently contained whisky, the produce of a private still, a pot and a measure.<sup>64</sup>

Drink and crime, as well as irresponsibility, played a role in contemporary discourses on accidental drownings. The role of drink in *The Old Curiosity Shop* takes on a 'more complex and even sinister' aspect: 'alcohol', which 'often symbolises good fellowship for Dickens', is more often than not perverted by Quilp's sadistic desire to torture those people he drinks with.<sup>65</sup> Quilp, we are told, has just brewed himself 'a great bowl of hot punch' from which he drinks 'a long deep draught, as if it were fair water and cooling to his parched mouth.' He takes 'another draught from the bowl' before he is forced to leave his bachelor residence. He leaves grateful for the foggy night which, he hopes, will help him evade justice.

Victims of accidental drowning seem not to have been able to swim; but even had they possessed this skill, they would have found it difficult to survive in the Thames because of the density of the river traffic. The 1834 report in *The Times* notes that the police 'who instantly rowed to the spot [...] cleared away the barges near the stairs'.<sup>66</sup> This level of overcrowding along the Thames was commonplace and would have meant that a drowning man could have easily been pulled under the water, not only by the boats anchored in the docks, but also by the frequent traffic along the river. Thus Quilp is killed when he comes into contact with the hull of a ship, whereupon the 'resistless water bore him down before he could give it utterance, and, driving him under it, carried away a corpse'.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *The Times*, 18 December 1835, p. 3, col. a.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Washington, 'Introduction' to Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Peter Washington, Everyman (London: David Campbell, 1995), p.xvii.

<sup>66</sup> *The Times*, 18 December 1835, p. 3, col. a

<sup>67</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 620.

After his body is recovered, Quilp is 'left to be buried with a stake through his heart in the centre of four lonely roads'.<sup>68</sup> This form of burial, traditionally associated with suicides, was outlawed in 1823 and Dickens is being deliberately anachronistic in bestowing it on Quilp.<sup>69</sup> *Felo de se*, or self murder, 'meant for a person, in the antiquated language of the inquisition, "not having the fear of God before her eyes but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil and of her malice aforethought [...] wickedly contriving and intending [...] feloniously to kill and murder herself".<sup>70</sup> According to Bailey, the verdict was at times applied to habitual drunkards. This would fit in with Quilp's obvious love of strong liquor. Bailey highlights the rarity of passing a *felo de se* verdict after 1837 but if it were passed, the body had to be buried by the police in unconsecrated ground between the hours of nine and midnight, without religious rites. This form of burial too was outlawed in 1882.<sup>71</sup>

Burial with a stake through the heart fits in thematically with the rest of the book. It would have been well known to Dickens's readership through vampire myths and Gothic literature. The reader would have immediately realised the significance of such a burial: it denied Quilp any chance of being resurrected. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a novel dominated by death and the idea of resurrection. Nell's reflections on the death of her friend, the little scholar, are of him 'not coffined and covered up, but mingling with angels and smiling happily'.<sup>72</sup> At the end, when Kit recounts Nell's life story to his children, they are offered the reward of seeing Nell in heaven when they die, as long as they are good. In a novel in which Nell visits and finds peace in many

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 665.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. 700 (Notes).

<sup>70</sup> Bailey, p. 65.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>72</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 262.



graveyards, it seems appropriate that Quilp should be denied a place in a graveyard since he denied peace to so many other characters in the book. Yet Dickens, in the final chapter, is vague as to the final resting place of Quilp's body:

It was rumoured afterwards that this horrible and barbarous ceremony had been dispensed with, and that the remains had been secretly given up to Tom Scott. But even here, opinion was divided; for some said Tom had dug them up at midnight, and carried them to a place indicated to him by the widow. It is probable that both these stories may have had their origin in the simple fact of Tom's shedding tears upon the inquest.<sup>73</sup>

The reburial reinforces the idea of the 'attraction of repulsion'. Earlier in the novel Mrs Quilp's relationship to Quilp is described as 'one of those strange infatuations of which examples are by no means scarce' and between Tom Scott and Quilp 'there existed a strange kind of mutual liking'.<sup>74</sup> In the end, therefore, the fate of Quilp's corpse becomes indeterminate.

#### IV

The appropriateness of Quilp's death through the elements of fire and water is often noted by literary critics. Peter Washington, in his introduction to the Everyman edition of the novel, alludes to the 'demonic Quilp, whose proper element is fire and who therefore dies appropriately by water'.<sup>75</sup> No commentator, however, has noted the appropriateness of the natural fog which brings about the drowning, except in terms of its impeding visibility. Quilp is often associated with the dark, whereas Nell's association is with the opposite. Garrett Stewart notices

how careful Dickens is to have them die "together." Quilp drowns in a preternaturally black night at the end of the sixty-seventh chapter [...] and two days later the search party arrives to find that the child has been dead for those same two days. "She died soon after daybreak" on the morning (so we discover by working backward) just after Quilp's death, with the first coming of light after his black terror [...] After the stage is set in each case, the lighting

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 73, 88.

<sup>75</sup> Washington, 'Introduction' p. xvii.

is all-important. The fragile child, willing and even glad, “faded like the light upon a summer’s evening”. This dimming and flickering out at dawn (although compared with day’s end) is in exact contrast to that “good black devil’s night” on which Quilp is drowned, blinded by the hideous brilliance of “the hundred fires that danced before his eyes”.<sup>76</sup>

Quilp’s identification with the dark ties in with the description of the darkness of the factory floor, the obscuration of the day by the smoke from the factory chimneys – ‘black vomit, blasting all things living or inanimate, shutting out the face of day, and closing in on all these horrors with a dense dark cloud’.<sup>77</sup> Later, another type of cloud, one composed of fog, will shut out the horror, which is Quilp, and lead to his death.

Quilp’s proper element is fire, but it is not only the demonic flames of hell which are being recalled, but also the fires found in industry. He perverts the idea of the natural in the novel. As John Lucas notes:

Quilp’s ‘bachelor hall’ is a debasing parody of pastoral values [...] His summer-house provides the anti-pastoral element of the novel, and that this should be so reinforces the concept of Quilp as supremely unnatural, which his deformity and grotesque manners also indicate.<sup>78</sup>

Quilp is hunted out by the fog; it is nature’s way of revenging itself on him. Lucas goes on to remark how it is ‘tempting to see Dickens playing with an anti-pastoralism; this river does not purify or return the body to the processes of nature’. But the text tells us that the body was left ‘there to bleach’. Surely, through a process of whitening, the body is being purified by nature; at the very least it can be seen as part of nature’s retribution to whiten the corpse of the man who so revelled in the dark and whose ‘complexion was one of that kind which never looks clean or wholesome’.<sup>79</sup> The illustration pictures Quilp entwined by the grasses and wilderness of the area where

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<sup>76</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Dickens and the Trials of Imagination* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 98.

<sup>77</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 424.

<sup>78</sup> John Lucas, *The Melancholy Man: A Study of Dickens’s Novels* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 86.

<sup>79</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 65.



his body comes to rest, as if the grasses are preventing his escape and are taking his body back to themselves. In the background the swirling fog recedes, having completed its task.

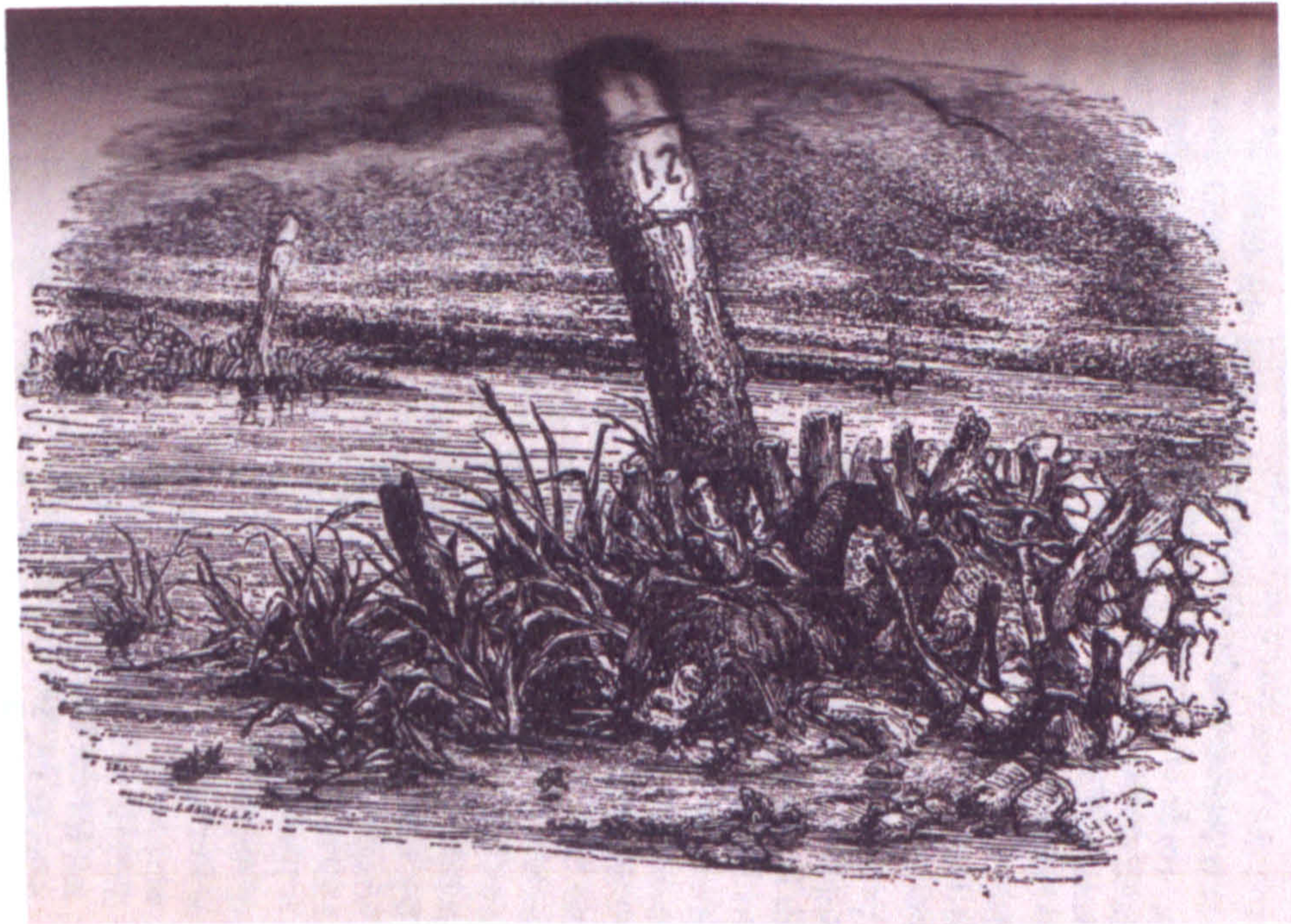


Fig 5: Quilp Lies Dead<sup>80</sup>

Reluctant to die, Quilp's mad death-struggle in the water shows his determination to fight for his life. This contrasts with Nell's acquiescence in death: 'She felt a hopelessness of their ever being extricated together from that forlorn place, a dull conviction that she was very ill, perhaps dying; but no fear or anxiety. A loathing of food.'<sup>81</sup> And indeed, whereas Quilp carries on eating and drinking right up to the point of death, Nell stops desiring food early on. As Garrett Stewart says:

Nell's death is the apotheosis of all her faint quiescence throughout the book, just as Quilp's death, for all its surprise and horror, is a kind of epitomizing moment, almost a sarcastic triumph [...] Nell's wished peace *is* a suicide, and

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 621. Illustration by Hablot Knight Browne ('Phiz').

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 426.



Quilp would have given anything to live the few more hours needed to laugh at it.<sup>82</sup>

At an earlier juncture, Nell, representing all that is pure and good, is forced to flee the city. As this point, nature is able to rise up against the negative forces of industry, but it still cannot save Nell's life. Nature's triumph, in the end, is not complete.

The fog represented in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is part of the natural world in London; it reveals that Dickens still has hope for the urban environment to share its space with nature, even allowing nature to wreak vengeance on that emblem of industrial pollution, Quilp. When Dickens came to write *Martin Chuzzlewit* two years later, the fog had changed; it was no longer a natural fog that dispensed natural justice, but one that imposed confusion on the city and its inhabitants.

### *Martin Chuzzlewit*

#### I

*Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) also describes a foggy day and it is a very curious description indeed. Though the narrative begins in Salisbury, from very early on in the novel the characters begin to look towards London as their destination. John Westlock moves from Pecksniff's house to London; Mark Tapley initially chooses London because he wishes to test his naturally jolly character in a serious situation; later, young Martin Chuzzlewit leaves the Pecksniff house and turns towards London; later still, Tom Pinch follows him. In fact, even before young Martin decides to go to the great city, both he and Tom Pinch are likened to 'a pair of Whittingtons, gents, without the cat' by Montague Tigg, thereby reinforcing the idea of London as a place to make a fortune.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Stewart, p. 99.

<sup>83</sup> Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 157.



However, the action within the novel only moves physically to London when Seth Pecksniff and his daughters, Charity and Mercy, go there in Chapter 8. The first description of the city, which is seen as a goal for so many characters, takes on a rather different aspect from that anticipated, one which is confusing and chaotic. In it, the reader follows an uncomfortable journey undertaken by Mr Pecksniff and his daughters to London, by coach. After a fitful night's sleep, they reach their destination, but it is not described in positive terms: 'At length they began to jolt and rumble over horribly uneven stones.'<sup>84</sup> It is very dark – 'it might have been midnight' – and the fact that it is morning is only indicated by the 'bustle' of the street in which they are dropped.<sup>85</sup> No reason is given for the darkness. We have to presume that this is the general condition of London. The fog is described as being in addition to the darkness, and not the cause of it: 'There was a dense fog too.'<sup>86</sup> So the reader's first impression of London is a negative one of a city enveloped in a double darkness. London is part of a fairy tale making it appear unreal, demarcated from the rest of the country by its cloudy, foggy atmosphere, 'as if it were a city in the clouds, which they had been travelling to all night up a magic beanstalk'.<sup>87</sup> They have moved from one fairy tale, *Dick Whittington*, into another, *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

Julian Wolfreys comments on this passage: 'The whole city is both afloat and insubstantial, rather than being marked by any oppressiveness.'<sup>88</sup> He seems to miss the point that London may be affected by a fairy-tale-like ether, but it is also affected by an unexplained and unnatural darkness which not only oppresses but also indicates the potential horror of this darkened city. It is perhaps a warning not to believe in the

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<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>88</sup> Wolfreys, p. 168.



fairy-tale aspect of London. An entry even by a 'magic beanstalk' may not lead to wealth or happiness. The warning is reiterated throughout the text.

The image from the fairy-story *Jack and the Beanstalk* parallels Tigg's own view of Martin and Tom being a pair of Whittingtons. Just as Jack climbed the beanstalk to gain a fortune, so too Whittington was made Lord Mayor of London and acquired his own fortune: London is a place where fortunes can be made. Yet both Jack and Dick Whittington were forced to meet and overcome severe challenges before making good. Jack's own challenge of the giant is introduced a couple of pages later inside Todgers: 'a gruff old giant of a clock'.<sup>89</sup> And, in the end, London does present challenges to the entire Pecksniff family. Mercy enters an unhappy marriage with Jonas Chuzzlewit; Charity tries to find a husband but is jilted at the altar, and Seth Pecksniff is bankrupted through his dealings with the Anglo-Bengalee company. For this family, at least, the promise of making some type of fortune, turns out to be illusory as the events of the novel unfold, whereas the other characters who turn to London do, at least, find happiness, if not fortune, in their own way.

Fog is not just a setting for fairy-tale elements in the story. The reality of a foggy day is introduced by the statement that 'there was a thick crust upon the pavement like oil-cake.'<sup>90</sup> The kind of polluted fog which Londoners endured often left greasy, oily deposits on surfaces like windows and pavements, adding to the general amount of filth left on the streets. Fog and frost came together to make things worse, as reported in 1840: 'On Saturday the metropolis was visited with a dense fog accompanied by a frost, which rendered the streets exceedingly slippery and travelling dangerous.'<sup>91</sup> Dickens describes this condition in *A Christmas Carol*, written at the same

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<sup>89</sup> Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, p. 182.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>91</sup> *The Times*, 30 November 1840, p. 7, col. b.



time as *Martin Chuzzlewit*. 'The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already: it had not been light all day: and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air.'<sup>92</sup> The writing admirably describes the tangible quality of the dirty air, suggesting the smears fog left on the pavement and surrounding buildings.

The line between reality and the world of make-believe is further obscured in the novel when Dickens brings in a conversation between two men sitting on top of the coach who describe the oil-cake substance as 'Snow'. How can something pure like snow be mistaken for something so impure and dirty like the oily deposits from polluted fog? Of course, London has transformed the pure natural snow into something impure and dirty, as soon as it fell on the ground. But the seemingly mistaken perception heightens the confusion of the situation. Fact and fiction have become blurred. The misperception is so gross that the men are described in terms of a lunatic and his warder: 'one of the outsides (mad, no doubt) said to another (his keeper, of course)'.<sup>93</sup> The incident adds to the comic tone of the piece whilst simultaneously making the reader feel uneasy as to the world which is being described. Other comparisons of snow with sooty deposits which often fell in the London atmosphere can be found in Dickens's work. In the opening of his later novel, *Bleak House* (1852-3), Dickens describes smoke falling from chimneys as 'a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes'.<sup>94</sup> In this passage the simile is being used to reinforce the size of the 'flakes of soot', rather than conflating the two as in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The natural world and the man-made world seem to have merged in this short passage in a rather confused and troubled way as if Dickens is

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<sup>92</sup> Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, p. 9.

<sup>93</sup> Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, p. 180.

<sup>94</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 49.



expressing despair at the impact of the city on the natural world: the snow is not white, but black, not pure but filthy and defiling.

After arriving in this atmosphere, Pecksniff takes 'a confused leave' of his relatives, Anthony and Jonas Chuzzlewit, who were by chance fellow travelling companions on their way to London. Why *Pecksniff* should be confused is unexplained; is it because of the broken sleep he experienced on the journey or because of the darkness and the fog? Or is the experience of London one of automatic confusion? After all, the London scene which has so far been described is one in which the natural and the man-world seem to have become confused: which is also inhabited by 'mad-men' and their keepers. Pecksniff then navigates himself and his daughters to Todgers's Boarding House. The journey is portrayed in a way which echoes the great haste which Pecksniff undertakes it. He 'dived across the street', indicating his speed of departure but also adding to a sense of the watery nature of the foggy atmosphere. The whole description of London continues to add to the confusion and alienation in its use of the superlative – the 'courts' are the 'queerest' and the alleys are of 'the strangest'. The 'archways' are the 'blindest' – blind because the fog does not allow one to see beyond them to the other side, giving the impression that they lead nowhere, surely another hint that the earlier notion of London being a place in which fortunes can be made is mistaken. And all of this is undertaken 'in a kind of frenzy: now skipping over a kennel, now running for his life from a coach and horses'. These everyday hazards encountered on a daily basis as part of city life, the open gutters or kennels and, of course, the danger from the coaches, was doubly lethal on a dark, foggy day. Contemporary newspaper reports recorded many accidents, sometimes fatal, of pedestrians being run over by traffic in these circumstances: 'Two young females, while crossing from Coventry-street to Sydney's-alley', as *The Times* reported during a major fog of 1829, 'were knocked down by the



leader of a stage coach and were much injured.’<sup>95</sup> The dangers of crossing a London street in a fog were well known to Dickens’s readers.

## II

In her introduction to the Penguin edition of the book, Patricia Ingham says of Pecksniff ‘He rushes – though there is no haste.’<sup>96</sup> Why Pecksniff should feel the need to pursue his journey to Todgers at such a pace is unexplained. London seems to automatically induce a state of panic. The desperation is conveyed by short and contradictory phrases: ‘now thinking he had lost his way, now thinking he had found it; now in a state of the highest confidence, now despondent to the last degree’. As Wolfreys suggests: ‘Pecksniff’s relationship to and knowledge of the city is highly ambiguous, verging between confidence and despondency.’<sup>97</sup> It is, in addition, one of the rare moments in the novel when the reader is allowed to share Pecksniff’s inner thoughts. The reader is carried at a furious rate by the pace of the text. We empathise with Pecksniff, as the passage’s great pace is brought to a halt, ‘but always in a great perspiration and flurry; until at length they stopped in a kind of paved yard near the Monument’.<sup>98</sup>

Later on in the novel, Tom Pinch also finds himself lost.<sup>99</sup> He refuses to ask for directions, and ends up at the Monument because he fears that he may be cheated by London criminals. The Monument overshadows Todgers’s Boarding House: ‘For first and foremost, if the day were bright, you observed upon the housetops, stretching far away, a long dark path: the shadow of the Monument: and turning

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<sup>95</sup> *The Times*, 15 December 1829, p. 2, col. c.

<sup>96</sup> Patricia Ingham, ‘Introduction’ to Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. by Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1999), p. xxi.

<sup>97</sup> Wolfreys, p. 168.

<sup>98</sup> Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, p. 180.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, p. 651



round, the tall original was close beside you, with every hair erect upon his golden head, as if the doings of the city frightened him.’<sup>100</sup> Once again London appears to induce panic. As Richard Maxwell comments:

Those erect hairs are stylised representations of fire; they contribute to an elaborate allegorical structure commemorating the Great Fire and London’s rebuilding. Dickens’s joke is to misinterpret the allegory – as though its significance had irrevocably changed, altered from the builder’s intention.<sup>101</sup>

The repeated presence of the Monument in the novel is a symbol of London’s growth from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1666. It is also a reminder of London’s vulnerability. The fact that the Monument appears ‘frightened’ by ‘the doings of the city’ reinforces the city as a negative image.

Blundering about in the fog in their search for Todger’s Lodging-House, Pecksniff and his party seem to be completely lost. When they appear to reach their destination, the density of the fog means that it has to trust Mr Pecksniff’s judgement that it is the Monument, since ‘for as to anything they could see of the Monument, or anything else but the buildings close at hand, they might as well have been playing blindman’s buff at Salisbury’.<sup>102</sup> After a ‘city in the clouds’ and a mad, frenetic journey through London, we now have a children’s game which involves impeding vision using a blindfold. The city is unknowable. As Wolfreys comments: ‘Absolute knowledge is subsumed by the dissolution of certainty [...] There is no truth to the city which can be fixed in place and the Monument becomes a suitable figure and metaphor for architectural solidity and certainty undergoing deconstruction at Dickens’s hand.’<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>101</sup> Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 131.

<sup>102</sup> Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, p. 180.

<sup>103</sup> Wolfreys, p. 168.



We know from Forster that 'the notion of taking Pecksniff for a type of character was really the origin of the book; the design being to show, more or less by every person introduced, the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness'.<sup>104</sup> Pecksniff's role within the text is as the epitome of selfishness and hypocrisy. And yet this passage shows a character who is in a panic haste but still demonstrates a certain amount of persistence and guile in order to reach his destination. Sylvère Monod has made the point that 'Pecksniff pleases the reader by his resourcefulness; he is very seldom disconcerted or taken aback.'<sup>105</sup> Michael Steig agrees: 'Pecksniff has partially disarmed even the reader by the consummateness of his hypocrisy, the brilliance of his ability to survive in a world of hypocrites and knaves [...] Pecksniff survives by making use of that society's tendency to admire the surface of virtue and ignore its reality.'<sup>106</sup> Pecksniff, under real pressure because of the darkness, the fog and the labyrinthine nature of London, demonstrates his uncanny adaptability. He has not been to London, or at least to Todgers's, for a number of years, judging by his initial conversation with Mrs Todgers, in which they flatter each other on their unchanged appearance.<sup>107</sup>

When in the novel, Martin says goodbye to Mary Graham, before he leaves to find his fortune in America, fog again descends but this time to illustrate Martin's blindness to Mary's feelings. Mary has been forbidden to young Martin by his grandfather, who has disinherited him. They meet on a 'morning, which was clad in the least engaging of the three hundred and sixty-five dresses in the wardrobe of the year. It was raw, damp, dark and dismal; the clouds were as muddy as the ground; and

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<sup>104</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Oxford University Press, [n.d.]), p. 290.

<sup>105</sup> Sylvère Monod, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 79.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Steig, 'Martin Chuzzlewit: Pinch and Pecksniff', *Studies in the Novel*, 1 (1969), 181-8, (pp.185-6).

<sup>107</sup> Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, p. 183.



the short perspective of every street and avenue was closed up by the mist as by a filthy curtain.<sup>108</sup>

The writing displays Dickens's creativity. Even a single line explaining that it was a miserable day is turned metaphorically to the idea of all the days in the year being clothed in different dresses. The attitude towards the fog highlights the different personalities of the characters. Martin's bitter despair at the weather only accentuates his own selfish thoughtlessness: 'He might perhaps have gone on to reflect that of all mornings in the year, it was not the best calculated for a young lady's coming forth on such an errand, either.'<sup>109</sup> Mark Tapley, in his usual fashion of trying to make the best out of any situation, uses the fog in order to avoid being seen to stare at the young sweethearts; in order to give them the appearance of privacy, he 'surveyed the fog above him with an appearance of attentive interest'.<sup>110</sup> When Martin places his arm around Mary's waist, he beholds 'Mr Tapley more intent than ever on the fog'.<sup>111</sup> But when it is necessary, such as acknowledging Mary's grateful thanks to him for his support of Martin, Mark is able to see beyond the fog, and 'he brought his eyes down from the fog to encounter, and received with immense satisfaction'.<sup>112</sup> The fog is used to reinforce our suspicions of Martin; but earlier, it also shows Pecksniff in possession of a surprising degree of resourcefulness, which goes some way to winning over the reader.

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<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, p. 302



### III

These passages illustrate Dickens's increasingly complex views of London. In his book, *Dickens and the City*, F. S. Schwarzbach also notes a change:

In *Martin Chuzzlewit* Dickens uses London quite consciously as a model of the social organisation of England. What is more, for the first time, we can say that Dickens is beginning to be interested in the idea of the city as a modern social community in general, quite divorced from the specific city, London. Furthermore, in the city, beneath its teeming, anarchic surface, Dickens discovers a mysterious organising social principle [...] In some sense, *Martin Chuzzlewit* is about this principle and about the city itself – London has become setting, symbol and subject all in one.<sup>113</sup>

Yet Dickens's use of fog in the novel reveals a rather different picture. It has specific associations with London, rather than a general reference to urban society at large. Fog has become London from this point, yet fog robs London of shape and form and renders it indeterminate, mysterious and confusing. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* the city attempts to thwart the traveller by hiding itself beneath the fog, thus creating confusion and panic. The natural and man-made worlds are indistinguishable, with snow confused with the sooty deposits which are part of the fog. Accepted reality appears to have dissolved under the weight of the fog and is turned into a fairy tale or a child's game. This foggy episode is quite short, barely covering a page of text, but it shows London dissolving into confusion, even madness, rather than revealing it as a coherent social organization. Yet in the end, Pecksniff overcomes the confusion and finds direction once more. In *Bleak House*, by contrast, fog represents forces that are far more difficult to overcome.

#### *Bleak House*

### I

LONDON. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not

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<sup>113</sup> F. S. Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City* (London: The Athlone Press, 1979), p. 80.



be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex Marshes [...] Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.<sup>114</sup>

For many readers the novel that instantly comes to mind when discussing the subject of fog is *Bleak House* (1852-3). In the opening pages the smoke lowers down, rather than circling upwards, preparing us for the idea that this is not a world in which the normal prevails. Nature has been perverted. Instead of soft white snow, there is a 'soft black drizzle'; and, just in case we need further reinforcement of the metaphor, the simile follows of the 'flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes'. Unnervingly, the soot-flakes, because of their blackness, metaphorically appear to have 'gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun'.<sup>115</sup> In the space of a few lines we have moved from the beginning of time, with the mention of 'a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill', to the supposed end of time, with the death of the sun.<sup>116</sup>

'Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows.' The verb could equally refer to the river or the fog: 'Fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.' Yet although the narrator is describing the negative attributes of

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<sup>114</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 49.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49



the 'dirty city', he also has to admit it is a 'great city', its greatness is illustrated by the 'tiers of shipping' so important in building up London as a commercial and financial centre. The difference between the town fog and the country fog may seem subtle but Dickens wants to highlight it in his use of the verbs 'flows' and 'rolls'. In the town the gas lights loom, but a similar, though natural situation is seen in the country where 'the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy'.

In *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, J. Hillis Miller notes the 'opening paragraphs of *Bleak House*, with their evocations of a single atmosphere unifying a complex urban scene, and their sudden leaps from one element in the scene to another'.<sup>117</sup> The pollution of London is connected to the city as the centre of industry and empire, between the defiled fog and 'the tiers of shipping'. The fog is also spreading out beyond London. It can stop shipping – those ships leaving London and (by implication) those coming into London. This was a situation common for London shipping during a fog as *The Times* described in 1842:

Up to 12 o'clock on Saturday the whole of London was enveloped in a dense fog, of so thick a description that it was almost impossible to see from one side of the street to the other [...] It was so thick about London-bridge that many of the steamers did not venture to start until several hours after their appointed time. The City of Canterbury, a Margate boat, was the first to make the attempt, but was forced to drop her anchor opposite the Custom-house'.<sup>118</sup>

In the passage from *Bleak House*, the shipping on the river is also immobile, stacked up in tiers, static in contrast to the rolling of the fog. The verbs used for the fog are, not surprisingly, extremely negative – it creeps, lies out, hovers, droops, pinches cruelly. It affects all, from the skipper who is 'wrathful' because he is forced to delay his journey, to 'his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck'. The skipper's cabin is described as 'close', everything is stagnated or blocked up.

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<sup>117</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 161.

<sup>118</sup> *The Times*, 22 February 1842, p. 6, col. c.



All are connected through the visible fact of the fog and its impact on their lives. The fog may form a physical barrier so that those affected cannot see each other, but the connection is still there, and will only be made when the fog is lifted, very like the connections between people in the text, which will only be revealed when the author's intentions become clear. Hillis Miller notes: 'These objects and people are more separated by the fog than linked by it [...] Things are visible, outlined in the fog, but nothing is related to anything else. Each new object is simply added to the others in a succession which makes more and more obvious their disconnection.'<sup>119</sup> The fog 'is both a physical mist and a spiritual blindness' which 'forms an opaque barrier between any one place and any other'.<sup>120</sup> Later, 'there are human beings or objects, but each of these is isolated from all the others, and swallowed up in the ubiquitous and persistent fog'.<sup>121</sup>

Dickens's symbolic purpose in describing this foggy, raw and dirty day is soon made clear: 'The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar.'<sup>122</sup> At the heart of the fog 'sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery'.<sup>123</sup> 'Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth.'<sup>124</sup> Here the fog, mud and mire come together and Chancery comes to represent all the political

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<sup>119</sup> Miller, *World of His Novels*, pp. 163, 165.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>122</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 50.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50.



and social institutions which, like the shipping on the river, are static and incapable of moving: 'For it is government inaction that allows the immense sanitary problem to remain unsolved. It is government inaction that leaves raw sewage uncollected [...] and that thereby is to blame for the deadly effluvia of this fog that poisons the city's air.'<sup>125</sup>

Dickens then pursues the image with the Lord High Chancellor sitting 'with a foggy glory round his head'; a brief 'can see nothing but fog'.<sup>126</sup> In the same way a 'large advocate with great whiskers' is looking for illumination, both light and knowledge, from 'the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog'.<sup>127</sup> The whole court is dim in all senses. Members of the High Court are 'mistily engaged' in a case, and very much like the foot-pedestrians in the opening of the novel, are 'tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running [...] against walls of word'.<sup>128</sup> 'Well may the court be dim, with wasting candles here and there; well may the fog hang heavy in it, as if it would never get out; well may the stained-glass windows lose their colour, and admit no light of day into the place.'<sup>129</sup> Like the gas and sun of the opening page, the candles give out very little light, and they are wasting away. In the same way, earlier the gas was 'haggard' and the sun suspected of being dead. The fog has intruded into the internal space of the court from the outside and there is a sense that the fog is imprisoning the court and its proceedings. As 'the Lord High Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in

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<sup>125</sup> F. S. Schwarzbach, 'Bleak House: The Social Pathology of Urban Life', *Literature and Medicine*, 9 (1990), 93-104, (p. 96).

<sup>126</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 50.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50.



it, and where the attendant wigs are all stuck in a fog-bank!', we recall again the ships of the opening scene which are also prevented from moving forward by the fog.<sup>130</sup>

It is a world connected to the outside by mud, mire and fog. The connection is emphasised through the use of verbs which hark back to the slipperiness of the outside world – 'a reply *slides out* of Mr Tangle (my italics)'.<sup>131</sup> In analysing the opening chapter of *Bleak House*, Hillis Miller refers to the way in which the world is disintegrating either into fog or dust, or both. This process of decomposition suggests parallels between spiritual and physical disintegration:

In the end, any organic entity, whether human or material, which gets caught up in the process of decomposition becomes nothing but a powdery or pasty substance, without form or life. This process can be either a physical or a spiritual disintegration, either the destruction of the individual through his absorption in the impersonal institution of "law and equity," or the dissolution of all solid material form in 'that kindred mystery, the street mud, which is made of nobody knows what, and collects about us nobody knows whence or how'.<sup>132</sup>

The most dramatic example of disintegration is Krook's death by spontaneous combustion, described in chapter 32. The depiction of Krook's death, brought on by too much alcohol, caused controversy when it first came out in serial form. Krook is, according to Miller, 'transformed into the basic elements of the world of the novel, fog and mud. The heavy odour in the air, as if bad pork chops were frying, and the "thick yellow liquor" which forms on the window sill as Krook burns into the circumambient atmosphere, are particularly horrible versions of these elements.'<sup>133</sup> The weather on the night of Krook's death seems contradictory. The cold may be actively 'searching' but the mist is conversely described as 'laggard':

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*, p. 53 (my italics).

<sup>132</sup> Miller, *World of His Novels*, p. 195.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*, p. 200.



It is a close night, though the damp cold is searching too; and there is a laggard mist a little way up in the air. It is a fine steaming night to turn the slaughter-houses, the unwholesome trades, the sewerage, bad water, and burial-grounds to account, and give the Registrar of Deaths some extra business. It may be something in the air – there is plenty in it.<sup>134</sup>

This suggests miasma, a theme which runs throughout the novel and is one of its main connecting themes, implicitly counterbalancing the lack of connectedness suggested in the novel's opening pages.

Jobling's friend Guppy arrives just after ten, to transact business with Krook, although Krook has insisted that they all meet up at midnight. Guppy also notices that Jobling is ill at ease but Guppy is more discomfited by the amount of soot falling. Something unnatural is about to occur, but the mention of soot also reminds us of the soot in the opening paragraph – 'as big as full-grown snowflakes'.<sup>135</sup> Guppy is horrified: "See how the soot's falling. See here, on my arm! See again, on the table here! Confound the stuff, it won't blow off – smears, like black fat!"<sup>136</sup> Later: "Fah! Here's more of this hateful soot".<sup>137</sup> When both Jobling and Guppy go to Krook's room to find the source of the soot and yellow liquid, they find nothing there but his smouldering body.

## II

Phil, the bent and decrepit assistant of Trooper George, dreams of the countryside of his childhood, but when asked, he can only remember the marshes, and only that "They was flat. And miste [*sic*]."<sup>138</sup> Mist was widely seen as miasmatic, causing the spread of fever and disease. Throughout the novel there is an emphasis on the

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<sup>134</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 499.

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*, p. 505.

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, p. 508.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, p. 420.



quality of the air, but this is especially the case on the night of Krook's death: The 'air is full of [...] phantoms' or there is a 'smouldering suffocating vapour in the room'.<sup>139</sup> Even the entertainer finds 'his voice seriously affected by the impure state of the atmosphere'.<sup>140</sup> The concept of infection begins from the opening page, even if it is only one of bad temper: 'Foot passengers jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper'.<sup>141</sup> The novel explores the concept of miasma and Dickens uses it to support a metaphorical structure that suggests that all, in spite of the fog of the opening pages, are connected from the very poor to the wealthy.

During the year that Dickens began writing *Bleak House*, a meeting was held in Paris, involving twelve nations (including the Ottoman empire). This was held, according to Roy Porter, 'against the backdrop of the cholera pandemics [...] It directed its attention to disputes that remained unresolved as to whether plague, yellow fever and cholera were contagious, miasmatic or resulted from an "epidemic constitution."'”<sup>142</sup> The miasmatic theory of disease, which held that disease was carried by vapours and smells in the air, was dominant until challenged in 1855 when John Snow presented his view to a House of Commons Select Committee that cholera was water-borne. The miasmatic theory of disease was further challenged in mid-century by contagionism, which also finds its way into *Bleak House*. When Lady Dedlock, poorly disguised as a servant, is led by Jo to the appalling cemetery near Tom-All-Alone's where her former lover's body has been laid, she shrinks both from Jo and from the hideous environment 'into a corner of that hideous archway, with its deadly

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<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 507, 511.

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*, p. 513.

<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>142</sup> Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 484.



stains contaminating her dress'.<sup>143</sup> When she goes to pay Jo, she is reluctant to touch him: 'She drops a piece of money in his hand, without touching it, and shuddering as their hands approach.'<sup>144</sup> She fears catching a fever through physical contact with Jo. But the stains on her dress are not only physical: her visit to the graveyard leads to the revelation of her former lover and the existence of their illegitimate child, Esther Summerson. For her it is social death. For Jo, the graveyard may be where he picks up the disease which he passes on to both Esther and her maid, Charley. Jo dies from the disease, but both Charley and Esther survive after a long illness, although Esther is left with scars on her face.<sup>145</sup>

The chapter describing Krook's death immediately follows from the announcement of Esther's illness and her admitting that it has made her blind. The means by which she has caught the disease is left indeterminate. She has contracted it from Jo through contagion, but there is also a sense that it was in the air. When she visits the brickmaker's site and finds Jo, we are told: 'The kilns were burning, and stifling vapour set towards us with a pale-blue glare.'<sup>146</sup> Surely the stifling air of Lincoln's Inn, with its greasy overtones, is also reminiscent of the vapour described at the brickmaker's home. Whether it be dirty fog, vapour or simply the air, the novel explores the idea of disease, pathological, psychological or moral, carried within the atmosphere.

Jamdyce's imaginary East Wind is another example of miasma in the book. Whenever he feels disturbed by unpleasant events or opinions, he blames the East

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<sup>143</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 278.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>145</sup> There seems to be a general consensus that the disease contracted by Jo is smallpox. See Michael S. Gurney, 'Disease as Device', *Literature and Medicine*, 9 (1990), 79-92, (pp. 82-90). Also Nancy Aycock Metz, 'Narrative Gesturing in *Bleak House*', *Dickensian* 77 (Spring 1981), 13-22, (p. 19) and F. S. Schwarzbach, '*Bleak House*: The Social Pathology of Urban Life', *Literature and Medicine*, 9 (1990), 93-104, (p. 97).

<sup>146</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 285.



Wind, instead of, as Ada and Esther discover, wanting to ‘blame the real cause of it, or disparage or depreciate any one’.<sup>147</sup> The fact that three of Dickens’s alternative titles for the novel were to do with the East Wind reveals its importance in its narrative.<sup>148</sup> The East Wind was proverbially the icy wind that irritated the spleen, leading to grumpiness, and this is why Jarndyce retreats to the Growlery. However, a more contemporary significance to the wind being in the east would have been readily understood at the time. The prevailing winds over London blew from west to east. Mingling with chimney smoke and other noxious vapours, they carried air pollution to the East End of London, which was a good reason for this part of the city being the poorer part, whilst the wealthier built their own properties in the west. But, as John Timbs, writing in 1855, noted: ‘[s]uppose the wind to change suddenly to the east, the great body of smoke will be brought back in an accumulated mass; and as this repasses the town, augmented by the clouds of smoke from every fire therein, it causes the murky darkness.’<sup>149</sup>

Timbs had no problem seeing the connection between fog and the East Wind as evident: ‘Sometimes the fog is caused by a very ordinary accident, – a change of wind, thus accounted for.’<sup>150</sup> *The Times* reported on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1840:

The fog on Saturday night was particularly dense westward of the metropolis. From 3 o’clock in the afternoon in the neighbourhood of Kensington, Hammersmith, and more eastward, a thick darkness overspread the atmosphere by which persons compelled to be out were quite unable to see one inch before them. From that hour links and candles, with and without candlesticks, were used by persons of all classes, male and female, the

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<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>148</sup> Susan Shatto, *The Companion to Bleak House* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988), p. 13. These potential titles include *The East Wind* and *Bleak House and the East Wind*.

<sup>149</sup> John Timbs, *Curiosities of London: exhibiting the most rare and remarkable objects of interest in the metropolis with nearly fifty years’ personal recollections* (London: D. Bogue, 1855), p. 310.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, p. 310.

proprietors of the omnibuses not suffering their vehicles to run after dark in consequence of the fog.<sup>151</sup>

The East Wind also transfers disease from east to the west. In 1851 Dickens made this point at an anniversary banquet of the Metropolitan Sanitary Association. When asked to propose a toast to the Board of Health, he suggested:

that no one can estimate the amount of mischief which is grown in dirt; that no one can say, here it stops or there it stops, either in its physical or its moral results [...] is now as certain as it is that the air from Gin Lane will be carried, when the wind is Easterly, into May Fair, and that if you once have a vigorous pestilence raging furiously in Saint Giles's, no mortal list of Lady Patronesses can keep it out of Almack's.<sup>152</sup>

In the same way, the slum quarter of Tom-all-Alone's is the subject of a heartfelt cry by Dickens:

Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say Nay to the infamous alliance [...] Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge.<sup>153</sup>

And it is the road-sweeping urchin, Jo, a ghastly representation of what Tom-all-Alone's can produce, who passes his infection on to Charley and Esther Summerson. On the night of Krook's death Snagsby and Jobling agree: "It's a tainting sort of weather".<sup>154</sup> The use of 'tainting' in both situations highlights the idea of corruption by disease and makes clear the connection between Tom-all-Alone's, which has been allowed to fall into rack and ruin by the negligence of Chancery, and the Lord Chancellor, through his representative, Krook.

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<sup>151</sup> *The Times* 1 December 1840, p. 3, col. c.

<sup>152</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association on 10 May 1851', in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens: A Complete Edition*, ed. by K. J. Fielding (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1988), p. 128.

<sup>153</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 683.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*, p. 500.



### III

For one contemporary reviewer, Henry Crabb Robinson, the description of the fog at the outset of *Bleak House* was off-putting because of its verisimilitude: 'London fog is disagreeable even in description.'<sup>155</sup> Schwarzbach comments: 'The novel's fog is an even more compelling example of the insistence on the *real*, in all its fantastic aspects.'<sup>156</sup> Dickens's descriptions of fog suggest that he has been following discussions in *The Times* as to what caused it. Was it a natural phenomenon and must therefore be lived with, or was it created by the smoke which was so much part of London life? The topic was even taken up by guide-books, revealing that writers knew they had to mention a subject so well known to tourists. In its second edition, published in 1850, a *Hand-Book of London*, written by Peter Cunningham (1816-1869), included it under the heading 'London Fogs'. By contrast, the first edition of this book, published in 1849, did not mention London fogs at all.<sup>157</sup> Its inclusion in the later edition reflects the growing awareness and criticism of the atmosphere, more than an actual worsening of the situation in the space of a year. Yet this was a turning-point in the representation of London fog. The 1850s reveal a dramatic increase in items on fog in newspapers and journals from the previous decades. They continue to increase each decade after the 1850s until the second decade of the twentieth century. Cunningham hypothesized:

The unwholesome fogs that prevail around London originate in the lamentably defective drainage of the neighbouring lands, as the numerous

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<sup>155</sup> From the diaries of Henry Crabb Robinson, 1852, cited by Philip Collins, *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 273.

<sup>156</sup> Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City*, p. 125.

<sup>157</sup> Dickens was presented a copy by Cunningham of the 1849 edition of *Hand-Book of London*. See *Reprint of the Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gadshill* (London: Piccadilly Fountain Press, 1935), p. 25. Inscribed from Peter Cunningham to C.D., 15 June 1849. Also see Dickens acknowledgement of the gift to Cunningham, in *The Pilgrim Edition: The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and K. J. Fielding, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), v (1981) 555. To Peter Cunningham, 18 June 1849.

stagnant pools, open ditches, and undrained marshes in the east, and cold clay lands along the banks of the Thames, Colne, Lea, Wandle, &c. When these spots are thoroughly drained, the fogs will cease, and London will become the most healthy city in the world.<sup>158</sup>

Cunningham did not see smoke as part of the problem of the London fog. Instead, he clearly thought of fog, in keeping with the prevalent theory of epidemics at the time, as a miasma rising from the ground.

For Frederick Knight Hunt, writing just after Peter Cunningham, and before Dickens began writing *Bleak House*, London fog was a combination of both smoke and fog: 'It is slippery walking up Ludgate Hill, early on a mid-winter morning, with an atmosphere well mixed with Thames fog and sea-coal smoke, after a week of rainy days. Look up for the dome of St. Paul's, and so much of it as you can see looks unusually magnificent, half-hidden in its bath of London yellow clouds.'<sup>159</sup> In *The Companion to Bleak House* Susan Shatto suggests that Knight's article was probably the inspiration for the opening pages of the novel.<sup>160</sup> Knight had in turn been inspired by Dickens's own satirical tale aimed at Roman Catholicism in *Household Words* on 23 November 1850:

Mrs. Bull and her rising family were seated round the fire, one November evening at dusk, when all was mud, mist, and darkness, out of doors, and a good deal of fog had even got into the family parlor. To say the truth, the parlor was on no occasion fog-proof, and had, at divers notable times, been so misty as to cause the whole Bull family to grope about, in a most confused manner, and make the strangest mistakes. But, there was an excellent ventilator over the family fire-place (not one of Dr. Arnott's<sup>161</sup>, though it was

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<sup>158</sup>Peter Cunningham, *Hand-book of London: Past and Present* (London: John Murray, 1850), p. xxx. Interestingly Cunningham acknowledged John Martin's *Thames and Metropolis Improvement Plan* as the source for this. John Martin was primarily known as a painter, and often referred to as 'mad Martin'.

<sup>159</sup> Frederick Knight Hunt, 'Twenty Four Houses in a London Hospital', *Household Words*, 2 (8 February 1851), 457-65, (p. 457).

<sup>160</sup> Shatto, p. 22.

<sup>161</sup> Dr Neil Arnott (1788-1874) not only invented the first type of water-bed, but also invented the Arnott ventilator which was incorporated into a popular closed stove. For this he won the Rumford Medal in 1854. *The Times* points out some incidents where the stove had either exploded or caused death by asphyxiation: *The Times* 2 January 1840, p. 2, col. f; 11 January 1843, p. 6, col. c; 'Smoke or No Smoke' in *Household Words* (1 July 1854), p. 465 for praise of Arnott's grates.



of the same class, being an excellent invention, called Common Sense), and hence, though the fog was apt to get into the parlor through a variety of chinks, it soon got out again.<sup>162</sup>

The story reflected a recent controversy aroused by Cardinal Wiseman's attempt to restore the Catholic hierarchy in England, announced in the Flaminian Gate letter of 7 October 1850. Wiseman was the first Roman Catholic Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, ordained on 29 September 1850. His letter provoked a storm of protest, some violent, from non-Catholics.<sup>163</sup>

Mr and Mrs Bull and her family represent true British values; although the eldest son, Master C. J. London, has weakened by giving 'encouragement [...] to that mewling little pussy, when it strayed here'.<sup>164</sup> The cat represents Pusey, a common image in *Punch* at the time, Pusey being associated with the Catholic revival in the Church of England through the Oxford Movement.<sup>165</sup> Mr Bull's sister, Miss Eringobragh, who represents Ireland, is depicted as grovelling on 'the ground, with her head in the ashes'.<sup>166</sup> She appears weak in the head, as we are told that 'the Bulls of Rome have had far too much to do with her present state'.<sup>167</sup> Common-sense is a defence against the fog of Roman Catholicism. Mrs Bull berates her son for playing with 'candles and candlesticks' (another symbol of Roman Catholicism), as in the past these self-same items had threatened to reduce Mr Bull's house to ashes.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Charles Dickens, 'A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr John Bull. As Related by Mrs Bull to the Children', *Household Words*, 2 (23 November 1850), 193-6 (p. 193).

<sup>163</sup> See *The Times*, 9 October 1850, p. 3, col. e for Wiseman's elevation to Archbishop and 22 October 1850, p. 4, col. b for beginning of the controversy over the restoration of the hierarchy.

<sup>164</sup> Dickens, 'A Crisis in the Affairs', p. 195.

<sup>165</sup> For an example of this see *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 19, [nd 1850], p. 247.

<sup>166</sup> Dickens, 'A Crisis in the Affairs', p. 195.

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>168</sup> *ibid.*, p. 193.



The whimsical tone of this 1850 short story is echoed in *The Mystery of Edwin*

*Drood* (1870):

‘Dear me, you’re choking!

‘It’s this fog,’ returned Edwin; ‘and it makes my eyes smart, like Cayenne pepper.’

[...] Edwin took the easy chair in the corner; and the fog he had brought in with him, and the fog he took off with his great-coat and neck-shawl, was speedily licked up by the eager fire.

[...] the three brought in with them as much fog as gave a new roar to the fire.

[...] As the fog had been the proximate cause of this sumptuous repast, so the fog served for its general sauce. To hear the outdoor clerks sneezing, wheezing, and beating their feet on the gravel as a zest far surpassing Doctor Kitchener’s.<sup>169</sup>

Fog coming indoors was a persistent and annoying problem, affecting not only the domestic home but also more public arenas like the theatre, where it often led to a cancellation of performances, and art galleries.

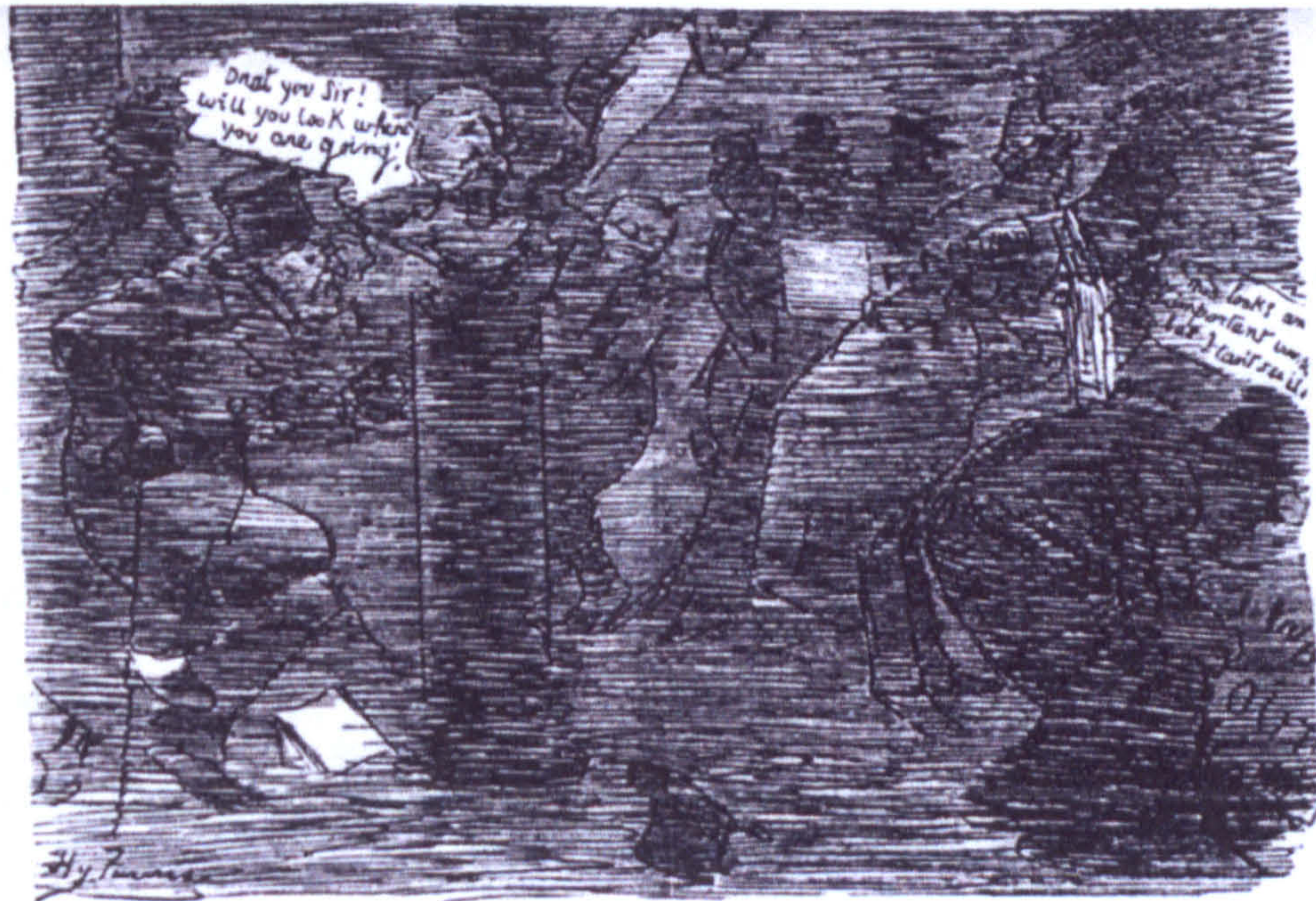


Fig 6: ‘The Winter Art Exhibitions: Opened last week, to the delight of all. Our Art-Critic, who sends Mr. Punch the above, has not sent any notes or sketches.’<sup>170</sup>

<sup>169</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. by Arthur J. Cox and Angus Wilson (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 136-9.

<sup>170</sup> *Punch*, vol. 91, 1887, p. 274.



Dickens began writing *Bleak House* in November 1851 at Tavistock House, his London home. It appears that fog was very much on his mind at this time. Not only did he write the 1850 article *A Crisis in the Affairs of Mr John Bull*, but also co-wrote, with W. H. Wills, another article on Spitalfields, in which the actual cost of the dirty fog to individual industries was discussed. A weaver, asked what effect the atmosphere of London had on his work, replied ‘stopping short, and speaking like a deeply-injured man, “the two-days fog we had in December last, was a dead loss to me of one hundred pounds”’.<sup>171</sup> Other publications, at this time, also had fog on the agenda. *Punch* mentions it in 1850 under the title, *Specimen of a Bit of London Fog*.

The Specimen of a slab of fog, too thick, until broken, to pass through Temple Bar, has been brought to *Mr. Punch*, who – in the proportion of one-twentieth of an inch to a foot – here gives its grain and texture. It has a very fine sulphurous flavour, and it perhaps the best specimen of the real London article. *Mr. Punch* thinks that London fog might become a very profitable article of commerce, inasmuch as there can be little doubt that, when cut, it is susceptible of a very high polish, and might be worn as mourning-rings, or shirt-studs.<sup>172</sup>

The article is accompanied by an illustration which is simply a square of grainy black lines to illustrate a slab of fog. In 1851 *Punch* carried two more articles dealing with the foggy atmosphere. One relates to a plan to build a sanatorium made of glass, and designed by Joseph Paxton, in the east of London. This hospital would, according to *Punch*, ‘give fogs the slip’ by having them ‘filtered and warmed’: ‘London smoke may be purified into an atmosphere that shall feed and sustain the rarest plants known to give out the greatest quantity of oxygen.’<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Charles Dickens and W. H. Wills, ‘Spitalfields’, *Household Words*, 5 April 1851 in W. H. Wills, *Old Leaves, Gathered from Household Words* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860), pp. 232-246 (p. 237).

<sup>172</sup> *Punch*, 19 ([n.d.], 1850), p. 265.

<sup>173</sup> *Punch*, 21 (21 December 1851), p. 23.



Another article in the same edition suggests that if Paris had suffered from fogs as London does, then perhaps the 1848 Revolution and its aftermath might not have taken place. Under the heading, 'Wanted a Fog', it states:

It is lucky a good thick English November Fog did not fall upon Paris at the commencement of the present outbreak. The troops would have found it very different work than firing at the balconies, and windows, [...] and even storming a barricade might have been attended with different result [...] Who knows, whether the progress of the revolution, and the career of LOUIS NAPOLEON (and we do not think we should have gone 'into mourning' if such an event had taken place), might have been suddenly short, as was too often the case with the French Telegraph, by the old familiar amusement of "*Interrompu par le Brouillard.*"<sup>174</sup>

This article reflected a common discourse celebrating the stability of English politics in contrast to the violence and inconsistency of the French. In this reading, fog could aid political tranquillity by confusing revolutionaries and their enemies alike. In *Bleak House* Esther Summerson wonders 'in such a distracting state of confusion [...] how the people kept their senses'.<sup>175</sup> Daniel L Pike confirms: '[...] an atmospheric moisture that comes from above and connotes mental and moral confusion'.<sup>176</sup>

It was particularly difficult for strangers to the city. In his *Picturesque Sketches of London*, published in 1852, Thomas Miller also makes a distinction between the attitudes to fog shown by the true Londoner, in contrast to the surprise and apprehension demonstrated by the newcomer to the city:

Although a real Londoner looks upon a dense December fog as a common occurrence, and lights up his premises with as little ceremony as he would do at the close of the day, yet, to one unused to such a scene, there is something startling in the appearance of a vast city wrapt in a kind of darkness which seems neither to belong to the day nor the night.<sup>177</sup>

It is Guppy who shows his character as a true Londoner. When questioned by Esther:

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<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*, 21 (21 December 1851), p. 267.

<sup>175</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 76.

<sup>176</sup> Daniel L. Pike, *Subterranean London: The World beneath Paris and London, 1800–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 261.

<sup>177</sup> Miller, *Picturesque Sketches*, p. 247.



'I asked him whether there was a great fire anywhere? For the streets were so full of dense brown smoke that scarcely anything was to be seen.'

'O dear no, miss' he said. 'This is a London particular.'

I had never heard of such a thing.

'A fog, miss,' said the young gentleman.<sup>178</sup>

Esther shows that she is a newcomer to London through her lack of acquaintance with London's great signifier. Nicola Bradbury writes:

Esther is an ingénue: fresh from the country, she needs help to decode the idiom which names the fog (the fog we readers have already learned to construe symbolically) 'a London particular' (Ch. 3). But she has the vital quality of truthfulness, and a willingness to observe evidence and to ask questions which equip her to guide us into the story.<sup>179</sup>

It is also significant that it is Guppy who helps her in this decoding of the fog, because it is Guppy who also tries to decode the mystery of Esther's parentage, much to Esther's distress. She resists this deciphering, when she goes to Guppy to request that he abandons his inquiries to discover her true mother, wanting it to remain as impenetrable as the fog of the opening pages.<sup>180</sup> As Hillis Miller says of her: 'She is conspicuously unwilling to engage in that form of the will to power which infects so many others in the book, the desire to decipher signs and to ferret out secrets.'<sup>181</sup>

#### IV

Not all commentators have fully appreciated the extent to which the metaphor of fog pervades the whole structure and action of the novel. Robert Alter makes the rather obvious remark about the opening chapter of *Bleak House* that it is a 'piece of bravura writing' in which Dickens is 'making the dirty fog a meteorological correlative

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<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>179</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin, 1996), p. xxix.

<sup>180</sup> See Chapter 38 for this meeting.

<sup>181</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'Interpretation in *Bleak House*', in *New Casebooks: Bleak House*, ed. by Jeremy Tambling (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), pp. 29-53, (p. 48).



for the suffocating obfuscation of British legal institutions that is the chief context of the action'.<sup>182</sup> Alter views Dickens's use of the death of the sun as a 'half-joking, fanciful conceit that triggers sombre implications far in excess of the play of wit ostensibly intended in the conceit'.<sup>183</sup> The death of the sun is, he goes on to say, 'no laughing matter: the very phrase is part of our culture's primary language for apocalyptic endings'. But as Alter then suggests: 'Dickens [...] does not make these momentary apocalyptic imaginings integral to what happens in the novel [except] to suggest that the disease bred in the filthy slum of Tom-all-alone's will spread to the most privileged precincts.'<sup>184</sup> For Alter 'there is a certain disjunction between the conventionalism of Dickens's plots and of his moral exhortations and the depth of perception opened up by his powerful metaphorical imagination'.<sup>185</sup>

It may be that the fog does not produce the end of the world, but Alter does not give Dickens the credit for pursuing this theme. The fog, both in its physical sense and as a metaphor for the obfuscation caused by Chancery, creates confusion and even madness, which permeates the novel. Esther is confused when first encountering it, and when Jo, the poor crossing sweeper looks up at the cross of St Paul's Cathedral: 'From the boy's face, one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city.'<sup>186</sup> Esther soon meets Miss Flite, who is referred to as mad by Richard Carstone. Miss Flite does not reject this description, but explains to the two present wards of court, Ada and Richard, as well as to Esther: 'I was a ward myself. I was not mad at that time.'<sup>187</sup> This adumbrates Richard's fall

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<sup>182</sup> Alter, p. 65-6.

<sup>183</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>185</sup> *ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>186</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 326.

<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*, p. 81.



into a form of madness by his obsession with his case in Chancery.<sup>188</sup> The following day, which is still dark and foggy, the wards and Esther encounter Miss Flite again, but this time at Krook's shop. Miss Flite, in her turn, refers to Krook as mad, a description which he does not deny.<sup>189</sup>

The fog leads to a deprivation of the sensory perceptions: 'Fog gets in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners [...] Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up on a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.' The fog forms an opaque barrier between one place and another. The novel is dominated by images of blindness. Krook's shop is described as 'blinded besides by the wall of Lincoln's Inn, intercepting the light'.<sup>190</sup> Even Mrs Snagsby, wrongly convinced that her husband is Jo's father, announces: 'you can't blind ME!'<sup>191</sup> Esther's knowledge of having herself contracted Jo's disease is confirmed in the final lines of chapter 31 when she tells her maid that she is blind.<sup>192</sup>

This image returns in the following chapter with night-time in Lincoln's Inn: 'From tiers of staircase windows, clogged lamps like the eyes of Equity, bleared Argus'.<sup>193</sup> This time the metaphor is being used to describe the futility of the law. The Jamdyce case, in which Richard Carstone becomes involved, damages vision. Thus John Jamdyce sorrowfully notes of his ward: "Jamdyce and Jamdyce has warped him

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<sup>188</sup> Miss Flite and Richard are likened even more directly on p. 576 when Esther comments on Richard 'so perfectly the opposite of Miss Flite! And yet, in the clouded, eager, seeking look that passed over him, so dreadfully like her!'

<sup>189</sup> *ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>190</sup> *ibid.*, p.99.

<sup>191</sup> *ibid.*, p. 411.

<sup>192</sup> *ibid.*, p. 497.

<sup>193</sup> *ibid.*, p. 498.



out of himself, and perverted me in his eyes”.<sup>194</sup> And, worse still, that “it is in the subtle poison of such abuses to breed such diseases. His blood is infected, and objects lose their natural aspects in his sight. It is not *his* fault”.<sup>195</sup> Just as fog distorts objects and renders them formless, so too does the metaphorical infection of the blood by the moral miasma of the Chancery proceedings. When the Jamdyce lawsuit is finally resolved with all monies lost in the cost of conducting the case, John Jamdyce, in a true spirit of friendship and forgiveness, visits Richard Carstone, who is now dying, and he notes that “the clouds have cleared away, and it is bright now. We can see now”.<sup>196</sup> Richard vows to “begin the world” and says this with ‘a light in his eyes’.<sup>197</sup> Richard is only able to see the light now that he is dying. And when Richard looks back, it is only to “where I shall be able to recall my many faults and blindnesses”.<sup>198</sup>

The world described in the opening of the novel is dominated by darkness: ‘Darkness rests upon Tom-all-Alone’s. Dilating and dilating since the sun went down last night, it has gradually swelled until it fills every void in the place.’<sup>199</sup> The darkness is not simply a feature of night-time. When Allan Woodcourt, the doctor, takes Jo away to provide care, they emerge as from a dungeon, and ‘come up out of Tom-all-Alone’s into the broad rays of the sunlight and the purer air’.<sup>200</sup> Jo is also described as being ‘in a state of darkness’ by Chadband, a hypocritical preacher, who says that he cannot see Jo clearly: ‘because you are in a state of obscurity’.<sup>201</sup> But Dickens makes the point that he is still God’s child and describes him as ‘looking up at the great

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<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, p. 547-8.

<sup>196</sup> *ibid.*, p. 926.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*, p. 927.

<sup>198</sup> *ibid.*, p. 927.

<sup>199</sup> *ibid.*, p. 682.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*, p. 691.

<sup>201</sup> *ibid.*, p. 325.



Cross on the summit of St Paul's Cathedral, glittering above a red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke'.<sup>202</sup> Dickens's description surely shows a world made angry by its treatment of Jo. Even though he has just been recently spoken to by a member of the church, religious comfort is as far away as the cross on St Paul's Cathedral – 'so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach'.<sup>203</sup> The river, as usual in Dickens, becomes a metaphor for life – 'the river [is] running fast' but it is also 'the crowd' which is 'flowing by him in two streams – everything moving on to some purpose and to one end – until he is stirred up, and told to "move on" too'.<sup>204</sup> Just before his death Jo slips into the 'obscurity' identified by Chadband: "It's turned wery dark, sir. Is there any light a-comin?" [...] "I hear you, sir, in the dark, but I'm a-groping".<sup>205</sup> The light, which has been denied to Jo in life, appears, we are told, in death: 'The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!'

Ian Ousby writes of the opening:

The physical muddle which the book's opening paragraphs evoke so powerfully is the outward manifestation of a deeper, moral disorder: a loss of coherence, vitality and connection. The characters' struggles to understand this disordered environment—and these form perhaps the book's central theme—are thus continually expressed through acts of perception in the simplest sense: they try to see the world clearly and to see it whole.<sup>206</sup>

As we have seen the attempts to gain a clearer vision are not only restricted by the fog, but are also offset by the emphasis on blindness, darkness and a bewildering of the senses throughout the text. Even the inability to read, to make sense of letters as a whole, a recurring theme in the novel, is likened in Jo's case to being blind:

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<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>204</sup> *ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*, p. 705.

<sup>206</sup> Ian Ousby, 'The Broken Glass: Vision and Comprehension in *Bleak House*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 29 (1975), 381-92, (p. 387).



To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops [...] To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postman deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language-to-be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb!<sup>207</sup>

Dickens's point in opening the novel in such a world of obscurity and darkness is to create not only a powerful metaphor for the world of Chancery, but, as the subsequent metaphorical chiaroscuro of *Bleak House* suggests, a more general metaphor for the world of London. It is a place where light is largely denied to individuals – whether this is the light of religious comfort to individuals like Jo, or the light generated by education, or just a general light which is denied by the smoke and fog. The smoke creates a world in mourning for the sun in the beginning of the book; the smoke around St Paul's Cathedral, as Jo rests, reveals angry tints of colour at society's treatment of the boy.

Hillis Miller notes of *Bleak House*: 'the world appears again and again as the dwelling place of a light which is rapidly, at this very moment, fading away, withdrawing to an infinite distance, and leaving the world to absolute darkness.'<sup>208</sup> The character who seems most successfully able to piece the obscure connections together is Mr Bucket, the detective. Ian Ousby writes of Bucket that he 'can transcend the partial viewpoint to which most of the characters are limited and see the world from a godlike eminence like that enjoyed by the third-person narrator.'<sup>209</sup> When he attempts to find Lady Dedlock in London, we are told: 'Sometimes he would get down by an archway, or at a street corner, and mysteriously show the light of his little lantern. This would attract similar lights from various dark quarters, like so many insects.'<sup>210</sup> He can make connections within the city showing his light but, in the end, it is not good

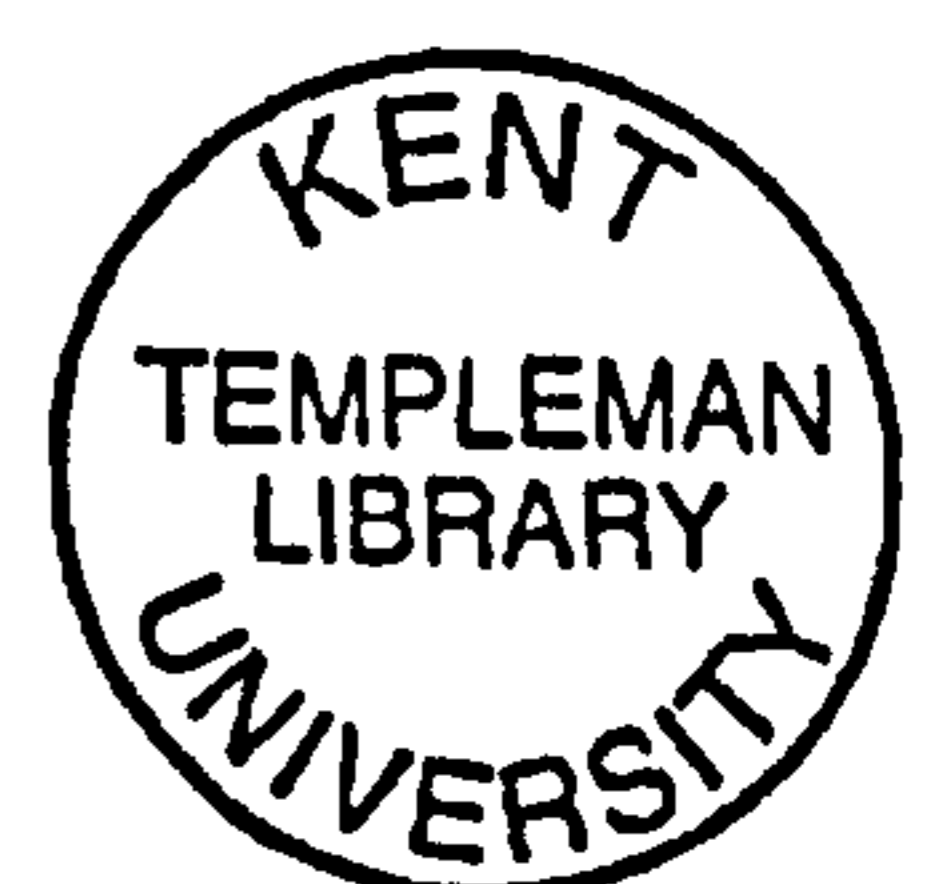
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<sup>207</sup> *ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>208</sup> Hillis Miller, *World of his Novels*, p. 212..

<sup>209</sup> Ousby, p. 392.

<sup>210</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 858.





enough and he only finds Lady Dedlock, after she has died. Like his name, Bucket proves hollow in his attempt to piece together the puzzle presented to the reader by the opening pages.

The emphasis on darkness, especially in the slum of Tom-all-Alone's, is discussed by Schwarzbach in his essay on 'The Social Pathology of Urban Life'. He notes Dickens's indebtedness to contemporary medical knowledge, especially 'the antiseptic value of light and air', as well as the desire to open up the 'rookeries' so that they would be subject to the controlling power of the visible gaze. Seen thus, Dickens transforms himself into a physician through his writings: 'Dickens by merely *describing* the conditions of London's slums is himself shedding light upon the physical and moral plague, an act that will begin the process of cure.'<sup>211</sup> Schwarzbach however rejects the purely Foucaultian analysis suggested above, partly because Bucket, who can turn his gaze on to the lower classes and appear to bring them under his control, when he wishes, fails in the end.<sup>212</sup> In addition, Dickens brings a voice to the slum dwellers who reject this invasion of their own private space. In Chapter 8 Mrs Pardiggle intrudes into the brickmaker's home 'as if she were an inexorable moral policeman carrying them all off to a station-house'.<sup>213</sup> Esther's description encourages the reader to feel that this is an unwarranted intrusion. The brickmaker is also allowed to defend his rights to privacy:

I wants a end of these liberties took with my place. I wants an end of being drawed like a badger. Now you're a-going to poll-pry and question according to custom [...] How have I been conducting of myself? Why, I've been drunk for three days; and I'd a been drunk four, if I'd a had the money. Don't I

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<sup>211</sup> Schwarzbach, 'Social Pathology', p. 98.

<sup>212</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Bucket's 'gaze', especially with reference to new photographic techniques, see Ronald R. Thomas, 'Making Darkness Visible', in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. by Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (California: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 134-169, (pp.142-6).

<sup>213</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p.158.



never mean for to go to church? No, I don't never mean for to go to church. I shouldn't be expected there, if I did; the beadle's too gen-teel for me.<sup>214</sup>

As Schwarzbach says of the Brickmaker: 'His lack of deference calls into question the very nature of class relations, and in so doing the very nature of the mission of social reform the novelist has taken upon himself.'<sup>215</sup> There are no easy remedies to the foggy world, or to the crumbling social system Dickens has described.

The only baby born within London in the novel is that of Caddy Jellyby and she is born deaf and dumb; another allusion to deprivation of the senses. Is Dickens commenting on the unsustainability of life bred within the unhealthy, dark and polluted air of the city?<sup>216</sup> He certainly sees the blight of the city spreading outwards. A letter to the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts, at about this time, shows that the problem was very much at the forefront of his mind: 'go into any common outskirts of the town, now, and see the advancing army of brick and mortar laying waste the country fields and shutting out the air'.<sup>217</sup> Already in 1829 George Cruikshank commented on the expansion of the city in his cartoon *London going out of Town: The March of Bricks and Mortar*, illustrated below. In this picture the clouds of smoke from domestic and industrial chimneys are polluting the countryside before the army of building equipment, represented by chimney-pots, moves in to the countryside. The haystacks and farm animals can only flee in terror. Again the dome of St. Paul's disappears behind the billowing black smoke.

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<sup>214</sup> *ibid.*, p.158.

<sup>215</sup> Schwarzbach, 'Social Pathology', p. 100.

<sup>216</sup> See Shatto, p. 296, who notes Dickens's interest in a blind, deaf and dumb girl in America in 1842 and his support of Harriet Martineau's campaign to treat and train properly those children who are deaf, dumb, blind or mentally defective.

<sup>217</sup> *The Pilgrim Edition: The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), VI (1990) 644. To Miss Burdett Coutts, 18 April 1852.



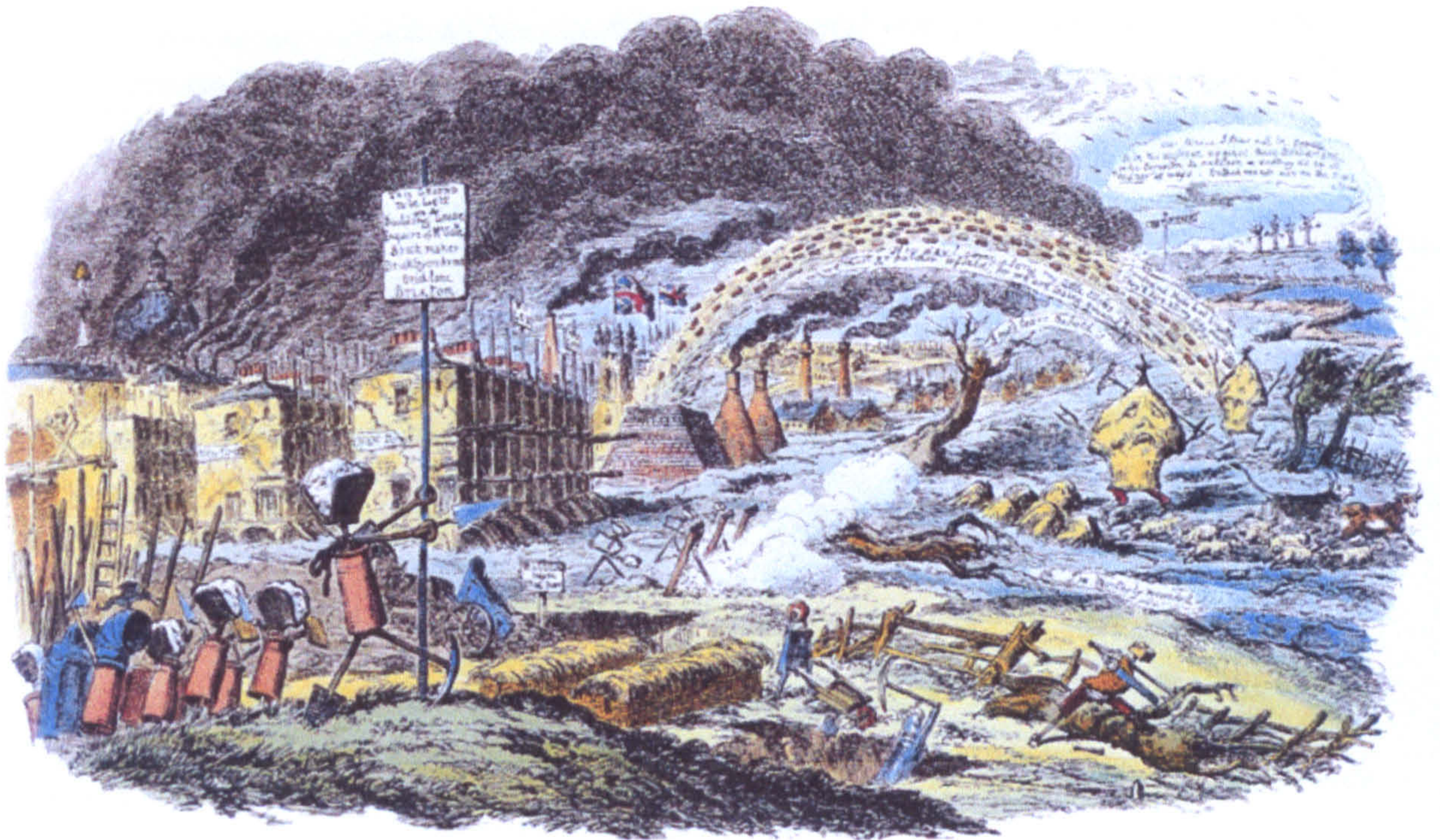


Fig 7: George Cruikshank: *London going out of town – or – The March of Bricks and Mortar*.<sup>218</sup>

In Dickens's novel, London's 'lurid glare' hangs over St Albans and even over Bleak House itself. The house is thus unable to provide a suitable retreat to warrant, if not a happy ending, at least an ending which promises peace to the major surviving characters. An alternative Bleak House is built in Yorkshire by John Jarndyce for Esther and her husband Alan Woodcourt. Only by escaping London altogether can they gain true happiness.

Terry Eagleton, in the Preface to the 1996 Penguin edition, sees the fog as an example of 'negative interdependence'.

There are several such images of negative interdependence in *Bleak House*. One of them is the fog, which in the celebrated set piece that opens the novel engulfs everyone from the paupers of Tom-all-Alone's to the august figure of the Lord Chancellor himself. The novel's various scenes are thus linked – but only by being plunged as a whole into a dense, obscuring medium which symbolizes the opaqueness of urban society, the difficulty of deciphering its structure. (As far as indecipherability goes, Jo the illiterate crossing-sweeper is

<sup>218</sup> George Cruikshank, *London going out of town – or – The March of Bricks and Mortar* (London: Museum of London, 1829), etching.



quite literally unable to decode the signs around him.) One of the very images that unifies the fragmentary world of the novel, then, testifies at the same time to that world's mysterious impenetrability. What coheres this society, it would seem, is that every piece of it is equally shrouded in enigma. The fog allows us to see the place as a whole, but only by allowing us to see nothing at all.<sup>219</sup>

This mirrors the structure of the novel in which the mysteries of the plot and the connections between characters only appear piece-meal. In the same way that Krook, another example of the difficulties of deciphering, can only begin to work out the text on the documents he hoards, letter-by-letter.

John Carey, on the other hand, sees the fog in *Bleak House* as a 'displacement', since Dickens could not write directly about the Court of Chancery and its abuses 'because to do so would have have entailed a mass of financial, legal and historical documentation which the Victorian novel form could not contain.'<sup>220</sup> Whilst Carey acknowledges that the fog 'illustrates [Dickens'] brilliantly resourceful displacement of the novel to an alternative centre of interest', he does have his reservations:

Yet clearly the Court of Chancery and fog are quite different things. There is no equivalence, of the kind Dickens' poetic symbol suggests, and the more he develops the poetic symbol, the less applicable it becomes. Fog hanging in the rigging of ships, or drooping on the gunwales of barges, is marvellously evocative visually. But the legal and financial facts about the Court of Chancery cannot be clarified by presenting it in these terms. The symbol does not, in fact, clarify but obscure. It is a fog about fogs.<sup>221</sup>

Carey repudiates the seriousness that readers have seen in Dickens in the previous two decades, and to highlight the centrality of Dickens's humour. He comments: 'Dickens' inability to take institutions seriously is one reason for believing that we shall miss his real greatness if we persist in regarding him primarily as a critic of society.'<sup>222</sup> Carey's

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<sup>219</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House* (1996), p. viii.

<sup>220</sup> John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1991), p. 175.

<sup>221</sup> *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>222</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.



main point is to show that Dickens was inconsistent and self-contradictory as a social critic. The fog in the opening of *Bleak House* is not, in the end, a symbol only of the institution of the Court of Chancery, but it reflects society, especially London, urban society as a whole. The fog is an ideal symbol of the corruption and disease found in that society because it is both a corruption of the mud and smoke produced; and of the miasma which was felt to cause disease at the time. *Bleak House* is markedly different from the earlier novels written by Charles Dickens and it does contain less humour. The difference is obvious when the fog in this later novel, is compared to the fog of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The fog in this earlier novel creates much confusion and anxiety, but it is only seen to affect Pecksniff and his family, whereas the opening of *Bleak House* insists that the fog is 'everywhere'.<sup>223</sup>

In *Bleak House* the fog has become a signifier of London, its institutions and its social constitution to a far more powerful degree than in Dickens's previous work. The first word may declare that it is 'London', but the need to establish this certainty simply highlights that the city is dissolving beneath its fog and mud.<sup>224</sup> After this opening chapter, when we return to London under the guidance of the other narrator, Esther Summerson, the first thing she notes is the confusion 'when every conveyance seemed to be running into us, and we seemed to be running into every other conveyance' but the second thing is the fog, which is smoke, which is specified, by Guppy, as 'a London particular'.<sup>225</sup> Fog is now triumphant; it plunges the city and the novel's characters into a world of darkness, madness and despair from which it is only possible to emerge by leaving the city altogether. As Hillis Miller suggests:

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<sup>223</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 49.

<sup>224</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>225</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.



The larger mystery, the mystery of Chancery or of the degeneration of England, is in fact not explained, or if it is explained this is done in so obscure a manner as to leave things at the end of the novel almost as dark, as mud-soaked and fog-drenched, as they are in the opening pages.<sup>226</sup>

### *Our Mutual Friend*

#### I

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* we saw how nature, even within the city, was able through a natural fog to turn against Quilp, an emblem of industry, and destroy him. In later novels by Dickens, the situation becomes more complicated as he comes to imagine a city which was, in his view, destroying itself at every level, both morally and physically. His ambivalence, towards London, after returning from abroad, centred on the atmospheric conditions that prevailed in the city: 'London is a vile place' he wrote in a letter of 1851: 'Whenever I come back from the Country, now, and see that great heavy canopy lowering over the house tops, I wonder what on earth I do there, except on obligation.'<sup>227</sup> As Dickens grew older, his views on London, became more pessimistic. This change becomes apparent in many of his later novels, particularly *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), Dickens's last completed novel.

Bruce Beiderwell describes Dickens's later view of the city as almost apocalyptic. He sees in the novel 'a network of associations that project a coherent sense of a decaying world which deals in death and is losing its human dimension'.<sup>228</sup> Dickens's use of fog as a negative metaphor emerges in the opening chapter of the third book of *Our Mutual Friend*. Indeed, its very employment at the beginning of a new section strikes a keynote. In effect, Dickens is making here a general statement

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<sup>226</sup> Hillis Miller, 'Interpretation in *Bleak House*', p. 39.

<sup>227</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, VI, 287. Dickens to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, 10 February 1851.

<sup>228</sup> Bruce Beiderwell, 'The Coherence of *Our Mutual Friend*', *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 15 (1985), 234-243 (p. 235).



about the state of society through the specific instance of a foggy day in London. The description shows a city defined by fog. The surrounding countryside is not spared the same foggy conditions, but there it is 'grey, whereas in London it was, at about the boundary line, dark yellow, and a little within it brown, and then browner, and then browner, until at the heart of the City – which call Saint Mary Axe – it was rusty-black'.<sup>229</sup> Elsewhere in the novel, as Burton Pike notes, Dickens portrays 'the aggressive expansion of the urban edge into the surrounding countryside [...] Dickens' word-city oozes into the suburban countryside'.<sup>230</sup> This is especially apparent, according to Pike, in the area of Bradley Headstone's school: 'where Kent and Surrey meet, and where the railways still bestride the market-gardens that will soon die under them'.<sup>231</sup> This incursion by the city into the suburbs blurs the boundaries between town and country and creates a confusion of seemingly unrelated items: 'here, an immense new warehouse; there, a dilapidated old country villa; then, a medley of black ditch, sparkling cucumber-frame, rank field, richly cultivated kitchen garden, brick viaduct, arch-spanned canal'.<sup>232</sup> And this leads to two images of confusion: 'frowziness and fog'; both images related just as much to a mental confusion as the physical reality of the jumbled scene.<sup>233</sup>

Dickens's depiction of the varied hues of London fog was not merely fanciful. A scientific study of urban fog published in 1896 noted: 'Town fog is mist made white by Nature and painted any tint from yellow to black by her children; born of the air of particles of pure and transparent water, it is contaminated by man

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<sup>229</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 479. All references from this edition unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>230</sup> Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 65.

<sup>231</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 267.

<sup>232</sup> *ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>233</sup> *ibid.*, p. 268.



with every imaginable abomination. That is town fog.<sup>234</sup> Later scientists studied the colours of the fogs in order to work out what caused them. R. Morton Rowe, Technical and Chemical Adviser of the Manchester Public Health Department in the 1930s, pointed to the change of colour over a period of time:

Thirty years ago the fogs were absolutely black. I have known it, at midday, be as black as night and impossible to see across the pavement. To-day the character of the fog has altered, – they are more yellow and not so densely black. But on the other hand I am inclined to think that they are quite as venomous as the black. The old fogs were black owing to the carbonaceous matter present, while the modern yellow fog is more characteristic of household smoke.<sup>235</sup>

His view reflected his experience in the heavily industrial atmosphere of Manchester. Londoners of the mid-Victorian period would have disputed Rowe's memory of fog as being black. For them, a typical November fog was invariably yellow, coloured by the greater proportion of home-fires in the capital: 'When the Major returned to London, which he did in time for the fogs of November [...] the valet was arranging his toilette in the deep yellow London fog,' as Thackeray put it in *Pendennis*.<sup>236</sup> The yellow tint of the fog illustrated the difference between London fogs and other fogs. J. Bayard Taylor, an American visitor, could hardly suppress his delight at seeing a real London fog:

A few days ago we had a real fog – a specimen of November weather, as the people said. If November wears such a mantle, London, during that sober month, must furnish a good idea of the gloom of Hades. The streets were wrapped in a veil of dense mist, of a dirty yellow color, as if the air had suddenly grown thick and mouldy.<sup>237</sup>

When describing fogs in their novels, many writers describe them as either black or yellow, but Dickens's employment of both colours in *Our Mutual Friend* with other

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<sup>234</sup> Dr J. B. Cohen *The Air of Towns* (Washington: Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, 1896), p. 23.

<sup>235</sup> Arnold Marsh, 'R. Morton Rowe: An Interview', *Journal of the National Smoke Abatement Society*, 2 (1931), 5-6 (p. 5).

<sup>236</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 310.

<sup>237</sup> J. Bayard Taylor, *Views A-foot; or, Europe with Knapsack and Staff* (London: Wiley and Putnam, 1847), p. 383.



colours of the spectrum as well, shows how he transformed observation into metaphor to symbolise the crisis of the city, a crisis that he seems to have envisaged as ultimately leading to the destruction of the city and its people.

In this chapter Dickens's geography of fog is almost purely metaphorical. The boundary line to the city is 'dark yellow'. The boundary is both substantial, in the sense that the change of colour creates a physical marker of the city, and insubstantial, in that it is made of fog, which can easily be passed through. London is separated from the rest of the country by this barrier, but it does not stop people from entering it. The yellow colour of the boundary line indicates the sulphurous nature of the fog; but the colour also acts as a warning. Yellow is a colour associated with disease, decay and old age. At sea, the yellow flag denoted fever, not just yellow fever, but any dangerous contamination.<sup>238</sup> Later, yellow or amber lights were used to warn road and rail traffic that it was about to be ordered to stop.

As the description moves closer to the city's centre, the colour moves from a 'dark yellow' to brown, and then the brown becomes darker until it becomes a 'rusty-black'. On one level this only confirms the opening line of the chapter, that 'the fog was heavy and dark'. But the gradual darkening colour of the city fog achieves so much more. It supplies a sense of tension as Saint Mary Axe becomes a Dickensian heart of darkness. But there is a casualness on the part of the writer as to where the heart of the city is – 'which call Saint Mary Axe' – indicating that he could just as easily have lighted on other areas within the city instead; the deliberate arbitrariness points the reader to the fact that this is a metaphorical geography. Saint Mary Axe is not unique. The description of the gradual darkening of the city as we move towards its centre is both dramatic and frightening. Saint Mary Axe is the home of Riah, the

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<sup>238</sup> See Tambling, pp. 11-13 on further discussion of significance of yellow.



gentle Jew, the unwilling employee and shield to the money lender, Fledgeby. It is in the context of this area as the place of business of Pubsey and Co., a cover for Fledgeby's nefarious monetary activities, that the reader has to situate the metaphorical significance of the fog's description.

## II

The 'heart of the City' is 'rusty-black', not just black, as the foul air causes 'animate London' to suffer from 'smarting eyes and irritated lungs'. Perhaps the 'rusty' appellation may simply 'pick up its rust associatively from the near-to-hand iron tool in "Saint Mary Axe"' as Robert Alter suggests, but 'rust' was a common slang term for money, which is so much a part of this novel; especially money which is allowed to rust, and which is not put to good use.<sup>239</sup> Part of John Harmon's reluctance to appear in public and confess that he is not dead is because the Boffins have inherited his father's money: 'Because he sees them happy with it, making good use of it, effacing the old rust and tarnish on the money.'<sup>240</sup> Old Harmon's money is no longer allowed to corrode and rust in the darkness of the fog.

We are told that 'inanimate London was a sooty spectre, divided in purpose between being visible and invisible, and so being wholly neither.'<sup>241</sup> This indeterminacy highlights the patchy nature of most London fogs but it also makes the environment formless and creates spectres or ghosts out of the usually solid urban backdrop. The passage appears to reveal a world of nightmarish fantasy; solidity is shown to be ambiguous throughout *Our Mutual Friend*. The Podsnaps are described in ponderously solid and heavy terms; yet they are often only seen as

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<sup>239</sup> Alter, p. 77. Augustus Mayhew, *Paved with Gold* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1858), III, p. 284: 'There's no chance of 'nabbing any rust.'" (an example of rust being a reference for money).

<sup>240</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 429.

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.*, p. 479.



reflected. Miss Podsnap's view of her father is significantly gained from 'the reflections of it in her father's boots, and in the walnut and rosewood tables of the dim drawing-rooms, and in their swarthy giants of looking-glasses'.<sup>242</sup> As J. Hillis Miller comments: 'The reflection in the mirror is emptied of its solidity and presented as a thin surface of appearance hiding fathomless depths of nullity. Mirroring brings to light the vacuity of people whose lives are determined by money.'<sup>243</sup> People have placed too much faith in the value of money and thus live in an environmental nowhere, appearances are deceptive, and what appears as solid may not be so at all.

Fog fulfils a similar metaphorical function. When suddenly the perspective is moved to a vantage-point above the city, looking down on it, the threat of the fog becomes extreme, even apocalyptic: 'From any point of the high ridge of land northward, it might have been discerned that the loftiest buildings made an occasional struggle to get their heads above the foggy sea, and especially that the great dome of Saint Paul's seemed to die hard.'<sup>244</sup> In a novel which is centred on the River Thames and its activities, including drownings, it is appropriate that the buildings are described as if they are struggling to keep their heads above water and are finally drowned.

On one level this could be seen as an ecological tirade against air pollution. The human cost has already been described: 'Animate London, with smarting eyes and irritated lungs, was blinking, wheezing, and choking.' The health hazards of the smoke-filled fog were well known, especially to the vulnerable, the very young, the elderly and those with lung and chest complaints. And, as Alter suggests:

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<sup>242</sup> *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>243</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Victorian Subjects* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 72.

<sup>244</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 479.



The brilliantly hideous metaphor of the “gigantic catarrh” at the very end of the paragraph focuses this collective experience of respiratory difficulties, also reinforcing the notions of rheumy fluids, bleariness, and messiness – all that the industrial age had made of London in Dickens’s eyes. The gigantic catarrh enfolded in the city equally links up with the more lethal interference with breathing involved in drowning.<sup>245</sup>

Not only the condition of London’s inhabitants but also its physical structure appear to have lost their solidity to become a drowning, fluid, spectral mass. For the discomfort of animate London is surpassed by the seemingly death-like struggles of the buildings which are described in human terms and which appear to be drowning in the ‘foggy sea’. There is hope of redemption for the city; but only because the apocalyptic ending is one possibility among many: ‘it *might* have been discerned’.<sup>246</sup>

Of course, it was not unusual to see the fog as a sea when looking down on it. Ever since the late eighteenth century, when balloon flight had made it possible to rise above the clouds and vapour, this image had become a standard one. The sea also ties in with the two most potent images in the novel, water and dust; Fog is a combination of both. Water imagery, in all its forms, was an important poetic symbol in many of Dickens’s novels. But as Roselee Robison suggests: ‘In his [Dickens’s] last completed novel, water imagery dominates the setting, controls the structure, and even helps to determine the relationships among the numerous characters.’<sup>247</sup> Within the novel the Thames is seen as a force that connects all levels of society. Characters are drawn to the river, Lizzie Hexam, and her father, Gaffer, make their living from the river, as indeed does Rogue Riderhood, and, of course, on a larger scale the river is the important support for the city’s commercial success. The river and money are very much connected.

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<sup>245</sup> Alter, p. 78.

<sup>246</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 479.

<sup>247</sup> Roselee Robison, ‘Time, Death and the River in Dickens’ Novels’, *English Studies*, 53 (1972), 436–454 (p. 449).



Just as important, the river is seen also as a possible means of transformation through baptism in its waters. John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn almost lose their lives in the river, but emerge from the experience changed men. Harmon comes to terms with his past and Eugene Wrayburn survives to accept his love for Lizzie in spite of the difference in their ranks in society. The river is not a force for good or evil, but is seen as neutral; redemption is dependent on the protagonists' willingness to change.

Thus when the foggy conditions of this same day outlined in chapter one of Book III are continued in the following chapter, Rogue Riderhood is run down by a steamer on the river. In this novel fog and water join together to test Riderhood's potential for redemption. Riderhood's immersion in the water leads his daughter to hope that a changed man might emerge from this near-death experience: 'Also some vague idea that the old evil is drowned out of him, and that if he should happily come back to resume his occupation of the empty form that lies upon the bed, his spirit will be altered.'<sup>248</sup> But when he revives, he is shown to be 'unimproved', and later, he is drowned again – this time without a reprieve.<sup>249</sup> The idea of redemption through water echoes the biblical story of Noah's Flood where the world was redeemed through its immersion in the water. Just as there is hope of redemption through immersion in the water for individuals in the novel, should we also see hope for redemption for the city in its immersion in the foggy sea described? Immersion in the water is not necessary for all, Riah is described as 'ever wading through the fog, waded to the doorstep of the dolls' dressmaker'.<sup>250</sup> He will not be drowned by the

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<sup>248</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, pp. 505-6.

<sup>249</sup> *ibid.*, p. 874.

<sup>250</sup> *ibid.*, p. 492.



fog because he does not need redemption because he shows true Christian values, even though he is a Jew.

London invests all its energies into money, the making of money, or the pretence of possessing money, and it is in danger of destroying itself through its loss of spiritual awareness and common humanity. It will be destroyed not only by water but also by the dust which is part of fog's composition. Indeed, the connection between dust and money or gold is made implicit in a number of ways. Boffin is the 'golden dustman' and the Harmon fortune is based on the dust heaps which are integral to the novel's landscape. From about the sixteenth century dust was a colloquial word for money. The happy resolution of the novel is indicated by the removal of the dust heaps to realise their monetary value so that John and Bella Harmon can circulate the money within society in a positive way. Dust and rust are powerful images in the novel for unused money.

Fog is the product of an accumulation of dust and waste in the air; it reveals what happens when nothing is done about the root causes of pollution. On a metaphorical level, it shows the city being suffocated because of its emphasis on commerce, rather than on Christian values. The buildings try to keep their heads above the 'foggy sea, and especially [that] the great dome of Saint Paul's seemed to die hard'. Many Victorians saw St Paul's Cathedral, and especially the dome as a comforting and continuing symbol of the nation's religious and moral state. Its presence was a visual signifier of London, indicating a continuity with the city's past as well as reassuring the present inhabitants of an existing religious presence. The fact that St Paul's was often viewed through a haze of smoke or fog indicated to many the real state of religious feeling amongst the populace. It seemed to symbolise a growing disregard for religion, especially a religion that appeared hazy or



meaningless in their everyday lives. Nathaniel Hawthorne also noted St. Paul's disappearing behind the smoke in 1857, and reflected that the dome may have been made of that very vapour which hid it from view and in a state of dissolution, writing that

when I reached Saint Paul's, the sunny intermixture, above spoken of, was at its minimum, so that the smoke-cloud really grew black about the dome and pinnacles, and the statues of Saints looked dimly down from their stand-points on high, faintest, as spiritual consolations are apt to be, when the world was darkest [...] the whole vast Cathedral had utterly vanished, leaving "not a wrack behind"; - unless those thick, dark vapours were the elements of which it had been composed, and into which it had again dissolved. It is good to think, nevertheless (and I gladly accept the analogy and the moral) that the Cathedral was really there, and as substantial as ever, though these earthly mists had hidden it from mortal eyes.<sup>251</sup>

In Dickens's earlier novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), Nell and her grandfather are escaping from London and when they reach a hill on the outskirts of the city: 'on top of that the traveller might stop, and – looking back at old Saint Paul's looming through the smoke, its cross peeping above the cloud (if the day were clear and glittering in the sun'.<sup>252</sup> In this earlier work St Paul's is not under threat, its cross is a sign of hopefulness, although interestingly it is not given to Nell and her grandfather in this context, it is 'the traveller' who might look back and not the 'escapees'.

The illustration from the novel (shown on p. 118) reinforces the idea of London, not only covered by the smoke, but almost being drowned by the vapour. However, in *Our Mutual Friend* the spiritually corrupt city entails the death-struggle of its most potent religious symbol, which 'seemed to die hard'. St Paul's as a religious symbol is nonetheless dying, and, significantly, it is also drowning, the fate of many of the characters in this novel.

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<sup>251</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The English Notebooks 1853 – 1856*, ed. by Thomas Woodson and Bill Ellis (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 8 December 1857, p. 446.

<sup>252</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 173.





Fig 8: Nell and her Grandfather look back on London.<sup>253</sup>

### III

Dickens does leave some room for hope for the city, in terms of the positive relationships between individuals. Often this ‘representation of human solidarity characteristically sequesters it in protected little enclaves within the larger urban scene’.<sup>254</sup> In *Our Mutual Friend* the very curious scene which takes place on the roof of Pubsey & Co. fulfils this function. As I have noted, Pubsey & Co. is owned by Fledgeby, one of the villains of the novel, and is situated in St. Mary Axe, described later as the centre of the black fog. Here, Riah, a gentle Jew who is forced to work for Fledgeby, allows Jenny Wren, the disabled doll’s dressmaker and her friend, Lizzie Hexam, to rest in the roof garden he has created. Lizzie is trying to improve her reading with Jenny’s help. The absence of anything grand is emphasised by the

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<sup>253</sup> *ibid.*, p. 174. Illustration by Cattermole.

<sup>254</sup> Alter, p 55.



description of the 'common basket of common fruit' which rests near the women. In addition 'A few boxes of humble flowers and evergreens completed the garden.'

Yet, although it is apparently a humble and simple scene of slight interest, the description then follows illustrates the tension between this almost pastoral scene and the city: 'the encompassing wilderness of dowager old chimneys twirled their cowls and fluttered their smoke, rather as if they were bridling, and fanning themselves, and looking on in a state of airy surprise'.<sup>255</sup> The ordered nature of the roof-garden makes the surrounding chimneys seem like a natural wilderness. This is a haven which appears to be secure from the smoke of the city, even from the interruption by Fledgeby, who cannot appreciate its quiet and air when Jenny points it out. "The quiet!" repeated Fledgeby, with a contemptuous turn of his head towards the City's roar. "And the air!" with a "Poof!" at the smoke.' Jenny continues: 'But it's so high. And you see the clouds rushing on above the narrow streets, not minding them, and you see the golden arrows pointing at the mountains in the sky from which the wind comes, and you feel as if you were dead.' There is no doubt, as Burton Pike suggests, that this scene can 'play on the reader's cultural-mythic sense of death, the idea that when one dies, one's body goes below ground and the soul goes up to heaven'.<sup>256</sup> The invitation to Riah – "Come back and be dead" – is an invitation to enjoy life after death, in the Christian sense, even though he is a Jew; the words addressed to Fledgeby: "But *you* are not dead, you know, [...] Get down to life!" is a sign that heaven is denied to him because of his villainy.<sup>257</sup>

Reading this in conjunction with the later foggy scene, also centred on St Mary Axe, illustrates how tightly knit the novel is. In the former scene, the smoke is

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<sup>255</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 332.

<sup>256</sup> Pike, p. 64.

<sup>257</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 334.



denied access to the humble paradise created above street level, in the later scene Riah is described coming out of the door of the same building, but this time at street level

into the fog, and was lost to the eyes of Saint Mary Axe [...] Thither he went at his grave and measured pace, staff in hand, skirt at heel; and more than one head, turning to look back at his venerable figure already lost in the mist, supposed it to be some ordinary figure indistinctly see, which fancy and the fog had worked into that passing likeness.<sup>258</sup>

Riah is worthy to enter heaven because of his goodness, but the fog, a polluting by-product of the city representing the city in all its negative aspects, transforms Riah into an ordinary citizen. Dickens here uses the fact that fog was often perceived as transforming reality, not only dissolving it into seemingly formless states, but also playing visual tricks. An 1870 cartoon from *Punch* illustrates this (shown on p. 121). Here, a calm and ordinary appearance is transformed into a threatening and frightening one by the fog.

Appearances deceive. Fledgeby is using the venerable Jew as a front to his business, so that he avoids being seen as avaricious and inhuman. This is easier because people's 'fancy' presumes that Riah, by virtue of his being Jewish, will display these negative qualities himself. Later, Fledgeby himself leaves to go out into the fog, but first he changes from his 'Turkish garments' to 'invest himself with Christian attire.'<sup>259</sup> The seeming Christian does, in reality, act the pagan. And, just in case we have missed the point: 'The murky fog closed about him and shut him up in his sooty embrace. If it had never let him out any more, the world would have had no irreparable loss, but could have easily replaced him from its stock on hand.'<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*, p. 480.

<sup>259</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 492.

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*, p. 492.



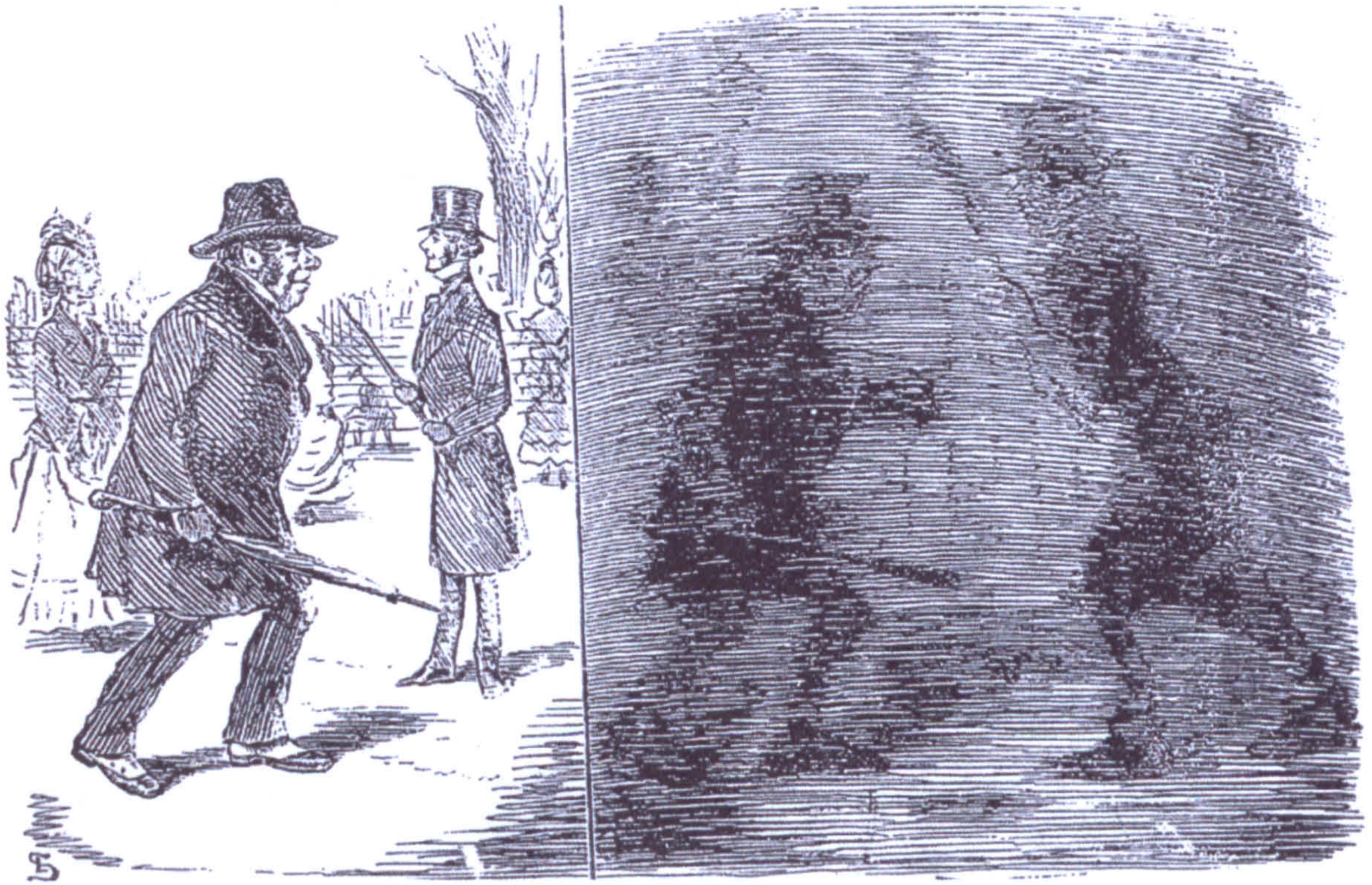


Fig 9: 'Nobody that knows them could doubt the respectability of these two gentlemen, yet you would hardly credit the unnecessary panic their imaginations caused them the other night in the Fog!'<sup>261</sup>

Whereas Jenny, Lizzie and Riah seemed protected from the smoke on the pastoral island of the rooftop, Fledgeby is taken by the fog, a symbol of the city, and embraced as if they are one. How different this fog is from the one described in *The Old Curiosity Shop*! In the earlier novel the natural fog rejects the symbol of industrialism, Quilp, and brings about his death. Here the polluted fog of the city embraces Fledgeby as one of its own.

### Conclusion

Many critics have discussed Dickens's increasingly pessimistic view of London in relationship with his use of fog as a metaphor, but some, like Robert Alter, have taken this pessimism to its very extreme: 'The barrier of pollution that

<sup>261</sup> *Punch*, 58 (19 February 1870), p. 72.



insulates the metropolis from nature is dense with the ominous idea [of] an irreversible catastrophe for human existence.<sup>262</sup> In fact, even in the later novels, signs of hope can still be glimpsed through the fog, reflecting the ambivalence Dickens, like other Londoners felt towards the fog in day-to-day life. In *Our Mutual Friend* the same fog described at the beginning of the third book continues to affect London later that day. We have been told that the fog is thicker down towards the river, not an uncommon situation.<sup>263</sup> The running-down of Rogue Riderhood by a steamer in the fog, at this point, provides an obvious comparison to the description of Quilp's death in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In the later novel the events are narrated from the point of the onlookers through the fog and not from the victim's point of view. This creates a mystery as to who has been run over. Riderhood, as is obvious from his first name, is a villain and rogue and his near dead body is also referred to as 'it' in the same way as Quilp's body.<sup>264</sup> The fog impedes vision: 'for every boat that put off sculled into the fog and was lost to view at a boat's length.'<sup>265</sup> Fog is obviously ultimately to blame for the accident.

However, the scene does not contain the horror conveyed in Quilp's death; in fact, there is a good deal of humour in it: 'Some man fell in with a splash, and was pulled out again with a roar of laughter.'<sup>266</sup> The general tolerance shown to London fog is represented by the onlookers not blaming the fog but blaming the steamer: 'She was the Murderer, bound for Gallows Bay; she was the Manslaughterer, bound for Penal Settlement.'<sup>267</sup> Even the fog seems to join the chorus of condemnation of

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<sup>262</sup> Alter, p. 79.

<sup>263</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 495.

<sup>264</sup> *ibid.*, p. 502. Miss Abbey refers to the drowned body as 'it'.

<sup>265</sup> *ibid.*, p. 501.

<sup>266</sup> *ibid.*, p. 500.

<sup>267</sup> *ibid.*, p. 501.



the boat: ‘The whole bulk of the fog teemed with such taunts, uttered in tones of universal hoarseness.’<sup>268</sup> Her lights are affected in human terms by causing them to blink, and the steam is almost as if she is having to blow her nose: “‘Them’s her lights, Miss Abbey, wot you see a-blinking yonder,’ and “‘She’s a-blowing off her steam, Miss Abbey, and that’s what makes the fog and the noise worse’”.<sup>269</sup>

This scene describes the feelings of confusion, indeterminacy and tension so often associated with the fog. Figures are ‘blurred’ and ‘lights moved spectrally’. Yet there is a sense of comradeship and desire to help on the part of the Londoners down by the river. Confusion is stopped by Miss Abbey, the owner of the inn, taking control of the situation and ensuring that everything is done to help the injured man. The urban community illustrates a collective purpose through the fog to help save Riderhood, even though, as he revives, there is a feeling that he is not worth saving. In this late novel, there is still a sense of what Alter refers to as ‘a small sustaining community of the kindhearted within the urban wasteland’.<sup>270</sup>

London fog, or at least one of its constituents, smoke, in Dickens’s novels is often seen in opposition to nature. As Alter comments on Dickens’s imagination: ‘The city is often seen as a departure from, or even a violation of, the order of nature, and in the deepest reach of his metaphoric imagination he evinces certain forebodings as to the price that may be exacted for this alienation from the natural world.’<sup>271</sup> But this ignores many examples where nature survives. *The Old Curiosity Shop* depicts a natural fog wreaking justice on the villain Quilp, that representative of industrialisation. The flower garden on Riah’s rooftop in *Our Mutual Friend* survives

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<sup>268</sup> *ibid.*, p. 501.

<sup>269</sup> *ibid.*, p. 501.

<sup>270</sup> Alter, p. 50.

<sup>271</sup> *ibid.*, p. 71.



in spite of the smoke and noise about it. Even in *Edwin Drood*, Dickens's final, unfinished novel we are told that in 'one of those nooks where a few smoky sparrows twitter in smoky trees, as though they called to one another, "Let us play at country"'.<sup>272</sup>

For the most part Dickens uses fog as a metaphorical representation of the troubling meanings of the new urban reality of London. Its rapid growth both in terms of physical growth as well as population growth had led to anxieties of loss of control and potential chaos. Despite the persistence of small enclaves of community spirit, offering a continuing glimmer of hope for the future, London's fog harks back to the beginning of time, with its misty swamps, as well as referring to the present confusion and disorder. The megalosaurus comes hot on the heels of the mention of smoke in the opening page of *Bleak House*. A connection between the two is inevitable. Fog was a consistent and memorable factor of London life.

Fog becomes a vehicle of confusion, as well as a symbol for it, dissolving familiar patterns of nature. By turning daytime into night it even confuses the natural order of the day. Esther Summerson finds London strange, 'the stranger from its being night in the day-time', a phenomenon which was often commented on in newspaper reports: 'From an early hour of the morning and during the day the fog in the city and many other parts of London was so dense, that the gas in the various shops was kept burning, and in many private houses candles were lighted.'<sup>273</sup> Because of this strange reversal, gaslights in Dickens's words, are turned into strange 'night creatures that had no business abroad under the sun'.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Dickens, *Edwin Drood*, p. 134.

<sup>273</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 76; *The Times*, 4 December 1837, p. 6, col. d.

<sup>274</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 479.



Often fog is seen in direct competition with the light, and it is the fog which is the active transgressor. In *Our Mutual Friend* this competition is seen by Dickens in dramatic terms as a murderous struggle 'with a sobbing gaslight in the counting-house window, and a burglarious stream of fog creeping in to strangle it through the keyhole of the main door'.<sup>275</sup> Dickens represents the fog as actively invading the private space of the light with violent intentions. The gaslight, a symbol of Victorian modernity, is portrayed in *Our Mutual Friend* not only as the weaker of the two but submitting without a fight to the fog as it menacingly invades the space of the counting-house.

The fog here is a metaphorical representation of Fascinating Fledgeby, the shadowy owner of the counting-house, who squeezes as much monetary interest out of his clients as he can, in the same way that the fog is attempting to strangle the life out of the gaslight. It is the noble Jew Riah who stops the death-struggle: 'But the light went out, and the main door opened, and Riah came forth with a bag under his arm.'<sup>276</sup> Fledgeby is part of the novel's criticism of those elements of society who do not make good use of their money. This extends from individuals like Fledgeby and the miserly Harmon senior, whose spirit pervades the novel, up to the government, which does not do enough to alleviate the misery of the poor. The fog is part of the ever-increasing darkness of the novel; it is significant that the end is marked by the appearance of sunlight, a reversal of the miserliness of old Harmon, as Mrs Boffin so accurately comments: "'And as if his money had turned bright again, after a long long rust in the dark, and was at last a beginning to sparkle in the sunlight?'"<sup>277</sup> The idea of fog is deployed by Dickens increasingly over time as a vehicle of a negative

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<sup>275</sup> *ibid.*, p. 479.

<sup>276</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 479-80.

<sup>277</sup> *ibid.*, p. 849.



view of London, yet he never entirely lets the prospect of redemption disappear from sight.

Dickens saw that just as much as fog was a part of London life, it was also a metaphor for London. In its indeterminacy it could be classed as fog, cloud or mist; and this allowed him to use the metaphor in many ways. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* the fog becomes a vehicle for revenge against the evil symbol of industry, Quilp; it is not the same oily and greasy fog of the later books but one which is more natural and therefore provides an apt source of retribution. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* the fog creates a fairy-tale world very much like the one later described by Whistler. London is a cloud in the sky but the softness and hope of the image does not prepare for the panic which the fog (or is it London) induces in the way it thwarts the traveller. The fog described in his later novels, *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, reflect a darkening of his view of London. In *Bleak House* the fog causes the dissolution of the individual in the same way the law seeks dissolution of the individual. It is a world where all suffer from the fog but none seem connected, a world in which confusion and madness reign, and in which the light of religious comfort, education etc are denied to those who need them. Dickens's final completed novel reveals a city defined by its fog. It is a fog which defines borders within the city, but it also suggests indeterminacy in the way it divides the city between visible and invisible. Its formless nature is still one that can transform Fledgeby, the villain of the novel, into the righteous Christian, whereas Riah, the Jew, is seen only as the heathen. The true values of each are concealed by the fog. In *Our Mutual Friend* both animate and inanimate objects are drowning beneath the fog, and this reflects that drownings, near-drownings and redemptions are major themes in the novel.



## Chapter Three: London Fog and Smoke in the Visual Arts

### Introduction

Visual representations of fog and smoke could also be metaphorical. Did they support a growing concern with the state of London, or conversely highlight the dynamic nature of London's growth and industry? Did visual artists in the nineteenth century represent smoke and fog in the same ways as writers of the same period? For many, London fog could be interpreted in moral terms. It was a symbol of London's growing industrial power, but also could be seen as a sign of the city's moral degeneration. How did visual artists throughout the nineteenth century use fog? If they used it as a metaphor, what was it meant to represent?

'Only with the emergence of Whistler's "impressionist" aesthetic', it has been claimed, 'had it become possible to view the fog as something that deserved to be viewed in its own right; before that, it had merely been a cloak that hid the material objects behind it.'<sup>1</sup> Until the late nineteenth century, most British artists appear on first sight to have chosen to ignore atmospheric pollution in their representations of London. Yet artists such as Constable and Turner did reveal an interest, even if only in a very small number of paintings. Constable hinted at the smoke problem in his painting *Whitehall Stairs* (1832), explored in the second section of this chapter. A third section examines J. M. W. Turner's treatment of London's atmosphere in a painting, which, like Constable's work, remained something of an exception in the artist's *oeuvre*. Turner moved towards a more realistic portrait of London in his *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge* (1835). The smoke and fog of the capital appealed to Turner because of his particular interest in atmospheric effects. But the painting was never finished.

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<sup>1</sup> John House, 'Visions of the Thames', in *Monet's London: Artists' Reflections on the Thames 1859-1914* (Florida: Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), pp.16-37 (p. 28).



Clearly, some larger influences were at work here, militating against the public exhibition of such paintings.

With these exceptions, British artists up to the 1870s avoided depictions of London's atmosphere, finding it indeed an obstacle to their work, even though this aspect of London was becoming a popular theme of writers at the same time. The reluctance to visualize modern London may be partly attributable to the influence of the Royal Academy, with its strict definition of what was good art. The Academy viewed history painting as the most important genre, creating dignity as well as showing patriotism. For Reynolds, the Academy's first President, art embodied a high aesthetic and moral purpose. Many landscape artists combined landscape with an historical scene, frequently harking back to the classical world to show an affinity with the achievements of Great Britain as a supreme power. Contemporary London did not fit into this model. As Nadel and Schwarzbach point out:

Traditional conventions, and often outmoded ones, were extremely powerful in all the arts in the century, and those that governed the graphic arts did not with ease admit urban subjects. Such subjects tended to be unruly, disordered, dirty, and unpleasant. Faced with the difficulties of adapting such material, most artists preferred to bow to the ruling conventions – which stressed order, sentiment, domestic morality, and piety – rather than stress what would be criticized as discomfiting or even sordid.<sup>2</sup>

According to E. D. H. Johnson, an 'Exhibition of the Art Treasures of the United Kingdom' at Manchester in 1857 contained 'virtually no industrial views' amongst the '1,600 oils and watercolours', even though the exhibition was intended in part to compensate for the exclusion of paintings from the 1851 Great Exhibition.<sup>3</sup> It is only later in the century that prospects of inner city views are shown. A hostile reviewer in the Art Journal of 1874 on Luke Fildes' *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* sums

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<sup>2</sup> Ira Bruce Nadel and F. S. Schwarzbach, *Victorian Artists and the City* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980), p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> E. D. H. Johnson, 'Victorian Artists and the Urban Milieu', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. by H. J. Dyos and Michal Wolff, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1973), pp. 449-74; (I, p. 449).



this up in his comment: 'There is little in a theme of such grovelling misery to recommend it to a painter whose purpose is beauty.'<sup>4</sup> The clear style and bright colours of an artist such as Canaletto were thus favoured over presenting a more realistic portrayal of the capital city.

Paintings of London, especially before the middle of the nineteenth century, were particularly influenced by the Venetian painter Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697-1768), commonly known as Canaletto. His influence is quoted by one art historian as 'far greater in England than it was to be after his death in Italy'.<sup>5</sup> Canaletto came to London in May 1746, at the age of 49, and stayed for nine years, only leaving once, to return to Venice in 1750-1. During his stay he painted around 50 views of the city.

In a recent newspaper article, Adrian Searle says of the Italian artist: 'He never gives us the smog that hung intermittently over the city from the 16<sup>th</sup> century [...] In Canaletto's London, the atmosphere is always clear'.<sup>6</sup> Part of the reason for this may have been political. Bruce Redford has pointed out that Canaletto's Whig patrons wished to have London portrayed in similar ways to Canaletto's views of Venice, in order to express their admiration for the political structure of the aristocratic Venetian Republic.<sup>7</sup> Andrew Graham-Dixon even refers to Canaletto's *The City seen through an Arch of Westminster Bridge* as 'a painting of one city (London) so suffused with memories of another (Venice) that it represents neither, but rather a fantastical hybrid of the two'.<sup>8</sup> Another reason was that wealthy patrons preferred pictures of a light, clean-looking London rather than ones which depicted the often dirty-grey reality. The style

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Royal Academy: Second Notice' in *Art Journal* (1874), pp. 197-201, 201.

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Links, *Canaletto* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1999), p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Searle, *The Guardian*, 23 January 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Redford, *Venice and The Grand Tour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p.78.

<sup>8</sup> Canaletto, *The City seen through an Arch of Westminster Bridge*, 1747, Collection of the Duke of Northumberland; Andrew Graham-Dixon, 'A Tale of Two Cities', *The Independent*, 16 November 1993, p. 25.



also evokes subjects patronised on the Grand Tour. Bruce Redford sums it up: 'It is Canaletto's achievement to keep the two cities [London and Venice] [...] simultaneously in play; the London before our eyes and the Venice of our memories [...] sustain a visual and imaginative dialogue.'<sup>9</sup>

Canaletto was not aiming for a fundamental realism. He has been described as 'a painter who made up his own world.'<sup>10</sup> He portrayed London in the best possible light. His *The Thames and the City of London from Richmond House* is typical of much of his London work.



Fig 10: Canaletto, *London: The Thames and the City from Richmond House* (1747?).<sup>11</sup>

It portrays a bright, clear London with clearly defined lines along the Thames and in the skyline. The Lord Mayor's barge is the central focal point on a calm and clean-looking Thames. Seemingly, the only work performed is by the boatmen ferrying passengers to another bank, and by a rather noble-looking servant sweeping the terrace. A fishing-boat on the left side seems to be drifting idly. The bright colours are

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<sup>9</sup> Redford, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Graham-Dixon, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> *London: The Thames and the City from Richmond House*, probably 1747, The Trustees of the Goodwood Collection.



enhanced by the pink and blue dresses of the women on the embankment. It is an uncluttered scene – one of space and light. The sky is not a single blue but is given interest by the variegated clouds. Spiralling dark clouds in the background probably denote a distant storm and ensure that the lines of the buildings are given greater definition.

A Swedish traveller, Pehr Kalm (1716-1779), gave an account of his visit to England in 1748, the same period as Canaletto's residence. He said of the view from St Paul's that 'the thick coal smoke, which on all sides hung over the town, cut off the view in several places'.<sup>12</sup> Slightly later in 1765, after Canaletto had left England, Pierre Jean Grosley (1718-1785), a Frenchman, noted 'the smoke, which, being mixed with a constant fog, covers London and wraps it up intirely [...] during the winter, which lasts about eight months'.<sup>13</sup> As J. G. Links comments: 'We cannot trust his [Canaletto's] light: he dispersed the infamous London smoke and bathed its buildings in Venetian sunshine.'<sup>14</sup>

John Ruskin commented in similar terms in *Modern Painters*:

The effect of a fine Canaletti is, in its first impression, dioramic [...] Presently, however, we begin to feel that it is lurid and gloomy, and that the painter, compelled by the lowness of the utmost light at his disposal to deepen the shadows, in order to get the right relation, has lost the flashing, dazzling, exulting light, which was one of our chief sources of Venetian happiness.<sup>15</sup>

To Ruskin Canaletto's paintings did not allow forms of Venetian architecture to show through: 'The mannerism of Canaletto is the most degraded that I know in the whole range of art. Professing the most servile and mindless imitation, it imitates nothing but

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<sup>12</sup> Pehr Kalm, *Kalm's Account of his Visit to England on his Way to America in 1748*, trans. by Joseph Lucas (London: Macmillan, 1892), p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Grosley, I, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Links, p. 201.

<sup>15</sup> John Ruskin, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1904), iii, p. 255.



the blackness of the shadows; it gives no single architectural ornament, however near, so much form as might enable us even to guess at its actual one'.<sup>16</sup> More reprehensible still, according to Ruskin was not only his faithlessness towards truth of colour - 'the truths of colour are contradicted by Canaletti by the thousand' - but that he tended to make up what was in front of him rather than be truthful to the scene he wished to represent:

Observe, I do not suppose Canaletti, frequently as he must have been afloat on these canals, to have been ignorant of their everyday appearance. I believe him to be a shameless asserter of whatever was most convenient to him; and the convenience of this, his scientific arrangement is indisputable.<sup>17</sup>

Ruskin's criticisms of Canaletto were in part intended to support Turner. It was Turner who 'gave the full character of the place in its detail, colour, light, mystery and poetical effect.'<sup>18</sup> Turner transfigured all by his own magical imagination and talent.

Even Canaletto, however, could not entirely ignore the pollution of London's atmosphere. His *London: The Thames and the City of Westminster from Lambeth* (1746?) provides a riposte to modern critics like Searle, who accuse Canaletto of only painting Mediterranean-like skies. In this the skyline is not so clear. It is hazy. There are distinct swirls of smoke exuding from domestic chimneys, the main culprit of the pollution of the London air at this time. The clouds in the sky are yellowy and grey. The yellowness may be the sun reflecting on the clouds, but with the chimney smoke visibly adding to the greyness of the low lying clouds, it may be the yellow haze that many commentators noted of the London atmosphere. This is a very rare example of Canaletto moving away from his usual clear skies. Avoidance of realism was normal in the eighteenth century, especially in topographical paintings.

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, iii, p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, iii, pp. 523, 522.

<sup>18</sup> W. G. Collingwood, *The Life and Work of John Ruskin*, 2 vols (London: Methuen & Co., 1893), I, p. 112.



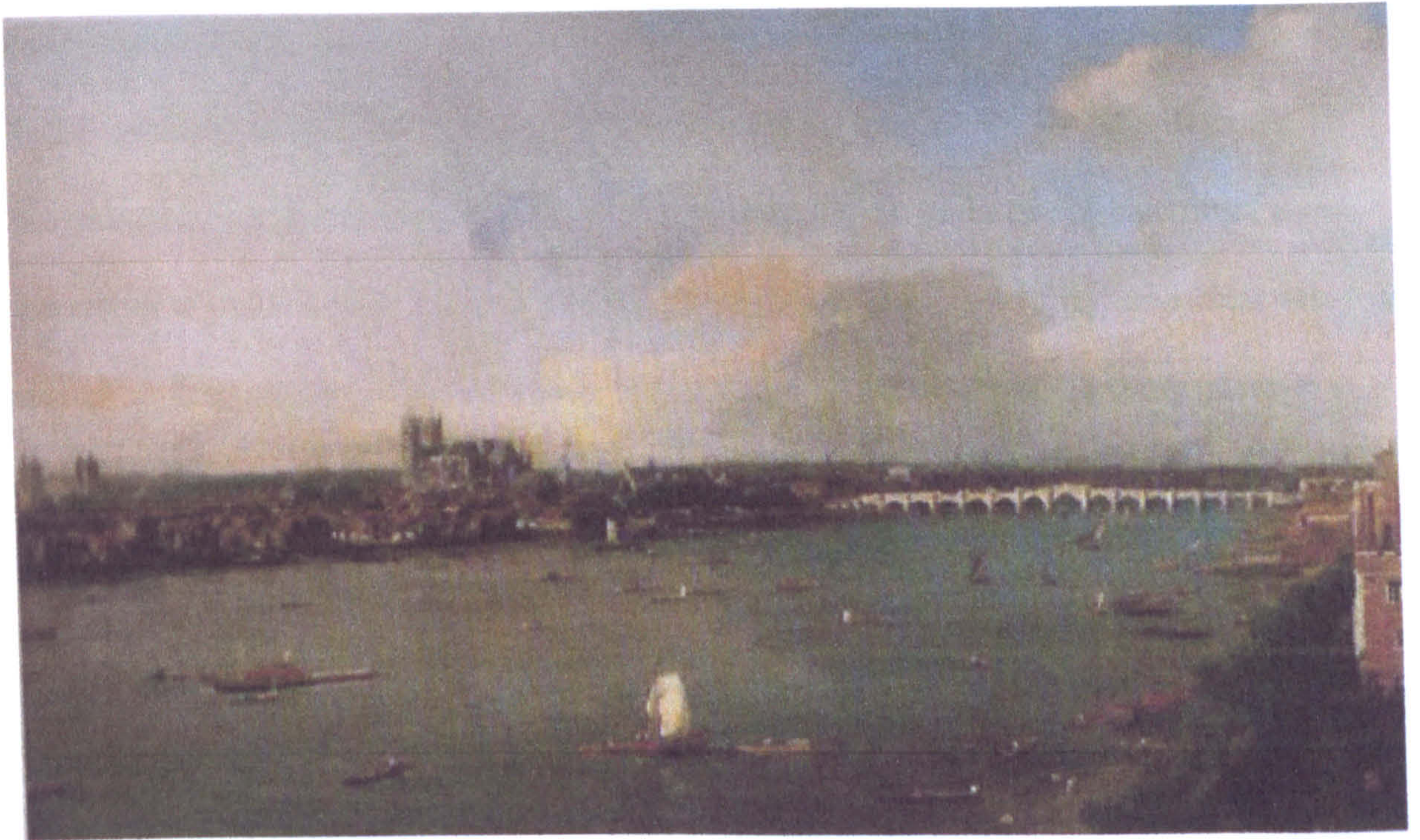


Fig 11: Canaletto, *London: The Thames and the City of Westminster from Lambeth* (1746?).<sup>19</sup>

Mechanical achievements were celebrated in art and seen as enhancing the landscape. Views of Coalbrookdale on the Severn were a rich source for many early nineteenth-century artists, including Turner. These paintings celebrated the energy of the blazing furnaces as sublime images, as discussed in the first chapter. As E. D. H. Johnson notes: 'The great engineers and industrial architects of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were esteemed not only as public benefactors, but also as true artists whose works enhanced the landscape.'<sup>20</sup> By the 1840s, however, the impact of industry on the landscape came to be seen in a more negative light, with the development of new industrial towns with their dark and squalid back-to-back housing, insanitary plumbing, and alienated and alienating way of life. Artists turned away from industrial miracles to ignore the factories and the towns which were created around them. As Klingender remarks: 'The alliance that had grown up in the later

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<sup>19</sup> *London: The Thames and the City of Westminster from Lambeth*, probably 1746, Lobkowitz Collections, Nelahozeves Castle, Czech Republic.

<sup>20</sup> E. D. H. Johnson 'Victorian Artists and the Urban Milieu', in *The Victorian City*, ed. by H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), II, p. 450.



eighteenth century between science and art had a common foundation of humanism. When political economy abandoned the humanist standpoint for the defence of property the link between science and art was broken.<sup>21</sup> In addition, by this time, many buyers were industrialists, part of a new upper-middle class, who preferred clear skies and clean lines. G. M. Young writes: 'From about 1840 it became commonplace that the patrons of modern art had changed and that the buyers no longer belonged to the noble and landed classes but were the now prospering manufacturers.'<sup>22</sup>

But while the painting of the London urban fog remained unacceptable to many British artists, foreign artists, like Whistler, Monet and Markino, realized the potential of urban fog and smoke and explored it fully in their paintings of London, discussed in the central sections of the chapter. The world of photography through the lens of yet another foreign artist, an American, Alvin Langdon Coburn, is discussed in a concluding section that looks at how this new artistic method sought to continue to explore the condition of London through its major signifier – fog.

### Constable

The English landscape artist John Constable (1776-1837) was mainly known for his Romantic representations of rural scenes. He did, however, paint London, and in so doing, applied principles of realism that forced him to acknowledge the atmospheric pollution evident in the city. Black smoke can be seen polluting the sky in one of his paintings exhibited by the Academy in 1832: *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge ('Whitehall Stairs, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1817')*. He had been working on this concept since the actual event and had produced several sketches, many in oils, over a long period. The work centres on the Prince Regent's embarkation from Whitehall Stairs for the official opening of John

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<sup>21</sup> Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution* ed. by Arthur Elton, Rev. edn. (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1968), p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> *Early Victorian England, 1830-1865*, ed. by G. M. Young, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), II, p. 115.



Rennie's Waterloo Bridge. The event took place on the second anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, with veterans from the battle lining up to meet the prince in the foreground. Constable's own conservative and royalist politics made this an ideal subject. But as Parris and Williams note, over the years in which he worked on the composition 'the landscape elements – water, trees and sky – gradually assumed greater importance, natural pageantry finally taking precedence over human pomp and ceremony.'<sup>23</sup>



Fig 12: Constable, *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge (Whitehall Stairs, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1817)*, 1832.<sup>24</sup>

Most critics have concentrated on the foreground of the painting and analysed how this evolved over the years from sketch to sketch until the final painting. In the background of the final version of the painting, to the right of the canvas, we see a number of industrial chimneys, on the east side of the bridge, belching out black smoke into a cloudy sky. These chimneys, with their smoke, provide an answering

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<sup>23</sup> Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams, *Constable* (London: Tate Gallery Publications. 1991), p. 206.

<sup>24</sup> John Constable, *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge (Whitehall Stairs, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1817)*, 1832, Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London.



balance to the buildings on the left which encourages the eyes to move through the centre of the painting. The magnificence of the middle area of sky, with shafts of sunlight filtering through the clouds, contrasts with the smaller area above the chimneys, where the smoke is beginning to blight the lower areas of sky. The area to the east of St Paul's is turning a muddy, black colour, and the clouds above are a dirty brown because of the pollution. The whole threatens to move westward and descend over St Paul's. Between St Paul's and the smoking chimneys on the right is a shot tower, constructed in 1826; the tower's appearance in this final version is an anachronism, as it certainly was not there in 1817.

Constable's earlier sketches show that he was not only experimenting with the angle and detail of the foreground activity, but was also working on the background atmosphere of the scene, especially the polluting chimneys to the right of St Paul's. The earliest sketches date from around 1819, although they are difficult to date precisely.<sup>25</sup> In one the only smoke represented is from the firing of the salute; it billows out, in rather too prominent a manner, at the centre of the sketch. Another sketch, probably done at about the same time, seems to indicate from its viewpoint that it was produced from the garden of Michael Angelo Taylor (1757-1834). Taylor, known as Chicken Taylor, because of his reference to himself as a 'mere chicken in the law', is now mainly remembered for his successful contribution to the abolition of the pillory and for the Metropolitan Pavements Act of 1817.<sup>26</sup> But he was also known to contemporaries as a vigorous campaigner against smoke pollution. In a prize essay on the prevention of smoke, written in 1856, Charles Wye Williams notes that Taylor's

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<sup>25</sup> Private Collection.

<sup>26</sup> Sketch for *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge*, c. 1819, Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Bill of 1821 appeared to be the first where smoke was officially recognised as a nuisance.<sup>27</sup>

If the date of Constable's sketch is correct at 1819, this was the same time that Taylor was moving for a Parliamentary Select Committee 'to inquire how far persons using steam engines and furnaces could erect them in a manner less prejudicial to public health and comfort.'<sup>28</sup> The committee reported that 'so far as they had hitherto proceeded they confidently hope that the nuisance, so universally and so justly complained of, may at least be considerably diminished if not altogether removed'. If Constable was using Taylor's garden to paint from, it is not inconceivable that they spoke, and Taylor may have drawn attention to the smoke problem. It is in this version that Constable introduces the smoking chimneys to the right of St Paul's Cathedral. Another addition to the final version is another house appearing to the left of the bow-fronted house.<sup>29</sup> This may well have been Michael Angelo Taylor's house.<sup>30</sup> Even if Constable did not actually talk to Taylor, there is no doubt that the smoke problem, around the time he began this project, was the talk of the neighbourhood. A resident of Privy Gardens, where Taylor lived, wrote a letter to *The Times* highlighting the problem which Constable refers to in his painting:

SIR – Your paper, with its usual promptness in the cause of the public, has not, I perceive, overlooked this most important subject. To the rapid increase of steam-engines within the bills of mortality, and to the infinite mischief resulting from them, *as now improperly worked*, the public attention ought to be roused without delay.

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Wye Williams, Assoc. Inst. C.E., *Prize Essay on the Prevention of the Smoke Nuisance* (London, 1856), p. 44. The bill passed on 28 May 1821 was 1 and 2 Geo. IV cap. XLI.

<sup>28</sup> Ashby and Anderson, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> See Canaletto's *London: Whitehall and the Privy Garden looking North*, probably 1751, His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry, KT, Bowhill and a pen and ink drawing of *London: Whitehall, the Privy Garden, Montagu House and the Thames from Richmond House*, 1747, whereabouts unknown, for a view of these houses from the Whitehall side.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion on the possible viewpoints which Constable used see Parris and Williams, pp 369-72.



We cannot but be astonished at the supineness of numbers, whose valuable properties are, beyond all conception, deteriorated by the encroachments of these dreadful nuisances of yesterday. Not a house is exempt from their pollution; and ere long our palaces in Westminster, and the humblest abodes in Whitechapel, will alike assume the blackness of the workshops in Birmingham and Sheffield.<sup>31</sup>

By whatever means, then, it is likely that Constable was alerted to the smoke before completing this sketch. Another sketch, worked on c.1820-5, like the first two, shows the scene without the shot tower.<sup>32</sup> This sketch shows chimneys smoking and the black smoke heading skywards in two single fluttering lines. There is no major black cloud of smoke as in the earlier and final versions. The sky looks heavy and overcast, but the skyline of the buildings is clear. Interestingly, a later sketch, c.1826-9, has completely lost the smoking chimneys to the right, but there is now a general haziness hanging over the buildings in the distance, obscuring the vision of the background scene.<sup>33</sup>

Constable worked over many years on his 'Waterloo' painting. He wrote of his difficulties in 1825: 'My Waterloo like a blister begins to stick closer & closer - & to disturb my nights - but I am in a feild [sic] that knows no flinching or affection or favor. "Go on", is the only [voice] heard - "aut Caesar aut nullus".'<sup>34</sup> All of these earlier sketches show Constable experimenting not only with the foreground, but also with the background and the atmosphere as part of a decision as to whether or not to draw attention to London's pollution problem. It is understandable that a painting Constable refers to as 'the great London' should portray one of London's most significant aspects - its smoke problem.<sup>35</sup> Apart from the possibility that Taylor may have influenced him, Constable and his family were also repeatedly concerned by London's air quality.

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<sup>31</sup> *The Times*, 30 November 1818, p. 3, col. a. The letter is signed of H.H. Privy-Gardens.

<sup>32</sup> The Fairhaven Collection, Anglesey Abey, The National Trust.

<sup>33</sup> Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

<sup>34</sup> John Constable to John Fisher, 19 November 1825 in *John Constable's Correspondence: VI: The Fishers*, ed. by R. B. Beckett 12 vols (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1968), XII, p. 207.

<sup>35</sup> J. C. to C. R. Leslie, 13 February 1832 in *John Constable's Correspondence: III The Correspondence with C. R. Leslie, R.A.*, ed. by R. B. Beckett, 12 vols (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1965), VIII, p. 62.



Constable wrote in November 1826 that he was continually 'flying from London to seek health in the country.'<sup>36</sup> John Constable told Joseph Farington, his mentor, that his father 'never could live in London' because he 'could perceive a difference in the *air* when he came to Ilford, seven miles from London, and it became more and more oppressive as he advanced towards the Metropolis'.<sup>37</sup>

This is one of the earliest oil paintings to refer to London's smoke problem, but is not related to an overall problem with the atmosphere and it certainly does not depict a London fog. Constable has rejected the clear, blue skies so typical of Canaletto's paintings, and those of his followers, to show a sky which is more realistic in terms both of the heaviness of the clouds and of the black smoke polluting the sky from the chimneys. It can be compared to Canaletto's *Westminster Bridge, London, With the Lord Mayor's Procession on the Thames*, which shows only a single swirl of black smoke rising up from a single chimney in the distance. The fact that Constable spent so much time trying to get the background right, even at one point removing the smoking chimney (perhaps out of nervousness as to how it would be received), and his complaints of the London smoke problem in his letters, do support the idea that Constable was trying to make a genuine ecological point – one that has been almost entirely missed by his contemporaries and later art critics.

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<sup>36</sup> J. C. to John Fisher, 28 November 1826 in *John Constable's Correspondence: VI The Fishers*, ed. by R. B. Beckett, 12 vols (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1968), XII, p. 228.

<sup>37</sup> R. B. Beckett, *John Constable's Correspondence: I: The family at East Bergholt 1807-1837*, 12 vols. (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society 1962), IV, p. 6.



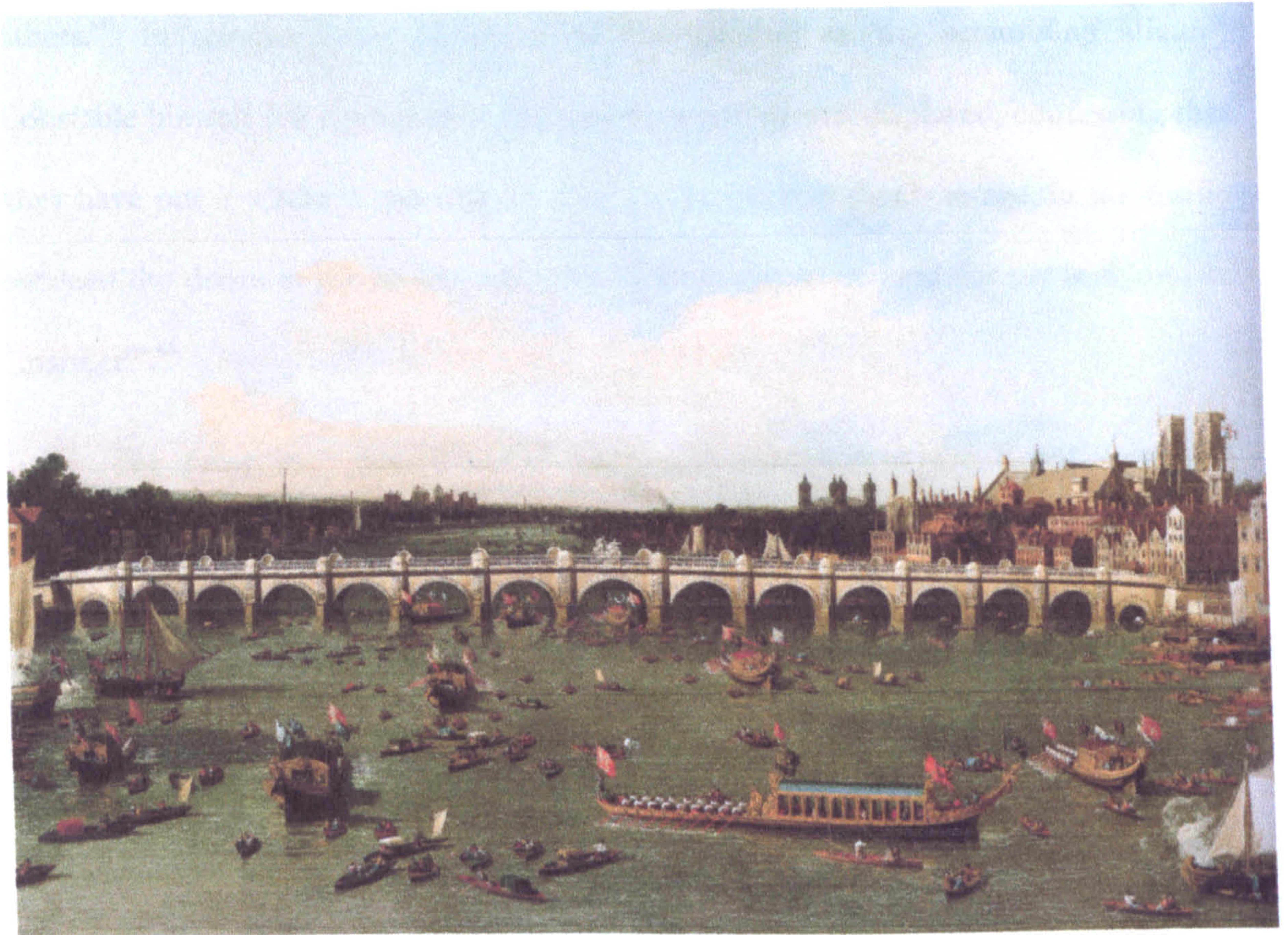


Fig 13: Canaletto, *Westminster Bridge from the North with the Lord Mayor's Procession*, 29 October 1746.<sup>38</sup>

Constable himself saw the painting as a failure, admitting to Leslie his restlessness about the picture that ‘it has not my redeeming voice, “the rural”’.<sup>39</sup> In the same letter he quotes a Thomas Stothard, an old friend, who remarked of it: “Very unfinished Sir – much to do – figures not made out Sir”.<sup>40</sup> His fear that this may be the general opinion caused him to regret having shown it, for, he wrote, ‘had you seen it, I am sure you would not have let me have sent it out of my house in so sad a condition – there I deserve my punishment. Besides that, to add to all the horrors of our annual show, it is also retributive, & I have my deserts for I played the devil with

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<sup>38</sup> *Westminster Bridge, London, from the North with the Lord Mayor's Procession*, 1746-7, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

<sup>39</sup> J.C. to C. R. Leslie, 24 April 1832 in *John Constable's Correspondence: III The correspondence with C. R. Leslie*, R.A., ed. by R. B. Beckett, 12 vols (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1965), VIII, p. 68.

<sup>40</sup> Beckett, *Correspondence with C. R. Leslie*, p. 67.



others.<sup>41</sup> In another letter he refers to his painting as ‘my scrambling affair’.<sup>42</sup> Constable himself felt aggrieved at the way his painting was displayed, confessing that ‘they have put it where it can only be seen to the greatest disadvantage, in the traffic between the doors in the new room – the light of the worst kind for my unfortunate “manner”’.<sup>43</sup>

The same year that *Whitehall Stairs* was exhibited at the Royal Academy, Constable also exhibited *Sir Richard Steele’s Cottage, Hampstead* a plein-air study of the city from Lower Hampstead. It shows a city in the middle distance wreathed in a smoky haze. Chimneys are vigorously pumping out smoke across the whole of the view of London, creating a smoky haze which is settling over the city. The dome of St Paul’s (a standard visual indicator of the effect of smoke) is almost cut in half by a stream of black smoke from a factory in front. This all contrasts with the rural Hampstead scene which is the foreground of the canvas. The sky is fittingly heavy and murky above the city. Eric Shanes refers to this painting as a ‘vivacious view of the city from lower Hampstead’.<sup>44</sup> For Shanes, Constable is highlighting the energy and dynamism of the city. But given Constable’s view of the smoke problem, he was more likely to have seen it in negative terms. These paintings suggest a change in Constable’s usual view of nature. As Eric Shanes points out in his book on the Royal Academy, Constable’s ‘simple unquestioning response to nature was no longer adequate in the increasingly lonely and hostile world in which he felt he was living.’<sup>45</sup> His beloved wife had died in 1828 and the agitation up to the passing of the Reform Bill of 1832 must have unsettled the conservative Constable.

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<sup>41</sup> Beckett, *Correspondence with C. R. Leslie*, p. 68.

<sup>42</sup> J.C. to Leslie, 27 April 1832, Beckett, *Correspondence with C. R. Leslie*, p. 69.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Shanes, *Impressionist London* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Eric Shanes, *The Genius of the Royal Academy* (London: Royal Academy, 1981), p. 63.





Fig 14: John Constable, *Sir Richard Steele's Cottage, Hampstead*, 1832.<sup>46</sup>

Neither Constable's *Whitehall Stairs* nor his plein-air study of *Sir Richard Steele's Cottage, Hampstead* received any critical attention or sold during the artist's lifetime. Eric Shanes feels the reason for the *Hampstead* painting not selling lies in its plein-air style, which he sees as a forerunner to Impressionism: "There was no cultural or economic incentive for artists to exhibit impressionistic works like these, and in any case, painters usually regarded them as no more than means to the end of producing set pieces for public display, which required a distillation of experience and a degree of finish that open-air studies simply could not supply."<sup>47</sup> *Whitehall Stairs* was sold after Constable's death in a lot with another painting at a knocked-down price of £4 14s 6d.

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<sup>46</sup> John Constable *Sir Richard Steele's Cottage, Hampstead*, 1832. Oil on canvas. Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia.

<sup>47</sup> Shanes, *Impressionist London*, p. 15.



Other views of his from Hampstead Heath tend to show the Heath with no overcast view of London. Indeed, Hampstead Heath became crucial to the health of Constable and his family, especially his wife, who was sick from tuberculosis for a number of years. The family rented a cottage in Hampstead in August 1819, and this retreat became an almost annual event until Constable moved his family there in 1827 for what he thought would be a permanent move. Abram Constable, John's brother, wrote to him in the year of the move on the subject of a house and land John was contemplating buying that 'it would be very comfortable to have such a house with a little land attach'd, to retreat into when you grow tired of the smoke & dirt of London.'<sup>48</sup>

## Turner

In 1832, while John Constable was putting the final touches to his painting at the Royal Academy, J. M. W. Turner was also hanging his latest work, *Helvoetsluys, the City of Utrecht, 64, going to sea*.<sup>49</sup> It was a sombre, grey work, 'with no positive colour in any part of it'. By contrast, Constable's 'Waterloo seemed as if painted with liquid gold and silver', according to C. R. Leslie, Constable's biographer. After coming in to view Constable's painting several times, Turner took his palette and, 'putting a round daub of red lead, somewhat bigger than a shilling, on his grey sea, went away without saying a word. The intensity of the red lead, made more vivid by the coolness of his picture' now made even the fresh lake and vermilion on Constable's painting look weak. Constable remarked bitterly: '[Turner] has been here [...] and fired a gun.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Abram Constable to J.C., 23 April 1835, *John Constable's Correspondence: I The family at East Bergholt 1807-1837*, ed. by R. B. Beckett, 12 vols (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1962), IV, p. 289.

<sup>49</sup> *Helvoetsluys, the City of Utrecht, 64, going to sea*, 1832, Tokyo, Fuji Museum.

<sup>50</sup> *John Constable's Correspondence: III The Correspondence with C. R. Leslie, R.A.*, 12 vols (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society: 1965), VIII, p. 69.



A day and a half later, during the last moments of varnishing days, Turner returned to his picture and glazed the scarlet daub he had put on his painting, shaping it into a buoy. This incident, and the close view which Turner took of Constable's painting, must have had some influence on a painting that Turner completed in 1835. *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge* is generally thought on stylistic grounds to have been started in 1830 but the close attention that Turner paid to Constable's painting indicates that Turner began the painting slightly later, as his response to Constable's London work.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the fact that they were reportedly keen rivals would have created a spur to Turner's interpretation of a subject which was in many ways much closer to his own London background rather than to that of the country-born Constable. Even though much of the same geographical area is represented, Turner's *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge*, as we shall see later, shows a strikingly different way of representing London and its smoke from Constable's.

This later oil painting was not the first example of Turner tackling contemporary London as a visual subject. This work derives from a pencil drawing that Turner also used as a basis for the earlier oil painting, *London From Greenwich Park*, exhibited in 1809. This was one of a series of about twenty exhibited paintings which focused on the river Thames and its tributaries. These paintings, undertaken between 1805 and 1810, mainly portrayed the river upstream to the west of London, above Richmond. All of them, apart from this one, convey an idealised landscape. It fits in with a style of landscape in which the rural in the foreground is contrasted to the urban in the background, similar to Constable's *Sir Richard Steele's Cottage, Hampstead* (1832), discussed earlier.

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<sup>51</sup> *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge*, c. 1830-5, The Tate Gallery, London; See Martin Butler and Evelyn Joll, *The Paintings of J. M. W. Turner: Text* (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), p.306. Butler and Joll acknowledge that although they date it from the early 1830s for stylistic reasons, 'it is just possible that this was projected as Turner's answer to Constable's picture'.





Fig 15: J. M. W. Turner, *London from Greenwich Park*, 1809.<sup>52</sup>

This 1809 depiction of contemporary London suggests to Ian Warrell ‘that Turner could not at this date reconcile the thrusting modernity of his native city with a sensibility wedded to the established aesthetics of an earlier age’.<sup>53</sup> In this painting, rain falls black as it dramatically penetrates the clouds. It shows a murkiness above London and also a low-lying misty haze on the horizon. It contrasts with the rural, peaceful scene of the foreground with deer resting and grazing on a sunlit hillside. The deer, pastoral symbols of the rural nature of the scene, create a sense of peace. But as Hemingway points out: ‘a foreground of parkland calm contrasts with the world of toil and business beyond, which [...] is covered by a layer of smoke made up of impastoed off-white paint, denser in effect than the more thinly painted grey areas which denote

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<sup>52</sup> *London from Greenwich Park*, exh. 1809 (London: Tate Britain Gallery), N00483.

<sup>53</sup> Katharine Lochnan, *TurnerWhistlerMonet* (London: Tate Gallery, 2004), p. 78.



buildings, and through which peak the spires of churches'.<sup>54</sup> Beams of sunlight contrast with the darker rain which falls on London. The light centred on London and highlighting it in the picture, makes London look as if it is disappearing in a sea of yellowish firmament. Couples running and sitting in the rural foreground only highlight further the gloomy explosion in the centre.

Turner wrote a verse, as he often did, to accompany this painting:

Where burthen'd Thames reflects the crowded sail,  
Commercial care and busy toil prevail,  
Whose murky veil, aspiring to the skies,  
Obscures thy beauty, and thy form denies,  
Save where thy spires pierce the doubtful air,  
As gleams of hope amidst a world of care.

The verse states explicitly what Turner only hints at in this oil painting. The textual metaphor of the 'gleams' which provide hope and the 'murky veil' which represents despair and care, is carried over as a visual metaphor of the painting. In the far distance we can see St Paul's Cathedral which is still a recognizable symbol of hope. Spires of other churches compete with the chimneys puffing out smoke and providing the veil mentioned in the poem. Turner fears that London's commercial world will expand too much and that the pollution which will accompany this expansion will raise itself to the skies and therefore hide the true beauty of the city, rendering it formless. Soligny, a French visitor to London, commented, only eight years after this painting:

All that can be seen of the city itself is the immense dome of its cathedral; the rest, apparently for leagues on every side, is one dead immoveable mass of thick dun-yellow smoke, not hanging over, but rising out of it, and more and

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<sup>54</sup> Andrew Hemingway, *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 239.



more dense as it approaches the earth; so that the thickest part must be that which the inhabitants breathe.<sup>55</sup>

This significance was not lost on later critics of the painting, and with the increasing smoke problem, it may even have grown by the middle of the century. *The Times* reported later in the century that it was ‘a view as one may see any gray afternoon from the park – a foreground of bank with Scotch firs and deer, and an outlook over the [Greenwich] hospital, along Limehouse Reach and the Pool, to where the mighty smoke cloud of London drifts up before a steady wind along the horizon’.<sup>56</sup> Once more, as in Dickens, St Paul’s, rising above the murk, serves as a metaphorical assertion of the power of the spirit over materialism and moral decay.

Alex Potts suggests that ‘if the prospect is to acquire the full complexity of meaning suggested by the poem, the effect of whiteness at the centre of the picture needs to be endowed with a deeply contradictory significance – seen on the one hand as a blinding fog that submerges and engulfs the city, and on the other as a kind of divine light or transcendent realm in which the lofty spires and domes are afloat.’<sup>57</sup> But the lofty spires clearly rise above the murkiness of the city to act ‘as gleams of hope amidst a world of care’; they are spatially separate from the white area, and do not seem to float on it at all. Ten years later Shelley was writing of London in much the same terms in his *Peter Bell the Third*:

Hell is a city much like London –

A populous and smoky city; [...]

All are damned – they breathe an air,

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<sup>55</sup> Victoire, Count de Soligny [pseud], *Letters on England*, trans. from the original mss. by P. G. Patmore, 2 vols (London: H. Colburn and Co., 1823), I, p. 40. Letter was actually written in October 1817.

<sup>56</sup> *The Times*, 10 November 1856, p. 7, col. e.

<sup>57</sup> Alex Potts, ‘Picturing the Modern-Metropolis: Images of London in the Nineteenth Century’, *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians*, 26 (1988), 28-56 (p. 31).



Thick, infected, joy-dispelling.<sup>58</sup>

Shelley's writings reveal the Romantics' distrust of the city. For him, however, it was not religion that the city destroyed, but the secular spirit of joy. Commerce was undermining human happiness; and he had no faith in the spires and domes of religion to remedy the situation.

Eric Shanes highlights four Turner watercolours which appear to have been painted in the 1820s.<sup>59</sup> He argues convincingly that these watercolours, all commissioned to be engraved, were originally intended as part of a series of engravings for a possible part-work on London. The popularity of works on London at this time is supported by the large number of engraved part-works on the capital city by various artists which appeared in this period – over thirty in this decade alone. The first of Turner's watercolours, *Old London Bridge and Vicinity*, is signed and dated 1824. It depicts the view across the Pool of London with the old London Bridge (demolished in 1830) as its central focal point extending across the centre of the drawing.

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<sup>58</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Peter Bell: The 1819 Texts*, ed. by Carlo M. Bajetta (Italy: Mursia, 2003), pp. 228, 236.

<sup>59</sup> Eric Shanes, 'Turner's "Unknown" London Series', *Turner Studies: His Art and Epoch (1775-1851)*, 1 (1981), pp. 36-41.





Fig 16: J. M. W. Turner, *Old London Bridge and Vicinity*, 1824.<sup>60</sup>

Shanes notes the depiction of St Olave's Church on the left and the shot tower, constructed in the 1780s and demolished in the mid-nineteenth century. The foreground is dominated by the clutter of ship masts and boats loading up to make the journey on the river. In the bottom central part of the drawing is a small boat containing two ladies (one holding the other rather nervously); the lighterman is about to make the perilous journey across the river, or perhaps they have just arrived from the other side of the river. Their danger amongst so many larger boats is self-evident. Can this not also be seen as a visual metaphor of the way individuals were beginning to feel lost and overlooked within the confines of such a large city? Many commentators remarked on the sense of isolation felt within the growing metropolis: 'But London is already overgrown. Amidst such a mass of human beings, individuals are being overlooked and lost.'<sup>61</sup> In the background, the clouds seem to merge with thick smoke or vapour rising from the city, darkening the overall scene. Shanes also notes in

<sup>60</sup> J. M. W. Turner, *Old London Bridge and Vicinity* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1824).

<sup>61</sup> 'Mourn, Ancient Caledonia!', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 27 (April 1830), 634-639 (p. 635).



another sketch from this series, *The Tower of London* 'of around 1825, the fortress [...] seen across a Pool of London filled with steamers, barges, lighters, a naval hulk, and the collier brigs that supplied the coal to power London's industries, heat its buildings, and – ultimately – pollute its atmosphere'.<sup>62</sup>

Turner's *View of London from Greenwich*, dated approximately 1825, depicts the view from Greenwich Park across to London and the area below the Pool of London. Shanes again notes the London buildings depicted: the Royal Navy Hospital in Greenwich on the right-hand side of the watercolour and St Paul's in the distance 'above a seemingly infinite number of masts.'<sup>63</sup> The present state of London as shown in the painting is one of clutter. The river is dominated in the further perspective by the masts of sailing ships, but closer to the viewer are not only sailing ships, but paddle steamers with thin lines of black smoke streaming from their funnels. These are being scrutinised by a seemingly elderly gentleman through a telescope, in parallel to another gentleman scrutinising the two maps of London holding a pair of spectacles in his hand, as if in disbelief or astonishment. Both telescope and glasses emphasise the act of visual scrutiny, and in both instances the object is London – the actual city or the city depicted on the maps. London in the distance is partially hidden by its murky atmosphere. Even St Paul's Cathedral, marked out by reference to it on the chart lying on the ground, is disappearing behind a veil of smoke. A black cloud rests ominously over London. A man, with his back to the view, holds his hands up, possibly in horror, or measuring out the increasing size of the capital from his far perspective.

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<sup>62</sup> Shanes, *Impressionist London*, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Shanes, 'Turner's "Unknown" London', p. 38.





Fig 17: J. M. W. Turner, *View of London from Greenwich*, c. 1825.<sup>64</sup>

Turner's watercolour presents a London overwhelmed by its murky atmosphere and behind the gloom, almost dissolved within the fog, are the steamers which are partly the cause of the murk and are also a physical sign of London's commercial expansion. Greenwich Hospital, which in the 1809 painting nestled in the centre of the painting, surrounded by the green rural landscape of trees and deer, is in this later painting moved to the right and appears the last bastion of rural peace as the steamers go past and London in the distance threatens to move closer.

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<sup>64</sup> J. M. W. Turner, *View of London from Greenwich* (USA: private collection, c.1825). watercolour on paper.





Fig 18: J. M. W. Turner, *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge*, 1835.<sup>65</sup>

Turner's treatment of London's smoke/fog problem in his *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge* is very different from Constable's in his *Whitehall Stairs 1817*. Turner's painting dispenses with the historical aspect which provides the main thrust of Constable's painting of the same scene. One wonders if the Londoner, Turner, is showing the country-born Constable what London is really like. A writer to the *The Times* complained of this very situation as early as 1818: 'Let any person view from one of our bridges, a part only of the chimnies already erected, and daily rising around him; and then, if he can, let him calculate the ruinous havoc committed by their sooty exhalations, on our furniture, our buildings, and our health.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> J. M. W. Turner, *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge* (London: Tate Gallery, c. 1825), NO 1992.

<sup>66</sup> *The Times*, 30 November 1818, p. 3, col. a.



Turner is advertising his claim to familiarity with this scene by putting smoke and atmospheric pollution at its centre.<sup>67</sup>

Constable's perspective is from further upstream but Turner's painting still covers much of the same scene. The bridge is again the central element, but here it is partially obscured by, or appears in spite of, the steam and smoke which rises from both sides of the river. The 1826 shot tower appears legitimately in this painting, but it is barely visible through the smoke of the various industries on the Lambeth side. On the other side, a steamer is either docking or preparing to leave – its black cloud of smoke thrusting upwards into the sky. The smoke from the steamer possesses an energy which is mirrored by the smoke which is swirling above Lambeth. William Rodner sees this painting as 'a potent essay on the energy and complexity of modern, polluted urbanism'.<sup>68</sup> Smoke represents a flourishing economy which brings employment and food on tables; but also the dirt and pollution associated with its fumes. All seems to be tainted by a sulphurous yellow, even the black plumes of smoke from the two funnels of the steamer have yellow streaks in them to give them a greater sense of movement and vitality. The swirling foggy vapours on both sides of the river meet in an arc, thus echoing the arches of the bridge, as well as symbolising the connection between the city's technology of chimney stacks from factories and the

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<sup>67</sup> In his book *Turner and the Scientists*, James Hamilton suggests that this painting may be 'a good-humoured response on Turner's part to his friend George Jones's painting' *The Royal Procession at the Opening of London Bridge, 1831* (exh. 1832). He cites as evidence the challenge they made to each other the same year to paint *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace*. He admits that 'only one subject is recorded in Jones's account of the jest,' but speculates that 'they may have competed again'. The other evidence he cites is that the big news in 1832 was not Waterloo Bridge, but the rebuilt London Bridge, and Turner's painting is of the procession for the opening of this bridge. For Hamilton, Turner's painting shows 'the reality of the river in the early 1830s with smoke from steamboats and from firing cannons 'kept up without intermission along the whole line of the river' on this celebration day. This seems to imply that Turner is painting a representation of the river which is only true of one day. A day of celebration would necessarily mean more traffic and certainly firing cannons would not be an everyday reality. Hamilton confines the painting to the reality of a single day, whereas the evidence seems to point to Turner wanting to upstage Constable by showing the reality of the river as it then was every day. Hamilton's argument, ultimately, is based on speculation. James Hamilton, *Turner and the Scientists* (London: Tate Gallery, 1998), p. 105.

<sup>68</sup> William S. Rodner, *J. M. W. Turner: Romantic Painter of the Industrial Revolution* (California: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 122-3.



funnels of the steam boats, and by implication, the message that the smoke will not stay still, but will move to connect itself over all the city.

Although the visible detritus of human activity is very much a part of the painting, most human activity is completely invisible beneath the dense smoke-fog. On the bottom right of the painting, men row into view. This is the only physical activity we actually see, and one that was increasingly being seen as part of the past, as steamships took up more river space, and bridges, like the one portrayed, provided an easier means of crossing the river than rowing boats. Any other human activity is hidden, submerged beneath the awesome and smoke-producing power of the new technology. In his short biography of Turner, Peter Ackroyd describes what he sees as an 'an apt description of Turner's painterly method [...] This emergence of form out of chaos'.<sup>69</sup> But in Turner's *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge*, it would be more apt to reverse this and see form being reduced to chaos. This 1835 painting reflects much more the mood of Shelley's 1819 poem, *Peter Bell the Third*. The air does seem thick and with its yellowy, black texture, also 'infected'. The sense of gloom inspires a despondent, even 'joy-dispelling' mood. The power and energy of Turner's London painting does make Constable's *Whitehall Stairs* appear rather flat by comparison. It is, as if to paraphrase Constable's earlier exclamation, Turner has fired a second gun, but this time much louder than the first.

Turner never bothered to finish his painting of *Waterloo Bridge*, presumably because he could see that there would be no ready market for it. The lack of an eager market for these paintings may lie principally in their depiction of the negative impact which technological advances like the river steamers and the new industries had on the environment, and the unwillingness of the new buyers of art, the new industrialists, to

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *J. M. W. Turner* (London: Random House, 2006), p. 53.



see their impact in such a negative way. In the early nineteenth century, it was far preferable to see industry portrayed in art as vigorous, dynamic and energetic, filled with huge glowing furnaces as the earlier pictures of Coalbrookdale had done, or to take refuge in representations of rural scenes, than to see the impact of black smoke on the atmosphere.

Turner's painting looked forward to Impressionism, a style which sought to represent not the objective reality of a scene but the subjective impression it made on the artist's eye. Jules Castagnary wrote in 1874 of 'the new term *impressionists*. They are *impressionists* in the sense that they render not the landscape, but the sensation produced by the landscape.'<sup>70</sup> Fog obscured and distorted, and so was an obvious source of interest. Luke Howard made this point when he described a fog on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> November 1828:

On the Thames, as on land, the tendency which fog has to enlarge distant objects, was strikingly illustrated; the smallest vessels on their approach seemed magnified to thrice their usual dimensions. St. Paul's had a prodigious effect through the mist, though neither that nor the monument were visible above the height of the houses. This optical illusion is said to arise from the fog diminishing the brightness of objects, and consequently suggesting a greater distance; since while the visual angle remains the same, the greater the distance the greater the [real] magnitude.<sup>71</sup>

Turner's painting of Waterloo Bridge captures both the varying colours and the sense of movement within the fog, and the distortion of form and perspective noted by Howard. For Turner, too, London fog is 'lugubrious and *Dantesque*'.<sup>72</sup> Was Turner, the consummate Londoner, beginning to despair of London's future?

Turner's influence was later acknowledged by the scientific community. The scientists G. & P. D. Hartwig noted that

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<sup>70</sup> Cited in Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> Howard, III, p. 303.

<sup>72</sup> Pecchio, p. 3.



a prospect veiled by a thin fog has its peculiar charms, as it opens a wide field to the imagination, and allows our fancy to picture all sorts of interesting scenes beyond the actual reach of vision. Some of Turner's best paintings represent misty seas with distant masts and sails dimly looming through the vapours, for the great artist well knew that objects seen through an indistinct haze are often more picturesque than when exposed to the full glare of daylight.<sup>73</sup>

It was not necessary to be a painter to see the artistic potential of a foggy day in London. The scientific point of view thus supported the Romantic idea of imagination taking up where vision has been blocked.<sup>74</sup>

In *Modern Painters IV* (1843), John Ruskin discusses the nature of clarity in great art and suggests that modern art is 'distinguished from old art eminently by indistinctness, and by its idle omissions of details for the sake of general effect'.<sup>75</sup> According to Ruskin 'every great man was definite until the seventeenth century. John Bellini, Leonardo, Angelico, Dürer, Perugino, Raphael, —all of them hated fog, and repudiated indignantly all manner of concealment.'<sup>76</sup> He divides contemporary landscape artists into two groups, one labelled those who are 'definers' and the others 'on the side of the clouds'.<sup>77</sup> The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is singled out as painters who 'to their utmost, dwell in an element of light and declaration, to antagonism to all mist and deception'.<sup>78</sup>

However, Ruskin defended Turner's 'universal indistinctness':

An English painter justifiably loves fog, because he is born in a foggy country; as an Italian painter justifiably loves clearness, because he is born in a comparatively clear country. I have heard a traveller familiar with the East

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<sup>73</sup> G. M. Hartwig and P. D. Hartwig, *The Aerial World: A Popular Account of the Phenomena and Life of the Atmosphere* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1874), p. 141.

<sup>74</sup> See Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: Harper Press, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> Cook and Wedderburn, *John Ruskin*, vol. vi, p. 73.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 74.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 74.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 75.



complain of the effect in a picture of Copley Fielding's, that "it was such very bad weather". [...] Mist of some sort, or mirage, or confusion of light, or of cloud, are the general facts; the distance may vary in different climates at which the effects of mist begin, but they are always present; and therefore, in all probability it is meant that we should enjoy them.<sup>79</sup>

As we shall see, Ruskin's enlistment of national background and character was in fact the exact opposite of the real attitudes of most English and foreign painters to clarity and suffusion of light. However, Ruskin's defence of fog and indistinctness in art must be understood generally in the context of natural mists and fogs generated within the countryside:

Our whole happiness and power of energetic action depend upon our being able to breathe and live in the cloud; content to see it opening here and there; rejoicing to catch, through the thinnest films of it, glimpses of stable and substantial things; but yet perceiving a nobleness even in the concealment, and rejoicing that the kindly veil is spread where the untempered light might have scorched us, or the infinite clearness wearied.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, he used London fog, in his writings, as an example of the way colours could transfigure distances, noting that 'yellow is a retiring colour, because when objects are seen through a London fog, the farther off they are the yellower they look'.<sup>81</sup>

Ruskin's appreciation of Turner is represented by two chapters in his book *Modern Painters IV* on 'Turnerian Mystery'. He felt he had to confront the question of the indistinctness of Turner's work.

Perhaps also, of all modern artists, Turner is the one to whom most people would first look as the great representative of this nineteenth-century cloudiness, and "ingenious speaking concerning smoke"; every one of his compositions being evidently dictated by a delight in seeing only part of things rather than the whole, and in casting clouds and mist around them rather than unveiling them.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, vi, pp. 88-9. Copley Fielding (1787-1855) was an English watercolourist renowned for his landscapes using the scenery of Wales and the Lake District, although later in life, he turned to seascapes.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, vi, p. 89.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, xv, p. 158.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, vi, p. 73.



Ruskin cites Dr. Waagen, director of the Royal Gallery at Berlin, who remarked of Turner's treatment of the burning of the Houses of Parliament that the artist 'had here succeeded in combining "a crude painted medley, with a general foggy appearance."'”<sup>83</sup> Ruskin refrains from quoting the first part of the extract, in which Waagen complained that he 'found such a looseness of treatment, such a total want of truth, as I had never before met with'.<sup>84</sup> Ruskin dealt with such criticism by praising Turner's skill rather than his choice of subject, claiming that 'in this matter of mere *execution*, all the great painters are with him, though at first he seems to differ from them, on account of that choice of foggy subject'.<sup>85</sup>

Ruskin's defence of lack of clarity in art rested first on the assertion that mists and clouds were a part of the natural landscape. But it was also, secondly, an aspect of perception: 'WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY.'<sup>86</sup> The human eye found it impossible to see everything in full detail: 'What we call seeing a thing clearly, is only seeing enough of it to *make out what it is*'.<sup>87</sup> After various examples he advises that the would-be artist should try to 'draw a bank of grass, with all its blades; or a bush, with all its leaves; and you will soon begin to understand under what a universal law of obscurity we live, and perceive that all *distinct* drawing must be *bad* drawing, and that nothing can be right, till it is unintelligible'.<sup>88</sup> Ruskin admits that this seemingly contradicts his championing of the Pre-Raphaelites; but their detail and representation of the natural world did not deny that the paintings 'are full of mystery, and suggest

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, vi, p. 88.

<sup>84</sup> Gustav Friedrich Waagen, *Works of Art and Artists in England*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1838), II, p. 152.

<sup>85</sup> Cook and Wedderburn, *Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vi, p. 81.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 75.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 76.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 79.



more than you can see'.<sup>89</sup> In the end the art critic has to admit: 'No human skill can get the absolute truth in this matter; but a drawing by Turner of a large scene, and by Holman Hunt of a small one, are as close to truth as human eyes and hands can reach.'<sup>90</sup> According to Ruskin, all the great painters displayed

a peculiar melting and mystery about the pencilling, [...] a most subtle confusion of colours and forms, [...] and if we find, on examining any picture closely, that it is all clearly to be made out, it cannot be, as painting, first-rate. There is no exception to this rule. EXCELLENCE OF THE HIGHEST KIND, WITHOUT OBSCURITY, CANNOT EXIST.<sup>91</sup>

Obscurity was justifiable, however, above all in representations of nature.

Ruskin's dislike of London's atmosphere was combined with his dislike of London generally. He felt it had a negative influence on artists, a feeling that he revealed in the appendix to *The Art of England*: 'All great art, in the great times of art, is *provincial*, showing its energy in the capital, but educated, and chiefly productive, in its own country town [...] There is no London or Edinburgh style, but there is a Kentish and Northumbrian one.'<sup>92</sup> This 'tendency to centralization', as Ruskin terms it, was 'pernicious in totally unprecedented degree, because the capitals of Europe are all of monstrous and degraded architecture'.<sup>93</sup> He especially highlights England's capital city: 'think what ruin it is for men of any sensitive faculty to live in such a city as London is now!'<sup>94</sup> He then continues to question the influence this might have on artists:

Without in the least recognising the sources of these evils, the entire body of English artists, through the space now of some fifteen years, (quite enough to paralyze, in the young ones, what in their nature was most sensitive,) have been thus afflicted by the deterioration of climate [...] But the deteriorations

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, pp. 79-80.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 80.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 81.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, xxxiii, p. 397.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, xxxiii, p. 397.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, xxxiii, p. 398.



of noble subject induced by the progress of manufactures and engineering are, though also without their knowledge, deadlier still to them [...] But in the plurality of cases the metropolitan artist passively allows himself to be metropolized, and contents his pride with the display of his skill in recommending things ignoble. One of quite the best, and most admired, pieces of painting in the same Old Water-Colour Exhibition was Mr. Marshall's fog effect over the Westminster cab-stand.<sup>95</sup>

Yet Ruskin clearly considered this an ignoble subject. This view, as we shall see, was shared by many English artists of the day.

## English Artists

Many English artists, especially those based in London, felt the same about the murky atmosphere as Ruskin did. To them it was a nuisance which affected the light and prevented them from painting. In October 1880, the artist Samuel Luke Fildes (1844-1927) complained:

We have endured and still endure the most awfully dark and hopeless winter that has ever been known in London, consequently the civilized globe. We had uninterrupted heavy fog for 5 consecutive days last week [...] it is too dark for painting and so dense that we have had to burn gas to get our meals by [...] Nobody is doing any work except a few at Hampstead.<sup>96</sup>

Some artists tried to get around the problem by having winter studios built. Made of glass, they would allow more light to come through. Others, who could afford to do so, ended up going abroad to paint. Fildes himself reluctantly came to this conclusion, writing: 'I am thinking most seriously of going to Venice for a few months – I may be able to do *something* there if only Pot-boilers for *I cannot hope to do anything more in a strange place*.'<sup>97</sup> David Roberts, another well-known artist and fellow of the Royal Academy, also acknowledged the problem in 1862: 'I break new ground with my "London from

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, xxxiii, pp. 404-6.

<sup>96</sup> Samuel Luke Fildes, Papers, National Art Library, Fildes to Woods, 1 January 1880.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, Fildes to Woods, 1 January 1880.



the Thames"; but I have still two weeks, and if the weather keeps from fog I shall be all right and ready."<sup>98</sup> This was written in March, not a month commonly associated with fogs. Although, in 1899 the *Westminster Gazette* remarked that 'a peasoup fog in March is going a little too far in the way of meteorological jokes'.<sup>99</sup>

Another view of London was painted in 1870 by William Lionel Wyllie (1851-1931) who was, like J. M. W. Turner, a Londoner, born in Albany Street. His father was a painter, as were his brother and half-brother. His various trips to Normandy as a child encouraged him in his love of sailing and the sea. As a child he would frequently sail up and down the Thames to Marlow and Chiswick.<sup>100</sup> Like Turner, he would often sit in a small boat in order to paint a scene. In later life, he became renowned for his naval scenes, and moved to Portsmouth in 1907. At the earlier stage of his career, in the 1870s, he worked as an illustrator for the *Graphic*. Not surprisingly, Wyllie was a great admirer of Turner. He had won the Turner gold medal when he was eighteen years old for *Dawn after a Storm* (1869), and he wrote a biography of Turner in 1905. Many of his paintings show Turner's influence.

*London from the Monument* (1870) was exhibited at the Royal Academy, even being 'honoured with a position on the line'.<sup>101</sup> It depicts London, as the title suggests, from the top of one of its tallest structures at the time. Cannon Street railway bridge offers a central point to the canvas, dividing it into the foreground industrial buildings of the south side and the railway shed of the station; beyond the bridge lies London almost submerged by a yellow foggy vapour, obviously caused by the numerous

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<sup>98</sup> James Ballantine, *The Life of David Roberts, R. A., compiled from his journals and other sources* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1866), p. 216. This is probably 'St Paul's from Blackfriars' discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>99</sup> *Westminster Gazette* 15 March 1899, p. 2, col. 3. The article quotes Leighton's speech at a dinner given by the Lord Mayor of London.

<sup>100</sup> M. A. Wyllie, *We were One: A Life of W. L. Wyllie* (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1935), p. 12.

<sup>101</sup> H. V. Barnett, 'By River and Sea', *Magazine of Art*, 7 (1883-4), p. 309.



smoking chimneys of the houses and factories. London is almost dissolving under a 'Turneresque' yellowy vapour, and the houses of Parliament in the distance have

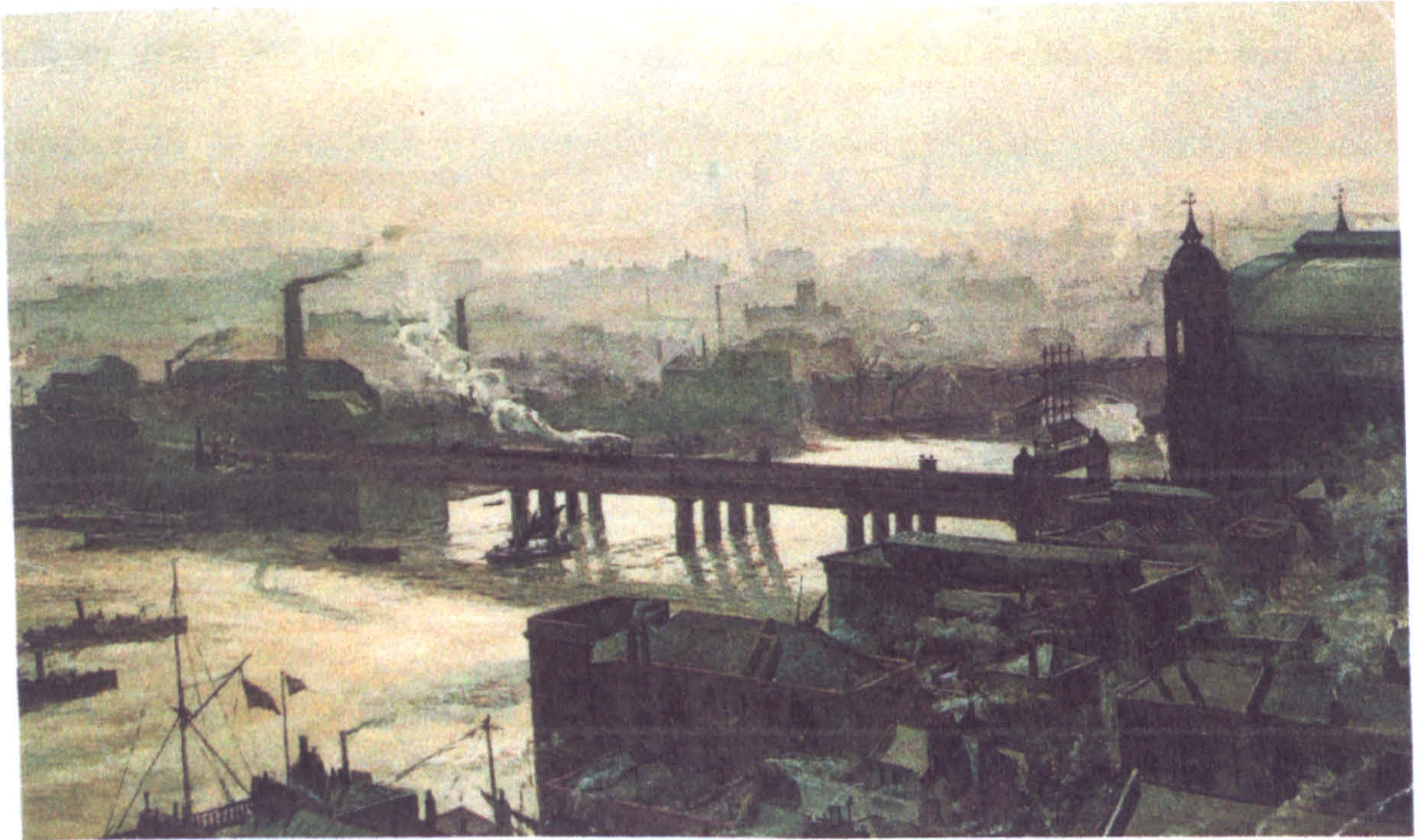


Fig 19: W. L. Wyllie, *London from the Monument*, 1870.<sup>102</sup>

become indistinct shadowy shapes. John House describes this in the following terms: 'A fascinating fusion of the topographical with the atmospheric [...] characterising London by the successive silhouettes of its buildings, receding into the distance, viewed against the light through the city's distinctive smoky haze.'<sup>103</sup>

Yet, even though it was shown at the Royal Academy, *London from the Monument* failed to sell. The conservative art journal of the day reviewed the exhibition of that year. After commenting on a sea scene by H. Moore, the article goes on:

Between fog and smoke the difference is not vast; and so we may cross the room and pass from the fog of the sea to the smoke of the metropolis, as delineated with ample justice by W. L. WYLLIE, in his picture of 'London from the Monument' (14). The city seems as a vast pandemonium. The picture is undoubtedly clever, and yet disagreeable. As its companion, hangs MR.

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<sup>102</sup> W. L. Wyllie, *London from the Monument*, 1870, Collection of Lord Lloyd Webber.

<sup>103</sup> House, p. 23-27.



MACCALLUM'S 'London Bridge and St Paul's (21) wherein most to be admired is the drawing of the river-craft.'<sup>104</sup>

For this critic, Wyllie's picture summoned up London in the same terms as Milton's hell, an image endorsed frequently in the literature of the period, but it was too 'disagreeable' to be considered art on the accepted precepts of the day. Worse was to follow when a picture dealer known as 'little T' came into the Wyllie's bedroom, where the painting, which had not sold at the 1870 exhibition, was hung. Mrs Wyllie takes up the story: 'He looked at the picture for some time and said, 'What d'ye want for it?' Bill named his price. T. said, 'I'll tell you what I value it at.' He took out his penknife, opened it, reached over me, and stuck the blade right into the middle of the canvas.'<sup>105</sup>

As late as 1870, contemporary views of London were still not wholly accepted by the more conservative elements of the art world. It was not only art critics who found pictures of contemporary London, with its foggy, smoky atmosphere difficult to accept. An art critic wrote of Andrew MacCallum: 'Not one of his pictures ever affects us when we stand before it, or haunts us when we have left it [...] this is the special weakness of our scientifically accurate art.'<sup>106</sup> A modern-day critic bracketed Wyllie with MacCallum by commenting that although 'W.L.'s surroundings deeply influenced his subject material' his work differed from Turner's in 'that his was the work of a pictorialist and did not display any of the mystery or symbolism evident in the work of Turner. To many, the signature W. L. Wyllie is a proof stamp that an artwork is of

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<sup>104</sup> *Art Journal* (1870), p. 162. Andrew MacCallum (1821-1902) was mainly noted for his picturesque landscapes, examples being *Glade in Sherwood Forest* and *Charlemagne Oak-Forest of Fontainebleau*. Also see *Art Journal* (1866), p. 218. Unfortunately I have been unable to find *London Bridge and St Paul's*.

<sup>105</sup> Wyllie, p. 45.

<sup>106</sup> Cited in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xxxv, 88. Under Andrew MacCallum which quotes from P. G. Hamerton, *English Painters of the Present Day*, 1871, p. 61.



impeccable technical accuracy.’<sup>107</sup> Yet it was a special kind of accuracy that painted London under clear skies.

A painting of *The Embankment* (1874) by John O’Connor (1830-1889) reveals the acceptable view of London in art at this time. It still very much reflects the style of Canaletto, O’Connor even positioned himself on the terrace of Somerset House to echo Canaletto’s painting of the same view some 130 years before. The painting is a celebration of the newly completed Embankment. Its clean lines and uncluttered road show a London which is relatively peaceful, with trees echoing the line of the Thames. This is a city in control of its natural world. St Paul’s is clearly seen in the distance standing out against the smoke of the surrounding chimneys, although partially obscured by it. But it is difficult to ignore the smoke of the factory chimneys and the steam trains and boats in the background. The foreground of clean lines is very much in contrast to the background of cluttered factory buildings, gasometers and industrial chimneys. The heavy clouds behind echo the heavy vibrancy of the scene directly below. O’Connor is indicating through the smoke and clutter of the background that there is more to do in terms of improving and cleaning up the centre of the capital. There is no doubt that the scene in the foreground with a relaxed mother and her children, with the symbol of Britain’s military power through to the marching grenadier guards, is slightly unsettled by the smoke filling the air in the background heading towards an unknown land. Lynda Nead comments on this painting that it is ‘a new vision of London; drawn from the discourses of the 1860s, but belonging more properly to the later decades of the nineteenth century. It is a vision of London not as metropolis but as capital of an empire.’<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Nigel Grundy, *W. L. Wyllie: The Portsmouth Years* (Portsmouth: City of Portsmouth publication, Portsmouth Paper Number 68, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-century London* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 56.





Fig 20: John O'Connor, *The Embankment*, 1874<sup>109</sup>

Another English artist, and President of the Royal Academy, Frederick Leighton (1830-96) felt so incensed about the smoke problem that he made a public speech at the Lord Mayor's dinner on the subject of London fog. For him the fog destroyed, not as in Dickens's image in *Our Mutual Friend* through strangulation, but by the 'quenching' of light and the 'blotting out of colour'. The first of these two images reflected the moistness of fog, the second denoted its absorbent quality:

[...] we are further and especially attacked and paralysed in the heart and centre of our intellectual activity; for we live by the suggestive imitation and presentment of that which is revealed to us by light, – and by light alone, – and made lovely by its splendour. To us, therefore, the quenching of light, the blotting out of colour, is an approach to the drying up of the very life springs from which we are fed and set in motion [...] many a brother painter must regret with me the interminable hours, days and weeks of enforced idleness spent in the continuous contemplation of the ubiquitous yellow fog, depressing the spirits all the more.<sup>110</sup>

Most British artists, perhaps, were so used to the restrictions created by the London fogs they could not see them as potential material for their own paintings. Leighton's

<sup>109</sup> John O'Connor, *The Embankment* (London: Museum of London, 1874), 000803.

<sup>110</sup> Frederick Leighton, 'An Artist's view of the smoke question', *The Builder* (25 March 1882), 42, p. 367.



insistence, in 1882, on the importance of light as a means of revealing a motif's splendour cut into the heart of debates around this time which was being opened up by the advent of Impressionism. But British artists could scarcely be fascinated by a phenomenon that they almost wholly saw as an appalling nuisance.

English artists generally preferred narrative, straightforward landscape or genre types of painting and were not interested in, or even hostile to, the impressionistic style, as an article of the late 1880s by the artist and critic, W. P. Frith (1819-1909) highlights:

Born and bred in France, what is called *Impressionism* has tainted the art of this country. [...] Coeval with this school, and in many respects similar to it, is one in which "nocturnes" and "symphonies" flourish, in which the examples of the great masters seem to be set aside and probably despised. [...] Let him throw nocturnes and symphonies to the winds, and let him also assure himself that gifts of imagination and even a poetic nature cannot thoroughly display themselves in art without the possessor having the means at his fingers' ends.<sup>111</sup>

Frith adds his own negative criticism of the importance of imagination in art – to seeing beyond what can be clearly seen – especially when, in his view, impressionist painters clearly lacked a practical talent.

An article written in 1888 highlighted how difficult London was to paint:

Whether London is more possible for treatment by the art of colour or that of line may be a question; but in either case it is certain that London is only "possible." As regards form, there is perhaps no city so lacking in distinction; and though art may do without almost every kind of beauty, it can ill dispense with that subtler quality of distinction – a quality missed with universal and unerring instinct by the builders of London as we know it.<sup>112</sup>

It was not that artists earlier in the century did not see the potential of fog/smoke as a basis for art. Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846), an English artist and diarist, wrote of the potential of smoky fog: 'So far from the smoke being offensive to me, it has

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<sup>111</sup> W. P. Frith, 'Crazes in Art', *Magazine of Art*, 11 (1888), 187-191 (191).

<sup>112</sup> Brunet Debaines, 'Trafalgar Square', *Art Journal*, 54 (1888), p. 149.



always been to my imagination the sublime canopy that shrouds the City of the World. Drifted by the wind or hanging in gloomy grandeur over the vastness of our Babylon, the sight of it always filled my mind with feelings of energy such as no other spectacle could inspire.<sup>113</sup> Yet he produced very few London paintings and mainly specialised in historical subjects, a genre which was much more popular at the time. Haydon's reluctance to commit his interest in the canopy of smoke hanging over London to canvas was possibly due to the fact that he realised that the art world would not give him the support he needed to save him from debtor's prison. He took his own life in 1846.

Other British artists of the time, such as David Roberts (1796-1864), now best known for his paintings of Egypt and the Holy Land, preferred to set his London paintings in the near past and ignore the fog problem as if it were something that only contemporary Londoners endured. He was certainly aware of the problems of the London atmosphere, and wrote to his daughter from the Holy Land of 'the moonlights such as you cannot conceive in your dismal foggy atmosphere'.<sup>114</sup> In 1862 he exhibited *St Paul's from Blackfriars*. The fact that this was first exhibited under the title of *A Relic from the Past: Embarkation of the Lord Mayor of London at Blackfriars (now abolished) on Lord Mayor's day, November 9<sup>th</sup>, forming No. 1 of a series of Views of London on the River Thames* is indicative that it is looking back rather than an image of contemporary London. It celebrates the embarkation of the Lord Mayor at Blackfriars, an event abolished in 1856. It has no indicators of modernity, and it was quickly bought by

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<sup>113</sup> Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, Historical Painter, from his Autobiography and Journals*, ed. by Tom Taylor, 3 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853), I, pp. 50-1. This autobiography, based on Haydon's diaries, was published after the painter's suicide in 1846.

<sup>114</sup> Ballantine, p. 104.





Fig 21: David Roberts, *St Paul's from Blackfriars*, 1862.<sup>115</sup>

Charles Lucas (1820-95), an extremely successful London contractor and one who bought all of Roberts' London pictures. Another Roberts painting, *The Thames at Hungerford Bridge* (c.1861) looks towards the south side of the river.

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<sup>115</sup> David Roberts, *St Paul's from Blackfriars* (London: The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, 1862).





Fig 22: David Roberts, *The Thames at Hungerford Bridge*, c.1861.<sup>116</sup>

A heavy atmosphere of cloud cover with some haze causing another shot tower to fade into the background is the only indicator that this is modern London. More sail boats are in the distance in front of the brewery. This is the type of idealized view favoured by the buyers of art at the time as a contrast to the rural views of the Thames. Roberts said he began working on a series of London scenes in the 1860s, as a result of a suggestion made earlier by Turner. He was aware of the significance of these views to later generations and wished to preserve the rapidly changing face of London. In this aim he reveals a pessimism regarding London's future which is echoed by later writers, like Robert Barr who declared that 'should the present generation be indifferent, I have some consolation that the future may not; and should my pictures survive to the period when that New Zealander is to stand on the ruins of London Bridge, and survey the very little left of London, he may still find [...] a representation of what London once was'.<sup>117</sup> And yet his representations of London hark back to a past age.

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<sup>116</sup> David Roberts, *The Thames at Hungerford Bridge* (Ingram Family Collection, c. 1861).

<sup>117</sup> Ballantine, p. 208.



Reviewers were aware of the idealized nature of his representations. One in the *Saturday Review* commented: 'We look in vain for fidelity in details, atmosphere, or even in general effect.'<sup>118</sup> *Blackwood's Magazine* noted sarcastically: 'Mr Roberts, having long haunted every canal in Venice, this year sails his bark upon Father Thames, and notwithstanding the sanitary condition of the water, manages to give us plenty of sunshine.'<sup>119</sup>

The portrayal of fog or smoke in the visual arts does not appear to have been so much of a problem for painters if the work was engraved for popular consumption rather than painted for wealthy buyers. An engraving from the 1840s by David Roberts, who was also the artist, shows a different view of London from that of the work exhibited in the Royal Academy. *A View of Blackfriars Bridge and St Paul's Cathedral* (illustrated on p. 171) depicts a smoky, hazy London. The steamboats and the buildings behind are puffing out thick streams of white smoke, and the houses and offices in front of St. Paul's are covered in a layer of white vapour which extends round behind the Cathedral on both sides.

The dark cloud behind St Paul's Cathedral means that it stands out more, but a Londoner would probably have recognised this as London's special, polluted atmosphere. The early date of execution, c.1840, shows that artists were willing to represent London's smoke problems, but only in art which would have been printed for the less wealthy classes. The same scene proved so popular that it was engraved again by Rowney in 1861.<sup>120</sup> George Hunt, another engraver, had earlier produced *A*

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<sup>118</sup> *Saturday Review* (24 May 1862), 13, p. 592.

<sup>119</sup> *Blackwood's Magazine* (July 1862), 92, p. 65.

<sup>120</sup> David Roberts, *A View of Blackfriars Bridge and St Paul's Cathedral* (London: Guildhall Library Print Room, 1861), Cat. No. p7498055.



*thoroughbred November and London particular* (1827), illustrated in the introduction.<sup>121</sup> This shows all the drawbacks of the foggy city. The *Art Journal* in 1884, after criticising Wyllie's *London from the Monument* because of its portrayal of London's smoke problem, commented that 'if the painters have to struggle for their point, the etchers have long owned London as their own'.<sup>122</sup>



Fig 23: David Roberts, *A View of Blackfriars Bridge and St Paul's Cathedral*, c.1840.<sup>123</sup>

As late as 1888, the well-known critic Frederick Wedmore reflected on the response of art to the modern world with its need to move with the times. He concluded:

It may transmute that which seems vulgar and trivial into the finer forms and warmer colours of its ideal world. But the real world must be its motive. That

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<sup>121</sup> M. Egerton, *A thoroughbred November and London particular*, engraved by George Hunt (London: Guildhall Library Print Room, 1827), p5430998.

<sup>122</sup> *The Art Journal*, 50 (1884), p. 200.

<sup>123</sup> David Roberts, *A View of Blackfriars Bridge and St Paul's Cathedral* (London: Guildhall Library Print Room, c.1840), q231983x.



is its one chance. It must not, by its exclusive glorification of an idyllic state we know no longer, teach us that beauty and significance were in the past alone. In some of its landscape it will dare to place the steam plough in the quiet field, and the tall chimney of the chemical works down in the marshes at the river's mouth. It must paint the atmosphere that rolls over our great cities.'<sup>124</sup>

In the same year, a correspondent remarked on the practicalities of painting London that:

And as regards colour and light, there is the standing grievance of the smoke [...] the blackness that comes from soot has neither depth nor lustre; it is opaque, gritty shallow, grey – a denial of everything that the colourist loves. Admittedly, then, London is not a good subject. Nevertheless good art upon a bad subject may be spent. And whatever our capital lacks, it has the quality of movement – a quality dear to many.<sup>125</sup>

This, and, much more, the quality of its atmosphere, the object of so much suspicion by the British art establishment, had already attracted major foreign artists to London, and was to do so again, as we shall now see.

## Whistler

It was foreign artists who first saw the potential of light through the fog and mist within the urban setting. Just as some northern artists moved to the Mediterranean for the different clarity of light, so artists familiar with the Mediterranean, or similar environments, found a new and exciting kind of light in London. Perhaps it could also be said that it took a foreigner to see the potential of what many English artists saw as a nuisance. In the earlier part of his painting career, Whistler's style was more representational than it later became.

A late twentieth-century exhibition catalogue on Whistler's work commented on an etching called *Battersea: Dawn* (1875) that the artist 'has worked out a stylised

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<sup>124</sup> Frederick Wedmore, 'Modern Life in Modern Art', *The Magazine of Art* 11 (1888), 77-80 (p. 80).

<sup>125</sup> *The Art Journal*, 54 1888, p. 149.



method of drawing to convey the elusive quality of light among the mist, and smoke, and reflections, of steam-boats and factory chimneys along the riverside'.<sup>126</sup>



Fig 24: James McNeill Whistler, *Battersea: Dawn*, 1875.<sup>127</sup>

Almost as soon as he had arrived in London in 1859, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) embarked on a series of etchings known as the 'Thames Set'. When this series of plates was exhibited in Paris in 1862, Baudelaire wrote of 'wonderful tangles of rigging, yardarms and rope; farragos of fog, furnaces and corkscrews of smoke; the profound and intricate poetry of a vast capital'.<sup>128</sup> The river had been painted a few times before by landscape painters, but most, as seen earlier, had concentrated on the more rural

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<sup>126</sup> *Whistler: The Graphic Work: Amsterdam, Liverpool, London, Venice* (An exhibition organised by Thos. Agnew & Sons, London, The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool and The Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, in association with The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976, selection and catalogue by Margaret MacDonald), p. 17.

<sup>127</sup> James McNeill Whistler, *Battersea: Dawn* (Scotland: Hunterian Museum & Art Gallery Collections, 1875), GLAHA. 47781.

<sup>128</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Art in Paris 1845-1862, Salons and Other Exhibition Reviewed by Charles Baudelaire*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1965), p.220.



stretches, or refused to paint its unique atmosphere, preferring to capture it with clear skies and uncluttered banks. Whistler was one of the first to see the potential of the river in the urban landscape as a consistent theme. According to Dorment and MacDonald, Whistler claimed to have been the first painter to make fog his special subject.<sup>129</sup>

John House suggests: 'Beginning in the early 1860s, mist and fog became an increasingly central element in Whistler's paintings of the Thames.'<sup>130</sup> These paintings were not intended to highlight the atmosphere in problematic terms and relate it to the smoke problem. They reflected his wish to aestheticise the visual experience. This, in turn, created a conflict between style and subject matter: 'The quest for decorative perfection was hard to reconcile with the teeming reality he actually saw from his London balcony during the day: the dredgers, tugboats and penny steamers that plied up and down the river from morning till night, churning the water into mud.'<sup>131</sup> Rather than give up on his commitment to realism, Whistler chose to paint the river at quieter times, at night-time, when the river turned to ice, and during times of fog. One example is *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (1864-71). The number of years he took to complete it indicates the difficulty Whistler had with the concept. This view, which is from Whistler's house in what is now called Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, across the river, shows a Thames smothered by fog. A Thames Lighter (as indicated by its brown sails) attempts to find its way home. In this painting the parasol of the lady helps to create an eastern mystique where the slightly blurred lines of the dresses give the appearance of eastern garb, one even looking like a kimono. The sail boat conveys a mystical eastern quality. Whistler is not interested in showing the source of the fog in the smoke

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<sup>129</sup> Richard Dorment and Margaret F. MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1994), p. 108.

<sup>130</sup> House, p. 23.

<sup>131</sup> Dorment and MacDonald, p. 120.



of the river steamers; for him it is just a means to capture light through the haze. Whistler lived just beside Battersea Bridge Pier, and just opposite the City Steam Boat pier in Battersea, so he would have been very aware of the steamboat traffic. His actual view across the river was of the factories of the Morgan Crucible Company and Price's Candles. The faint mound in the top-left of the painting is actually a coal slag heap on Battersea shore, with a church next to it, on a far-off island. Whistler was rejected by the Academy and his retrospective at the Flemish Gallery in Pall Mall in 1874 was a critical failure. *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* is not finished, and perhaps it was never put up for sale. It certainly never sold and was later bequeathed by Whistler to his sister-in-law in 1903.



Fig 25: James McNeill Whistler, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses*, 1864-71.<sup>132</sup>

A later painting that shows a foggy area in central London is *Nocturne in grey and gold – Piccadilly* 1881-3. The difficulty of portraying the spots of brightness and colour through a fog is described in the way Whistler dealt with the subject layer by layer:

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<sup>132</sup> James McNeil Whistler, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey House* (Scotland: Hunterian Art Gallery, 1864-71), 46358.



Taking the lightest tone, the windows, he applied an overall wash and let it dry. Then he outlined the windows and left them untouched, applying a darker wash to the rest of the sheet. Working quickly, he built up the darkest areas with further colour as the wash dried. When it was dry, a few distant spots of light and the one near street light were painted in precisely, using body colour to glow in contrast.<sup>133</sup>



Fig 26: James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in grey and gold – Piccadilly*, 1881-3.<sup>134</sup>

It is a picture that evokes both mystery and fear. The background appears to be an empty chasm devoid of form which we know must be there. The contemporary Londoner would have recognized a scene all too familiar.

The precise way the street light and the brighter windows were painted give the overall impression of these looming towards the viewer as, in fact, they often seemed to on a foggy night. The horses and the people are ghostly silhouettes whose form

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<sup>133</sup> Whistler, *The Graphic Work*, p. 22.

<sup>134</sup> James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in grey and gold – Piccadilly* (Ireland: National Gallery, 1881-3).



appears to be dissolving before our eyes. The people on the top of the carriage in the foreground appear to be floating on air. As the *Standard* wrote “The horses are ‘understood’.”<sup>135</sup> The eeriness and the ghostliness are further enhanced by the flares of the linklighters. It reveals a world disappearing into formlessness beneath the weight of the yellow-grey fog. The *Kensington News* described this painting as ‘one of the most enchanting little atmospheric gems one could well desire to possess’.<sup>136</sup>

The picture was exhibited as part of an exhibition in Bond Street that May by Dowdeswell, but it failed to find an immediate buyer with a desire to possess it.<sup>137</sup> A sketch from *Punch* (shown below) illustrates the problem that potential buyers experience: the fog has seeped out of the paintings into the gallery, blinding the visitors so that they cannot see the art at all. Normal connoisseurs needed clarity of vision, but in this view of Whistler’s art, all he did was to produce obfuscation and formlessness and confuse the normal process of visual perception.



Fig 27: Sketch from *Punch*.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> *Standard*, 2 January 1884.

<sup>136</sup> *Kensington News* 29 May 1884.

<sup>137</sup> E. R. and J. Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, rev. edn (London: Heinemann, 1911), p. 239.

<sup>138</sup> From *Punch's Almanack for 1887* [n.p.no.].



It was Whistler's aim to aestheticise London fog. As he said in his *Ten O'Clock* lecture of 1885:

And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become *campanili*, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us – then the wayfarer hastens home; the working man and the cultured one, the wise man and the one of pleasure, cease to understand, as they have ceased to see, and Nature, who for once, has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone.<sup>139</sup>

For the artist, the veil disguises the poverty, commercialism and squalor of London, transforming it into a magical world. He shows nature redesigning itself, not only at night, but also during the fog. Dickens too had described fog as transforming humdrum urban reality into a fairytale when he describes London 'as if it were a city in the clouds [...] up a magic beanstalk' in *Martin Chuzzlewit*; but Whistler saw it as a leveller, wiping out all social and moral distinctions in blinding them to the aesthetic possibilities of a *natural* phenomenon.<sup>140</sup>

Whistler does not acknowledge, in this passage at least, that fog could be partly man-made. Whistler found the quality of movement within a foggy day. He came to be known for his work dealing with the atmosphere of London, even after his death. His biographers, the Pennells, wrote that as 'the coffin was lowered, the thick London atmosphere wrapped the green enclosure in the magic and mystery that Whistler was the first to see and to reveal'.<sup>141</sup>

Whistler was far from being the only foreign artist attracted to London at this time. Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878), whose *St Pauls from the Surrey Side* (1873) is in the National Gallery, visited England in 1866, where he met Whistler, and returned during the Franco-Prussian war, when he met Monet. His attitude to the

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<sup>139</sup> James MacNeill Whistler, *Mr. Whistler's "Ten o'clock"* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1888), p. 15.

<sup>140</sup> Dickens, *Chuzzlewit*, p. 180.

<sup>141</sup> Pennell, p. 432.



atmosphere of London certainly reflected that of English artists. He wrote in October 1870: 'It's eleven o'clock in the morning. So much for the climate. Fog! Visibility less than two paces.'<sup>142</sup> His picture is painted from a viewpoint which is only slightly above the river looking across to St Paul's from the south side. The clutter of the coal-barges at the foot and the decaying wharves on the right of the picture provide a darker frame to the murky picture of Blackfriars Bridge and the smoking chimneys on the left. The smoke from the chimneys rises up in to the sky, discolouring it to a yellowy grey. St Paul's is beginning to recede visually because of the smokiness of the atmosphere and the clouds in the sky look yellow and heavy.

John House remarks: 'Unlike Monet, Daubigny did not foreground the changes that were transforming this reach of the river at this moment.' Perhaps this is partly because, as House describes it, 'the indistinct smudge along the far bank on the left

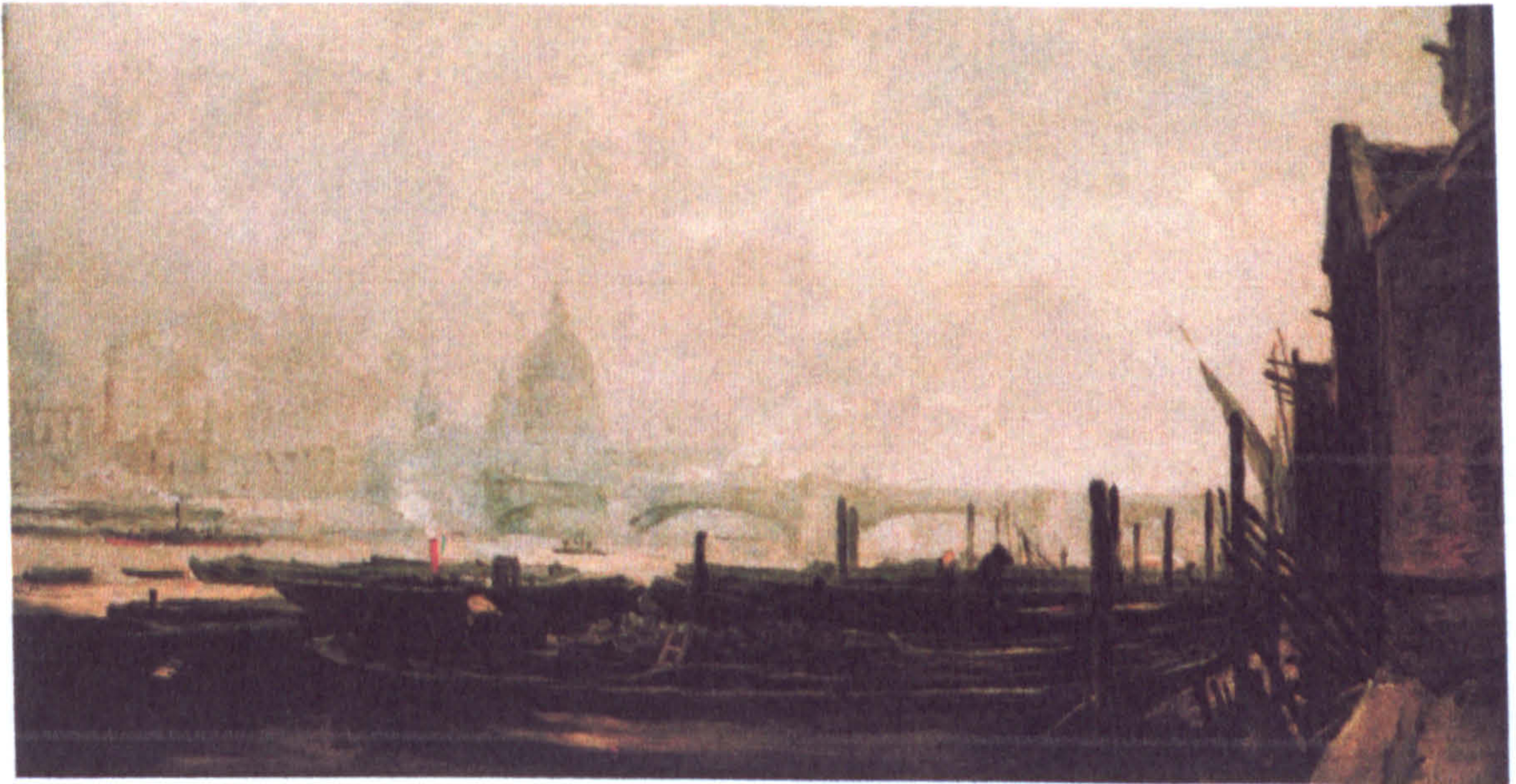


Fig 28: Charles-François Daubigny, *St Paul's from the Surrey Side*, 1873.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Cited in Nicholas Reed, *Monet and the Thames* (London: Lilburne Press, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>143</sup> Charles-François Daubigny, *St Paul's from the Surrey Side*, (London: National Gallery, 1873), N 2876.



shows the newly built Embankment'.<sup>144</sup> Yet there are explicit markers of modernity such as the steamboats, the steam train travelling across the bridge, and the smoking chimney in the foreground. Even the yellowy-green colour of the atmosphere on the left is a symbol of modernity. Its colour and weight make us feel that it is the beginnings of a pea-souper fog. Little relieves the drabness of the picture, except the red pole, which is probably the funnel of a ship, and is reminiscent of Turner's red blob. A sense of movement is felt in the smoke and the increasing fog. There is scarcely a sign of human life except in the industrial activity of the boats, train and chimney. Even the buildings on the left seem like ruins. The only solidity is that of the barges and wharves on the right but they seem decayed and dying as well, and certainly the bleakness of the colour of these does not inspire hope.

## Monet

In 1883 George Gissing, whilst standing on Battersea Bridge, reflected on the view which the mist afforded to him:

A mist lurks about the river, vapour which thickens, obscuring the objects on either bank. Obscuring, but not hiding; blotting out all meaner details, shading off the harsher intermediate lines, leaving only the broad features of buildings massed darkly against the grey background [...] Now the eye loves to dwell on what would offend it in the clearer light; the rude blocks of new houses on the north bank show only a glimmering window here and there on the surface of what looks like a lordly pile; to the left, the group of factory chimneys does not lack its suggestive beauty in the murkier air which hangs about it; the brief spire of St. Mary's of Battersea has lost its commonplace ugliness; the railway bridge which remotely spans the river is only a faint vision of arches, bounding the prospect not ungracefully. [...] Over the river there, in the shadow of the factories, is crowded together a flotilla of steamboats, moored for the night; you can just discern their shapes, but nothing of the wharfage behind them, nothing of walls and sheds and work-yards. Night has fallen upon that unsightly confusion, blending all in the rich shadow of the etcher. Here, however, on the nearer side, the broader mass of black outline is relieved by a

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<sup>144</sup> House, p. 27.



few gas-lamps: their light burns strangely of a pale green, the effect of contrast with the sky above.<sup>145</sup>

Gissing's impressions hark back to Whistler but, this time, the peculiar softening qualities of the mist are not restricted to the artist alone as Whistler had suggested; Gissing's impressions look forward to Monet, who not only perceived a softening of outlines through the fog, but attempted to create the colours that the London fog conjured up. Impressionism, originating in France, brought more than one artist to London in search of atmospheric effects. Claude Monet (1840-1926) showed a keen interest in the effects of light on overcast days in the city environment throughout his artistic life.<sup>146</sup> Arriving in London for the first time, during a particularly foggy period, he painted at least three pictures which reflected the Thames shrouded in a winter fog. One of these was *The Thames and the Houses of Parliament* (1871), which shows a thick yellowy, purpley overcast sky, the colour of the haze reflected in the water of the Thames. The scene is unified by its atmosphere. The steamers which dominate the left hand side of the painting puff out white smoke which curls up into the sky to create a subtle variety of colour, although a heavy yellowness is dominant. Both the fog and the river convey a sense of motion. The water's choppiness is highlighted by the shadows thrown by the waves, and the vapour in the sky appears to be subtly circling the Houses of Parliament, together with Westminster Bridge have begun to lose their definition in the haze, although Big Ben, in the foreground, appears more solid than the rest. There are no buildings visible behind the Palace of Westminster; all are obscured by the atmosphere.

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<sup>145</sup> George Gissing, 'On Battersea Bridge' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1873. Cited in Jeremy Tambling, *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2009), p. 266.

<sup>146</sup> See Monet's *Unloading Coal* (1875, private collection) as an example; or his Gare Saint-Lazare series of paintings (1877) which can be seen as 'a pretext for rendering light and atmosphere', Henri Lallemand, *Monet: Impressions of Light* (New York: Todtri, 1994), p. 58.



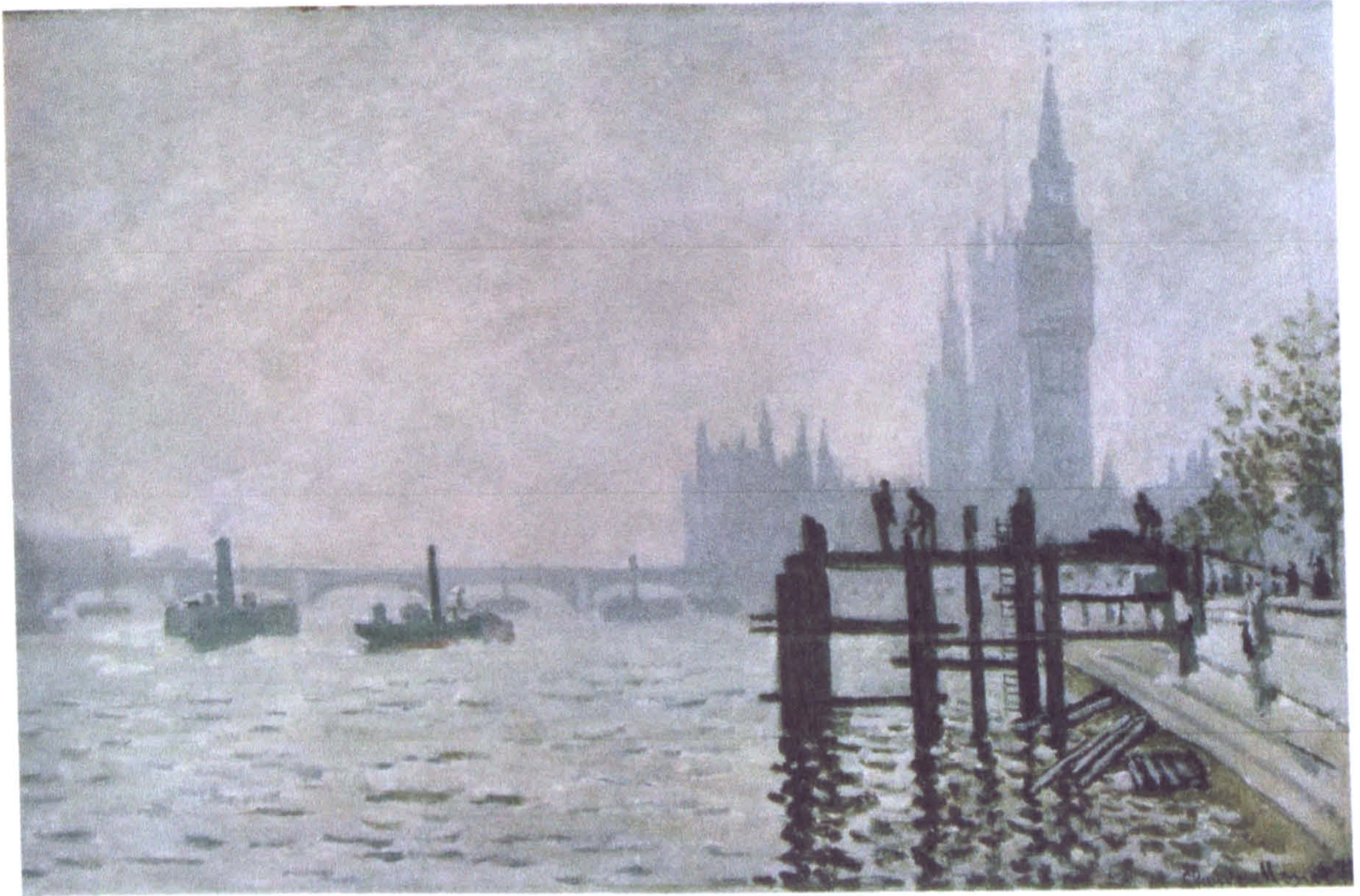


Fig 29: Claude Monet, *The Thames and the Houses of Parliament*, 1871.<sup>147</sup>

This is not a fog which interrupts working life. It continues as if the vapour were not there. This type of yellow haze was very much the sort of atmosphere Londoners had to endure through much of the winter, but especially during November. It did not impede vision for short distances. The men working on the jetty contrast with the more leisured classes promenading on the embankment.

In this painting Monet shows an optimism about modern society. Both working and leisured classes are seen harmoniously in one scene, just as boats powered by steam and those powered by wind and sail share the river. All is watched over benignly by the Houses of Parliament. The different classes are in near proximity seemingly without antagonism. Possibly this provided a contrast to the troubled scenes left behind in Paris, which the artist had fled to escape the turmoil of the Franco-

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<sup>147</sup>Claude Monet, *The Thames and the Houses of Parliament* (London: National Gallery, 1871), cat. No. 166.



Prussian War, the overthrow of Napoleon III, siege of Paris, the Commune and its brutal suppression.

‘I so love London!’ Monet later told René Gimpel, ‘but nothing like it is in winter with the fog, for without the fog London wouldn’t be a beautiful city [...] ‘It’s the fog that gives it its magnificent breadth.’<sup>148</sup> In order to study the impact of the changing atmosphere of London, he took a room on the sixth floor of the Savoy Hotel from September to November 1899, returning to the hotel twice more in order to complete his work. During his second stay he was unable to use the same room and had to content himself with a room with a similar view on the fifth floor. From here he painted Charing Cross Bridge and Waterloo Bridge, producing a total of 34 and 41 paintings respectively. He used a room in St Thomas’s Hospital to paint a series of pictures of the Houses of Parliament, of which 19 examples are known. Views of Leicester Square, which he also worked on, were painted from the green room of a club in St Martin’s Street. He started many sketches at this time; but the effect that so impressed him - the changing colours of the light and atmosphere - proved an immense problem, as these factors did not remain constant enough to enable him to finish any one painting at a time. So he started on several canvases and went back to them when he figured the light was similar. In this way he started over a hundred paintings, many of which he destroyed or never finished. In the end he took them back to his studio in Giverny to complete them.

He confessed his difficulty with the subject matter as late as 1903, when he informed Paul Durand-Ruel, his Parisian art dealer: ‘I cannot send you a single painting of the London series as it is absolutely necessary for the work I am doing to have them

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<sup>148</sup> René Gimpel, *Diary of an Art Dealer*, trans. by John Rosenberg (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 129.



all in front of me and, to be honest, not a single one is completed yet.’<sup>149</sup> He did not want each to illustrate a state of the atmosphere individually, standing alone, but wanted to see them in continuity with each other. His stay in London did result in the largest series of paintings that Monet had yet produced. From this period he exhibited thirty-seven paintings in 1904, many showing the same London scenes in different atmospheric conditions, but most portraying them through a veil of fog (unlike the 1871 painting which shows the yellow haze of the fog merely as a backdrop to the scene). They have a similar structure, a bridge dividing the picture between the water of the Thames below the bridge from the line of the buildings appearing against the sky above. Many of the paintings have the word ‘*effet*’ in the title to indicate the impression of the changing atmosphere on the artist’s eye.

In Monet’s *Waterloo Bridge (Effect of Mist)* we are given the view which Monet would have seen opposite his hotel on the other side of the river. Here the Lion Brewery stood with its sculpture of a lion on top; two shot towers also stood here as well as numerous other industries. But this is an industrial landscape with a difference, and it is also a view of foggy London which is much more highly coloured than his earlier painting, *The Thames and the Houses of Parliament*, (1871). The skies are green, yellow and almost tormented with the swirls and flourishes of paint. Beyond the arches of Waterloo Bridge, factory chimneys can be indistinctly seen, the centre one is puffing out smoke which is incorporated into the atmosphere almost immediately. Everything is indistinct and blurred in effect. The scene is divided horizontally in two by the blue and purplish bridge, which stands out, but only slightly, and it looks as if it is beginning to dissolve into the background. There is a sense of movement on the bridge with flashes of light and the image of its dissolution is enhanced by its dark reflection which

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<sup>149</sup> Claude Monet to Paul Durand-Ruel, 23 March 1903. Cited in *Monet and Modernism*, ed. by Karin Sagner-Dul’chting (London: Prestel) p. 58.



is broken up by the choppy waters. On the bridge, people and omnibuses seem to have been merged into a cluttered confusion, tiny figures dwarfed by the river, the bridge, the chimneys and the atmosphere.



Fig 30: Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge (Effect of Mist) London*, 1903.<sup>150</sup>

In this instance the painting inspires a sense of desolation. The optimism of 1871 has vanished. It has been noted that there is a change in Monet's subjects in the 1880s: 'The sociable motifs of the 1860s and '70s gradually ebb away, and we more frequently see images of loneliness and of nature's sublime powers'.<sup>151</sup> In this painting we can see the power of the great commercial and industrial city but the solid reality of the buildings is dissolving into an atmospheric chaos.

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<sup>150</sup> Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge (Effect of Mist) London* (Russia: The Hermitage Museum, 1903).

<sup>151</sup> Robert Herbert, 'Method and Meaning in Monet', *Art in America*, 67 (September, 1979), 104-108 (pp. 104-5).





Fig 31: Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge, Morning Fog*.<sup>152</sup>

Another painting of the same view shows how Monet was representing a different impression using the atmosphere. In the painting, *Waterloo Bridge, Morning Fog*, the colours are much more purple than the previous painting discussed, and the outlines of the bridge and buildings are more distinct. Again the bridge provides a significant structure dividing the painting horizontally, but it is also in a process of disappearing behind the atmosphere. The traffic on the bridge add to a sense of movement, conveying an impression of human insignificance.

Monet's subsequent stays in London were solely because of the fog. He once wrote: 'When I got up, I was terrified to see that there was no fog, not even the least trace of a mist; I was in despair, it seemed all my canvases were going for naught, but then little by little, as the fires were lit, the smoke and the mist returned.'<sup>153</sup> Industrial smoke also enthralled him, and he complained of its absence on Sundays, reminiscent

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<sup>152</sup> Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge, Morning Fog* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1901).

<sup>153</sup> Cited in Daniel Wildenstein, *Monet or The Triumph of Impressionism* (Germany: Taschen, 1999), p. 345.



of Henry James's complaints which are discussed in the next chapter: 'What a dreary day this damned English Sunday is. Nature feels the effects, everything is dead, no trains, no smoke, no boats, nothing to inspire me.'<sup>154</sup> Of course, too much cloud cover also meant that Monet was denied the special effect of the light through the mist, and he had to stop working.

Three companion pieces on a view of the Houses of Parliament illustrate the synthesis of atmospheric impression which Monet was trying to represent. They were obviously painted at different times of the day to capture the changing light effect. The first one, *Houses of Parliament, Fog Effect* (1900-1), not shown here, has pinkier tones in the clouds, reflected in the water.<sup>155</sup> It is almost as if the sky and the water have caught fire. The green skiffs in the foreground add interest, but little movement. The Houses of Parliament recede into the background in warmish purple tones. The buildings behind have dissolved into formlessness.

The second painting, also called *Houses of Parliament, Fog Effect* (1900-1) is more yellow than red, cooler with slightly more sunlight reflected through the scene. The water in the river is greener with yellow tints. Both the actual Parliament buildings and the reflection seem even less substantial, and the buildings behind are a formless blur. All is seemingly being absorbed into the atmosphere.

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<sup>154</sup> Cited in Reed, p. 34.

<sup>155</sup> *Houses of Parliament, Fog Effect* (France: Musee des Beaux-Arts, 1900-1), Cat. No. 1608.



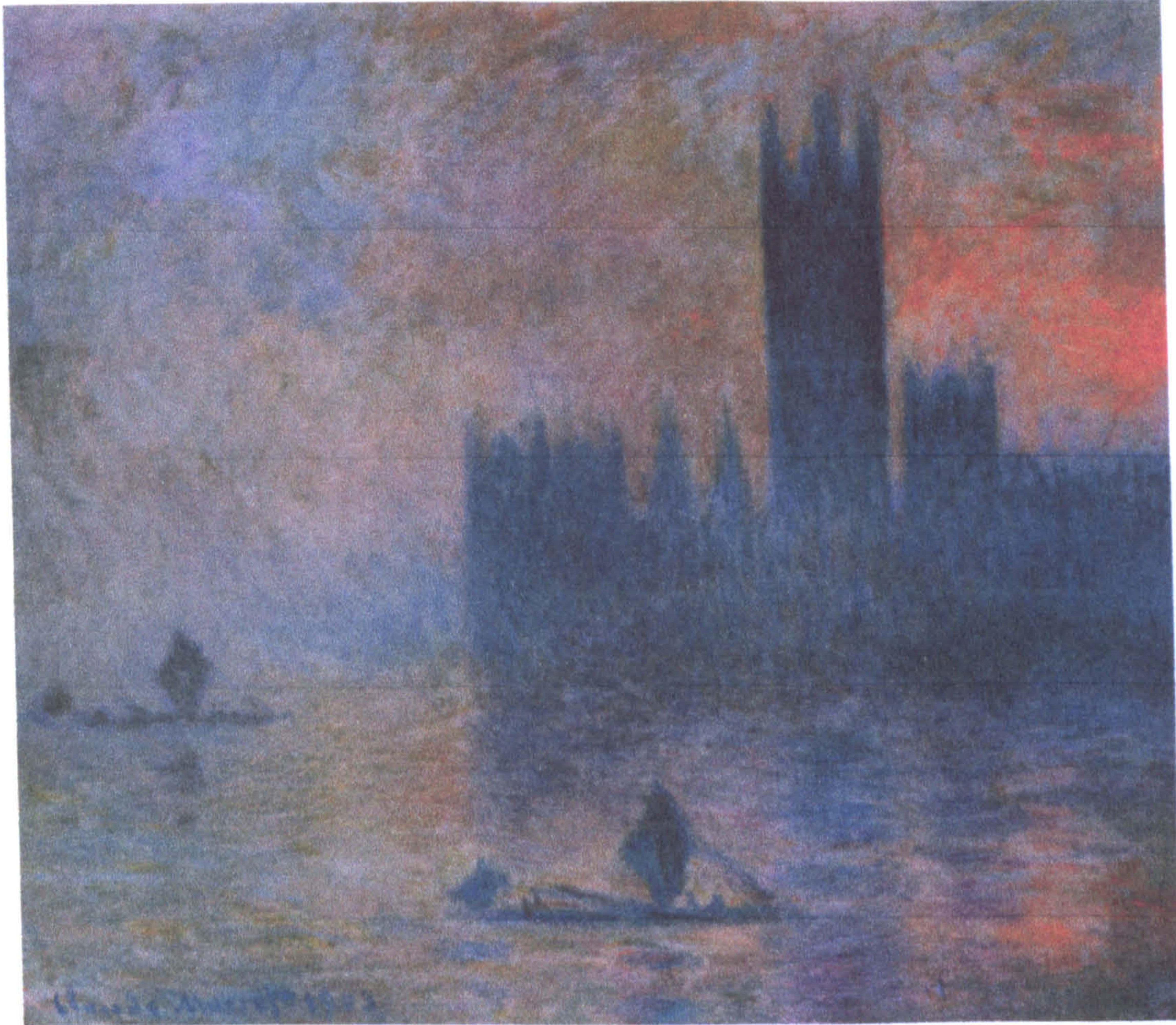


Fig 32: Claude Monet, *Houses of Parliament, Fog Effect*<sup>156</sup>

The third painting in the series is *Houses of Parliament, Effect of Sunlight in the Fog* (1900-1). The sun is trying to show itself through the clouds, its reflection showing itself in warm oranges and yellows on the river. The Parliament Buildings are virtually lost in the purple haze of fog; their outlines have virtually disappeared, except for the towers.

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<sup>156</sup> *Houses of Parliament, Fog Effect* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1900-1), Cat. No. 1609.



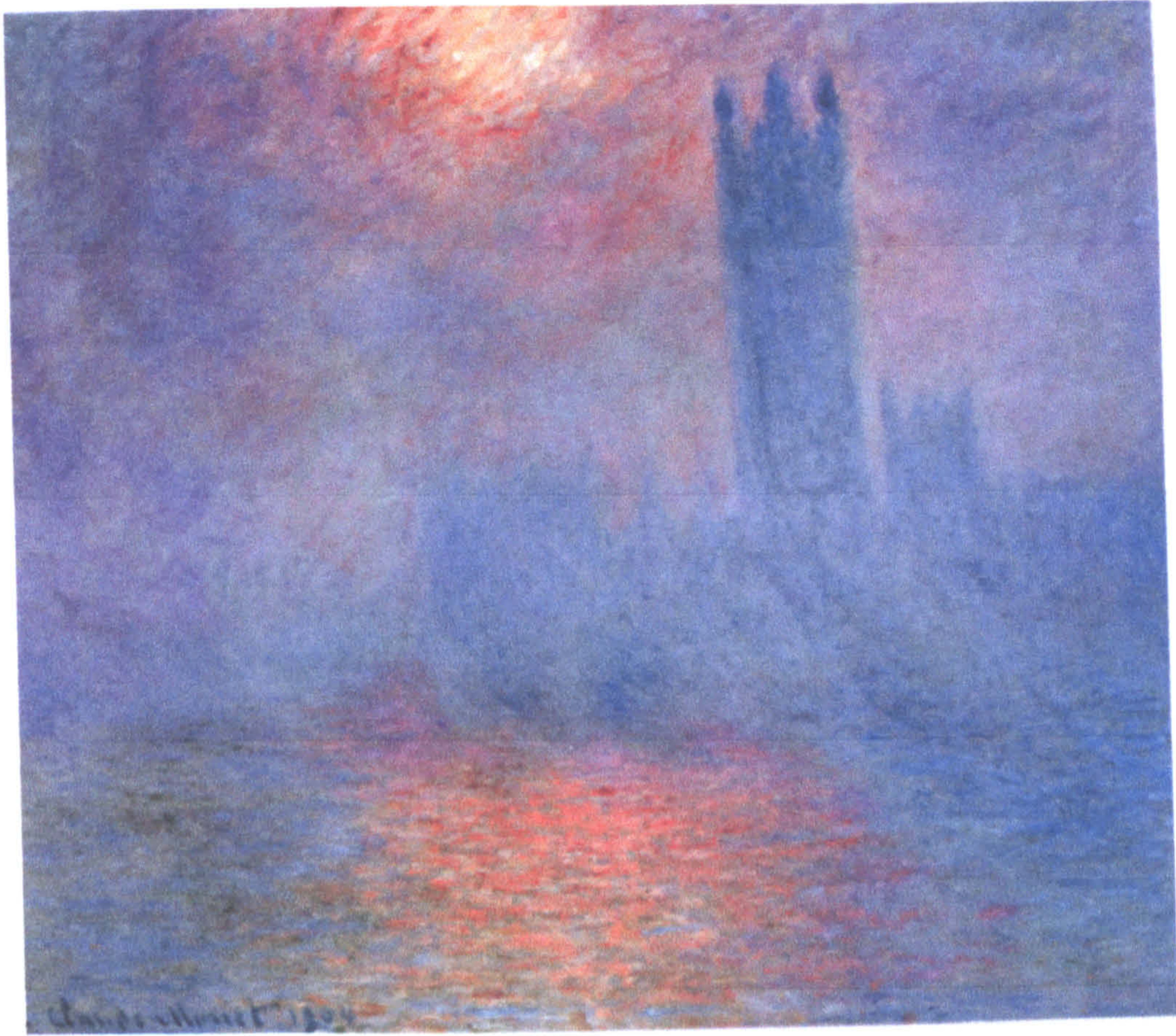


Fig 33: Claude Monet, *Houses of Parliament, Effect of Sunlight in the Fog*<sup>157</sup>

This use of the sun's reflection does not, somehow, supply hope which might be expected to be offered. It is more frightening, appearing to set the buildings alight. The yellows speckled with red give them a blood-like lustre. The bright colours appear to be held in the air and the water and offer a sense of menace or threat. In all of these, Monet is using the fog deliberately to distort the Neo-Gothic building. He vertically elongates St Stephen's tower to provide a greater impact, so that it rises like a phantom through the mist. But the buildings are also in a process of dissolution. They appear as solid forms which are in danger of turning into the fluid of the water or the mist.

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<sup>157</sup> *Houses of Parliament, Effect of Sunlight in the Fog* (France: Musee d'Orsay, 1900-1), Cat. No. 1610.



Monet consistently likes to show the eye's impression of the dematerialization of matter in his paintings.<sup>158</sup>

Whilst talking to Rene Gimpel in 1918, Monet commented 'I adore London, it's a mass, a whole, and it's so simple. But what I love more than anything in London is the fog. How could the nineteenth-century English painters render houses brick by brick? They had to paint bricks which they couldn't and didn't see!'<sup>159</sup> The city's 'massive, regular blocks', he added, 'become grandiose within that mysterious cloak'.<sup>160</sup> Without the fog, he saw them as foursquare, unappealing to the imagination. Only through the dissolution of their forms could they gain grandeur and mystery. Octave Mirbeau, an influential French art critic and friend of the artist, commented on Monet's London series of paintings in the 1904 exhibition catalogue, highlighting the relationship between the fog and the smoke:

Smoke and Fog; forms, architectural masses, perspectives, a whole dull, rumbling city in the fog, composed of fog itself; the struggle of light and all the phases of that struggle; the sun held captive in the haze or breaking through the coloured, irradiant, swirling depths of the atmosphere in separate beams; the complex drama of reflections on the surface of the Thames, infinitely transient and subtle, sombre, or magical, disturbing, delicious, blossoming or chaos, floating gardens, the invisible, the unreal, and all of these together forming a nature, the nature particular to this prodigious city – which was created for painters, but which painters before M. Claude Monet have never learnt to see, have never been able to express.<sup>161</sup>

Mirbeau saw Monet's representation in terms of the subjugation of the cityscape by natural forces, turning the urban scene into something magical. The changing nature of the fog imposed constantly changing impressions on the artist's, and hence the viewer's eye. Monet may have chosen such well-known objects like the Houses of

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<sup>158</sup> See John E. Thornes and Gemma Metherell, 'Monet's "London Series"' in *Weather, Climate, Culture*, ed. by Sarah Strauss and Ben Orlove (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 141-160, (154-6) for how accurate Monet's pictures were of London fogs.

<sup>159</sup> Gimpel, p. 73.

<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>161</sup> Octave Mirbeau, *Correspondance avec Claude Monet*, ed. by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet (France : Tusson, 1990), p. 260.



Parliament, or the bridges spanning the Thames, in order to play with the pre-set ideas of the viewer and suggest the transience of apparently fixed impressions dissolving time as well as space. As we shall see in Chapter 4, this showed uncanny parallels with the representation of fog in the literature of the 1890s and early 1900s, where London also appears to be in a state of dissolution; it also echoed Dickens's imaginative depiction of fog as creating a world simultaneously prehistoric and futuristic.

### Markino

The light effects created for the beholder by fog also brought to London another, much less well-known foreign artist, from a very different background and tradition, working with a very different interest. Yoshio Markino (1869-1956) was painting scenes of London at the same time as Monet was composing his own London series. Markino came over to England in 1897. Originally from Japan, he had spent four and a half years in San Francisco trying to paint the thick fog that rolled in from the sea at certain times of the year to cover much of the city. He came to London to produce 'a study of London mists'.<sup>162</sup> Heavily influenced by Turner, Markino, like Monet, could not perceive of London in any other atmosphere:

Age and the fogs have made the buildings so beautiful. I often hear artists complaining because they cannot get models or views resembling their own ideal, but I must say London in mist is far above my own ideal [...] The colour and its effect are most wonderful. I think London without mists would be like a bride without a trousseau. I like thick fogs as well as autumn mists. Even on a summer day I see some covering veils. When I came to London first, I thought the buildings, figures, and everything in the distance, looked comparatively large, because in Japan the atmosphere is so clear that you can see every small detail in the distance, while here your background is mystified abruptly, which has a great charm to me.

[...] December is my favourite month in London.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Yoshio Markino, *A Japanese Artist in London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1919), p. 104.

<sup>163</sup> W. J. Loftie, *The Colour of London: Historic, Personal, & Local* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914), pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.



His writings reveal his interest in the colour of the fog, and also his fascination in the way it seemed to distort the size of the buildings. Like Monet, he too appreciated the way London fogs transformed the bricks of London: 'For instance, that house in front of my window is painted in black and yellow. When I came here last summer I laughed at its ugly colour. But now the winter fogs cover it, and the harmony of its colour is most wonderful.'<sup>164</sup> Markino's delicate watercolours and sepia drawings are a good contrast to Monet's much denser treatment in oils of the subject of the atmosphere. The introduction to his autobiography by Sammy I. Tsunematsu is entitled, 'Yoshio Markino, – the painter of fog'.<sup>165</sup> Markino was nicknamed 'Heiji, painter of fog, in



Fig 34: Yoshio Markino, *Feeding the Gulls, Blackfriars Bridge*.<sup>166</sup>

London'.<sup>167</sup> He initially found it difficult to find a market for his paintings. But things changed when W. J. Loftie chose many of them to illustrate a book on London. In his

<sup>164</sup> Markino, *Japanese Artist in London*, p. 189.

<sup>165</sup> Sammy I. Tsunematsu, 'Introduction', Yoshio Markino, *A Japanese Artist in London* (Brighton: In Print Publishing Ltd, 1991), p.v.

<sup>166</sup> Loftie, facing p. 112.



sepia drawing *Feeding the Gulls, Blackfriars Bridge*, the buildings in the background are blurred beyond recognition. The eye is drawn away towards the misty distance by the solid line of the bridge, whose detail is shown in the foreground of the picture. In spite of the lack of colours, the artist manages to show the different densities of the fog, not only in the distance, but as it swirls around and through the bridge. The circling movement of the gulls echoes the swirling movement of the fog, but also provides a white contrast to the darkness beyond, thereby balancing the street lights on the bridge. The people crowd around the parapet, feeding the gulls but also looking into the grey mass beneath the bridge. It is reminiscent of the passage from the opening of *Bleak House*: 'Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.'<sup>168</sup> The solidity of the bridge's column reassures the viewer as it stands out against the vaporous nature of the background. Markino's fascination with the mist and the way in which the 'background is mystified abruptly' shows in this picture. He writes how it 'has a great charm for me'. Yet the arch of the bridge appears like a gaping hole or dungeon. The people on the bridge are unaware of this because they cannot see it from their angle. Yet to the viewer it is unsettling, almost frightening – an entrance to the unknown.

In *Fog: Ladies Crossing Picadilly* the fog in the background appears as layers of delicate shades of pink, blue and yellow. People are blurred into indistinction by the fog, except for two ladies in the foreground. We can see the swirl of the dress of a lady in the distance presumably being held up as she crosses the road from the other side, mirroring the two female figures in the foreground. The ladies are dressed warmly, wearing hand muffs, but the viewer is more attracted by the swirls of their skirts which

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<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*, p. xix.

<sup>168</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 49.



are lifted up as they are about to cross the road. They look ahead seemingly unaware of the horse and carriage which is coming up on their right.



Fig 35: Yoshio Markino, *Fog: Ladies Crossing Piccadilly*, 1907.<sup>169</sup>

Yoshio Markino produced many more pictures which used the atmosphere of London as a background to highlight the figures and buildings in the foreground. Many of these figures are women, revealing Markino's admiration of the Edwardian English lady, an admiration he further explored in a book on 'John Bullesses', the females of the English species.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Loftie, facing p. 2.

<sup>170</sup> Yoshio Markino, *My Idealized John Bullesses* (London: Constable, 1912).



M. H. Spielmann, art critic and editor of *Magazine of Art* for 17 years, commented on Markino's work in the introduction to *The Colour of London*:

But he who is endowed with true artistic perception and with the eye of the fine painter, finds no words to express his delight and admiration for the vast town whose greyness is built up of every colour of the rainbow, whose murkiness gives quality to the silvery greys, and tinges the yellow fog with auburn gold, whose mists and moisture lend height and added dignity to the buildings, and close in the shortened vistas with poetic mystery.<sup>171</sup>

For Yoshio Markino, the fog transforms the city from the grey reality into a 'poetic mystery'. For him the fog was not simply grey, yellow or black; even in his sepia drawings he manages to illustrate the varied shading of the fog. His work is closer to the style of Whistler than to Monet. Markino's pictures show a delicate layering reminiscent of Whistler. The colours are not substantial or as thick as Monet's use of colour to portray fog. Yet in the paintings of both artists there is a sense of danger, not sensed by the people in the picture, but certainly sensed by the viewer. In his autobiography Markino tells how: 'At first I was so frightened with London fogs. I thought, if I live in such dreadful fog I will soon become consumptive. So I bought a respirator at a drug store, and used to wear it whenever I went out [...] (Who knows? This "dreadful fog" has become my greatest fascination, only a few years later!).'<sup>172</sup>

### Coburn

Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882-1966) was another foreign artist who also displayed an interest in the London fog through his work, but this time through the medium of photography. An American, he was primarily known for his photographs of literary figures, like Henry James, George Meredith and W. B. Yeats, collected together in two books, *Men of Mark* (1913) and *More Men of Mark* (1922). In 1909 he initiated a book of photographs on the subject of London with a text written by Hilaire

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<sup>171</sup> Loftie, p. vii.

<sup>172</sup> Markino, *Japanese Artist in London*, 1991, p. 4.



Belloc, whom he had photographed in 1908.<sup>173</sup> He does not appear to have been keen on Belloc's text. He later explained: 'The introduction by Hilaire Belloc concerning the city completely ignored my pictures!'<sup>174</sup> Belloc indeed wrote about London fog rather than about Coburn's photographs of it. He insisted that it was 'not wholly produced by modern industrial conditions. The mists of the Thames estuary, the murkiness of the North Sea fog, were there long before London arose.'<sup>175</sup>

Coburn preferred the foreword written by George Bernard Shaw, rejected by the publisher in favour of Belloc's text. Perceptively, Shaw saw the relationship to another American's work: 'Like Whistler, Mr. Coburn has the advantage of looking at London much more imaginatively than any born Londoner could. What he shews us is there, as the camera testifies; but few of us had seen it until Mr. Coburn shewed it to us.'<sup>176</sup> Shaw knew that it took the foreigner to appreciate the beauty of the London atmosphere. A year later, Coburn published a book in a similar layout but dealing with the city of New York. The text, written by H. G. Wells, harks back to the London book and highlights the atmosphere which was so peculiar to the British capital: 'Mr. Coburn has already done his share in recording that soft profundity, that gentle grey kindness, which makes my mother London so lovable.'<sup>177</sup> He predicted that a future generation 'will know nothing of carbon-laden fog-veils and sooty bricks and the blackened stems of trees against the spring'.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn, *London* (London: Duckworth & Co), 1909.

<sup>174</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer, An Autobiography*, ed. by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (New York: Dover Publications, 1978), p. 74.

<sup>175</sup> Coburn, *London*, [online], [cited on [www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/earlyphotos/](http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/earlyphotos/)], accessed 10 April 2009.

<sup>176</sup> G. B. Shaw (unpublished foreword for *London*), cited in Gernsheim, p. 74.

<sup>177</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn, *New York* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1910), foreword by H. G. Wells, cited in Gernsheim, p. 76.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.



Coburn's book was the first to be produced from his own press using a photogravure process where the excess ink was wiped off by hand. He was proud of the quality of the finished product and wrote: 'I think I may claim that in my hands photogravure produced results which can be considered as "original prints", and which I would not hesitate to sign.'<sup>179</sup> Coburn's pictures highlight the mysteriousness and isolation of the fog. In his photograph, *Hyde Park Corner*, the lack of clutter, with the horse-drawn bus is dimly visible in a solitary position between the trees provides a sense of melancholy isolation. Everything behind the trees has lost its contour and shape.

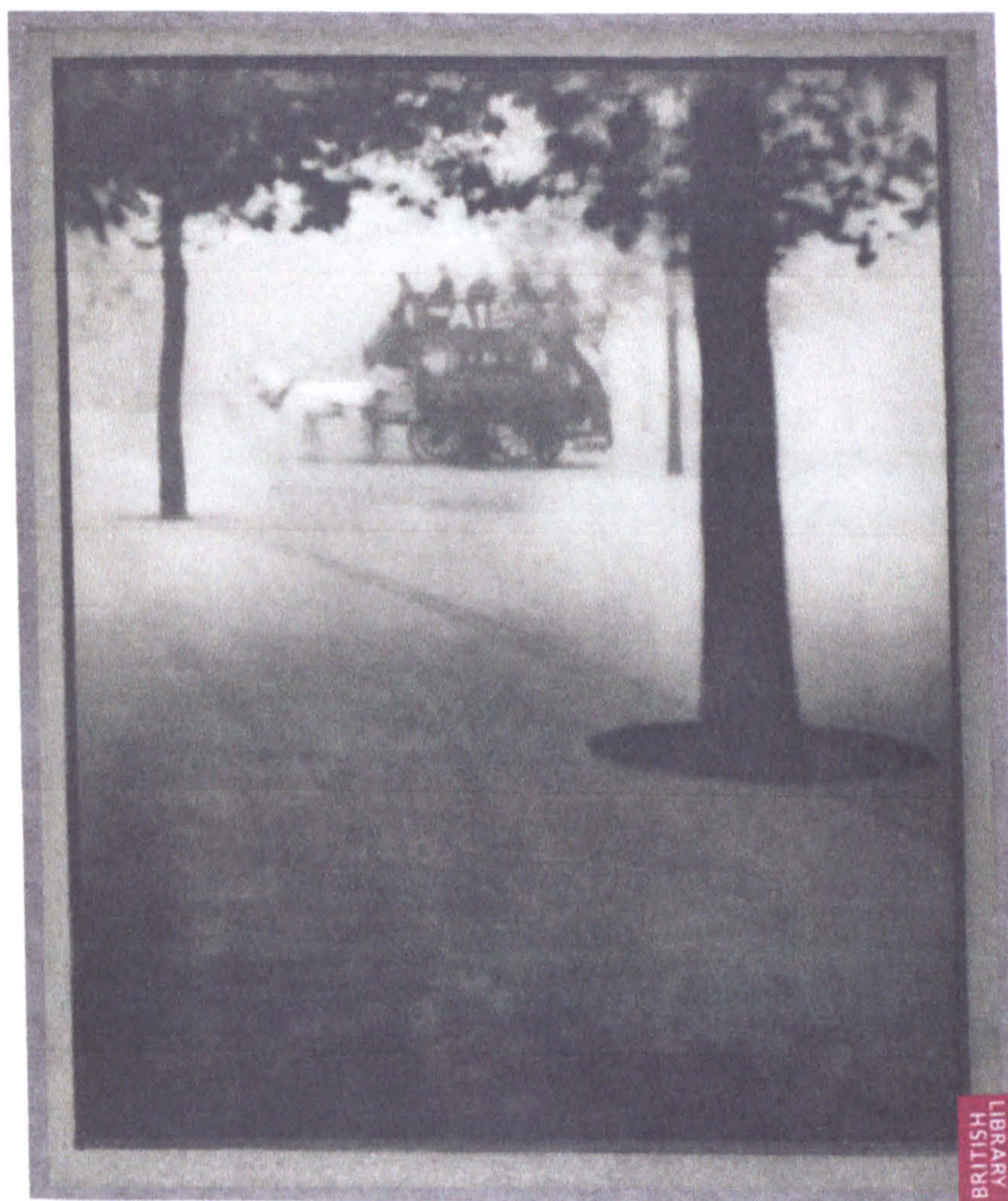


Fig 36: Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Hyde Park Corner*, 1909.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>180</sup> Coburn, *London*.



Another picture, *Fog, Kensington Gardens*, has a similar effect. Belloc's text describes 'the curious way in which London engulfs village after village, creeping round it as a flood of lava might creep round a temple or a walled enclosure', creating an unspoken parallel to the way fog submerged the built environment.



Fig 37: Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Fog, Kensington Gardens*, 1909.<sup>181</sup>

Coburn's photographs were carefully composed. Whistler had complained some years before: 'If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surfaces he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this.'<sup>182</sup> Coburn presented photography as art, using fog for

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<sup>181</sup> Coburn, *London*.

<sup>182</sup> James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: Heneimann, 1994), p. 128.



aesthetic effect in a similar way to Whistler, highlighting the mystery and isolation created by the fog.

## Conclusion

During the nineteenth century, a few artists attempted to represent London as the negation of natural beauty, its smoke, fogs, industrial chimneys and ships cluttering up the the Thames and belching noxious fumes into the atmosphere. Yet this was not popular with the middle classes who were increasingly dominating the art market. John Constable, impelled by a personal apprehension of the consequences of atmospheric pollution for his own health, made some faltering steps towards this in his *The Opening of Waterloo Bridge*, but his nervousness about portraying the smoking chimneys in the background of his painting meant that he could not decide whether to leave them in or not. After revising the painting for over ten years, he finally exhibited it at the Royal Academy, but his sense of failure was accentuated by the negative reaction with which it was greeted. The art world was simply not prepared to sacrifice the clean lines and blue skies which it had appreciated through the influence of Canaletto.

Turner's 1835 painting, *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge*, never shown to contemporaries, was very much ahead of its time. Whether it might have made representations of atmospheric pollution in more acceptable had it been exhibited, will never be known. Turner's own reluctance to show it reveals his indecision too. London's solid reality is reduced by fog into an ambiguity, representing Turner's own anxiety regarding London's future, an anxiety stated in the verse accompanying the 1809 painting, *London from Greenwich Park*. Later English artists' work represents a battle to rid the art market of the pre-conceived ideas that even views of London had to depict the purity of nature and its comforting harmony with the urban cityscape. W. L. Wyllie's *London from the Monument* (1870) was a critical and market failure. John



O'Connor's 1874 painting, *The Embankment*, revealed the more acceptable side of representing London, and perhaps registered the beginning of a change of attitude towards the city in which negative representations, as in literature, were becoming more common. The foreground is clear and uncluttered, but the background does show smoking chimneys and industrial activity – a positioning very reminiscent of Constable's earlier painting.

It was foreign artists, like Whistler and Monet, who saw in the fog of London, not a representation of the industrial ugliness which London could produce, but a softening of its harsh, solid lines, transmuting London's solidity to a formlessness they found fascinating. Whistler saw the fog turning the city into a 'fairy-land', where 'the whole city hangs in the heavens'.<sup>183</sup> Through the paintings of Monet, the city, in terms of its solid forms, seems in danger of dissolving into fluidity. For Monet, the built environment of London was ugly, foursquare; the fog transmuted it into something indeterminate and magical. The ambiguity between form and formlessness in his paintings hangs in the air like the fog that created it. The Japanese artist Markino also perceived a softening of form, but he also portrayed harder shapes in the foreground, opening up chasms of vaporous nothingness reminiscent of a dungeon. Coburn's photographs again concentrate on the softening of form and the contrast between definite structures in the foreground and foggy vagueness behind, rather than the dissolution of form altogether. But as in Markino's work, the fog isolates human individuals, creating an unsettling effect of loneliness in the bustling city. At Hyde Park Corner the omnibus is on its own, its passengers cut off from any other human society, just as Markino's ladies crossing Piccadilly cling anxiously to each other for

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<sup>183</sup> Whistler, *Ten o'clock*, p. 15.



protection as the hubbub of the street is dissolved into formless indeterminacy in the background.

By the *fin-de-siècle* years, indeed, there was a growing interest in what could not be seen, in mystery and visual inaccessibility. ‘The “obscure”’, as Daniel Pick remarks, ‘became something of a tag to identify the *fin de siècle* itself along with the dark colours and shadow lines so often described in its novels. Stories united by little else often seemed at least to share an intense preoccupation with sombre shades, fading lights and dim worlds beyond immediate recall.’<sup>184</sup> Not only in the visual arts, but also in fiction, blindness, fog, mist, smoke, darkness and obscurity came to play a more central role in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. ‘In the 1880s and 1890s’, as Pick notes, ‘popular fiction as well as esoteric human sciences focused upon the relations of blindness and insight, visibility and invisibility in a variety of ways.’<sup>185</sup> The uses of obscurity in narrative fiction extended to the metaphorical and the symbolic, both in the work of major writers and in the popular stories of minor literary figures who have themselves in the meantime fallen into obscurity. ‘Blurring and masking, [...] light and dark, sight and sightlessness’ were the focus of increasing literary and artistic attention in the 1880s and 1890s and on into the Edwardian period. This was the product not least of growing anxieties about the social and moral condition of London and a growing feeling that it was becoming a threat to moral clarity and social order, with the conventional boundaries of proper behaviour and control dissolving into chaos, as we shall now see.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Daniel Pick, ‘Stories of the Eye’, in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 186-199, (p. 186).

<sup>185</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>186</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.



## Chapter Four: Fog and Social Tension

### Introduction

In a novel published in 1873, but set in the distant future, the theosophist Edward Maitland (1824-1897) asked

Who now that sees our flat and commodious roofs, with their friendly gatherings, and elegant adornments, can realize the time when for an aerialist to pass over a large town, at a moderate height, would have been to court destruction by suffocation! For then every house was a volcano, and every chimney a crater, in a state of perpetual eruption, vomiting forth fire and smoke that made the atmosphere lurid, and loaded it with darkness and poison.<sup>1</sup>

Since the early 1870s, he fantasized, a growing shortage of coal had driven people to discover alternative sources of energy, producing a time when, finally, ‘the freshest air and the quietest repose are to be found, and not a “London black,” once so proverbial, comes to soil their garments’.<sup>2</sup> Maitland’s fantasy signalled a new and rapidly growing concern with the threat posed by smoke and fog. As Bill Luckin has remarked, of the second half of the nineteenth-century, ‘terrifying images of “strangulating” smoke fog and biological or racial decline interacted with and reinforced one another, generating an astonishingly powerful set of deeply pessimistic environmental discourses’.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as this chapter will argue, these discourses can be read metaphorically as environmental. Visions of death and disease were combined with anxieties concerning the degeneracy of Londoners, as well as the potential of the poorest and most brutal members emerging to upset the existing social balance: these anxieties were conjured up in

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Maitland, *By and By: An Historical Romance of the Future*, 3 vols (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1873), I, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Luckin, ““The heart and home of horror”: the great London fogs of the late nineteenth century’, *Social History*, 28 (2003), 31-48 (p. 33).



representations of fog, providing a series of dramatic images of the social tensions of the age.

Their first startling expression was in the widely reported disaster of the Smithfield Cattle Show of 1873. The annual Smithfield cattle show coincided in December 1873 with one of the worst fogs in living memory. The Hon. F. A. R. (Rollo) Russell, in his seminal work on London fogs, describes this fog as ‘one of the thickest and most persistent of this century’.<sup>4</sup> London, according to G. M. and P. D. Hartwig, ‘was enveloped in a misty shroud of almost unprecedented density’ at this time.<sup>5</sup> Whether it began, as the Hartwigs claimed, on 8 December, 1873 or a day later, as most other commentators thought, all sources agree that this ‘dense black fog’ continued until 14 December.<sup>6</sup> Its impact on the cattle was so devastating that the phrase ‘fog fever’ was coined to describe it.<sup>7</sup> ‘The unpleasant thickness and pungency of the fog-laden atmosphere’ reported *The Daily News*, ‘bore heavily on the fat cattle which stood openly panting and coughing in a very distressing way.’<sup>8</sup>

Animals begun to be distressed as early as the first day of the fog, ‘and exhibited symptoms as if they had been inhaling a noxious gas.’<sup>9</sup> By the time the show closed that evening, efforts had been made to introduce more air in to the building by opening doors and ventilators. But this had no effect. It may have slightly cooled down the hall, but it would not have helped introduce purer air, since the fog had not

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<sup>4</sup> The Hon. Rollo Russell, *London Fogs* (London: Edward Stanford, 1880), p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Hartwig, p. 138.

<sup>6</sup> Russell, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Hartwig, p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily News*, 10 December 1873, p. 2, col. a.

<sup>9</sup> Hartwig, p. 139.



abated, and the lack of wind would have meant that the stagnant air in the hall would not be forced out. In order to cool down the overheated hall and reduce the competition for any oxygen that still remained, the gas lamps were extinguished. Other measures included trying to damp down the dust created by the numerous visitors during the day by sprinkling water over the floor. The organisers of the cattle show employed extra watchmen to keep an eye on the cattle, in conjunction with veterinary surgeons, who remained in the hall overnight to assess the situation.

Despite all this, according to *The Daily News*, the distress of the animals increased hourly: 'By daybreak two had died where they lay in the Hall, and by nine o'clock the reception yard was full of the great suffering animals, panting piteously in a state closely akin to suffocation; while in the interior of the hall sobbed and panted others nearly, if not quite in as bad a state.'<sup>10</sup> During the course of Wednesday, it was reported that one animal had certainly died in the reception yard. Several had been slaughtered before they could be removed. Two had died in the vans after permission to remove them had been granted. Others had had to be slaughtered after they had been removed elsewhere: 'not, as the Irishman said, to save their lives, but for the value of the meat'.<sup>11</sup> By Thursday morning, according to the Smithfield Club's own records, 91 cattle had been removed at the request of their owners or agents, and, 'of these, 50 were slaughtered, some died in the vans in which they were taken away, and some recovered'.<sup>12</sup> The losses were devastating.

*The Daily News* had no doubts as to what had caused the deaths of the cattle:

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<sup>10</sup> *Daily News*, 11 December 1873, col. d.

<sup>11</sup> Hartwig, p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> E. J. Powell, *History of The Smithfield Club* (London: The Smithfield Club, 1902), p. 54.



That the sole ailment is suffocation is proved by an examination of the animals that have died or been slaughtered, their lungs being found gorged with black blood. No case of disease has occurred; indeed, the veterinary surgeons would much prefer an outbreak of contagious disease to the present visitation, as they would know how to cope with that, while now they are powerless.<sup>13</sup>

The newspaper began a campaign to reduce the animals' suffering by excluding the public and allowing the animals to be removed where possible. The saga of the 1873 Smithfield cattle show was widely reported, and was one of the most sensational demonstrations of just how deadly London fog could be.

The fog took its toll on the human population as well; Rollo Russell describes how 'in the evening a choking sensation was felt in breathing'.<sup>14</sup> The potential of the fog's deadly impact on human beings was discussed in the medical press shortly afterwards. *The Medical Times and Gazette* of that week raised the issue under the title 'Killed by the Fog'. The title distinguished between those people who were killed in accidents due to the lack of visibility in the fog, and those who were killed because of the fog's direct impact on their health.

The 1873 article acknowledged that spells of very cold weather were already accepted as increasing the death rates of the elderly and vulnerable. It considered that 'the influence of a fog is not so apparent to those of the outer world', the general public, as it was from the statistics of the Registrar-General.<sup>15</sup> It cautioned people against following the age-old advice of ensuring good ventilation even in cold weather: 'The extreme discomfort we have seen in some cases during the last few days has been distressing to witness, and has in some instances ended in death; but an easy death is

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<sup>13</sup> *Daily News*, 11 December 1873, p. 6, col. d.

<sup>14</sup> Russell, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> 'Killed by the Fog', *The Medical Times and Gazette: A Journal of Medical Science, Literature, Criticism and News*, 11 (13 December 1873), p. 668, col. b.



almost preferable to the sufferings of some who yet remain, but whose condition is hopeless.<sup>16</sup> Other medical journals also highlighted the dangers of the foggy atmosphere. It could cause extreme discomfort to those with lung complaints or to the elderly. *The Medical Times* sympathised because to ‘an irritated lung the combination of cold and smoky air is particularly unbearable. Violent coughing ensues; and whilst the patient coughs he cannot breathe, and cough materially interferes, moreover, with circulation.’<sup>17</sup>

*The British Medical Journal* ran a series of reports from different London hospitals to reveal the impact of the fog. It included the usual list of accidents which had occurred because of the poor visibility. In addition, many hospitals took the opportunity to mention the general effect of the fog on people’s health. Charing Cross Hospital stated that:

Persons in good health who were living in the fog suffered much bodily discomfort, and smarting of the conjunctivae was frequently accompanied by severe frontal headache. To invalids, however, and especially to those suffering from disease of the lung, the atmosphere was most distressing [...] The death-rate amongst the in-patients suffering from heart and lung-diseases was greatly increased.<sup>18</sup>

The publication of the Registrar-General’s weekly statistics on deaths quantified in human terms the deadly impact of the fog and attracted the attention of *The Times*:

We are very glad indeed to hear that 780 Londoners above the average died the week before last of the fog. We do not want them to die, of course, but if they were to die, it is better that they should die of the fog, and so get rid at once of the superstition that the most disagreeable, inconvenient, dangerous, and spirit-depressing visitation which falls on Londoners is somehow “good

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 668, col. b.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 668, col. b.

<sup>18</sup> *The British Medical Journal*, 20 December 1873, p. 731.



for us". It is not good for us, any more than for cattle, but bad, as the Registrar's return shows.<sup>19</sup>

Early in the New Year, 1874, *The Times* decided to run another article on the subject (which had first appeared in *The Lancet*) to give maximum coverage to the mortality statistics published a couple of weeks previously:

The Registrar-General's weekly returns show that whereas the death-rate in London for the week ending December 6 was 23 per 1,000, in the following week, when the fog was prevailing, the rate rose to 27, and in the week afterwards the full effect of the fog is shown by the remarkable death-rate of 38 per 1,000. The deaths returned from phthisis and disease in the respiratory organs in the same weeks were 520, 764, 1,112.<sup>20</sup>

In 1814 a tombstone in Kensal Green Cemetery testified: 'L.R./Who died of suffocation in the great fog of London/1814.'<sup>21</sup> In the revised edition of his book, *The Climate of London*, Luke Howard, a manufacturing chemist, meteorologist and Quaker, says of a fog which occurred on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1828: "The effect was most distressing, making the eyes smart and almost suffocating those who were in the street, particularly asthmatic persons."<sup>22</sup> Anecdotal and literary evidence had been pointing out the dangers of a foggy atmosphere for decades. Fog could not only cause death by suffocation, it could also as Charles Manby Smith pointed out, create 'a misty atmosphere fraught with catarrh and influenza'.<sup>23</sup>

Many pictures of people in the fog show them trying to protect themselves from inhaling it by covering their mouths with a handkerchief. Other attempts to

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<sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 29 December 1873, p. 4, col. c.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 2 January 1874, p. 11, col. e.

<sup>21</sup> *Magazine of the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery*, April 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Howard, III, p. 303.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Manby Smith, *Curiosities of London Life, or Phases, Physiological and Social of the Great Metropolis* (London : William and Frederick, 1853), p. 80.



protect oneself from the ill-effects of the fog was the introduction of fog-glasses. *Punch* in 1849 had heralded this by extending their use to horses, but explained that they 'should like to test the alleged power of these glasses, by putting them on, and plunging our head into a tureen of cold pea-soup'.<sup>24</sup> Although as *Punch* continues perhaps the glasses should be sent to France, or even to politicians in Britain, extending the metaphor to the world of politics. In a later sketch an elderly lady wears fog-glasses and covers her mouth with a handkerchief.



Fig 38: Fog-glasses (people).<sup>25</sup>



Fig 39: Fog-glasses (horses).<sup>26</sup>

Yet it was the 1873 Smithfield cattle disaster which for the first time established a discursive connection between fog and health on a continuous basis. From this point on, fog was widely seen as a threat. At frequent intervals, commentators produced fresh statistics to illustrate the devastation it caused. Thus in 1880 for example, Rollo Russell highlighted the higher death rates during a fog which lasted off and on for 8 days in late January to early February of that year. He notes

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<sup>24</sup> *Punch*, 17 (1849), p. 194.

<sup>25</sup> *London Sketches – A November Fog, The Graphic*, 9 November 1872.

<sup>26</sup> *Punch*, 17 (1849), p. 194.



the higher than average deaths from respiratory diseases but also a sharp increase in deaths from whooping cough as well: 'The excess of deaths in London during the three weeks was 2994, and of these probably at least 2000 may be ascribed to the character of the fog alone, and not to the cold.'<sup>27</sup> Rollo Russell listed the dangers of the polluted air on the urban population, and highlighted the greater dangers to the population to the east of the city:

Owing to the prevalence of westerly winds the eastern portion of the town suffers more from smoke and fog than the western, and from this and other reasons its inhabitants present an unhealthy appearance altogether unlike that of the country population. The evil effects of smoke upon health may be roughly classed as follows: Actual suffocation of healthy persons; aggravation of lung diseases, bronchitis, and nervous disorders; prostration of convalescents and others from want of fresh air; effects similar to those produced more conspicuously by dust in grinding mills, factories of textile fabrics, etc., by the constant presence of small solid particles in the air, weakening the system and shortening life; effects upon the mind and spirits, resulting frequently in a resort to alcoholic drinks, producing disease; damage to eyesight by want of light and use of gas; accidents by railway, road, and river.<sup>28</sup>

Russell's warnings articulated a view of fog as a threat to health and well-being that had become widespread by the late nineteenth century. It was to be expressed by writers of fiction in far more drastic, general terms, linking fog not just to the physical but also to the moral health of the capital.

## London Apocalypses

### I

Rollo Russell did not stop at illustrating the physical threat posed by London fog. For him, it also posed a spiritual threat, and he lists 'moral evils' which are produced by these clouds of smoke; the loss of sunshine causes 'an increase in the use

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<sup>27</sup> Russell, p. 29.



of spirituous liquors, which again lead to disease, misery, and death. The winter gloom of London is very unfavourable to sobriety.<sup>29</sup> The loss of the natural world, whose view is blotted out by the haze of pollution is to Russell the loss of 'sermons from nature which humanity has need of.'<sup>30</sup> God's influence can be seen in the natural world, and moral lessons gained, but all this is lost to those who most need it in the man-made city of London.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the unease regarding the atmosphere of London and the medical consequences of these urban fogs took on a metaphorical form in a series of novellas and short stories. The first appeared in 1880 and was written by William Delisle Hay: *The Doom of the Great City; being The Narrative of a Survivor, Written A.D. 1942*. Hay's story recalled events which the author imagined taking place in February 1882, two years after the actual publication of the novella, from the perspective of sixty years after the narrator's involvement. It tells of a major black smoke-fog that had lasted since Christmas and which destroyed all life in the capital on the fateful day of the narrator's birthday. By setting the disaster shortly after the date of writing, the author gives his story a contemporary resonance and lends it a prophetic quality. It was written as a warning of a possible impending ecological disaster brought about by the dirty atmosphere and constituted a somewhat hyperbolic imaginative response to the medical and scientific literature of the time which warned of the dangers of the smoky atmosphere.

It ultimately expressed an increasing pessimism about the urban environment, especially of London, and reflected a widespread feeling that such cities were growing

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.



too rapidly at the expense of a supposedly more idyllic rural lifestyle. City-dwellers were not only physically unable to compete with their country counterparts, but were becoming immoral as well.

The survivor in Hay's story recounts his narrative from his exile in New Zealand, having fled from the horrors of the events he is about to recount. He describes his own rural idyll, as a loving grandfather celebrating his birthday, surrounded by his numerous family, 'turning the assemblage to a profit' by picking peaches and oranges to send to the market. This is in contrast to the London of his youth where 'the monotonous drudgery of my City life' is likened 'to the "hard labour" of a prison'.<sup>31</sup> In his youth, he says, he was compelled to leave university and move to London in order to earn a living after his father's death. Supporting his mother and sister, who have also been forced out of his father's country rectory, the narrator has an intense loathing of London, and chafes under the newly imposed hardships of his life. This undoubtedly reflects the author's own experience. In his autobiographical book on New Zealand, published in 1882, Hay narrates how he had gone there as an emigrant but had been forced to return to London: 'Not until a few days before I left its shores had I any other idea but that the rest of my life was destined to be that of a colonist [...] Circumstances, which have nothing to do with this chronicle, caused me to lay down axe and spade, and eventually to become a spoiler of paper instead of a bushman.'<sup>32</sup> Hay's evident loathing of London and obvious hankering after country life may well have been the products of this disappointment. New Zealand, as the title of his book suggested, was for him a

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<sup>31</sup> William Delisle Hay, *The Doom of the Great City; Being The Narrative of a Survivor, Written A.D. 1942 in British Future Fiction: The End of the World*, ed. by I. F. Clarke (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001), pp. 17-68 (p. 24).

<sup>32</sup> William Delisle Hay, *Brighter Britain! Or Settler and Maori in Northern New Zealand* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1882), p. iii-iv.



'brighter Britain', with British civilization rebuilt in a natural world far removed from the foggy atmosphere of the mother country.

In Hay's novella, the narrator's highly critical description of London centres on its 'murky atmosphere, the dingy gloom'.<sup>33</sup> Over the previous weeks before the disaster 'London had been stifled in a fog of varying density'.<sup>34</sup> The writer wonders whether 'anyone ever attempted to write a history of London fogs, their gradual rise and progress, or gradual increase in duration and density up to their terrific culmination'. He proffers the standard historical and scientific description of the fog used by many writers and journalists of this time. Mist is a natural weather condition of London 'especially in those districts lying near to the river, or to localities that had originally been marshes'.<sup>35</sup> But the natural mists have been corrupted, 'supercharged with coal smoke, with minute carbonaceous particles, "grits" and "smuts" with certain heavy gases, and with a vast number of other impurities'. The fog, part of the natural world, has degenerated into an urban smoke-fog: what would be termed by 1905 a smog.

The dirty atmosphere, as well as being uncomfortable and dangerous to health, is not merely a physical phenomenon. It also provides a veil through which the narrator sees 'the odious colours of the evil that lies hidden behind the awful pall. Sadly, solemnly, grievingly, I must repeat – the old metropolis of England harboured Vice and Sin as its dearest, most cherished inhabitants. Evil!<sup>36</sup> This evil extends to all

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<sup>33</sup> Hay, *The Doom of the Great City*, pp. 17-68 (p. 23).

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p.38.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 32.



walks of life, from corruption in the law and business to sexual promiscuity and the increase of prostitution:

Among the higher ranks of society immorality was so common as to excite but small attention [...] Down through the middle class filtered every evil of aristocratic birth, losing nothing in the process [...] while up from the lowest depths there constantly arose a stream of grosser, fouler moral putrescence, which it would be a libel on the brutes to term merely bestiality.<sup>37</sup>

The narrator, newly arrived from the country, a first-generation Londoner and an unwilling city dweller, is appalled by the low standard of London morals, and the high level of corruption in all sections of London life. Here, fog is a metaphor for lack of moral clarity, the inability to draw visible boundaries between good and evil, honesty and corruption, chastity and vice.

The fog brings moral retribution, like a Biblical plague. When the narrator leaves London for Dulwich to stay with friends on his birthday, their discussion is centred on an as yet unconfirmed story that people have been 'choked with the fog regularly strangled and killed outright' in Bermondsey.<sup>38</sup> Whether the story is credible provokes a debate between the narrator and his host, Mr Forrester and his physician son, Wilton. This discussion reflects the general tenor of discourses on the fog problem of the day. The narrator, invigorated by the cleaner air of Dulwich, becomes more optimistic:

It began by my observing that I could not understand how the fog – however bad it might be – could become sufficiently thick or poisonous as to destroy life. Moreover, we had been accustomed, more or less, to London fogs ever since London existed, and I had never heard that people had been killed by them in that way before [...] My argument therefore was, that as the fogs had not before been found directly hostile to life, it was to be presumed they were not so now, since no distinctly new element had been imported into them [...]

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 40.



I was inclined to take the usual Londoner's view, and to scoff at the idea of a time-honoured nuisance turning out an actual danger.<sup>39</sup>

'The elder Forrester points out the 'clear evidence that the fog injured health, even to the point of proving very quickly fatal to old people, and to those who were suffering from chest complaints or pulmonary weakness of any kind [...] The statistics of the death-rate showed this to be so beyond dispute.' Even though the narrator's host accepts these statistics and accepts the possibility that an 'intensification of the fog would tend to the detriment of human life', he cannot accept that the fog has caused the deaths rumoured in Bermondsey: 'Although he saw the possibility of such accidents in some distant period of the future, yet he could not realise to his mind their actual occurrence now.'<sup>40</sup>

It is left to the physician and scientist, Wilton Forrester, to give credence to the rumour and to explain scientifically how death might occur. He remembers a case, two years previously, of a cabman who had mysteriously died. The cause was felt to be too much drink, leading him to fall off his cab. In fact a post-mortem examination showed:

The cause of death was evident from the state of the lungs and air-passages, which were highly congested. The bronchi and tubes ramifying from them were clogged with black, grimy mucus, and death had evidently resulted from a sudden spasm, which would produce suffocation, as the lungs would not have the power in their clogged condition of making a sufficiently forcible expiratory effort to get rid of the accumulated filth that was the instrument of death.<sup>41</sup>

People could choke to death because of the amount of detritus inhaled through breathing in the dirty fog. The post-mortem results echo those found in the

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.



examinations of the dead cattle after the Smithfield cattle show of 1873. But the black mucus is also a sign of the internal corruption at the heart of man. Just as the fog provides a veil for man's immorality, so it begins to infect both morally and physically. The phlegm found in the cabman's lungs is a sign of the moral corruption which Hay sees in Londoners.

The men's fear of the fog becomes reality the following morning when they set out to discover why the postman has not arrived. When they reach the main street in Dulwich, they are greeted by the sights and sounds of a panic-stricken crowd. London has been cut off 'by an impenetrable wall of fog' and the borders between the healthier suburban districts and the deadly 'Great City' take on the physical dimensions of an actual wall.<sup>42</sup> It is almost as if the city has placed itself in quarantine. This is similar to the way Dickens describes the fog as a series of differently coloured borders as it gets closer to London in *Our Mutual Friend*. The city has, in fact, become the physical prison that the narrator had accused it metaphorically of being.<sup>43</sup> There is a sense that life is destroyed in London as an act of purification. This outcome is indeed foreseen by 'men who dared to think for themselves, who looked for the coming of some social cataclysm, and who were heard to compare the "Great City" to those Cities of the Plain that the old Biblical legend tells of as being destroyed by fire from heaven'.<sup>44</sup> It is, of course, not fire that destroys life in the city but its opposite elements – water trapped in air – in other words, fog. People and classes could behave corruptly and wickedly because they were hidden from view by the darkness of the atmosphere. There would be a moral benefit deriving from different social classes

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>43</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 479.

<sup>44</sup> Hay, *The Doom of the Great City*, pp. 17-68 (p. 36).



being more visible so that they could set each other a better example. Hay's fictional fog has turned from a means of concealment into an instrument of retribution. Attempts 'to penetrate the vaporous veil' and enter the city fail, with men being forced to return, 'scared and choking to speak of dead men lying in the street whose bodies they had stumbled over, to tell of the suffocating intensity of the dreadful fog'.<sup>45</sup>

With all communication cut off to the centre of London, and no way of knowing the extent of the disaster, or whether its contamination might begin to move further outwards, many people panic and travel further into the country. The narrator, fearing for his mother and sister, who have remained in London, knows that he has to find them. He begins a journey alone towards the city. He is aided by 'a sensible alteration in the fog; it became lighter around us, while puffs of wind were now to be felt at short intervals'.<sup>46</sup> His journey takes him from Dulwich to Camberwell, over Vauxhall Bridge, via the Strand to the City. London has become a heart of darkness, 'a black obscurity' and the Strand is now 'the very heart and home of Horror itself'.<sup>47</sup> The dead are everywhere. Death appears to have been fairly instantaneous. A sentry on guard outside Buckingham Palace still stands upright, seemingly still on guard duty, even though he has died at his post. The fog has affected all: rich and poor, high and low, the actors on stage in a theatre and the audience which had been enjoying the show. There are poignant contrasts – a wealthy mother and her two daughters in a splendid carriage, on their way home from a grand entertainment, have become 'victims of that clammy, relentless fog', and lie not far from 'two miserable little bodies in the gutter, two poor little ragged urchins,

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 53-4.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 46, 51.



barefooted, filthy, half-naked outcasts of the stony streets, their meagre limbs cuddled round each other in a last embrace, their poor pinched faces pressed together and upturned to heaven'.<sup>48</sup>

When the narrator finally reaches his home, a picture of domestic normality greets him – the cat on a chair, his mother and sister sitting next to each other – but they are all dead. They are not part of the corruption of the city but they have been contaminated by the fate of all who are bound within it: 'One common doom, one common sepulchre of gloomy fog, there was for the richest and the poorest, the best and the worst alike.'<sup>49</sup> Just as Dickens makes the point that the corruption which spreads through Tom-all-Alone's in *Bleak House* affects all levels of society by showing the impact of the spread of smallpox, so Hay shows that nobody will be spared the deadly impact of the corruption of the city through the impact which the fog has on its inhabitants. Corruption is a deadly force that will spread to destroy all that is good in society as well.

The final fate of London after 'the GREAT EVENT' is not detailed, and the only practical change made is hinted at by the claim that: 'The tendency of modern times has been to curtail the inordinate increase of large cities.'<sup>50</sup> As Bill Luckin comments: 'At an extreme, those who articulated this anti-urban ideology proposed nothing less than a real or imagined pastoralization of the greatest capital in the world.'<sup>51</sup> For Hay's narrator, sickened by the horror of his experience, however, this is

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 20, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Luckin, p. 33.



not an option. He goes to New Zealand, chosen, we are informed, because it was 'a virgin wilderness, though now one of our most populous rural districts'.<sup>52</sup>

*The Doom of the Great City* is part of a growing literature condemning the unregulated growth of towns, especially that of London. It is an example of a 'tale of the future', a genre which was becoming increasingly popular and included other works of fiction such as Bulwer Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) and Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885). In Hay's story the future is only two years away from the actual date of publication; the story is meant to be read as a warning of what might happen if the problem of the smoke-fog and rampant expansion of the size of towns is not tackled. The immoral and depraved deeds of Londoners are enacted under the darkness of the foggy day in which 'garotters, burglars, and all the guilds of open crime revelled in contented impurity'.<sup>53</sup> The impurity of the criminal classes reflects the impurity of the atmosphere which shields them. In the same way that Hay explains the existence of a natural fog which has been made impure by the smoke of the London atmosphere, so he acknowledges that the good in London 'was so encompassed with evil as to be barely recognisable; while the influences of exuberant vice were such as to warp the integrity of men's ideas of what was right, to benumb their perceptions of moral turpitude, and to lower the standard of excellence to the very mud'.<sup>54</sup> The environmental and moral spheres reflect each other and create a pessimistic picture of moral decline and environmental implosion. Darwinian theories fuel much of the angst of *The Doom of the Great City*, but the evolution of London and its inhabitants is seen not as progressive but as retrogressive. Because of this,

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<sup>52</sup> Hay, *The Doom of the Great City*, pp. 17-68 (p. 21).

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.



Londoners have to be wiped out and lessons learnt from the dire consequences of their sinful ways.

## II

*The Doom of London*, by Robert Barr (1850-1912), published in 1892, twelve years after *The Doom of the Great City*, bears striking resemblances to the earlier work. Robert Barr was originally born in Scotland, but moved with his family to Canada when he was only 4 years old, and first came to London in 1881. Like Henry James and W. D. Hay, he was thus not acquainted with London from birth. Encountering London fog for the first time as an adult, he quickly took a stance on it, and felt the need to write about it, publishing *The Doom of London* in *The Idler Magazine* in 1892, of which with Jerome K. Jerome he was co-founder as well as contributor. A friend of Arthur Conan Doyle, Barr was described by the creator of Sherlock Holmes in 1924 as 'a volcanic Anglo- or rather Scot-American, with a violent manner, a wealth of strong adjectives, and one of the kindest natures underneath it all'.<sup>55</sup> In the February 1905 issue of *The Idler Magazine*, Barr reprinted his story, as he said, 'on account of recent fogs'.<sup>56</sup> He had overheard people talking about 'The Doom of London' during one of these fogs, and this had inspired him to resurrect it. In an editorial in the same issue, Barr recalled how after the original publication of his story, he had been sent the pamphlet of Hay's earlier narrative by an artist, living in Paris. In an accompanying note, the artist had accused him of plagiarism. Barr admitted that 'the evidence [was] so conclusive that no sane man would have taken my word against it'.<sup>57</sup> Yet, he went

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<sup>55</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* (London: John Murray, 1930 p. 140.

<sup>56</sup> *The Idler Magazine: An Illustrated Monthly*, ed. by Jerome K. Jerome & Robert Barr, 26 (February 1905), pp. 540.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 561.



on: 'I had never seen the pamphlet before, nor heard of it.'<sup>58</sup> If we accept this denial, then it seems that the subject was at the forefront of people's consciousness, and especially the fear that the fog might be more dangerous than was generally realised. Barr and Hay tapped into a major anxiety of the day. They also benefited from the accumulated information which was appearing in newspapers and other non-fiction sources on the subject of fog. Barr's short story is remarkably self-restrained and certainly less judgemental of the nineteenth century than Hay's story. In Barr's case, depicted, from the vantage of the distant future, events which purportedly occurred in the last year of the nineteenth century, or in other words, not long after the time of writing.<sup>59</sup>

The narrator, a survivor of a disaster which has killed millions of people in London, is encouraged to tell his story because he wishes to defend the inhabitants from twentieth-century criticism by men like Professor Mowberry of Oxford University, who:

endeavours to show that [...] Londoners were so dull-witted and stupid, so incapable of improvement, so sodden in the vice of mere money-gathering, that nothing but their total extinction would have sufficed, and that, instead of being an appalling catastrophe, the doom of London was an unmixed blessing.<sup>60</sup>

This story, like Hay's, thus has a moral dimension. But whereas Hay listed all areas of London life, business and religion to show how corruption had permeated every level of society, Barr's criticism is much less specific. Hay does admit that there are some good people in London (all of whom, however, meet the same fate). By contrast, Barr

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 561.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Barr, 'The Doom of London', in *The Idler Magazine: An Illustrated Monthly*, ed. by Jerome K. Jerome & Robert Barr (London, 1893), pp. 397-409.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 398.



makes no exceptions. Through Mowberry's criticisms, the race of Londoners is seen as 'dull-witted and stupid', and become degenerate because of its inability to improve. Darwinian theories of evolution had shown that, in order to survive, a race must continually adapt and improve. By refusing to clean up their environment, Londoners were unwilling or unable to adapt, and, in these terms, they were destined to become extinct.

Like Hay, Barr describes the origins of the fog. However, writing from an imagined, distant future, Barr finds it necessary to describe these for his readers because 'fog has now been abolished both on sea and land'.<sup>61</sup> Fog is 'simply watery vapour rising from the marshy surface of the land, or from the sea, or condensed into a cloud from the saturated atmosphere'.<sup>62</sup> This natural phenomenon is then corrupted:

London at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century consumed vast quantities of a soft bituminous coal for the purpose of heating rooms and of preparing food. In the morning and during the day, clouds of black smoke were poured forth from thousands of chimneys. When a mass of white vapour arose in the night these clouds of smoke fell upon the fog, pressing it down, filtering slowly through it, and adding to its density. The sun would have absorbed the fog but for the layer of smoke that lay thick above the vapour and prevented its rays reaching it.<sup>63</sup>

The problem of atmospheric pollution is here firmly laid at the door of the householder. There is no role for industry as a polluter; a view reflecting a widespread belief in the 1890s. Earlier in the century, parliamentary legislation had emphasised the need for industry to consume its own smoke. Industrialists tried to point the finger at the domestic fire as the main polluter but there was a continued general reluctance on the part of legislators to see household smoke as part of the problem. In order to

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 399-400.



legislate successfully, it would have been necessary to interfere with the family home which was felt to be politically unacceptable.

But a gradual change in attitudes around the middle of the nineteenth century had begun to admit that the domestic fire might be the main polluter. An article in *The Lancet* in 1880 reflected this change of direction and viewed the problems as getting worse because of the increasing population:

There is little doubt that the nuisance is extending. As the population increases chimneys increase also, and there are now, at least, as many chimneys as persons in this overgrown town. As the smut-producing area is being increased, it is obvious that the central parts of that area are certain to be overcast whenever the wind is much short of half a gale, no matter what may be its direction.<sup>64</sup>

By the time Hay and Barr came to write their stories, therefore, the expansion of London's population was generally seen as the main factor behind the prevalence of atmospheric pollution.

The fact that fogs were not seen as unusual is again reflected in Barr's story. The narrator repeats popular complacency as a further mark of irresponsibility:

In the first place, fogs were so common in London, especially in winter, that no particular attention was paid to them. They were merely looked upon as inconvenient annoyances, interrupting traffic and prejudicial to health, but I doubt if anyone thought it possible for a fog to become one vast smothering mattress pressed down upon a whole metropolis.<sup>65</sup>

The story goes on to mock an American who has invented a portable, personal oxygen-producing machine to promote well-being and good health. The machine is especially effective on a foggy day. The inventor tries underhand methods to introduce his machine to the head of the narrator's firm, which leads to him being

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<sup>64</sup> *The Lancet*, 23 October 1880, p. 666.

<sup>65</sup> Barr, pp. 397-409 (p. 399).



expelled from the company. It is accidentally left on in the narrator's office, so he survives.

The arrival of the fog on a Friday in November is described in the usual calm and accepting terms as a fog might be described in a newspaper:

The fog did not seem to have anything unusual about it. I have seen many worse fogs than that appeared to be. As day followed day, however, the atmosphere became denser and darker, caused, I suppose by the increasing volume of coal-smoke poured out upon it. The peculiarity about those seven days was the intense stillness of the air. We were, although we did not know it, under an air-proof canopy, and were slowly but surely exhausting the life-giving oxygen around us, and replacing it by poisonous carbonic acid gas.<sup>66</sup>

In Hay's work, people die by breathing polluted air. Barr ignores the science, and kills them by depriving them of air of any kind. Barr was fully aware of the lack of scientific foundation to his story; in fact, it almost caused him not to publish it. He felt that for 'a story of this kind, to be successful, [it] must either be built on a foundation of probability, or it must be so skilfully written that the reader forgets or ignores its lack of probability'. He determined to obtain support for his thesis, before publication, by requesting the opinion of two eminent scientists. John Tyndall (1820-1893) wrote a letter that seemed to imply support: 'As far as he could judge, such a catastrophe might happen, although the fog would need to be very dense and the weather very calm if sufficient air to keep the Londoners alive did not percolate under the edges of the coverlet, as it were.' But perhaps the letter should not be taken at face value. The use of 'coverlet' indicates use of irony, and Tyndall refused to allow Barr to publish his letter at the same time as the story was published, suggesting he had some serious anxieties about its possible reception in scientific circles. If he did, then they

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p. 404.



were certainly justified. A short time later Barr received the very opposite response from Professor Thomas H. Huxley (1825-1895). Barr describes it as a 'crusher'.<sup>67</sup>

A decade later, he tried to make light of it:

It was a four-page letter, and began by saying he had read my story with much amusement. (I thought I had written a tragedy.) The great man went on to say that I would need to nail the edges of my fog down all round London and then cement it to the earth. Even if I did this he was not sure that my projected homicide would be successful. He suggested a rubber blanket instead of a fog.<sup>68</sup>

Intimidated by these comments, Barr had resolved not to publish his story; but his co-editor, Jerome K. Jerome, had insisted that it should be printed, arguing that they 'were not issuing a scientific review, but a popular monthly of fiction'. In the same editorial of 1905, Barr does admit that Hay's device for killing the population of London was better than his, but then he proceeds to enumerate the flaws in Hay's writing. He cannot understand how the clerk manages to survive his walk through the fog: 'He probably survived that he might confound me ten years later as a plagiarist. He also found gas still burning in a Strand theatre, which seems rather remarkable considering the state of the atmosphere.' He criticises Hay for showing Londoners being warned of the dangers of fog and 'paying as scant attention to science as they did some pages before to piety. Indeed Londoners appear to have been such a heedless generation that by-and-by the reader of this pamphlet begins to long for their annihilation.'<sup>69</sup> Since in Barr's own story, his Londoners also disregard the warnings given, this appears rather disingenuous, especially as he continues in the same article to write: 'I think that after these horrors if London does not set to and sweep up her

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p. 560.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 561.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 561-2.



fogs it will not be the fault of either Mr. Hay or myself. London had had warning enough but she seems to have paid little attention to it during the twenty-two years the pamphlet has been in existence.<sup>70</sup>

The idea of London possessing distinct borders is carried further in Barr's story, making it appear as if it is now a self-contained, but airless, box (a point strongly reinforced by Huxley's criticisms). The disaster takes seven days to unfold fully. As with the creation of the world, the seventh day is a day of rest; in this story it reveals people who look as if they are resting but who are, in fact, dead from suffocation. When the narrator realises that all of the people in his firm, including his employer, are dead, it still takes him time to realize the extent of the disaster. Initially he thinks that the noxious vapours are local to his company, some carboys having perhaps been broken in the cellar. Only when he opens a window with the idea of getting help does the narrator realise that the disaster goes further than his own office building: 'The street was silent and dark in the ominously still fog, and what now froze me with horror was meeting the same deadly, stifling atmosphere that was in the rooms.'<sup>71</sup>

The portability of the oxygen machine allows the clerk mobility and his first instinct is to follow his usual route home and go down to Cannon Street underground station. He realizes the foolishness of this action in retrospect: 'He would have known that there could be no trains at Cannon Street station, for if there was not enough oxygen in the air to keep a man alive, or a gas-jet alight, there would certainly not be enough to enable an engine fire to burn, even if the engineer retained sufficient energy to attend to his task.'<sup>72</sup> In fact, the underground tunnel provides a hole into the

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 564.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 406.



enclosed environment of the city, and some pure air is able to get through from its opening in Ealing to maintain some human life. The sight which greets him is one of panic and confusion. The scene is set in semi-darkness: 'The electric lights burned fitfully. The platform was crowded with men, who fought each other like demons, apparently for no reason, because the train was already packed as full as it could hold.'<sup>73</sup> Their reliance on machines (and, of course, the railways were partly responsible for the smoke pollution even though this is not mentioned in this text), leads them to forget that the train needs a human being in order to work it.

When a driver is found, he fights the narrator for the oxygen machine but whilst grabbing it, falls off the moving train. Fortunately, the narrator no longer needs the machine to survive. The train is heading outwards from London. 'A western gale had sprung up' and the forceful wind, supplied by nature, is able to disperse the fog. The narrator goes on to relate that 'one hundred and sixty-seven persons were rescued from that fearful heap of dead' at Cannon Street Station, but many of these died within a couple of days of being rescued, while 'others never recovered their reason'.<sup>74</sup> Of the people on the train, most were dead, but of the two rescued alive 'one [...] his clothes torn from his back in the struggle, was sent to an asylum, where he was never able to tell who he was'.<sup>75</sup> In Hay's story, the people died off-stage; Barr shows the deadly struggle for life in the railway station directly and describes vividly the horrific

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 407-8.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 409.





Fig 40: "Fought like Demons."<sup>76</sup>

way in which many people die. Londoners left alive become madmen. The narrator is the only seemingly rational person left to tell the tale. In both stories, the inhabitants of London are described as degenerate. In Hay's story, the degeneracy is mainly moral. In Barr people are generally 'so dull-witted and stupid, so incapable of improvement, so sodden in the vice of mere money-gathering' and they have lost all human feeling.<sup>77</sup>

### III

In his essay on 'Science Fiction: Past and Present', I. F. Clarke argues 'that the scientific romance is generally either catastrophic or millennial'.<sup>78</sup> In Hay's and Barr's stories, both authors can only see the outcome as catastrophic. The appearance of fog is a prompt for their gloomy prognostications of the future of London. Because fog created an atmosphere which frequently triggered ill-health and often increased the death-rate, it became a metaphor for the sickness of urban society; at its extreme, it was used to portray the death of London. The rapid growth of London's population

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 398.



was viewed by many with alarm. Many felt that this level of growth would lead to its destruction. This apocalyptic view of the city frequently used fog to herald its downfall. Barr's character Professor Mowberry, with many others, drew similarities between the stupidity of Londoners and the inhabitants of Pompeii who were 'making merry at the foot of a volcano'. The situation of London is compared with the dangers of living near a volcano frequently in Barr's story; but whereas the eruption of a volcano is a natural phenomenon, the smoke-fog that kills so many is a natural phenomenon corrupted by the acts of man.

The apocalyptic moral pessimism of Hay and Barr paralleled a rapidly growing discourse of social conflict and tension in the 1880s and early 1890s, of which fog became a key signifier. This reached a climax in the disturbances of February 1886, when the threat of 'outcast London', the casually employed and disorderly poor, took on a very real physical form. A protest meeting of the unemployed in Trafalgar Square on 8 February turned into a riot, with 'roughs' throwing stones through the windows of gentlemen's clubs in Pall Mall, overturning carriages, and looting shops in South Audley Street. The next day, as a dense fog descended upon London, 'roughs' gathered in Trafalgar Square again, and shops were boarded up. Marion Sambourne's diary entry for this day reveals the fear felt by the middle classes: 'Did not go out on account of fog & afraid of riots.'<sup>79</sup> The double danger of the fog and riots seem to link up in people's minds. The fog thickened on 10 February and 'the disorderly classes' gathered in Trafalgar Square again. A mass panic descended on the West End, with rumours flying around that 10,000 dockers were marching in, destroying property as they came. Mobs were said to be converging on the centre of the capital from Kentish

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<sup>78</sup> I. F. Clarke, 'Science Fiction: Past and Present', *Quarterly Review*, 295 (1957), 260-270 (p. 268).

<sup>79</sup> Shirley Nicholson, *A Victorian Household* (Stroud: A. Sutton, 1994), p. 80.



Town and Whitechapel. The police dispersed crowds in Deptford and the Elephant and Castle. In Cumberland Market, 2,000 people gathered in thick fog to hear a speaker who did not turn up: 'Many rough-looking characters were revealed by the light of the lamps' as the police moved in to break up the crowd. Similar though less severe scares in the next two or three years contributed to a reorientation of charity and social reform efforts among the middle classes, which tried to separate the deserving poor from a 'degenerate' residuum by providing them with regular employment.<sup>80</sup>

On 29<sup>th</sup> January 1885, a young Scottish doctor, James Cantlie, gave a widely-discussed address on *Degeneration amongst Londoners* at Parkes Museum of Hygiene. Henry James also commented on the physical condition of the town-dweller, especially those in London. Yet he saw 'the people who bear the distinctive stamp of that physical, and mental degradation [...] the pallid, stunted, misbegotten' as exceptions.

when such exceptions are taken the observer still notes the quantity and degree of facial finish, the firmness of type, if not always its fineness, the clearness and symmetries, the modelled brows and cheeks and chins, the immense contribution made to his impression, above all, by the elements of complexion and stature.<sup>81</sup>

Much of the medical discussion centred on the impact of the foggy air on the stature and health of the Londoner. For many, the fog could only be seen as yet another aspect of London life which shortened the lives of many through complaints like phthisis and other respiratory diseases, as well as the lack of natural daylight which

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<sup>80</sup> Jones, pp. 284-303.

<sup>81</sup> Henry James, 'An English Easter' in *English Hours*, ed. by Leon Edel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 69-87 (p.78). First published *Lippincott's Magazine*, July 1877.



contributed to 'the enfeebled vitality of its inhabitants as it has with their pale faces.'<sup>82</sup> In 1891 George Gissing also noted the effect of fog on mental well-being. He refers to a 'thick black fog [which] penetrated every corner of the house. It could be smelt and tasted. Such an atmosphere produces low-spirited languor even in the vigorous and hopeful; to those wasted by suffering it is the very reek of the bottomless pit, poisoning the soul.'<sup>83</sup>

A year before the 1886 riots, medical opinion had put forward clean and fresh air as the cure for London's social tensions. 'He who would find the centres of decay in a nation, still on the whole robust and active, must seek for them at the points of social tension', argued an article in *The Lancet* in February 1885: 'The proofs of pressure, starvation, and atrophy, of vice and of brutal reversion, and of their results are all to be found here.'<sup>84</sup> The 'means of cure' for such degeneracy were two: 'fresh air and exercise'. The writer was optimistic: 'We have good hope that the national mind, recognising that there is degeneration and that it is curable, will continue to treat it with sympathy, as it has begun to do, and will direct upon it the fresh air of public discussion and the healthy exercise of a wisely corrective legislation.'<sup>85</sup> Writers like Hay and Barr expressed in metaphorical terms the discourses on social tension characteristic of the 1880s and early 1890s; for them too, clean air in a metaphorical as well as a literal sense was the solution to social conflict just as fog aided it and brought it to a head.

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<sup>82</sup> J.P. Williams-Freeman, M.D., *The Effect of Town Life on the General Health with especial reference to London* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1890), pp. 17-18. Williams-Freeman goes on to argue that a fourth generation pure-bred Londoner cannot exist, which illustrates the extreme of the debate under discussion at this time.

<sup>83</sup> George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 422.

<sup>84</sup> 'Degeneration Amongst Londoners', *The Lancet*, 7 February 1885, pp. 264-65 (p.264).

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 265.



For a number of journalists and writers in the late 1880s and early 1890s, fog now appeared as a metaphorical expression for a huge social threat looming over the metropolis. The opening passage of *The Big Bow Mystery* (1891) by Israel Zangwill (1864-1926) expressed this clearly:

On a memorable morning of early December, London opened its eyes on a frigid grey mist. There are mornings when King Fog masses his molecules of carbon in serried squadrons in the city, while he scatters them tenuously in the suburbs; so that your morning train may bear you from twilight to darkness. But today the enemy's maneuvering was more monotonous. From Bow even unto Hammersmith there dragged a dull, wretched vapor, like the wraith of an impecunious suicide come into a fortune immediately after the fatal deed.<sup>86</sup>

Fog here is described in battle terms: 'serried squadrons' and 'masses his molecules'. King Fog appears to be the invader who usually concentrates his forces within the city whilst leaving some to make their mark on the suburbs. But on this day the forces are not so unevenly scattered and the impact of the fog is evenly felt throughout London and its suburbs. Zangwill highlights the cause of the fog by describing him massing 'his molecules of carbon'. The scientific community was, at last, beginning to agree on what the populace had long known: that there was a connection between the fogs of London and the carbon emitted from its chimneys.

Later in the nineteenth-century the term 'King Fog' now joined the more affectionate mid-Victorian Dickensian term of a 'London particular' or a 'peasouper' as a more aggressive, more masculine designation, perhaps reflecting a feeling that fog had come to rule over the city because of its frequency, and that it was now viewed more as an unwelcome invader of tyrannical proportions. This change of attitude is partially explained by the increased amount of scientific and medical literature, attesting to the dangers of the foggy climate. In 1883, George Augustus Sala took a distinctly gendered view: 'Queen's weather! Leaving Charing Cross at seven forty A.M.

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<sup>86</sup> Israel Zangwill, *The Big Bow Mystery* (New York: Dybbuk Press, 2006), p. 1.



on Saturday, there did not seem to be much chance of the weather in question coming to the fore. It seemed the rather, that the Winter King or the Fog Fiend would be the predominate potentate.<sup>87</sup>

*Punch* in 1888 heralded the arrival of 'KING FOG, who paid his first state visit of the season to his own capital'. The mock description noted the music, including

grand fantasias on A Thousand Respiratory Organs, Baron BRONCHITIS was out with his Bandannas borne by four hoarse-men [...] and in the train of KING FOG followed the celebrated General DEPRESSION, with deputations from the various states of Ill-health and Indi-gestion. The rear was brought up by bands of Roughs, Burglars, and Policemen at a respectful distance.<sup>88</sup>

Another article in *Punch* which appeared the same year heads itself: 'In the Days of King Fog.' It refers to a foggy spell which lasted from January 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of 1888 and which again looks at the fog from the point of view of its danger to health. It is illustrated on the following page. In Zangwill's depiction, the fog's impact is felt on people's spirits and health. The simile likening the vapour to 'the wraith of an impecunious suicide come into a fortune immediately after the fatal deed' reminds us that fog had a reputation for increasing suicide attempts and depression.

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87 George Augustus Sala, *Living London: Or, Echoes Re-Echoed* (London: Kemington & Co., 1883), p. 527.

88 *Punch*, 27 October 1888, 95, p. 193.



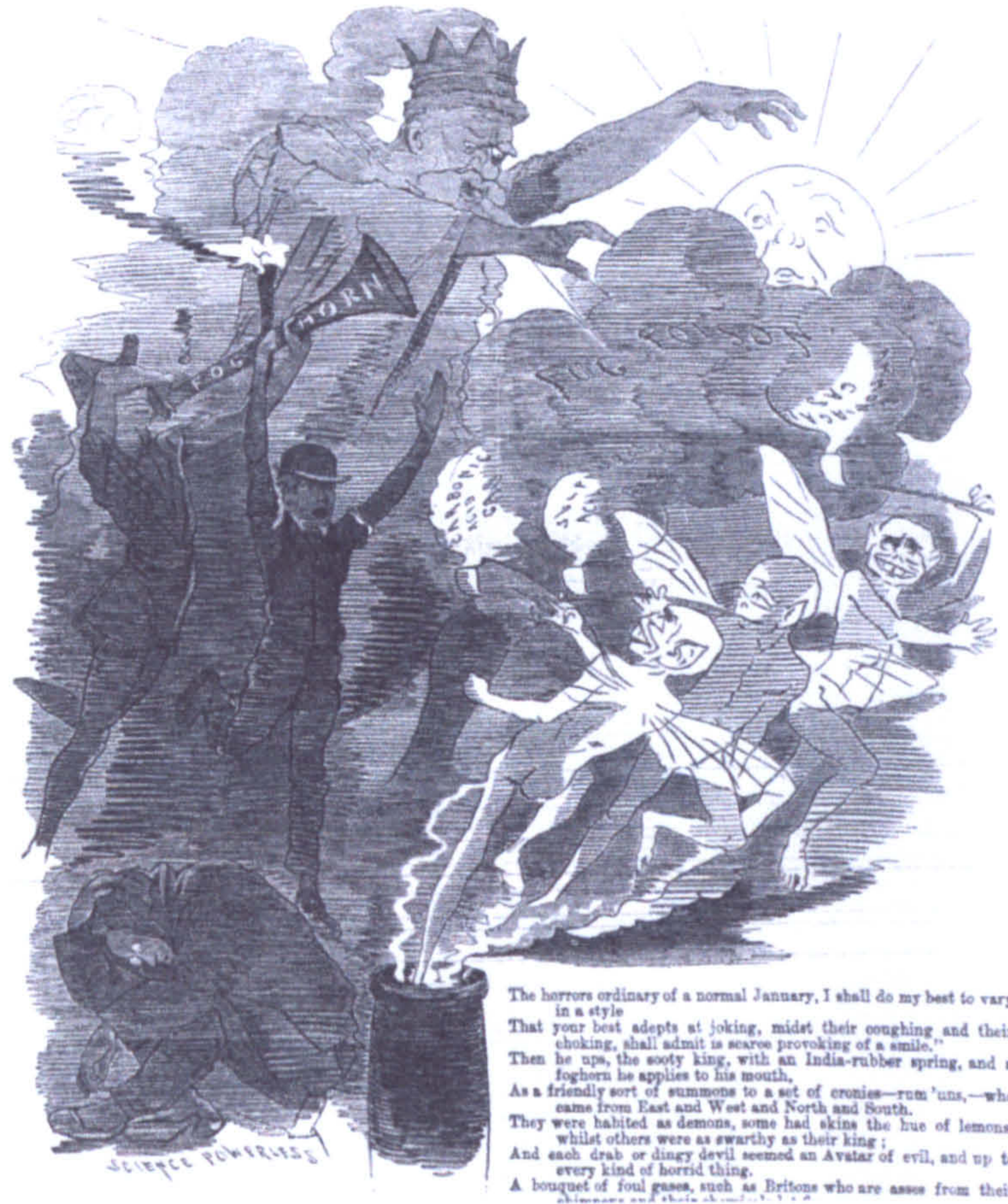


Fig 41: *In the Days of King Fog.*<sup>89</sup>

In 1896, Laurence Binyon gave expression to the discourse on moral degeneration in verse; he describes a foggy day in Deptford:

Alas! I welcome this dull mist, that drapes  
 The path of the heavy sky above the street,  
 Casting a phantom dimness on these shapes  
 That pass, by toil disfeatured, with slow feet  
 And sad mistrustful eyes; while in the mire  
 Children a mockery of play repeat,  
 Drearly to satisfy their starved desire.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>89</sup> *Punch*, 21 January 1888, 94, p. 26.

<sup>90</sup> Laurence Binyon, 'Deptford', *London Visions* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1908), vs. 2, p. 30.



The solidity of the image of the 'mist' which 'drapes the path' suggests to the reader the idea of the physical and psychological oppressiveness of the fog. But it is also a mist which is hiding the 'disfigured' nature of the people. The fog has overcome natural appearances, instincts and desires, leaving even to children the possibility only of enacting a 'mockery of play'.

Nineteen years after his first essay on London fog, Rollo Russell was striking a far more apocalyptic tone. In the lecture delivered to the Building Trades Exhibition in 1899, he claimed that the factory system, symbolised by the fog and smoke, had spread out and taken over the city, destroying the natural world and diminishing the influence of God in people's lives. The constant gloom and pollution were producing a race of people who were regressing, both physically and mentally. He highlighted instances in which London's gloom was actually seen in terms of the end of the world:

Occasionally we see paragraphs in the country papers portraying the alarm caused by the occurrence of intense gloom about midday at long distances from London. This happened at Farnham, for instance, two or three years ago, and it was said that several people, scared by the phenomenon, took it for the end of the world.<sup>91</sup>

Fiction writers took up these themes from the scientific and non-fiction writings of the day and explored the apocalyptic scenario that, for many, loomed if London's fog problem was not dealt with. But writers also viewed the fog as a metaphor for the corruption of the urban environment. It affected the health of Londoners and led to a moral degeneration as city dwellers were forced to live in a darkened environment without sight of the sun or the natural world that was quickly being destroyed by the pollution. This, it was feared, led to greater drinking amongst the working classes, who could not see beyond the dirt and gloom. Londoners, especially those living in the

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<sup>91</sup> The Hon. F. A. Rollo Russell, *London Fog and Smoke* (A lecture delivered at the Building Trades Exhibition on Friday, April 28, 1899), p. 15.



East End, appeared in this vision as troglodytes, as in the future imagined by H. G. Wells in *The Time Machine* (1895) where the Morlocks have degenerated into subterranean monsters ready to emerge at any time to satiate their carnivorous desires by capturing and devouring the gentle, civilised, but in their own way equally degenerate beings who inhabit the daylight world above.

## Overcoming Social Tension

### I

Already in 1903, the subject of London's fog was being treated in a more optimistic manner. A positive outlook of this kind is discernible in the treatment of fog by Frederick Merrick White (1859- ?), who wrote a series of short stories for *Pearson's Magazine* describing various disaster scenarios in the capital city, such as *The Four White Days*, in which London is subjected to the grip of an Arctic winter and its consequences. One of these stories, *The Four Days' Night*, tells 'The Story of a London Fog that turned Daylight into Darkness for Four Days.'<sup>92</sup> Unlike Hay and Barr, White does not use a first-person narrator, a device favoured by H. G. Wells in his own science-fiction stories such as *The War of the Worlds* (1898); neither does he attempt a warning about the danger of ignoring the looming threat of fog by describing the complacent attitude of Londoners to it before the disaster. In fact, White's ecological message regarding the fog is, in the end, quite confused. The initial disaster is not created by the fog but by a fire that breaks out in large petroleum storage tanks stationed on the Thames. A scientist, Martin Hackness (B.Sc., London), has been convinced that an accident of this nature, which creates black plumes of smoke wafting over the capital, will lead to the smoke being pressed down on to London if it

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<sup>92</sup> Fred. M. White, 'The Four Days' Night', *Pearson's Magazine*, 15 (1903), pp. 166-178.



happens on a foggy day, and suffocate those who are unfortunate enough to be caught up in it: 'I pictured that awful canopy of sooty, fatty matter suddenly shut down over a great city by a fog. A fog would have beaten it down and spread it.'<sup>93</sup>

The smoke from the petrol fire is described in terms usually applied to an urban fog: 'The inky vapour spread overhead like a pall.' The fog descends on London at the same time as the conflagration takes hold and therefore has a yellow colour, typical for that time of year. When the fog restricts the movement of the smoke and the smoke is pressed down to ground level, it is a 'black wall [...] greasy and oily and grimy'. The smoke is noxious, reeking of petroleum, making breathing difficult. The Cimmerian darkness it imposes mean that people walk into the river and drown as well as being the cause of numerous other accidents of a kind familiar in normally dense London fogs. There were other more practical deprivations: 'No bread could be baked, no meal could be carried round, no milk or vegetables delivered so long as the fog remained. Given a day or two of this and thousands of families would be on the verge of starvation.'<sup>94</sup>

Yet the people of London are not accused of moral degeneration in White's tale, although the writer cannot help falling back on a stock phrase, indicating the possibility of Divine retribution: 'One of the plagues of Egypt with all its horrors had fallen upon London.'<sup>95</sup> There is no panic, and although there is some attempt by criminals to take advantage of the situation, even they realise that they cannot escape with their stolen goods. Overall we are told: 'London was holding out doggedly and

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<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 170.



stolidly.<sup>96</sup> And because people are unable to reach their own homes, they are forced to stay in whichever house they are made welcome in: 'Belated women, frightened business girls, caught in the fog had sought the first haven at hand, and there they were free to remain. There were sempstresses in Mayfair, and delicately-nurtured ladies in obscure Bloomsbury boarding-houses. Class distinction seemed to be remote as the middle ages.'<sup>97</sup> Thus the fog brings out a strong sense of community, transcending class divisions, which no longer seem to matter.

The situation appears to be deadly, with alarmists predicting disaster: 'Every hour the air, or what passed for air, grew more poisonous. Men fancied a city with six million corpses!'<sup>98</sup> But the crisis is, in the end, resolved by Hackness himself, who lets off explosions from a flying machine through the fog, thus opening channels through which the deadly smoke can escape into the upper air, to dissipate over the sea. This idea, incidentally, was evolved in 1925 by a proposal for a 'Fog Battery', a large cannon that could be fired to disperse the fog into the atmosphere (as a tribute to the designer's sense of neatness, the cannon could be retracted into an elaborate monument).

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, p. 174.



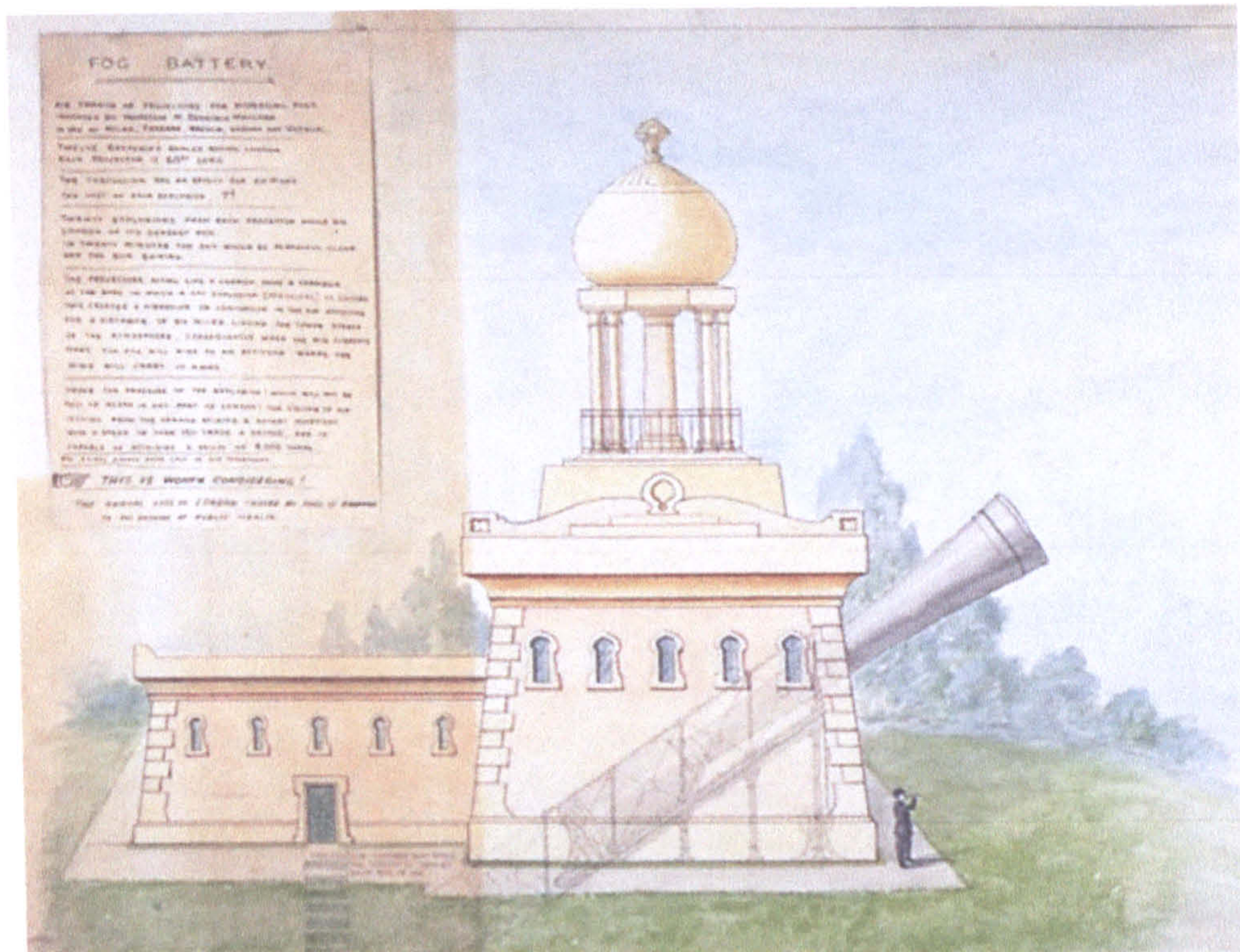


Fig 42: Proposal for a 'Fog Battery'.<sup>99</sup>

After the fog has been dispersed, White reflects on how the disaster might be avoided in future: 'No great mass of people would ever dare to congregate together again where manufacturers made a hideous atmosphere overhead. *It would be a great check upon the race for gold.*'<sup>100</sup> Yet this is the only statement of moral condemnation in the story. White leaves it to one of his protagonists, a character called Eldred, to suggest an answer which puts the blame on the householder as well as industry:

Abolish all fires throughout the Metropolitan area [...] In time it will *have* to be done. All London must warm itself and cook its food and drive all its machinery by electric power. Then it will be one of the healthiest towns in the universe. Everything done by electric power. No thousands of chimneys belching forth black poisonous smoke, but a clear, *pure* atmosphere. In towns like Brighton, where the local authorities have grappled the question in earnest, electric power is half the cost of gas.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Proposal for a 'Fog Battery' (London: Guildhall Library, 1925).

<sup>100</sup> White, pp. 166-178 (p. 174) (my italics).

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, p. 178.



White accepts that this must be done through government interference in the home, reflecting a new willingness to break the long-held convention against interference in private life.

White's story reveals some major differences in attitude towards London and its inhabitants in comparison with the two previous stories by Hay and Barr. London is not shown as a city which is morally decayed or sinful, as in Hay's novella; neither does it show Londoners as 'dull-witted and stupid', as in Barr's story. It also does not wish to reverse industrialisation and revert back to a more rural age. Urbanization is accepted as an irreversible process. In fact, the author wishes to move forward by greater use of electric power. Technology dissolves the fog in its use of the flying machine to take the explosives up in the air and set them off. Under the weight of the catastrophe, Londoners are largely shown in a positive light, breaking down class barriers by helping each other. This reflects a greater optimism about relations between social classes characteristic of this period. 'The "social crisis" of 1886-7' Geoffrey Searle notes, 'had disappeared by the end of Victoria's reign. The "respectable" no longer dreaded an uprising of the dispossessed, and property seemed to be reasonably secure.'<sup>102</sup> Just as importantly, figures like Charles Booth had begun to investigate the world of the poor, and even to quantify poverty and place it in different categories. The poor were no longer a dark, unknown uniform class posing a huge latent threat to civilization, but a complex and differentiated social group in which the respectable working class was as different from the indolent as the middle-classes were themselves: 'Booth had also achieved something very important in that he had largely de-sensationalized slum life, a useful counter to the melodramatic accounts

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<sup>102</sup> G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War: 1886-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 201.



which had preceded his own publications.<sup>103</sup> In their respective stories dealing with a similar catastrophe, Hay, Barr and White all reflect through their description of London urban society, the changing way in which their own contemporaries viewed the present as well as the future.

## II

In 1908 a deadly fog was the subject of yet another short story, this time by Hugh Owen. It appeared in *Pearson's Magazine* (as had White's story in 1905) and carried the title: 'The Poison Cloud: A Record of the Great Fog – with the Story of the Adventures and Sufferings of Some of the Survivors of London's Greatest Disaster.'<sup>104</sup> The story is told in the first person by Collinson, travelling from Edinburgh to London by train just as the fog is settling over London. He is keen to meet up with his girl-friend, whose step-mother had recently refused permission for them to marry when he had asked her during his visit to Scotland. The first hint of the danger created by the fog is given by a 10-hour delay to the train on its journey to London because of the weather conditions. Indeed, the train is fortunate to arrive at all, since many trains have collided with each other or just been prevented from moving forward because of debris on the line.

The fog is described as 'the densest fog of recorded experience'. It is referred to as a "London particular," and a "pea-souper" [...] just the ordinary London fog that the Londoner has always tolerated, and in his heart been secretly proud of.<sup>105</sup> The condemnation of Londoners' acceptance of such air pollution, even being proud of it,

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<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, p. 195-6.

<sup>104</sup> Hugh Owen, 'The Poison Cloud', *Pearson's Magazine*, 26 (1908), pp. 657-689.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 659, 660.



is certainly apparent here. But it is not direct, as it is in the earlier stories of Hay and Barr. Indeed, to some extent Londoners are even absolved of responsibility for the disaster. A newspaper article, quoted in the narrative, reports that ‘one contributory cause of the calamity may be the huge quantities of inferior foreign coal that have latterly been burned in London owing to shortage of home supplies due to the coal strike’.<sup>106</sup> In fact, during this period, according to the official history of the British coal industry, ‘imports [of coal] were negligible, only once exceeding 50,000 tons, which was during the national stoppage of 1912’.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, the narrative taps in to a mood of xenophobic nationalism which prevailed at this time and had already given rise to the 1905 Aliens Act, designed to control the number and quality of immigrants entering the country, above all of Eastern European Jews.<sup>108</sup> It also reflects continuing debates held from early on in the new century regarding tariff reform, for which demands were becoming increasingly insistent in view of the cheap goods entering Britain in the era of free trade. The view that foreign coal was not up to the standard of the British product suggests that the author was not in favour of allowing foreign produce to enter without some form of protectionism.

In Owen’s story, the fog is further removed from the ordinary when it is described as degenerating into something even more deadly: ‘The fog had changed suddenly to the black infliction we felt about us, and had closed in on town and suburbs, blotting London out, as it were.’<sup>109</sup> Atherton, a heroic medical man and the scientific mouthpiece of the story, exclaims: “‘Why, a London fog may turn out to be

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<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, p. 664.

<sup>107</sup> Roy Church, *The History of the British Coal Industry, 1830-1913: Victorian Pre-eminence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 37.

<sup>108</sup> For more on this topic see Anne Kershen, ‘The 1905 Aliens Act’, *History Today*, 55 (2005), pp. 13-19.

<sup>109</sup> Owen, pp. 657-689 (p. 660).



one of the tragedies of history. I've always said that, given the right conditions of barometer and temperature, with a windless, stagnant, and moistened air – conditions always within the compass of probability – and we should paralyse London, and stagger humanity.”<sup>110</sup>

In portraying the fog and its deadly potential to Collinson, the doctor likens it to the Great Plague: ““Why, every day of it will account for a month’s ordinary mortality bill!”” The dangers of fog were represented as far exceeding street accidents which had become a staple of reports on the fog in newspapers by the mid-nineteenth century. The fog was deadly in itself:

“No, I don’t mean casualties only. I mean, quite simply, that even the healthy will have a struggle to live through much of this, and that the very young and the very old, and all the weak or ailing, will not possibly be able to survive even three or four days of it. And if we had a week of it, why, London would become a dead city – a gigantic charnel house!”<sup>111</sup>

London is in danger of becoming a tomb, a ‘dead city’, both in economic and physical terms. Caught up in the fog himself, the narrator feels the impact on his own health. The description conveys, in an extreme fashion, what many people must have felt in an ordinary fog: ‘The cold was intense – it numbed and deadened the limbs, and the fog seemed to soak into one’s very bones. My eyes smarted agonisingly, my head throbbed with pain, a dull singing noise began to fill my ears, and my breathing became quick and laboured. The engineer seemed to suffer even more than I.’<sup>112</sup>

The engineer, who has travelled in the same carriage as the narrator, Collinson, from Edinburgh, and who accompanies him on a frightening journey by car through

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<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p. 666.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p. 666.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.* p. 661.



London, very quickly dies from the effect of the fog. The doctor details the engineer's symptoms: 'Acute pneumonia, complicated by a distinct state of narcosis [...] breathing poisoned air.'<sup>113</sup> The poisonous air has become a kind of vaporous drug that causes a narcotically-induced sleep. Atherton tries to revive the engineer from the coma into which he has slipped by use of pure oxygen, a large supply of which the doctor has acquired precisely as a precaution against the potential dangers of a major fog. It is this oxygen supply that saves the lives of Collinson and his fiancée, whom the doctor fortunately manages to locate. The oxygen is used in conjunction with two mining helmets found in the engineer's personal belongings – helmets originally intended to save miners from the effect of choke-damp (carbonic acid gas). This enables Collinson and his fiancée to travel southwards to safety beyond the fog. The use of the mining helmets is a reminder of how fog is likened to creating a cavern or a mine-like environment above ground.

Atherton himself climbs to the top of the Victoria Tower of the House of Lords, one of the highest points in London, in the hope of getting above the deadly fog. There he finds the Speaker of the House of Lords, Black Rod and others already assembled; this puts them physically above the people, reinforcing in class terms their superiority, and underlining the need for the continuation of government. Here the density of carbonic acid gas in the air is slighter and enables them to survive longer. Before the doctor has retreated up to the Tower to give himself a chance of life, he describes the situation in the bleakest terms:

The tragedy gallops to its end. London is almost an obliterated city. Its bricks and mortar are standing, but that is about all that can be said for it. For its population by now must be simply decimated. As an organised city of human existence, London no longer exists. The whole of the East End is a charnel house of horrors. Plague will soon add its terrors to the work of starvation, for

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, p. 665.



all the dead lie above ground and we are all cooped up in a living tomb. The very streets are strewn with the dead.<sup>114</sup>

Atherton even fears that an epidemic of smallpox might break out once the fog lifts.<sup>115</sup>

This serves as yet another image for the breakdown of society. Since the control of epidemics had been achieved mainly through state intervention, in the form of compulsory vaccination, quarantines, disinfection, slum clearance and more besides, the possibility of an epidemic emerging in the wake of a fog that had reached its deadly concentration only because of the failure of the state to take preventive measures becomes a metaphor for the degree to which the state had disintegrated. Here too, as in the issue of tariff reform, the author reveals himself as a champion of increased state intervention in society, in opposition to the traditional liberal proponents of free trade and *laissez-faire*.

The protagonists of *The Poison Cloud* – Collinson, his fiancée Miss Clarice Heseltine, and the scientist figure of the doctor – are largely calm and practical individuals, as are the professionals with which they come in contact: nurses, policemen and sailors from the Navy. But the impact of the fog on the uneducated masses is one of panic and fear. The poor of the East End are especially vulnerable to the hysteria caused by the fog, and the narrator describes subsequently reports of ‘the wild scenes that had taken place, particularly in the East End, where a panic had seized the people to escape to Epping Forest, and of the holocausts that followed, in which

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<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, p. 679.

<sup>115</sup> It is surprising that Owen should have chosen smallpox to describe one of the possible effects of this situation since smallpox had been one of the success stories of the nineteenth century. A compulsory vaccination campaign had led to a decline in deaths from smallpox after Jenner’s discovery of the effectiveness of the cowpox vaccine in 1798; indeed, according to Wohl, this had ‘accounted for 20 percent of the total reduction in mortality from disease in Victoria’s reign’. (Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1983), p. 132). It was more likely that the danger would be from cholera, typhoid or some other waterborne disease, especially if the water supply had been infected by the dead bodies of people and animals.



hundreds of men, women, and children were trampled to death by surging crowds that moved blindly onwards to their own doom.<sup>116</sup>

Panic and fear were the least of the threats unleashed by the fog and its immediate consequences:

All the latent criminality of London will soon be at work, reinforced by the starving hordes of the East End of London. When starvation begins to stalk, and panic and fear go hand in hand with it, and all the restraints of authority are removed, we must look out for trouble [...] Anarchy is going to take the place of law, chaos of order. We who live in the most law-abiding capital in the world, with law and authority organised on the most perfect basis that civilisation has yet evolved, are suddenly to be thrown back into a vortex of elemental barbarism and passion, each man for himself, and all authority powerless.<sup>117</sup>

Under the concealment of the deadly fog, London does indeed quickly descend into anarchy. Fear and a general lack of order bring looting and riots, and these inevitably lead to greater destruction perpetrated by the common people: 'Hunger and desperation have converted them into a lawless, fiendish mob.'<sup>118</sup> The fog is both a symbol that evolution has regressed and a factor in causing its rapid degeneration to a primeval state through the panic it encourages. Even the civilising impact of time is shown to have come to an end: 'Big Ben above us was silent, and no longer measured the hours.'<sup>119</sup> The silencing of Big Ben, a symbol of London and of the Houses of Parliament, is another reference to the fact that London 'as an organised city of human existence [...] no longer exists'.<sup>120</sup> Here too, as in Dickens, fog signifies the

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<sup>116</sup> Owen, pp. 657-689 (p. 668).

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, p. 671.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, p. 677.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, p. 684.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, p. 679.



abolition of spatial and temporal boundaries, the dissolution of time into a formless simultaneity of epochs.

In the end martial law is established under the military police and the Navy. It is the Navy which saves Collinson and Miss Heseltine from convicts who have escaped from Brixton prison, and who, under the rules of martial law, are shot immediately. The Navy emerges as the state institution best equipped to deal with the situation. The marines have helmets similar to the ones found in the engineer's case, these being used to save men trapped in submarines. Their torpedo-boat flotilla is used to clear the Thames, which is filled with debris from crafts unable to move or crashed into each other. The boats also attempt to dispel the fog by sending up rockets (a device successfully utilised in the 1903 story by White), though these fail to work. Since the fog is composed of water as well as smoke, and the Navy is associated with the sea, it is hardly surprising that the Senior Service turns out to be the arm of state best equipped to deal with the crisis, but in any case the Navy was a very topical subject at the time of writing the story. Discussions regarding the size of the fleet and expenditure on it, especially in reference to the growing power of the German Navy, were at this time dominating the headlines.<sup>121</sup>

Through its use of the Navy, Owen very much places his story within his own time. Its topicality is increased by references to the Conscription Bill, a disastrous coal strike (countered by a threat to disqualify every miner from his state pension), and the introduction of a new aeroplane *service de luxe* from London to Brighton. By blaming the fog on the import of foreign coal, as well as supporting the Conscription Bill and demonstrating the central importance to society of the Navy, Owen reflects the growing fear of war prevalent at the time and adds his voice to those of many



commentators who were demanding decisive action to prepare for the prospect of conflict with hostile foreign powers. Fog, seen as a quintessential signifier of London in earlier representations, has here become something *foreign*, caused by foreign imports, and dispelled by military action.

Repeated references to the East End in terms of its inhabitants' propensity to panic and to mob violence, far from signifying the kind of indigenous social tension that underlay the foggy discourses of Hay and Barr, constitute another example of the xenophobia that marks this story. While many areas of London were experiencing a general decrease in population as more of the respectable working classes moved out to the suburbs of London, 'the population of inner East London increased by 3.5 per cent', according to Gareth Stedman Jones, almost solely due to 'Jewish settlement in Whitechapel and the adjacent districts'.<sup>122</sup> A leaflet produced by Conservative Central Office for the 1905 Mile End by-election indicated the fear which was beginning to be centred on the East End: 'Paupers who fill the streets with profligacy and disorder', was how the likely 'alien invasion' of the next few years was described if immigration remained unchecked.<sup>123</sup>

Popular feeling at this time increasingly stigmatized the East End as an overcrowded area filled with violence and crime. Its inhabitants had become degraded by their environment. The emphasis is on the uncontrolled population of the East End and also the fear of the mayhem caused if the East End should be forced to extend beyond its own boundaries, eastward in the direction of Epping Forest (already a popular destination for weekend trippers from the East End). In a speech given by

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<sup>121</sup> For more see Searle, pp. 312-4.

<sup>122</sup> Stedman Jones, p. 325.

<sup>123</sup> Alan Palmer, *The East End: Four Centuries of London Life* (London: John Murray, 1989), p. 106.



Joseph Chamberlain at Limehouse, on December 15, 1904 on the subject of tariff reform and unemployment, anxiety regarding cheap foreign imports and the problem of unrestricted immigration are linked. He told his audience: 'You are suffering from the unrestricted imports of cheaper goods. You are suffering also from the unrestricted immigration of the people who make these goods [...] The argument of our opponents is the same on this subject as it is on the general subject of the injury done to our trade by free imports.'<sup>124</sup> These sentiments are loudly echoed in Owen's 'The Poison Cloud'.

The outcome of the story follows the pattern of Hay's 1880 narrative. Clarice Heseltine and the narrator Collinson, escape from London to a rural retreat in Surrey. By this time they are married, and Clarice is even pregnant with their first child, whose forenames will include that of Atherton, now a close friend. The situation has been rescued by the Navy, but in the end, the fog is dissipated by 'Heaven and its winds [which] saved London from its final annihilation'. Divine intervention takes the form of a hurricane, 'and the breath of Heaven blew the pall of pollution away – and revealed to London its own horror!'<sup>125</sup> Again the fog has had the role of hiding the horror of London from its inhabitants. Whether this horror is specifically the horror of the disaster, or general horrors, it has endured over the years is deliberately left vague; the story's paranoid account of the East End and its denizens suggests both. London's horror recalls Hay's own London which becomes 'the heart and home of horror itself' and looks back to Conrad's own *Heart of Darkness* (1902).<sup>126</sup> The responsibility for the creation of the 'poison cloud' is not left vague, however: 'If I

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<sup>124</sup> *Mr Chamberlain's Speeches*, ed. by Charles W. Boyd, 2 vols (London: Constable & Co Ltd, 1914), II, pp. 262-3.

<sup>125</sup> Owen, pp. 657-689 (p. 688).

<sup>126</sup> Hay, pp. 17-68 (p. 46).



were dictator, I would order every fire in every domestic grate in London to be extinguished. They are all doing their best to contribute to the asphyxiation of London.<sup>127</sup> Owen agrees with White that it is not industry but the domestic hearth that is to blame – a clear change from literature of the mid-nineteenth century, which still held the open hearth as sacred and central to family life, inviolable from government interference.

### III

Fog in all its fascination and terror was a theme repeatedly picked up by short story writers. In one sense what they wrote were disaster stories on the 'what if' scenario. In these stories, fog descends on the whole of London at the same time, obliterating these local variations. In both Hay and Barr, the narrative is told from a future roughly 50 years hence, even though the main disaster is set in distinctly contemporary times, perhaps only two years from the date of publication. This makes the tales futuristic as well as contemporary. White's use of a flying machine which he calls an 'aerophane', a kind of dirigible hot-air balloon, gives the story a futuristic feel. Blériot did not make his first Channel crossing until 1909, six years after the story was published, and Wright's first powered flight did not take place until the end of 1903, so White's vision is still a prophetic one. Owen's story, written in 1908, has a contemporary relevance achieved through its use of the Navy, Conscription Bill, and other issues of public debate at the time. But it deliberately refers to the fog in outdated Victorian language, using terms such as 'pea-souper' and 'London particular' at a time when the contemporary term 'smog' had come into usage. In this way Owen both bases his story in the tensions of his times and also views the fog as a remnant of the Victorian era.

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<sup>127</sup> Owen, pp. 657-689 (p. 667).



Both the later stories were written when observers noted a sudden decrease in the frequency and intensity of fogs compared to the Victorian era. Fog was changing colour. An article written in 1899 celebrated the disappearance of the Biblical darkness that had accompanied fogs of former times, noting that a fog of that week had 'but a slight approach to the proverbial pea-soup hue, and the Egyptian darkness in which on such occasions London has been invariably plunged was conspicuous by its non-occurrence'.<sup>128</sup> In 1901, Sir C. A. Cookson commented that a 'great difference has taken place in the atmosphere [...] we had more than the normal number of misty days, but not one of those black fogs with which we are annually plagued during the winter'.<sup>129</sup> The deadliness of fog was declining. All the stories strike a warning bell by implicitly condemning Londoners' trivialization of fog as a general nuisance rather than a deadly menace. Yet these stories portray fog reaching unprecedentedly *high* levels of intensity at this time, despite all evidence to the contrary: a powerful indicator of fog's primarily metaphorical function in these writings.

The decline in the intensity and frequency of fogs was not accompanied by any corresponding decline in public anxiety about their consequences for people's health. In 1902, the veteran campaigner against urban fogs, Rollo Russell, wrote: 'We do not realise how dangerously near we are approaching to the limits of bearable impurity in the air on which every minute of life depends.'<sup>130</sup> Indeed, there was a general feeling that if the air was not made cleaner then the consequences might be deadly. These stories reflect among other things an apocalyptic anxiety regarding the quality of the London atmosphere. They also tap metaphorically into the social anxieties of the day.

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<sup>128</sup> 'An Encouraging Feature of the Recent Fog', *The Lancet* (October 1899), 11, p. 1183.

<sup>129</sup> Sir C. A. Cookson, 'A smokeless London', *Journal of State Medicine*, 9 (November 1901), p. 692.

<sup>130</sup> Rollo Russell, 'The Reduction of Town Fogs', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 51 (1902), 131-143 (p. 131).



Fog is not only a device for cleansing the city, it acts as a metaphor for the sickness of urban society.

In Hay's novella, the whole of London is seen subject to moral decay and corruption; the fog throws a veil over these misdeeds. Even the few good people who are mentioned in the story are killed through fog's retribution. But in the 1908 story by Owen, London is seen much more as a city divided between the light of civilisation and the darkness of regression. Raymond Williams points out that London was still seen, even by the end of the nineteenth century, as 'a city of light [...] This light was an obvious image of the impressive civilisation of the capital, visibly growing in wealth and in conscious public effect [...] The perception of "darkest London", in the largely separated East End, was a consequence of the blaze of light in that part of the city [the West End] which was a national and international capital.'<sup>131</sup>

Owen's story portrays a London divided between the hysteria which emanates from the East End, an area traditionally represented as dark and unknown, and the middle classes, whose representatives like Atherton, Collinson and Clarice show that they are capable of stoically enduring disaster and helping each other in a calm and civilised manner. Implicit in the story is a fear that just as the fog cannot be contained within a specific area of London, so areas like the East End, which have regressed to a less civilised state, are in danger of spreading outwards and destroying the light with its sooty blackness. Owen's London 'is almost an obliterated city. Its bricks and mortar are standing', but 'as an organised city of human existence, London no longer exists'.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 228.

<sup>132</sup> Owen, pp. 657-689 (p. 679).



## Fog and Gender in Henry James

### I

In a very little-known novel, *Out of the Fog* (1888) by William Hardinge, the female protagonist feels imprisoned by the fog. The possibility of a walk outside will be determined by the thickness of the fog, 'and if the fog should not thicken, she might, perhaps, be able to walk the length of the street to where those great iron gates shut off the Bloomsbury Squares'.<sup>133</sup> The fog that constrained the movement on the streets of Hardinge's heroine may be seen as a metaphor for the constrictions under which lone women existed when they appeared on the streets of the capital city. As Judith Walkowitz says: 'This cityscape of strangers and secrets [...] was interpreted as a negative environment for respectable women, one that threatened to erase the protective identity conferred on them by family, residence, and social distinction.'<sup>134</sup>

Nowhere is fog used as a metaphorical representation of the social tension between men and women with greater subtlety and complexity than in the work of Henry James. In his 1888 essay, *London*, Henry James reflected upon his life in the British capital. His description of his first impression of London is dominated by his use of dark colours. He arrives in London on 'a wet, black Sunday, twenty years ago, about the first of March'.<sup>135</sup> Even his memory of an earlier trip to London as a child has 'turned to grey, like faded ink'. Yet after these poorly coloured reminiscences, James confesses: 'No doubt I had mystic prescience of how fond' he was to become

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<sup>133</sup> William Hardinge, *Out of the Fog [A tale]* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1888), p. 23. The novel is dedicated to the author's sister 'In glad and sad remembrance of many fogs together.'

<sup>134</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight, Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago Press, 1992), p. 46.

<sup>135</sup> Henry James, 'London', in *London Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by David Kynaston (Cornwall: Tabb House, 1989), pp. 241-270 (p. 241).



of the city, 'the murky modern Babylon'.<sup>136</sup> James's far from glowing early descriptions of London blossomed into a great love of the metropolis. Much of this developing relationship to London can be reflected in James's view of the city's atmosphere. For James, London became a paradigm of modernity and commercial success, both of which are symbolized by 'the distant atmospheric mixture that represented London'.<sup>137</sup>

James came to London in 1876, and stayed for most of the rest of his life. Within a few weeks of his arrival, he began to reflect on the city and its atmosphere. A letter written to his mother after two weeks in the city gave a far from positive picture of his surroundings:

The weather is, and has been, beyond expression vile – a drizzle of sleet upon a background of absolutely *glutinous* fog, and the deadly darkness of a London holiday brooding over all [...] to plunge into darkness, solitude and sleet, in mid-winter – to say nothing of the sooty, woolsy desolation of a London lodging – to do this, and to like this murky Babylon really all the better, is to feel one is likely to get on here.<sup>138</sup>

His *London* essay, written twenty years later describes the 'murky modern Babylon' in much the same way. Yet both the letters and the essay reveal a James determined to like what he sees. As he says in the same letter: 'I must be a born Londoner, for the place to withstand the very severe test to which I am putting it.'<sup>139</sup> The test to which he has put London is a comparison with Paris, which James has just left. But, one also suspects, James feels London is testing him. In this early letter, London is dominated by darkness, sleet and fog, and it seems that James is relishing the atmosphere because he can practise his literary skills describing it. He sees it as a

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<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>137</sup> Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (London: David Campbell Publishers Ltd, 1991), p. 401.

<sup>138</sup> Henry James, *Henry James Letters*, ed. by Leon Edel, 4 vols (London: Macmillan, 1975), II, 1875-1883, pp. 85-6. James to his mother, Mrs Henry James Sr., 24 December 1876.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, p. 86.



painter would, the sleet in the foreground and the fog as a backdrop. The texture of the fog for James is sticky, viscid – ‘glutinous’ – which not only describes its thickness but gives it a tangible, almost painterly quality. Often for James, fog seems to be worse on Sundays; a day characterised by its lack of excitement. In this particular instance James writes of ‘a combination of two drearinesses – a London Sunday afternoon and a London detached Christmas eve’.<sup>140</sup> The silence is heightened by the density of the fog.

James recalls this first impression more than once. In *An English Easter*, an essay written for an American magazine in 1877, he comments: ‘Arriving there, during the past winter, about Christmas-time, I encountered three British Sundays in a row – a spectacle to strike terror into the stoutest heart.’<sup>141</sup> Foggy Sundays are much worse for James, it seems, because the weather makes him reluctant to leave home. Later, when James reflects on his life in London, he appreciates the benefits that this state of seeming isolation gives him: ‘Those to whom it is forbidden to sit up to work in the small hours may, between November and March, enjoy a semblance of this luxury in the morning. The weather makes a kind of sedentary midnight and muffles the possible interruptions. It is bad for the eyesight, but excellent for the image.’<sup>142</sup>

For James, the writer, fog’s turning the day into night is a positive factor, especially since he had recently been ill and was possibly under doctor’s orders to rest. The fog may strain the eyes when he is out of doors, but it has the added benefit of making the author more productive. Fog dampens the sounds coming into his study from outside, and the fact that it is difficult to see beyond the pages of the book acts

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<sup>140</sup> *ibid*, p. 85.

<sup>141</sup> James, *An English Easter*, pp. 69-87 (p. 74).

<sup>142</sup> James, ‘London’, pp. 241-270 (p. 261).



as a stimulus to the imagination. Henry James could afford the oil to light the lamps and the coal to provide heat; for the less successful writer, like George Gissing, fog had a different effect:

I think of fogs in London, fogs of murky yellow or of sheer black, such as have often made all work impossible to me, and held me, a sort of dyspeptic owl, in moping and blinking idleness. On such a day, I remember, I once found myself at an end both of coal and of lamp-oil, with no money to purchase either; all I could do was to go to bed, meaning to lie there till the sky once more became visible.<sup>143</sup>

Just as there was a great discussion on how the presence of fog affected the work of the artist in the 1880s, so writers at this time debated ways in which the fogs might affect their work.<sup>144</sup> For James, it appears not only to stimulate him, but also gives him the appearance of being more hard-working than perhaps he is. George Gissing (1857-1903) was in the process of writing *New Grub Street* (1891) when James's essay was printed in the *Century* magazine in 1888, the same year in which Hardinge's novel was published. For Gissing the act of writing is a much more solitary, agonising affair in which the role of a spectator is desired only in order to reveal the pain of authorship. The novel's protagonist, Edwin Reardon, upon receipt of his six bound copies of his latest work, from the publishing house, is aware 'that people will skim over it without a suspicion of what it cost the writer!'.<sup>145</sup> For Reardon, whose first work was published with great critical success, the act of writing subsequent pieces has become torturously difficult: "What hellish torment it was to write that page! I did it one morning when the fog was so thick that I had to light the lamp."<sup>146</sup> He longs to

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<sup>143</sup> George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, ed. by Mark Storey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 142.

<sup>144</sup> See for example Samuel Luke Fildes Papers, National Art Library, Fildes to Woods, 1 January 1880, when he writes of the problems artists encountered in foggy London.

<sup>145</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, p. 201.

<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*, p. 201.



gain the form that enabled him to write his first successful novel: 'How full my mind was in those days! Then I had only to look and I *saw* something; now I strain my eyes, but can make out nothing more than nebulous grotesques.'<sup>147</sup> Physical fog not only makes the act of writing difficult, because of the unnatural darkness, in *New Grub Street* but it also becomes a metaphor for the inchoate formlessness of his defective imagination.

Earlier in *New Grub Street*, an unwilling worker in the world of literature, Marian Yule, is forced to work in the British Library on a foggy day. The inconvenience of the fog which intrudes into the Reading Room is both an insight into the practical disadvantages of the thick fog whilst working, and the basis for two magnificent metaphors for the pain caused by the act of writing:

The days darkened. Through November rains and fogs Marian went her usual way to the Museum, and toiled there among the other toilers [...] One day at the end of the month she sat with books open before her, but by no effort could fix her attention upon them. It was gloomy, and one could scarcely see to read; a taste of fog grew perceptible in the warm, headachy air. Such profound discouragement possessed her.

The fog grew thicker; she looked up at the windows beneath the dome and saw that they were a dusky yellow. Then her eye discerned an official walking along the upper gallery, and in pursuance of her grotesque humour, her mocking misery, she likened him to a black, lost soul, doomed to wander in an eternity of vain research along endless shelves. Or again, the readers who sat here at these radiating lines of desks, what were they but hapless flies caught in a huge web, its nucleus the great circle of the Catalogue? Darker, darker. From the towering wall of volumes seemed to emanate visible motes, intensifying the obscurity; in a moment the book-lined circumference of the room would be but a featureless prison-limit.<sup>148</sup>

For Marian the agony of writing is connected with her feeling that she is simply a machine supplying material for her father's fairly unsuccessful works of criticism. Here too, the intellectual world dissolves into formless chaos: 'This huge library, growing

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<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*, p. 201.



into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print'. Her feelings of entrapment, increased by the fog and the book-lined shelves, though she is a woman engaged in a public activity lead her to a sense that she is imprisoned.

Fog, in Henry James's vision, on the other hand, not only constrained women's behaviour in public, but on occasion revealed their misbehaviour: 'London, in December, was livid with sleet and fog, and against this dismal background was offered me the vision of a horrible old woman in a smoky bonnet, lying prone in a puddle of whisky! She seemed to assume a kind of symbolic significance and almost frightened me away.'<sup>149</sup> The woman is lying in a pool of liquid which James presumes is whisky, or is too shy to hint at it being urine, and the liquids of the sleet and fog somehow merge with the liquids of the urine/whisky. She represents the worst excesses of the city. She seems almost a product of the fog, extruded by it onto the street. She also represents the nightmare that was thought to be part of the streets at night, and now through the fog is part of the daytime. She has transgressed the boundaries of propriety and violated Victorian norms of female behaviour. In their treatise on *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, indeed, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have noted that what respectable people 'encoded [with] their own fascinated preoccupation with the carnival of the night, [was] a landscape of darkness, drunkenness, noise and obscenity', visible too when fog creates night out of day.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 106-8.

<sup>149</sup> James, 'An English Easter', pp. 69-87 (p. 75).

<sup>150</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 137.



In his writings on the cityscape, James experiences an 'attraction of repulsion' in his view of London and more especially its atmosphere, creating a confusion of form engendered by fog:

A Christmas Day or a Good Friday uncovers the ugliness of London. As you walk along the streets, having no fellow-pedestrians to look at, you look up at the brown brick house-walls, corroded with soot and fog, pierced with their straight stiff window-slits [...] Nowhere is there such a play of light and shade, such a struggle of sun and smoke, such aerial gradations and confusions.<sup>151</sup>

Some years earlier, in 1873, James's representation of the blurring of time and space by fog had been, perhaps, more subtle. London was a place:

where the smoke and fog and the weather in general, the strangely undefined hour of the day and season of the year, the emanations of industries and the reflection of furnaces, the red gleams and blurs that may or may not be of sunset – as you never see any *source* of radiance you can't in the least tell – all hang together in a confusion, a complication, a shifting but irremovable canopy.<sup>152</sup>

James's attitude towards the London atmosphere had been partly conditioned by his reading of the fiction of Dickens and Thackeray as a young boy. He also perused copies of *Punch* and he was particularly impressed by one of their main illustrators, John Leech, who, he wrote: 'conveys at times the look of the London streets – the colour, the temperature, the damp blackness. He does the winter weather to perfection. Long before I had seen it I was acquainted, through his sketches, with this aspect of Baker Street in December.'<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>152</sup> James, 'London', pp. 241-270 (p. 247).

<sup>153</sup> Henry James, 'George Du Maurier' in *Partial Portraits* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970), pp. 325-372 (p. 339).



James dates his acquaintance with Leech's sketches, from about 1850 to 1855.<sup>154</sup> The only example to be found of Leech's work on this subject appeared in *Punch's Almanack* of 1855 when James was twelve years old. It is a sketch entitled 'The fog is



Fig 43: 'The fog is so very thick that Frederick and Charles are obliged to see Clara and Emily home'.<sup>155</sup>

so very thick that Frederick and Charles are obliged to see Clara and Emily home' (see illustration). Women could not be left alone on the streets in a fog. There are threats all around. The background figure of the hirsute gentleman looming towards the two couples, looks menacing and threatening. The misty outline of the horse's heads, the street lamp, the carriage driver and a link-boy hover as if they are phantoms in mid-air. The maidservant holds a cloth over her mouth to indicate the dampness and the disagreeable taste of the foggy evening. The impish link-boy guiding the couple appears to be enjoying the scene, a sinister grin on his face which seems to reflect the

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<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>155</sup> From *Punch's Almanack*, 1855, Vol. XXVIII, [n.p.]. James refers to Leech's English maidens with their 'English hands and feet, English ringlets, English petticoats' (p. 339) which also leads one to this illustration.



malevolent leer on the young man's face accompanying the girl in front. This is, as James wrote in another context, 'like the late afternoon light of a foggy winter Sunday, when even inanimate objects have a kind of wicked look'.<sup>156</sup>

Significantly, James reverts back to his more negative feelings on London's atmosphere when he returns to London after lengthy breaks away and he feels a renewed strangeness to it: 'London, in the empty (Christmas holidays etc.) midwinter phase, when I came back, looked like a big black inferno of fog, mud, drunkenness and pauperism. That impression [...] has since been balanced by others – and I have enjoyed the home-feeling of the last three months.'<sup>157</sup> For James, part of the horror of London lay in its fog, giving the city the characteristics of a hell-like environment, intimidating by its size and blackness. Perhaps the hideous picture of the drunken washerwoman stayed with James, causing him to sum up the London masses by their 'drunkenness and pauperism', a kind of human defilement that extends the environmental defilement of mud and fog.

James remarks on the fog when the city appears empty either because it is holiday season or a Sunday, a theme he explores in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886): 'a dense brown fog made the daylight impure, without suggesting an answer to the question whether the scheme of nature had been to veil or to deepen the sabbatical dreariness.'<sup>158</sup> Yet this was more apparent than real. It is not that London is empty of people, a point made rather ironically by Henrietta Stackpole, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, written nine years earlier: "There's no one here, of course, but three or four millions of people. What is it you call them – the lower-middle class? They're only the

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<sup>156</sup> James, 'Robert Louis Stevenson', in *Partial Portraits*, pp. 135-174 (p. 170).

<sup>157</sup> James, *Letters*, III, 252. James to Charles Eliot Norton, 25 March 1889.

<sup>158</sup> James, *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 406.



population of London, and that's no consequence."<sup>159</sup> The 'big black inferno of fog' hides them from sight. James's feelings of isolation are accentuated by the fog:

I endeavour on this "beastly" winter night, before my carboniferous hearth, to transport myself into the family circle. You are right in pitying us over here for our odious winter – a more disagreeable one can't be imagined. Violent cold, torrents of driving sleet, poisonous pitch-black fogs – no abomination is wanting to it; and London, with the slosh of a snow-fall that has turned to rain and has resolved itself into soot-colored mud, is not, as you may imagine, delectable.<sup>160</sup>

James's use of 'carboniferous' to describe his coal-burning hearth, in contrast to the normal wood-burning fires of his American homeland, expresses his awareness of the irony that the hearth which kept him warm, and also helps him to feel closer to his family circle, contributed to the 'poisonous pitch-black fogs' itself. Yet by the time of this letter, only three years after he had arrived from France, James seemed to feel 'Londonized' enough to refer to 'us', the Londoners amongst whom he clearly counted himself. The outsider was now indicating that he felt a sense of ownership of London and a sense of fellow-suffering.

## II

In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), James describes the heroine's state of mind and indicates her future by means of a foggy afternoon in London. Isabel Archer has just said goodbye to her sister, Lily and her family at Euston Station. Isabel has suffered Lily's criticism of her unmarried state, as well as her disapproval of her decision to remain in Europe rather than settling down in New York. For her part, Lily is puzzled by her sister's silence regarding her private life and concludes 'that she had lost her

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<sup>159</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 192-3

<sup>160</sup> James, *Letters*, II, 210. James to his mother, Mrs Henry James Sr., 18 January 1879.



courage' – a trait which is often discussed in connection with Isabel.<sup>161</sup> She is praised for possessing it by Ralph Touchett when she first arrives in London.<sup>162</sup> Isabel, on the other hand, feels that it is 'more romantic to say nothing'.<sup>163</sup> The Ludlow family's departure, especially Lily's, leaves Isabel feeling that, 'She had never had a keener sense of freedom, of the absolute boldness and wantonness of liberty.'<sup>164</sup> She is not lacking in courage at all: 'The world lay before her – she could do whatever she chose. There was a deep thrill in it all, but for the present her choice was tolerably discreet.'<sup>165</sup>

Her immediate choice is to walk back from the station to the hotel. The reasons why this can be seen as an act of 'absolute boldness' is listed in a mock-romantic style: 'The early dusk of a November afternoon had already closed in; the street lamps, in the thick, brown air, looked weak and red; our heroine was unattended and Euston Square was a long way from Piccadilly.' Her lack of an escort on such a long walk and under such conditions placed her in danger as a woman alone on the street. It is this boldness which she earlier proclaimed to desire when she resists Caspar Goodwood's proposal of marriage: 'I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me.'<sup>166</sup> In fact, her walk is uneventful, and Isabel's deliberate attempt to make it more dangerous by losing her way is thwarted by a kindly policeman who gives her clear directions back to her hotel.

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<sup>161</sup> James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 372.

<sup>162</sup> *ibid*, p. 204.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*, p. 372.

<sup>164</sup> *ibid*, p. 373.

<sup>165</sup> *ibid*, p. 373.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid*, p. 214.



There are several layers of irony to this episode. John Kimmey notes: 'Enhancing [Isabel's] sense of destiny and liberation is [...] the Doric arch of Euston Station.' According to Gordon Biddle, this was at the time 'the first and finest of the monumental railway entrances, symbolizing the triumph of man over nature and the beginning of a new age'.<sup>167</sup> Yet the contours of the arch are blurred as the passenger is confronted by a foggy world, nature's response to London's man-made pollution. In the same way that the boast of the Doric arch is false, Isabel's feeling that the world is before her as her sister's train leaves the station is an illusion because precisely at that moment her vision is diminished by the fog. This has echoes in her view of her future life. She is already contemplating marriage with Gilbert Osmond and feels she knows what her future will hold. It is Ralph Touchett who tries to warn her of the dangers of her proposed marriage. He suggests that she "wait a little longer." [...] "for a little more light".<sup>168</sup>

The fog is a metaphorical representation of this lack of light in her life, the obscurity of her emotional future. In her desire to control her fate, Isabel seeks a sense of danger and is disappointed by her failure to find it. She refuses to acknowledge the limits to which her life as a young woman in Victorian England may be subject. On a practical level she refuses to accept that the fog will limit her world, just as she also refuses to acknowledge that her proposed marriage will limit her freedom. In her marriage to Osmond she senses very little danger; but in the end it does curtail her liberty. The danger is not one of excitement, but a confinement, a narrowing in of her emotional and spiritual freedom, just as fog causes the physical world to shrink round the beholder like a prison.

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<sup>167</sup> John Kimmey, *Henry James and London: The City in his Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1991), p. 66. Gordon Biddle, *Victorian Stations* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), p. 21.



Her feelings of liberty and boldness experienced at Euston Station are in direct contrast to her feelings after her marriage as she returns to England. Even though the countryside on her journey through Europe is enjoying the benefits of the spring weather, Isabel's views are described as 'strange-looking, dimly-lighted, pathless lands, in which there was no change of seasons, but only as it seemed, a perpetual dreariness of winter'.<sup>169</sup> Whereas she had felt that she could see 'the whole world lay before her', now she undertakes this return to London 'with sightless eyes'. 'Her mind had been given up to vagueness; she was unable to question the future.'<sup>170</sup> Just as Ralph had warned her five years earlier that Isabel would 'be put into a cage'.<sup>171</sup> Isabel now feels that 'she *should* never escape; she *should* last to the end. Then the middle years wrapped her about again and the grey curtain of her indifference closed her in.'<sup>172</sup>

James deliberately does not use *would* as this would remove Isabel's own feelings from the decision. She knows 'she *should* never escape' because she realises that she lacks the courage to do so. The 'grey curtain' reminds the reader of the fog encountered when Isabel left Euston Station five years earlier. But the contrast between her present self and the person she was during her walk through the November fog is evident to her: 'She remembered how she walked away from Euston, in the winter dusk, in the crowded streets, five years before. She could not have done that to-day, and the incident came before her as the deed of another person.'<sup>173</sup> Her confidence in walking forth alone from Euston Station five years earlier is in contrast

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<sup>168</sup> James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, pp. 393-4.

<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*, p. 606.

<sup>170</sup> *ibid.*, p. 606.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*, p. 608 (the italics are my own).



to her passivity at Charing Cross Station: 'She asked nothing; she wished to wait. She had a sudden perception that she should be helped.'<sup>174</sup> Her desire to be helped is in direct contrast to her disappointment in being helped by the 'obliging policeman' before. Not only does she long to be accompanied by someone when she reaches London but: 'The dusky, smoky, far-arching vault of the station, the strange, livid light, the dense, dark, pushing crowd, filled her with a nervous fear.' The effect of the light had been weakened by the fog in her earlier visit but it was not intimidating: now, the light has a 'strange, livid' quality. The light which Ralph had asked Isabel to wait for has come, but in a different way from his request.

These two scenes exemplify the difference between Isabel Archer before her marriage and afterwards. The earlier November fog is used to highlight Isabel's courage in making her own way to her hotel, but also to show that although she thinks she can see her future before her, in fact she is blinded, not only by the thickness of the fog, but by her own lack of experience of life and people. James uses the fog and lack of it, not only to reflect Isabel's state of mind but also metaphorically to show the limits which Isabel will be subjected to when she marries. Isabel feels certain that she can find her own way during the November fog when she should feel more uncertain, not only in her journey to her Piccadilly Hotel but also in her journey to a future with Gilbert Osmond. Five years later, she experiences 'a perpetual dreariness of winter', even though it is spring, because she can now see her position truthfully even though her perceptions are 'strange-looking, dimly-lighted', just as objects would appear in a London fog. Her only solution is to try to veil them behind 'the grey curtain of her indifference'.

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<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*, p. 608.

<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*, p. 608.



In the conclusion of the novel, the physical fog experienced by Isabel during her November walk has turned into a metaphysical sea of water; James employs both fog and water imagery, connecting them to each other through the thematic strands within the novel. The final scene refers back to Isabel's walk through the fog to show her understanding, and final acceptance of her situation. Her friend, Ralph Touchett, has died, and Henrietta Stackpole is to be married and will move to America. Caspar Goodwood, still in love with her, urges her to leave her husband. She now comprehends that 'the world, in truth, had never seemed too large; it seemed to open out, all round her, to take the foam of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters. She had wanted help, and here was help; it had come in a rushing torrent.'<sup>175</sup>

The false illusion of clarity which she had experienced in the fog is now replaced by the clearer images similar to those supposedly experienced when drowning: 'So had she heard to those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink [...] She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path.'<sup>176</sup> Her desire to be lost earlier, and her willingness to be directed five years later, have now been replaced by a certainty of direction to return to her husband, finally accepting the limits to which she is subjected in life.

### III

'The friendly fog seems to protect and enrich' wrote James in 1888: 'Then it is that I am most haunted with the London of Dickens, feel most as if it were still recoverable, still exhaling its queerness in patches perceptible to the appreciative.'<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*, p.635.

<sup>176</sup> *ibid.*, p. 636.

<sup>177</sup> James, 'London', pp. 241-70 (p. 261).



James, thinking, perhaps, of *The Princess Casamassima*, published in 1888, knew that any writer who tackled the London social novel would have to, in some way, reference himself, or be compared, to Dickens. As Frederick Nies and John Kimmey comment:

what he is doing in the book, apart from evoking London and dramatizing the social and political unrest rumbling beneath [...] is demonstrating both his connection with and distance from Dickens [...] he is measuring his achievement in depicting London against the writer who more than any other opened up the British capital as a subject for nineteenth-century novelists. He is showing that he too can create a big city world, different from “the master” but just as complex and comprehensive.<sup>178</sup>

For James, as for other post-Dickensian writers, fog was a key signifier of London, as he makes clear when the novel’s hero fixes his ‘eyes on the distant atmospheric mixture that represented London.’<sup>179</sup>

For James the general attitude towards the atmosphere represented one’s view of the city: ‘One doesn’t test these truths every day, but they form part of the air one breathes (and welcome, says the London-hater – for there be such perverse reasoners – to the pestilent compound).’<sup>180</sup> Fog and London could not be separated and neither could a dislike for one lead to a love of the other. Nevertheless, fog has not been reduced to a mere cliché; on the contrary, James uses it in complex and subtle psychological ways. James saw that for the generation which no longer could claim any tie to the countryside, a generation which had been born in the city and had not moved to it from the country, the city was part of its make-up and could not be seen as a separate entity. In *The Princess Casamassima*, Millicent Henning is one of these, ‘a daughter of London, of the crowded streets and hustling traffic of the great city; she had drawn her health and strength from its dingy courts and foggy thoroughfares, and

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<sup>178</sup> Frederick Nies and John Kimmey, ‘David Copperfield and *The Princess Casamassima*’, *The Henry James Review*, 10 (1989), 179-84 (p. 183).

<sup>179</sup> James, *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 401.



peopled its parks and squares and crescents with her ambitions; [...] she understood it by instinct and loved it with passion'.<sup>181</sup> Unlike Isabel Archer, who thrills at the sensation of the crowded London streets but can only enjoy it as a 'spectacle of human life', Millicent is part of the spectacle.<sup>182</sup>

Hyacinth Robinson, the 'hero' of the novel as James often terms him, is born and brought up in London, but he has a more cerebral and artistic appreciation than Millicent Henning. His view is more that of a spectator, like Isabel in James's earlier novel: 'He liked the reflection of the lamps on the wet pavements, the feeling and smell of the carboniferous London damp; the way the winter fog blurred and suffused the whole place, made it seem bigger and more crowded, produced halos and dim radiations, trickles and evaporations, on the plate of glass.'<sup>183</sup> The blurry formlessness created by the fog is congenial to Hyacinth, who is suspended between social classes, both a denizen of London and trying to socially and spiritually to move beyond its confines.

Millicent and Hyacinth's rather strained courtship illustrates the dilemma of working-class couples who could not enjoy privacy in their own small homes, and who also could not afford to go regularly to the theatre or a restaurant together:

Their [Millicent and Hyacinth] conversation was condemned, for the most part, to go forward in the streets, the wintry dusky, foggy streets, which looked bigger and more numerous in their perpetual obscurity, and in which

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<sup>180</sup> James, 'London', pp. 241-270, (p. 247).

<sup>181</sup> James, *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 43.

<sup>182</sup> James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 373.

<sup>183</sup> James, *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 57.



everything was covered with damp, gritty smut, an odour extremely agreeable to Miss Henning.<sup>184</sup>

The city again appears to expand in size because of fog's impact, but it also remains perpetually obscure. The city is unknowable even to Millicent, 'a daughter of London.'<sup>185</sup> The theme of prison/guilt which pervades the novel from the first page is referenced here in the way their conversation is 'condemned'. Even when accompanied by a man, Millicent is still imprisoned by the fog. Without doubt James is making fun of Millicent's aspirations by referring to her as Miss Henning whilst also showing her to be working class in her tastes for the disagreeable fuliginous odours. The word 'smut' refers back to Millicent, as a child, 'years before, [who] was always hugging a smutty doll and courting his [Hyacinth's] society'.<sup>186</sup>

Hyacinth's personality is described in fog-like terms: 'He was liable to moods in which the sense of exclusion from all that he would have liked most to enjoy in life settled upon him like a pall.'<sup>187</sup> It is his lack of money, but just as significantly his position within the working classes which excludes him from the cultured life he most desires, just as fog could, in some representations, act as a barrier. Throughout most of the novel, Hyacinth is part of a revolutionary group which meets at a public house, the 'Sun and Moon', neither visible in the fog. In the early part of the novel, Hyacinth views the potential influence of his colleague and friend, Paul Muniment, to be paramount to the cause, and wonders when he might choose to exert this influence:

Hyacinth only wished that day would come; it would not be till then, he was sure, that they would all know where they were, and that the good they were

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<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>185</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>186</sup> James, *The Princess Casamassima*, p. 57.

<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*, p. 115.



striving for, blindly, obstructedly, in a kind of eternal dirty intellectual fog, would pass from the stage of crude discussion and mere sharp, tantalising desirableness into that of irresistible reality.<sup>188</sup>

Even the person Hyacinth most admires and who is regarded as one of its leaders, Paul Muniment, 'it was generally admitted that he could see further than most. But it was suspected that he wanted to see further than was necessary.'<sup>189</sup> The very foggy world of London is transferred metaphorically to differing visions of the working man in the varying extent of his radical ambitions.

## Conclusion

### I

The sense of social threat represented metaphorically by London fogs in the Victorian era reached its height in the 1880s, and at this time also found its way into the metaphorical appropriation of fog by figurative artists – not merely the cartoonists whose work we have already looked at, but also oil-painters selling their pictures on the art market. Earlier in the century, as we saw in Chapter Three, they were unable to generate much interest in realistic portrayals of London scenes. But in the 1880s the public's growing concern with social disorder arguably made it more receptive to such work than it had been previously. During this period, John O'Connor painted a very different view of London from that of *The Embankment*, which he had painted in 1874, and although similar in style and outlook to Wyllie's painting of *London from the Monument* (1870) (also discussed in Chapter Three), it experienced a much more positive reception. O'Connor's *From Pentonville Road Looking West: Evening* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1884, and also at the Royal Hibernian Academy the

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<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>189</sup> *ibid.*, p. 237.



following year. It was bought in 1887 by Sir Isaac Holden (1807-1897) a successful Bradford wool manufacturer. It is painted from the viewpoint of a rooftop on the corner of Rodney Street and Pentonville Rise. The street scene is one of activity; there is a general haze above the city, obscuring the streetscape towards King's Cross. The people and horse-drawn trams are descending from foreground clarity into the background murk, passing by unawares an unsettling scene of mess and debris on the



Fig 44: John O'Connor, *From Pentonville Road Looking West: Evening, 1884*.<sup>190</sup>

rooftop at bottom right, suggesting the chaos that lay behind the orderly street façades below. The yellow atmosphere, used to highlight the gothic building of St Pancras Station, hangs over the whole scene.

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<sup>190</sup> John O'Connor, *From Pentonville Road Looking West: Evening* (London: London Museum, 1884), 001651.



William Wyllie's representation of London also changed in the 1880s. His *London from the Monument* had aroused fierce criticism for its 'disagreeable' representation of fog, despite its adherence to established topographical convention. In the 1880s his paintings depict a more contemporary London, not fearing to show the dirtier side of the city's continuing growth. In 1883, Wyllie's *Toil, Glitter, Grime and Wealth on a Flowing Tide* was not only exhibited at the Royal Academy, with a buyer waiting in the wings to



Fig 45: W. L. Wyllie, *Toil, Glitter, Grime and Wealth on a Flowing Tide*, 1883.<sup>191</sup>

take it after the exhibition, but also gained the attention of the prestigious Chantrey Bequest, which bought it for the nation.<sup>192</sup> One trustee of the Chantrey Bequest was none other than Sir Frederick Leighton, who had railed against fog in a public speech

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<sup>191</sup> W. L. Wyllie, *Toil, Glitter, Grime and Wealth on a Flowing Tide* (London: Tate Gallery, 1883), No.1580.



a year earlier. The picture title signifies the contrast that Wyllie wished to portray, the toil of the workers set against the value of the cargo and the wealth to its owners. The painting is filled with broad contrasts of light and dark. Smoke rising from the steamboats and factories in the background creates a yellow, brown and black murk that obscures the view in the distance. Wealth creates a grimy atmosphere, signifying social antagonisms.

Will Vaughan discusses both of the Wyllie paintings in his essay on *London Topographers and Urban Change*. He does not separate out the failure of *London from the Monument* from the success of Wyllie's later *Toil, Glitter, Grime and Wealth on a Flowing Tide*. Vaughan comments: 'It was Wyllie's love of grime and smoke that seems to have set the seal on the popularity of such river scenes [...] For there was clearly nothing morbid in Wyllie's interests. They stemmed rather from a healthy delight in conflict and achievement.'<sup>193</sup> The 1870 painting, as we have seen, was not popular. Nor is it immediately clear in which way the 1883 picture showed a 'healthy delight in conflict'. The social contrasts Wyllie represented in 1883, with their implicit criticisms of capitalism, spoke clearly to contemporary fears of social conflict and unrest.

It was still thought desirable in some quarters, however, to put a good face on London's grime. The *Art Journal*, which had been so critical of Wyllie's *London from the Monument* now suggested that: 'Painters are making an energetic effort to give London a good character as a paintable city, by turning its very blemishes to pictorial purpose. If they cannot have lucid horizons, they make good effects of the lurid skies; [...] Mr. Wyllie, for instance, has lately been bold to present to us coal-barges floating down a

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<sup>192</sup> Wyllie, pp. 45-6.

<sup>193</sup> Will Vaughan, 'London Topographers and Urban Change', *Victorian Artists and the City: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Ira Bruce Nadel and F. Schwarzbach (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980), pp. 59-77, (p. 74).



dreary river, with an imp-like body of smoke hanging over them in a chilly sky.<sup>194</sup>

Underneath the surface therefore, London's blemishes remained, with lurid skies, dreary river, smoke and fog suggesting the price that was being paid for economic success.

## II

In December 1890 George Gissing described the following scene in one of his letters:

Was awakened this morning at 9.30 by man outside bellowing "Execution of Mrs Percy! Scene on the Scaffold! – Paper!" Such cries harmonized with the morning: snow lying everywhere, grimy with soot, & a muddy fog obscuring the sky. Yesterday one of the most hideous fogs I ever knew, unintermittent. One might describe the weather, & connect with it reflections on capital punishment.<sup>195</sup>

The sense that London's polluted atmosphere was malignant and even 'baleful', as Gissing described it on another occasion, had led to much anxiety throughout the later part of the nineteenth century.<sup>196</sup> The funereal associations of the atmosphere were clear. Gissing saw the metaphorical resonances of the capital's confinement underneath the obscuring canopy of fog: fog appeared as a coffin, shrouding the streets in the colours of death. A sketch by William Luker (1867-1951) the following year, entitled *November Mourning!* makes the connection between fog and death in a very direct way. The title suggests that the horse is drawing a hearse; it has to be led by a man because it cannot see where it is going, and the lamps are of no use. The blinkers it is wearing cannot make things any easier for it. The other man in the

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<sup>194</sup> 'Our Illustrations', *The Art Journal* (1884), p. 200.

<sup>195</sup> *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family*, ed. by Algernon and Ellen Gissing (London: Constable & Co., Ltd, 1927), p. 44. G.G. to C.B., dated 23 December 1890.

<sup>196</sup> *ibid.*, p. 327. Gissing uses 'baleful' to describe London's atmosphere in a letter to his brother, 19 June 1892.



picture can only advance by gingerly using a stick like a blind man to feel his way.

The whole scene seems to be enveloped in a canopy of black.



Fig 46: 'November Mourning!'.<sup>197</sup>

These associations of fog and death were not reached by chance. Anecdotally, the relationship was discovered very early. The fog of 1873 provided seemingly irrefutable evidence that it could kill both animals and people. Rollo Russell had listed the evils which might manifest themselves from the foggy climate. John W. Graham, writing in 1907, reiterated them in a more gendered fashion in his study of the smoke problem, arguing that if the housewife had bright sunshine streaming through her windows and her children could play outside in the grass rather than the black streets:

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<sup>197</sup> W. Luker, Jr., 'November Mourning!' in W. J. Loftie, *London City: Its history, streets, traffic, buildings, people* (London: Leadenhall, 1891), p. 24.



then 'her temper would be less sharp, her husband's evening life would be a quieter one, he would be more inclined to stay at home and so would drink less'.<sup>198</sup>

In literature, fog was adopted as a metaphor for the general moral health of the populace. Apocalyptic stories responded to fears that London fog might lead to an impending ecological disaster in reaction to the medical and scientific literature of the time but extended this to the behaviour of the capital's inhabitants. Both Hay and Barr expressed pessimism about the urban environment but also the degeneration of city-dwellers, especially morally. The fog became a symbol of regressive human evolution, abolishing the light of progress and civilisation and turning back the wheel of time to a more primitive age. In Hay's story no-one who is in London at the time of the fog descending survives. In Barr's story, the survivors of the fog disaster, except for the narrator, are left insane.

By the 1880s a metaphorical relationship between social tension and fog became apparent – a fear that the most brutal members of the residuum could spread across London with the fog from areas such as the East End to upset the social balance and wreak havoc and destruction. In the West End disturbances of 1886, indeed, this threat for a time became a reality, further stoking the fires of social tension and anxiety. In the story *The Poison Cloud* it is the East End which is especially vulnerable to panic. The denizens of this area begin to loot; from here, anarchy threatens the entire city. In 1891 Zangwill described fog in martial terms, as 'King Fog' lording it over London and replacing the existing order. Later still, fog became a metaphor that represented xenophobic fears of immigration and even the potential of a World War. Yet the Edwardian era also shows a new optimism, when extreme

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<sup>198</sup> Graham, p. 10.



visions of an urban apocalypse were beginning to be accompanied by rays of hope that somehow social conflict could be overcome. White's story of 1903, for example, shows a more positive view of the population doggedly holding out and overcoming class differences by supporting each other.

The popular literature of the 1880s through to the 1900s is fairly crude in its attempt to locate anxieties regarding social tensions of all types within the metaphor of fog destroying London. Henry James employs it much more subtly by taking the idea that the streets were already denied to women because of their supposed danger, and extending this to streets in a fog. In *The Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer's attempt to break out of this socially imposed confinement, by her walk through the fog, ultimately proves futile. She does not experience any danger on her walk. Her attempt to break the limits imposed on women's freedom reflect on Isabel's feeling that she can break through the constraints in the rest of her life. This is also shown to be futile. In *The Princess Casamassima* fog represents the confinement imposed by the rigid class system, and lack of money. Both Hyacinth and Paul Muniment want to look beyond the fog of their lives, but are unable to do so. Henry James sees fog in terms of restriction and confinement, therefore, reinforcing barriers of gender and class rather than upsetting them, but at the same time underlying the conflicts and tensions that existed between those on either side.

In all these various ways, fog was used by different writers as a metaphorical representation of collective antagonisms of one kind and another. But fog could also be used on a more intimate level, to signify in terms of greater or lesser subtlety the crossing of barriers by individuals engaged in acts of social, moral and legal transgression, as we shall now see.



## Chapter Five: Fog and Transgression

### Introduction

'In the nineteenth century', Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have noted, the idea of 'fear of differences that "have no law, no meaning, and no end" was articulated above all through the body of the city: through the separations and interpretations of the suburb and the slum, of grand buildings and the sewer.'<sup>1</sup> Fog was deployed as a metaphorical means of articulating such threatening differences, representing transgression, the blurring of legal and moral boundaries, concealment, the keeping of secrets, and the invasion of private space. Stallybrass and White also note how writers 'obsessively returned to the "unutterable horrors" of the city, where there were no "architectural barriers or protections of decency and propriety".<sup>2</sup> Fog offered itself as a way to represent the absence or abolition of such barriers and protections. Thus it was used as a metaphorical representation not only of general social tensions at a collective level, but also of the particular, individual threat posed by murderers and criminals, deviants and other agents of social and moral transgression. Fog represented a London that was dark, hostile and labyrinthine; but the moral degeneracy it signified was attached not only to the underclass in general but also to transgressive individuals in particular.

That fog could offer concealment to criminals intent on theft or even murder had long been a commonplace. Even in early nineteenth-century London, the fog was often so thick that thieves could remove the luggage from the back of carriages without being noticed, as is suggested by this newspaper report from 29<sup>th</sup> December 1813.

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<sup>1</sup> Stallybrass and White, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 124.



Lord and Lady CASTLEREAGH and their Suite, when they reached Whitechapel, on Monday evening, were forced to procure men to sit upon the trunks and boxes fixed to the carriages, different attempts having been made by some villains to cut them off. They had intended to sleep at Chelmsford, but owing to the fog it was with the greatest difficulty they reached Rumford, by the aid of flambeaux.<sup>3</sup>

This sport of divesting coaches of their luggage continued in more ingenious ways a few years later:

ROBBERY OF THE WINDSOR COACH. – On Tuesday night, one of the Windsor coaches, which comes to the Bolt-in-tun, Fleet-street, was robbed. It seems that the thieves, during the intense fog, had made an opening in the boot behind, and stole every parcel it contained.<sup>4</sup>

J. G. Kohl (1808-78), a German tourist, wrote of London's foggy weather in 1814: 'It must be fine weather for pickpockets and other scamps, who can be out of sight in a moment.'<sup>5</sup> Other specific examples of criminal acts undertaken in the fog seem more trivial: *The Times* report on the stealing of hats appears rather jocular in style especially with the title 'A New Trick –' although perhaps the jocularity is partly because it is a crime which occurs in Liverpool, rather than London, showing the newspaper's rather southern bias:

A NEW TRICK. – During one of the late fogs a gentleman was passing down Lord-street at an early hour of the evening, and was knocked against, no doubt designedly, by a fellow who came rushing towards him, and whose hat fell off at the instant [...] and immediately he seized the gentleman's hat, darted off through the thickest of the fog, and was wholly out of sight before he had gone six paces. – *Liverpool Albion*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 29 December 1813, p. 3, col. c.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 24 December 1818, p. 3, col. c.

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Kohl, *From England and Wales* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), p. 177.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 21 January 1845, p. 7, col. c





Fig 47: A pickpocket at work in the fog.<sup>7</sup>

The point is made visually in a part of a sketch which appeared in *The Graphic* of 1870 and which highlights the confusion that fog created. In the right-hand corner, a young pickpocket is removing a watch as the elderly owner holds on to a lamp-post for dear life. Fog was an obvious cloak under which criminals could ply their trade. But in fictional works by authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Marie Belloc Lowndes, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Joseph Conrad, it could be used as a signifier of transgression in far more subtle and complex ways. This chapter examines the metaphorical use of fog by each of these authors in turn, discussing the ways in which they deployed it to convey not only the transgressor's state of mind and moral constitution but also that of the people whose role it was to reassert the moral order

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<sup>7</sup> *The Graphic*, 9 November 1872, p. 431.



and, indeed, the condition of the moral and social world in which the depraved and corrupt individual could cross the boundaries of convention, propriety and morality.

### *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

#### I

Peter Ackroyd has described *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), by Robert Louis Stevenson, as 'the greatest novel of London fog', yet, on closer inspection, there is, in fact, very little fog in it, nor is fog used as a practical part of the plot, for example by concealing the murderer's actions.<sup>8</sup> What makes the novel appear foggy in the reader's memory is the fact that there is a great deal of secrecy and concealment within it. All the same, the single significant fog in the novel does play an important metaphorical role. It follows the brutal murder of the MP, Danvers Carew, by Hyde. It lasts from the early hours of the morning and through the whole day and evening and provides the background to a cab journey taken by the lawyer, Mr Utterson, who has been asked to identify the body of his murdered client and leads the Police Inspector to Hyde's lodgings. The gloom which the fog creates becomes a mirror of Utterson's feelings of confusion. His thoughts are of 'the gloomiest dye' as he journeys through the fog with Police Inspector Newcomen to the house that Dr Jekyll has rented for his other persona, Mr Hyde, who is suspected of having committed the murder.<sup>9</sup>

Utterson is aware of some strong bond between his friend, Dr Jekyll, and Mr Hyde, a bond which extends to Jekyll having made a will in Hyde's favour. As Jekyll's lawyer, Utterson is aware of the will, but its terms seem strange to him, since it leaves the doctor's assets to Hyde in the event not only of his death but also of his

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<sup>8</sup> Ackroyd, *London*, p. 435.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde', in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 27-97 (p. 48).



disappearance. Why, Utterson wonders, should the respectable Dr Jekyll contemplate his own disappearance? What dangerous game has he become involved in? Nor does Utterson understand the generosity Jekyll has shown to this recent and unknown acquaintance. He thinks that Hyde must be blackmailing Jekyll, and he is worried that Hyde's relationship to Jekyll will be revealed, to the detriment of his friend when he is arrested for having killed Danvers Carew; this will undoubtedly have a very damaging effect on Jekyll's reputation. His concerns are of such an extent that even he feels soiled by a general sense of guilt especially 'when he glanced at the companion of his drive, he was conscious of some touch of that terror of the law and the law's officers which may at times assail the most honest.'<sup>10</sup> Once the police are involved, there is no way any wrongdoing can be smoothed over without too much disclosure and kept secret. The fog, in its capacity to absorb light, and make one feel walled in, touches Utterson in the cab and provides a signifier of the law closing in around Utterson and his friend, Dr Jekyll.

Fear of disclosure is a major theme of the story. The clarification of the narrative is told through letters, written by various people, which are stored in Utterson's safe, away from prying eyes. Utterson has been specifically directed not to open them until after Jekyll's death or, more mysteriously, his disappearance. This stipulation is adhered to even though Utterson, at one point, is desperate to 'disregard the prohibition and dive at once to the bottom of these mysteries'.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the novella a code of silence ties the professional men together. Their adherence to conventions of confidentiality is based not only on professionalism but also on a masculine belief in the virtues of keeping quiet that is practised by all the men in this very male novel. Utterson, Enfield, and even Poole, the servant, all refuse to take on

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59.



the role of the detective. The Police Inspector is not accepted as part of the established professional circles in which the lawyer and doctor move. His name alone, Newcomen, signifies his parvenu status. Personal and professional secrets cannot be disclosed to him. For this reason Utterson will not disclose Hyde's relationship to Jekyll to the police, even though a Member of Parliament, a friend of Utterson's, has been murdered.

As Utterson and Newcomen drive along, we are told that they are passing through 'the first fog of the season' at 'nine in the morning' in October.<sup>12</sup> More fogs are clearly expected. Indeed, the 1880s, as we have seen, reflected on the discourse on fog in London at its first full intensity, paralleling a marked deepening of social antagonisms and tensions. Stevenson wrote this novella in the middle of the decade. Although he was staying at Boumemouth at the time of writing, these major fog outbreaks were given widespread publicity in *The Times* and other newspapers. Stevenson uses language which is similar to that of Dickens to describe the fog: 'A great chocolate-coloured pall lowered over heaven.'<sup>13</sup> Here too, as in so many other instances, fog is represented by using the imagery of death (in Victorian funerals, the pall, a cloth draped over the coffin, was usually black or purple). Dickens himself employed the same image in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) to describe the thick fog which eventually leads to the death of Quilp: 'The warning lights and fires upon the river were powerless beneath this pall.'<sup>14</sup> Here, Dickens uses the metaphor to describe a white fog. But more frequently a fog is described as a pall to signify its dark and dirty nature, blocking out the light and keeping the coffin from people's sight. As early as 1820, Henry Luttrell wrote: 'Scarce an eclipse with pall so dun | Blots from the face of

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 613.



heaven the sun.’<sup>15</sup> Slightly later Mayhew notes that the London fogs ‘are often so dense as to require the gas to be lighted in midday, and they cover the town with a most dingy depressing pall.’<sup>16</sup> A pall, through its function of covering the whole of a coffin, with a body inside, is also a metaphorical device which conveys the suffocating and concealing properties of a fog.<sup>17</sup> Frederic Harrison noted, in his *Choice Books* (1886): ‘Overhead by day and by night a murky pall of smoke.’<sup>18</sup> Looking back on turn-of-the century London, Shaw Desmond, as late as 1927, described it as ‘a smoke-palled London’, its inhabitants ‘pale ghosts surprised by the dawn’.<sup>19</sup> The metaphor has become a cliché; writers reached unthinkingly for the word ‘pall’ as soon as they started to describe a London fog.

Stevenson’s use of the word, however, is more reflective. In the context of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, likening the fog to a pall is singularly appropriate, since there really is a dead body, this being the morning after the horrific murder of the MP, Danvers Carew. But why should the ‘great chocolate-coloured pall’ lower *over* heaven? In Stevenson’s novella, heaven itself is concealed by the fog, so terrible is the crime that has been committed. The murder has been carried out by Hyde, a creature artificially produced by separating the good and evil sides of a single personality: he is, in effect, pure, distilled evil. In Christian terms Dr Jekyll has interfered with the natural creation of life which was created by God and this has resulted in murder. Just as the fog transforms so have the chemical powders transformed Hyde, however this is not a visual trick but a reality.

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Luttrell, *Letters to Julia, In Rhyme* (London: John Murray, 1822), Letter II, p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (London: Frank Cass Co., Ltd, 1967), II, p. 340.

<sup>17</sup> See John Wolfe, *Great Deaths: Grieving, Religion, and Nationhood in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), plate 7 (between pp. 214-5), for a picture of a pall.

<sup>18</sup> Frederic Harrison, *Choice of Books, and Other Literary Pieces* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1886), p. 438.

<sup>19</sup> Shaw Desmond, *London Nights of Long Ago* (London: Duckworth, 1927), p. 31.



The world which is described in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is one of inversion. Daylight seems like 'twilight'. It is not a static twilight, but consists of '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'.<sup>20</sup> The fog reveals to Utterson a variety of colours, but also gives a sense of movement, even confusion. The fog has created a world which is defined by its fluidity and its blurring of forms and distinctions. In the same passage, the wreaths of fog are described as 'swirling' and occasionally 'the fog would be quite broken up'.<sup>21</sup> The passage is dense with its layers of description upon description and gives the reader the sense of the confusion and gloominess which Utterson is experiencing. The experience of movement and confusion suggested by the description makes what is described beneath the fog on the dingy street even more distressing than if it had been revealed in full daylight.

The critic Gordon Hirsch refers to this passage as showing 'Stevenson at his most Dickensian'.<sup>22</sup> Hirsch notes echoes of the opening pages of *Bleak House* with 'the mud, the "slipping and sliding" foot passengers, the expressions of doubt whether "this day ever broke," and the "haggard and unwilling look" of the gas lamps "lighted two hours before their time" – all of which may be found in the opening three paragraphs of Dickens's novel'. He sees Stevenson's 'strange conflagration' more as an echo of Krook's death by spontaneous combustion in *Bleak House*, but this passage reveals a much wider range in Stevenson's knowledge of Dickens's work and the echoes go beyond this single novel. In *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens refers to the

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<sup>20</sup> Gordon Hirsch, 'Frankenstein, Detective Fiction, and *Jekyll and Hyde*', in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde: After One Hundred Years*, ed. by William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, Chicago and London), pp. 223-46 (p. 244, note 13).

<sup>21</sup> Stevenson, pp. 27-97 (p. 48).

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 244, note 13.



buildings which try to keep 'their heads above the foggy sea, and especially that the great dome of Saint Paul's seemed to die hard'.<sup>23</sup> Stevenson echoes this in noting the 'foggy cupola' of the medical theatre which he has to cross to gain entry to Jekyll's laboratory, and of the 'drowned city' two pages later.<sup>24</sup> Here the fog is inside the cupola, whereas in *Our Mutual Friend* St Paul's as both symbol and fact is above the fog; in the medical theatre it is not. It is already affected by the fog of evil and moral confusion which is spreading from Dr Jekyll's laboratory.

## II

The impact of Stevenson's pall is offset by the wind that moves the fog momentarily at times so that the scene can be revealed, as if a curtain has been briefly lifted. The city is seen here as a place of conflict. The fog and the wind are represented in military terms: 'the wind was continually charging and routing these embattled vapours'.<sup>25</sup> In 1891, as discussed in chapter 4, Israel Zangwill uses similar military imagery. The battle imagery is continued, but this time between the light and the unnatural darkness created by the fog, as the 'lamps [...] had been kindled afresh to combat this mournful reinvasion of darkness'.<sup>26</sup> The fog in the novella is seen as the enemy trying to invade the city. On the one hand, it appears to be unsuccessful: the 'vapours' are described as 'being routed by the wind', but on the other hand, it is so successful that Utterson sees the foggy area through which he passes as 'a district of some city in a nightmare'. Interestingly it is not the district which has been described as 'a dismal quarter of Soho', but the whole city which is 'in a nightmare'.<sup>27</sup> The description refers the reader back to Utterson's nightmare of Hyde confronting Jekyll

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<sup>23</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 479.

<sup>24</sup> Stevenson, pp. 27-97 (p. 51).

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.



as he lies asleep: 'the curtains of the bed plucked apart, the sleeper recalled, and, lo! There would stand by his side a figure to whom power was given, and even at that dead hour he must rise and do its bidding.'<sup>28</sup> In a similar way as Utterson's dream, when the bed curtains are raised to reveal the sleeper before he is murdered, the fog lifts 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 two-penny 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'.<sup>29</sup>

This is not an environment that a true gentleman would choose to inhabit. It is an indication of how far down the social ladder Jekyll has allowed himself to fall through the guise of Hyde. Not only is it poor and rough, it is obviously not morally respectable as well, revealing the immorality of Hyde in wanting to stay here. The juxtaposition of the women leaving to have a drink with the ragged children being left huddled in doorways emphasises their denial of maternal responsibility. Worse than this, they take the key of the door with them, thus denying the children access to their homes and possible warmth away from the cold, wet fog.

The glimpse which the fog allows us is of a very female world – men are not seen. In the world of a novella where power seems to lie in the wrong hands (Hyde has the key to the cabinet and seems to hold power over Jekyll) what are we to make of this matriarchal society glimpsed at through the fog? The patriarchal society produces its Hydes, its men slipping down the social ladder, but this matriarchal world also produces horror and chaos. These women deny the traditional Victorian view of women as keepers of the domestic hearth. The fact that they are forsaking this ideal

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.



for drink makes it even more obscene. The need to pay for alcohol often meant that women resorted to prostitution. The connection between these two would have been strongly felt by the contemporary reader, especially because the women have made a public spectacle of their transgression, crossing the unseen boundaries of propriety that featured so strongly in the work of Henry James, as we have seen. The other question this passage raises is why Stevenson insists that they are 'many women of many different nationalities'? Soho was very much associated with immigrants, and according to the historian Jerry White was known as a centre of French prostitution.<sup>30</sup> The social tension of the 1880s has already been noted. Through the fog lifting briefly, Utterson's gaze is extended, we are made aware of the middle-class fears of the undisciplined world which threatened to overturn social hierarchy and male domination, as if it might spill out and affect the ordered social world.

But the fog only allows brief glimpses of scenes such as these because 'the next moment the fog settled down again upon that part, as brown as umber, and cut him off from his blackguardly surroundings.'<sup>31</sup> Utterson's glimpse of this part of Soho makes him reflect on the irony of this being home to 'Henry Jekyll's favourite; of a man who was heir to a quarter of a million sterling'.<sup>32</sup> It seems highly appropriate that a man like Hyde, who has committed such a gruesome murder, should hide in such an area. That Utterson is cut off from his surroundings so promptly indicates the condition of living within the city: the sense of being isolated and being cut off from one's neighbours. The sense of isolation is further emphasised by the women being 'of many different nationalities'; there is a sense that this is almost a foreign land.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jerry White, *London In the Nineteenth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> Stevenson, pp. 27-97 (p. 48).

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.



Utterson cannot identify this area, even though it is part of the same city which he walks around with Enfield once a week.

As Saposnik suggests, 'London is the essential metaphor' in Stevenson's novella and it 'was much like its inhabitants, a macrocosm of the necessary fragmentation that Victorian man found inescapable'.<sup>34</sup> It is only when a murder brings Utterson to this part of Soho, and the fog lifts momentarily, that he becomes fully aware of how another London lives its life. Compare the explicitness of this passage to the teasing sensuality of an earlier passage describing the street in which the rear entrance to Jekyll's house is situated:

The inhabitants were all doing well, it seemed, and all emulously hoping to do better still, and laying out the surplus of their gains in coquetry; so that the shop fronts stood along that thoroughfare with an air of invitation, like rows of smiling saleswomen. The street with its freshly painted shutters, well-polished brasses, and general cleanliness and gaiety of note, instantly caught and pleased the eye of the passenger.<sup>35</sup>

The sensual imagery of the description, especially language like 'coquetry' and 'air of invitation', indicates that there may be much more going on behind these freshly painted shutters than it first appears. As Sandison comments:

The treatment of the by-street behind Jekyll's house goes some way to show how Stevenson exploited the city's capacity to suggest discordances and 'strange selfhoods', characterised as it is by double standards, a lascivious and disorderly subterranean life, and by the preoccupation with façades and frontages. As for the by-street, so for the city as a whole – which plays a bigger role in the novella than is usually recognised.<sup>36</sup>

Yet Sandison fails to highlight the unsavoury side of the city proffered by the glimpse beneath the fog of Soho and its 'women of different nationalities'. There are no obvious 'façades and frontages' to hide the poverty and depravity of this street. Its

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<sup>34</sup> Irving, S., Saposnik, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), pp. 90, 89.

<sup>35</sup> Stevenson, pp. 27-97 (p. 30).

<sup>36</sup> Alan Sandison, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism: A Future Feeling* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 225.



only possible façade is that created by the fog and this only partially hides it from sight. It is not concealed at all by the language of description which is much more direct. Perhaps the 'touch of that terror of law' which Utterson experiences is not only because his own conscience has deliberately sought through his past for any peccadillos but because the horror shown in this part of London is one which he has assiduously shunned.

### III

The city reaches a state of nightmare not immediately after the murder but during the next day when Utterson seeks Jekyll in the afternoon. The fog has now invaded private homes: 'for even in the houses the fog began to lie thickly'.<sup>37</sup> Saposnik describes how the action within *Jekyll and Hyde* 'becomes internalized' and 'leads farther and farther into the interior of Jekyll's house'.<sup>38</sup> This culminates in Poole, Jekyll's butler (traditionally the defender of the front door) and Utterson breaking down the final barrier of the door to Jekyll's cabinet. By doing so they invade his literal and metaphorical refuge to reveal his secrets. The fact that we are told that the fog has begun to invade houses forewarns us of this more brutal invasion by Poole and Utterson, and shows us that a refuge in the hearth, where, it is noted, a fire is burning and a lamp has been lit on the chimney shelf, will not always provide the protection desired.<sup>39</sup>

Yet these domestic images recur in a more comforting form in the description of Utterson's hearth, on the evening of the same day, with Mr Guest, his head clerk, his 'guest' for the evening. The outside horror is not forgotten: 'The fog still slept on the wing above the drowned city, where the lamps glimmered like carbuncles; and

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<sup>37</sup> Stevenson, pp. 27-97 (p. 51).

<sup>38</sup> Saposnik, p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> Stevenson, pp. 27-97 (pp. 69-71).



through the muffle and smother of these fallen clouds, the procession of the town's life was still rolling in through the great arteries with a sound as of a mighty wind.<sup>40</sup> Life continues through the fog-bound city in the evening as it did during the morning. The sounds of the city might disturb but these have been partially deadened by 'the muffle and smother of these fallen clouds'. The image of the fog as a sleeping bird above a city described as 'drowned' leaves is a paradoxical image – one that is both refreshingly natural but also conjures up fog as a pollutant concocted from below. This claustrophobic impression offset by the cosy fireside scene and the description of the fine wine 'that had long dwelt unsunned in the foundations of his house' which itself leads to images of 'acids long ago resolved; the imperial dye [which] had softened with time, as the colour grows richer in stained windows; and the glow of hot autumn afternoons on hillside vineyards'.<sup>41</sup> The wine creates a picture of exotic foreign lands which help 'to disperse the fogs of London'. Under the influence of the hearth and the wine: 'Insensibly the lawyer melted.'<sup>42</sup> The good chemicals of the wine contrast with the bad chemicals used by Jekyll to transform himself, and also provide a contrast with the fog outside which is also a chemical.

Possibly Utterson is slightly drunk; after all, we have been told in the first paragraph that he 'drank gin [...] to mortify a taste for vintages'.<sup>43</sup> Is it his lawyer's façade which is melting, leaving open the person beneath the title? This seems possible, since he is described by his profession rather than by his name, and he does then show Guest the letter, although careful to pledge Guest to secrecy when he identifies Hyde's handwriting as virtually identical to Jekyll's. The emphasis on the

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<sup>40</sup> Stevenson, pp. 27-97 (pp. 53-4).

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29



hearth (less so on the wine) is very Dickensian, but Stevenson creates a more complex ensemble of worlds: there is the world of fog, which covers the world of the living city, which is outside another world, Utterson's hearth and home, which in turn opens a window, through the wine, onto a further world of warmth and hillside vineyards. Unlike the earlier passage in which we are told the fog has begun to invade homes, Utterson's home seems immune from the fog, and the only invasion is through the sounds of the city, which have themselves been muffled by the fog.

Stevenson, it has been argued, also uses his description of the fog to explore his own personal nightmares to do with the colour brown. He wrote: 'at times they were almost formless, [I] would be haunted, for instance, by nothing more definite than a certain hue of brown'.<sup>44</sup> This would then take on the form of nightmarish 'Brownies'.

Veeder explains:

On the one hand, the childhood into which the patriarchs of the novella regress can be seen as ultimately Stevenson's own. The "brown" fog that enwraps Utterson's world is the farthest emanation of Louis's terrors, which emerged first as a childhood nightmare about the colour brown, then reemerged as a boyhood nightmare about a brown dog, and eventually shaped itself into the Brownies who personified for him the unconscious processes themselves. Likewise, the night-time in which every violent event of *Jeekyll and Hyde* occurs is a protraction of the long nights of fear that Louis endured as a sickly boy.<sup>45</sup>

Veeder ignores the fact that the night on which the violent, unprovoked murder takes place is actually brighter and clearer than the following fog-filled day: 'the early part of the night was cloudless, and the lane, which the maid's window overlooked was brilliantly lit by the full moon.'<sup>46</sup> Bryan Bevan is similarly mistaken when he writes: 'The scene of the murder is characteristic of what he described as "fitness in events

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Chapter on Dreams', *Scribner's Magazine* (April 1888), 122-8 (p.123).

<sup>45</sup> William Veeder, 'Children of the Night', in *Dr Jeekyll and Mr Hyde: After One Hundred Years*, ed. by William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 107-160 (p. 114).

<sup>46</sup> Stevenson, *Dr Jeekyll*, pp. 27-97 (p. 46).



and places”, in virtue of which a given locality becomes associated with an appropriate invented action. The scene is a sordid district of Soho, London on a dark, murky night.<sup>47</sup>

It is, in fact, the following day that is murky, not the moonlit night of the murder. And the clarity of the night-time scene is due not to street lighting but to the natural influence of a bright moon. Possibly this may allude to werewolf mythology, which requires a full moon in order to make a transformation, as has happened with Jekyll and Hyde that night – a transformation in Hyde’s physiognomy which is reflected in some movie versions of the story. But it also suggests that Hyde has reached the point where he no longer cares if he is seen indulging his murderous actions, since he carries them out in the full glare of the moonlight. This attitude runs counter to the major theme of the book of secrecy and circumspection amongst the male professional classes. In this way, Hyde openly parades his moral degradation, just as do, later, the women in Soho. It is only the thought of the scaffold which makes Hyde regret his lack of caution.

It is important for the plot that at the time of the murder of Carew, the night is bright, since this gives credence to the maid’s clear view of events. This means that there is no question of the maid mistaking the events and people she witnesses. In fact, her vision is so sharp that she is able to contrast the innocence of the victim – ‘but the moon shone on his face as he spoke, and the girl was pleased to watch it, it seemed to breathe such an innocent and old-world kindness of disposition’ – with the ‘ill-contained impatience’ of Mr Hyde. Ironically, even though the night is bright and clear, Dr Jekyll, when he describes the murder in a letter recalls ‘A mist dispersed.’<sup>48</sup> This is, of course, a psychological mist, seen from the viewpoint of Mr Hyde, Jekyll’s

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<sup>47</sup> Bryan Bevan, *Robert Louis Stevenson: Poet and Teller of Tales* (London: Rubicon Press, 1993), p.119.

<sup>48</sup> Stevenson, *Dr Jekyll*, pp. 27-97 (p. 91).



evil alter-ego. It is only self-preservation which causes the mist to clear: 'I saw my life to be forfeit; and fled from the scene of these excesses, at once glorying and trembling.'<sup>49</sup> Only after the murder does the real mist, in the form of the 'great chocolate-coloured pall' of fog, descend to obscure events.

Mists are also used, in a more conventionally metaphorical way, towards the beginning of the novel to describe Utterson's growing knowledge of Hyde, 'out of the shifting insubstantial, mists that had so long baffled his eyes, there leaped up the sudden, definite presentiment of a fiend'.<sup>50</sup> But when the lawyer does meet Hyde, after Utterson has begun to haunt doors even 'at night under the face of the fogged city moon', it is another of those fine clear nights (like the night of the murder) on which Hyde can be clearly recognized. Utterson feels that seeing Hyde's face will dissolve the mystery but, of course, it does not because in this book the face or the surface of things never reveals the full story. The irony is that although Utterson thinks he can see the true Hyde out of these metaphorical mists, he does not gain the full picture. Hyde never appears out of a real fog or mist within the story. When Utterson travels through the fog with Newcomen to track Hyde down, he finds that the doctor's alter ego has disappeared.

Running through the novella is the theme of public and private: Hyde commits his crimes in public, yet Jekyll's friends want to keep his disastrous experiment private. Respectability, a key theme of the novella, is a public virtue, yet Hyde completely negates it. The mist of uncontrolled urges obscures Jekyll's reason when he is transmuted into Hyde, and is easily dispersed by apprehension of danger; a far denser, darker fog descends on the other characters when they try to use their powers of

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 35-6.



reason to penetrate the mystery of the two men's relationship to one another. Utterson is first introduced to us as a great walker of the city, with Enfield an example of a *flâneur*. Yet, when Utterson takes the cab journey through the fog with Newcomen, he seems unprepared, even shocked, at what he gains a glimpse of through the fog. The glimpses afforded to Utterson by the fog symbolise the desire to keep scenes like this hidden, especially from the class that Utterson represents, both as himself and as a lawyer. It reveals the major division of the city between the rich and the poor. The fog is not used in this novel to hide the murderer, or his actions, but it does conceal the moral depravity of some parts of the city. The fog is a recurring condition of the city which cannot be escaped even when inside one's home; in the same way the socially and morally poor cannot always be kept hidden.

### Jack the Ripper and *The Lodger*

#### I

On Friday, October 12, 1888, *The Daily Telegraph* reported on the closure of the stage version of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. It made explicit a connection between the closure and the recent 'Jack the Ripper' murders:

Mr. Richard Mansfield has determined to abandon the "Creepy Drama," evidently beloved in America, in favour of wholesome comedy. The murderous Hyde will peer round the drawing-room windows and leap at his victim's throat for the last time during the forthcoming week; [...] Experience has taught this clever young actor that there is no taste in London just now for horrors on the stage. There is quite sufficient to make us shudder out of doors.<sup>51</sup>

Fact and fiction were beginning to merge in the public's mind. The Whitechapel murders took place between the months of August and November in 1888 and these murders had been inextricably linked to the stage version of the story, to the point that

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<sup>51</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 October 1888. Cited in *Jekyll and Hyde Dramatized: The 1887 Richard Mansfield Script and the Evolution of the Story on Stage*, ed. by Martin A. Danahay and Alex Chisholm (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2005), p. 186.



an American newspaper had written seriously that ‘the Whitechapel murders are the result of a case in real life of “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”’<sup>52</sup> Richard Mansfield had opened in the dual roles of Jekyll and Hyde at the Lyceum Theatre, London on Saturday, August 4, 1888. As a homage to the impact of the murders on the East End, and possibly to his drama, Mansfield gave the final performance in aid of the homeless of the East End. Its only lasting legacy for its actor was that he was to be named by some later Ripperologists as one of the possible suspects in the real murder case, since he was accused by letter of having committed the murder at the time.

As with the murder committed by Mr. Hyde, so too the murders committed by Jack the Ripper have long been portrayed by commentators as having taken place in a foggy Victorian London. A 1935 French novel captures this feeling when its first page records of Jack the Ripper: ‘The mere syllables of his name evoke the special atmosphere of sordid alleyways teeming with people, foggy evenings, and a phantom that looms up from nowhere [...] Blood, filth and fog – those are the three essential elements of Jack the Ripper’s world.’<sup>53</sup> In a similar vein, John Douglas and Mark Olshaker have claimed that the murders by Jack the Ripper ‘represent a real-life mystery from the era of Sherlock Holmes – the bygone romantic era of high Victorian society, gaslights and swirling London fog’.<sup>54</sup> Twentieth-century television dramas based around the Whitechapel murders also insist on the fog being an important part of events. A characteristic example is an episode of the ABC television series *The Avengers*, entitled ‘Fog’, in which the murderer is called the Gaslight Ghoul.<sup>55</sup> Even the science-fiction series *Star Trek* had an episode, written by Robert Bloch (the author of

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<sup>52</sup> *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1888, p.186.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Dorsenne, *Jack L'Éventreur: Scenes from Life*, trans. by Molly Whittington-Egan (Malvern: Capella Archive, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> John Douglas and Mark Olshaker, *The Cases that Haunt Us* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2002), p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> *The Avengers*, made by ABC, first aired June 23, 1969.



*Psycho*, 1960), in which a timeless force of inhumanity, formerly known as Jack the Ripper on earth, inhabits the foggy side of an alien planet.<sup>56</sup> As the Ripperologists Coville and Lucanio maintain: 'Like a potent witch's brew, a writer or director merely needs to add a soupçon of fog, a dram of yellow gaslight, a hint of echoing footsteps, a modest dose of darkness [...] The result screams "Jack the Ripper".'<sup>57</sup>

## II

The most successful account of the Ripper murders before the First World War was fictional: *The Lodger*, written in 1911 by Marie Belloc Lowndes (1868-1947), the daughter of a French lawyer, Louis Belloc, and Bessie Rayner Parkes, the campaigner for women's rights. Her brother was the well-known writer Hilaire Belloc, whose text Alvin Langdon Coburn so disliked in his photographic book on London, as mentioned in chapter three. *The Lodger* was the best-selling title amongst her more than sixty books. It has been in print since its publication and has been turned into a play, an opera and several movies – one film version being an Alfred Hitchcock silent movie, starring Ivor Novello.

*The Lodger* began life as a short story in *McClure's Magazine* and was then published, two years later, as a novel. Lowndes had become a journalist in the late 1880s, writing for, amongst others, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, at that time under the editorship of W. T. Stead (1849-1912) a champion of equal opportunities for women. Stead had taken the lead in reporting the Whitechapel murders in the press. He compiled and summarised accounts of the murders from the morning papers and represented them in his evening paper with a few twists of his own. Lowndes'

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<sup>56</sup> *Star Trek* (Wolf in the Fold), made by NBC, first aired December 22, 1967. Cited in Gary Coville, and Patrick Lucanio, *Jack the Ripper, His Life and Crime in Popular Entertainment* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1999), p. 71.

<sup>57</sup> Marie Belloc Lowndes, *The Lodger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 107.



proximity to Stead at this time may have laid the seeds for this later story based on the 'Jack the Ripper' murders.

Belloc Lowndes's story centres on a respectable landlady, Mrs Bunting, who begins to suspect that her lodger is the serial murderer known as 'The Avenger'. 'The Avenger', the author notes, 'comprises in his own person the peculiarities of Jekyll and Hyde, Mr Louis Stevenson's now famous hero'.<sup>58</sup> The effect of these growing suspicions and what she might do with this information creates the dramatic tension within the novel. The novel opens on a day described as 'so cold, so foggy, so-so drizzly'.<sup>59</sup> The 'fog-laden, drizzling atmosphere of the Marylebone Road' is securely shut out by a pair of 'red damask curtains'.<sup>60</sup> The curtains have a double function: they keep out the bad weather both physically and visually, but they also prevent the room being looked into from the outside by strangers. This barrier to the public gaze functions so the Buntings can retain the façade of being comfortably off. The Buntings' 'carefully-banked-up fire' indicates, in fact, that they are a couple in financial need.<sup>61</sup> The boundary between the public and private space is breached, in the course of the novel, in several ways. The couple needs, for financial reasons, to take in a paying guest, or their private space may be invaded in a more violent way by the baliffs, if they fail to pay their bills. Their position, teetering on the edge of destitution, but above the very poor, is one which they realise they cannot continue indefinitely.

Their lodger, Sleuth, is even more of an intrusion because of their growing certainty that he is the murderer. If the police find out, the house will be completely overrun by strangers. Further public gaze would be directed to their home because of

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.



press interest and general curiosity of the crowd. A foretaste of this is experienced in a dream of Mrs Bunting's: 'Hoarse voices seemed to be shouting in her ear: "The Avenger close here!" [...] And even in her dream Mrs Bunting felt angered – angered and impatient. She knew so well why she was being disturbed by this horrid nightmare!<sup>62</sup> She even experiences a brief moment of envy based on class-consciousness when she wonders 'if those horrid newspaper men were allowed to shout in Belgrave Square'.<sup>63</sup> The shouts of the newspaper vendors pierce beyond the red damask curtains into their home, as do the sounds of the crowd rushing to the site of the murder which happens just around the corner from the couple's home. Mrs Bunting's dream is similar to Utterson's dream in *Jekyll and Hyde*; just as Utterson dreams of Hyde entering the privacy of Jekyll's bedroom, the Avenger seems to be entering her subconscious self as well as threatening to be physically closer. The complication arises because Mrs Bunting is torn in that she is almost certain that the Avenger really is in her house; and that he is the gentleman lodger, Mr Sleuth. In her mind, Sleuth only takes on the attributes of the Avenger when he is out of her sight, but when they are in the same room, he becomes a gentleman again – a Jekyll and Hyde existence in her perceptions of him.

The lodger's respectable voice recalls to the landlady 'her happy, far-off days of youth and of security' when she was in service.<sup>64</sup> The Buntings' sense of security in their own home is shattered when they realise that they have left Bunting's pretty young step-daughter, Daisy, alone in the house with the lodger. Their fear that something untoward may have happened to her is quickly dispelled when they reach home but their thought of what might have occurred adds to the tension in the novel.

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.



The theme of the invasion of private space is taken up again when Mrs Bunting sticks a pin into a Bible on a sudden impulse after Sleuth has disappeared. The lines marked out depict a final assault on private space: 'My tabernacle is spoiled and all my cords are broken [...] There is none to stretch forth my tent any more and to set up my curtains.'<sup>65</sup> Perhaps a reference back to the red damask curtains of the opening page is meant here. The final lines of the novel inform the reader that the Buntings decide to give up their own home to be in 'the service of an old lady, by whom they are feared as well as respected, and whom they make very comfortable'.<sup>66</sup> By moving the murders closer to the Buntings' home in the West End from where they actually took place – the poorest parts of East London – Belloc Lowndes increases the contrast between safe domestic space and the dangerous outside.

The changing relationship in the novel between public and private space is represented by the repeated metaphorical use of fog. Nearly all the murders which take place within the novel (four have already occurred before it begins) are committed on foggy nights; only the final murder does not. The connection is underlined by a letter in the correspondence column of a newspaper, speculating that the murderer might be a middle-class gentleman: 'On foggy nights, once the quiet household is plunged in sleep, he creeps out of the house.'<sup>67</sup> The fog obstructs the police force's view; their hunt for the killer is likened to 'a game of blind man's buff, in which the detective has his [...] eyes bandaged'.<sup>68</sup> This is a reference to a famous cartoon which appeared in *Punch* at the time of the actual Jack the Ripper murders in which a policeman's sight is obstructed, not by fog, but by a blindfold representing his

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46.



ignorance and lack of progress in the case. The cartoonist shows the policeman surrounded by degenerate, simian representatives of the underclass, throwbacks to an earlier stage of human evolution, much as Mr. Hyde is depicted by Stevenson, or criminals were supposed to be in the influential system of criminology developed by Cesare Lombroso in the 1870s. Just as the police were widely regarded as ineffectual during the real Ripper murders, so too the detective in Belloc Lowndes's story, Joe Chandler, the only official member of the police force represented within the novel, never questions the appearance of the lodger in the house he is frequenting. He is not even curious to see him; instead, he is overwhelmed by his desire to see Daisy, the landlord's daughter. Mrs Bunting's rather more positive view of Chandler's ability as a

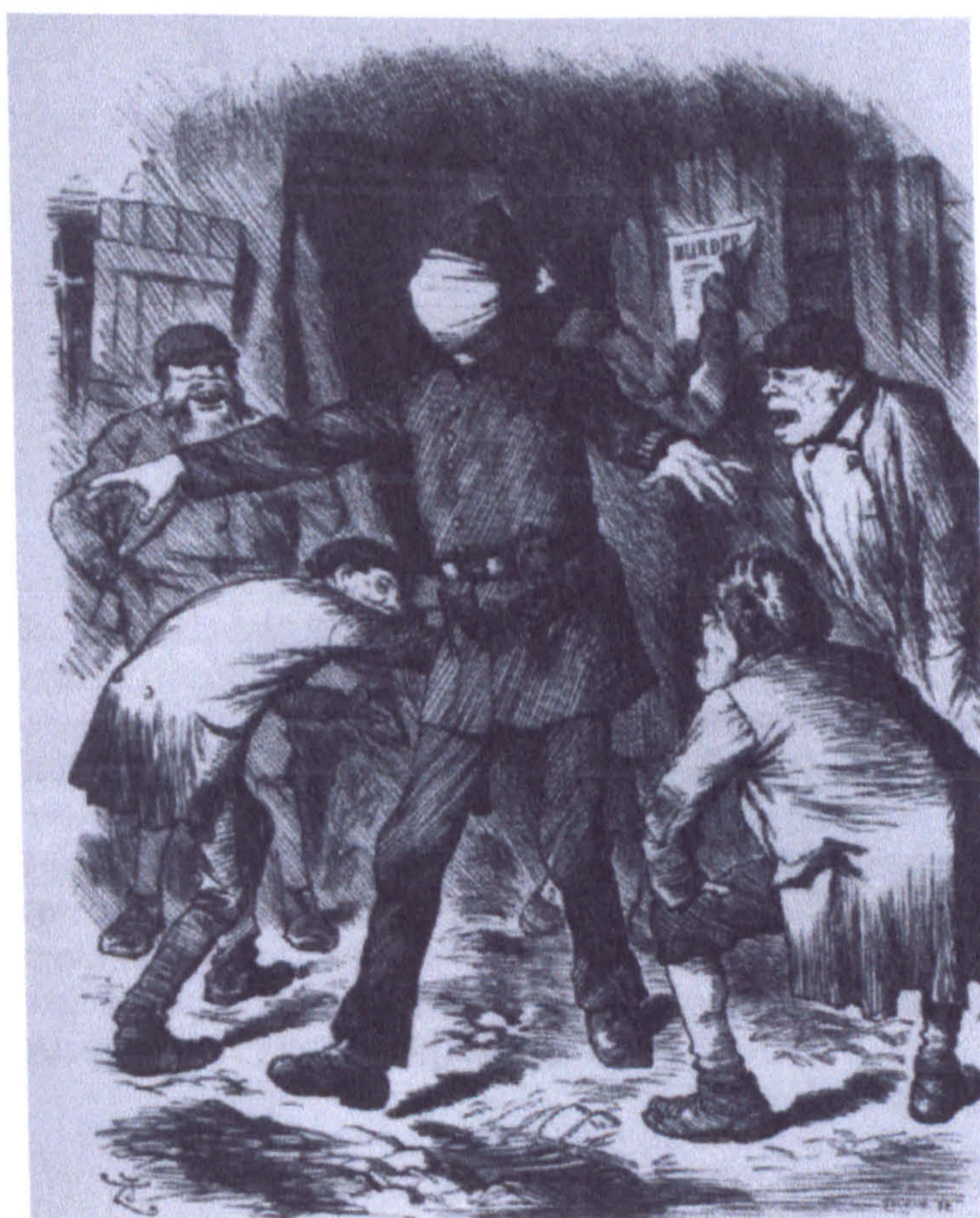


Fig 48: Blind Man's Buff (As played by the Police)<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Punch*, 22 September 1888, p. 139.



detective makes her grateful when Daisy goes away for a few days because it will mean that Chandler will not come around so often. It is ironic that Chandler, whose name represents candles, the bringing of light, should contribute so little to the illumination of the mystery. The lodger himself goes by the name of 'Sleuth', but is in fact a major suspect. The true detective in the novel is Mrs Bunting. She ferrets out clues – like the whereabouts of Sleuth's holdall – and matches the timing of the murders with Sleuth's walks in the fog. But she does this only to try to ease her anxiety and to try to establish that he is not the murderer. Even when she does suspect him, she makes it quite plain that she will never tell the police. She even keeps her suspicions from her husband throughout most of the novella.

### III

The reader of the novel is led by the author to suspect that the lodger is the murderer long before Mrs Bunting does. Her suspicions of Sleuth are aroused when she observes that it is 'a funny habit [...] of going out for a walk after midnight in weather so cold and foggy'.<sup>70</sup> The fifth murder, which takes place after the lodger has come to stay, takes place on a night with an 'awful fog'.<sup>71</sup> This makes a description of the murderer extremely difficult to come by. He is described as just 'a tall, thin shadow of a man-with a bag'.<sup>72</sup> This information, and her realisation that her lodger arrived only with a bag which he subsequently locked in a wardrobe, together with the fact that she hears him go out in the early hours of the morning, begins to make her uneasy, although initially she does not know why. Mrs Bunting's view of the unknown Avenger uses the formless indeterminacy represented by London fog: 'Mrs Bunting always visioned the Avenger as a black shadow in the centre of a bright, blinding light

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<sup>70</sup> Lowndes, p. 45.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.



– but the shadow had no form or definite substance. Sometimes he looked like one thing, sometimes like another.<sup>73</sup>

Dramatic tension occurs when Joe Chandler accompanies Daisy to stay in Belgrave Square one afternoon, when ‘a yellow pall of fog had suddenly descended on London’.<sup>74</sup> By this time, Mrs Bunting has begun to sense a connection between the London fog, the brutal acts of the Avenger, and the lodger, Mr Sleuth. When Sleuth indicates that he is going out in the fog that afternoon, she tries to prevent him: ‘She moved back, still holding the tray, and stood between the door and her lodger, as if she meant to bar his way – to erect between Mr Sleuth and the dark, foggy world outside a living barrier.’<sup>75</sup> Mrs Bunting wants to perform the same function as the red damask curtains in the first few lines of the novel in order to keep Sleuth safe within her home. When the lodger notes the sudden lifting of the fog – ‘rolling off in that sudden, mysterious way in which local fogs sometimes do lift in London’ – there is ‘no relief in his voice, rather was there disappointment and dread’.<sup>76</sup> This is the opposite reaction from what is expected, and rouses the suspicions of Mrs Bunting, and the reader, still further.

Any momentary sympathy Mrs Bunting feels for the victims after she attends the inquest on one of them is quickly dismissed when she sees her own home:

her spirit suddenly lightened. The narrow, drab-coloured little house [...] looked as if it could, aye, and would, keep any secret closely hidden [...] For a moment, at any rate, The Avenger’s victims receded from her mind. She thought of them no more. All her thoughts were concentrated on Bunting – Bunting and Mr Sleuth.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 90

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 151.



The idea of remaining private and keeping secrets within the confines of one's own house echoes the same theme in *Dr Jekyll*. Mrs Bunting is not concerned for her own safety within the confines of her own respectable home. But her respectability is much more fragile than that of the wealthy professional Dr Jekyll. She is convinced enough of Sleuth's guilt as 'The Avenger' that she will not allow Daisy to sleep by herself, but insists she share her own bed. Mr Bunting is obliged to occupy the spare room. To Mrs Bunting, the idea that a gentleman like Sleuth might be a murderer is too much of a contradiction. She tries to resolve it by keeping Sleuth within doors so that he will not be contaminated by the fog and become a murderer. As Mr. Bunting says: 'It isn't safe for decent folk to be out in such weather'.<sup>78</sup>

Mrs Bunting often excuses Sleuth's odd, suspicious behaviour by seeing it as eccentric, more a signifier of the class to which she feels he belongs than of his possible identity as a murderer. And even when Mrs Bunting thinks of the horror of the Avenger's crimes, it is always overshadowed by her lodger's genteel background: 'Somehow, a great rush of pity, as well as of horror, came over Mrs Bunting's heart. He was such a – a – she searched for a word in her mind, but could only find the word 'gentle' – he was such a nice, gentle gentleman, was Mr Sleuth.'<sup>79</sup> So it is a shock to her when the suggestion is made in a letter written to a newspaper by a reader who calls himself 'Gaboriou' that the murderer may be someone who lives in west London, and is therefore, a gentleman.<sup>80</sup>

The theme of the sanctity of private space is further explored on the afternoon of Daisy and Joe's walk, when fog is described as entering the hallway of the Buntings'

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>80</sup> 'Gaboriou' was an implicit homage to the French mystery writer Émile Gaboriau (1832-1873) who invented the detective Monsieur Lecoq. Lowndes's father was a French barrister and would have known of this.



home: Mrs Bunting 'found herself downstairs in the fog-laden hall, for it had drifted in as she and her husband had stood at the door seeing Daisy off'.<sup>81</sup> This incursion by the fog into her home coincides with Mrs Bunting feeling that her suspicion that Mr Sleuth might be 'The Avenger' is becoming too much for her: 'her secret suspense and trouble was becoming intolerable'.<sup>82</sup> When Mr Sleuth returns from his walk out into the fog, Mrs Bunting imagines his progress – "stealthy" she called it to herself-through the fog-filled, lamp-lit hall'.<sup>83</sup>

Similarly, Mr Sleuth creates noxious vapours with his 'experiments', performed in the cold room at the top of the house, which he has chosen because it has a gas ring and sink. What these experiments are never becomes clear, but the suggestion is that he is in fact burning his own clothes after each murder; Sleuth's experiments are carried out generally after he has been out. Mrs Bunting thinks one evening: "Twas odd he chose tonight, when it was so foggy, to carry out an experiment."<sup>84</sup> On finding that his own gas ring is not working, Sleuth asks Mrs Bunting for the use of her kitchen. Although she tries to stay awake to listen out for Sleuth coming downstairs to use her kitchen, she falls asleep. Later, in her bedroom, she is awakened by the 'faint acrid odour' of Mr Sleuth's experiment down below. It is described as 'elusive, intangible, it yet seemed to encompass her and the snoring man by her side, almost as a vapour might have done'.<sup>85</sup> Here the connection between the fog, the murders and the experiments is completed. Evil vapours have invaded the house, leaving Mrs Bunting feeling contaminated by the lodger's activities: 'Mrs Bunting felt herself to be

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<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109.



all smell.<sup>86</sup> When Mrs Bunting descends to her kitchen the following morning, expecting the acrid smell to be there, 'the cavernous, whitewashed room was full of fog' as the windows have been left open, presumably to rid the room of the smell.<sup>87</sup> The fog itself has now entered beyond the hall, into the private space of the Buntings' kitchen, in the same way that the suspected murderer has infiltrated their home as a lodger.

Mr Bunting's surprise that the lodger has gone out in the fog brings on an affectionate lament that "We don't get the good old fogs we used to get – not what people used to call "London particulars".<sup>88</sup> He then recalls a former employer who loved living in London so much that she would go out in foggy weather without being afraid. Fog has become more dangerous, he implies. It has become, as in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a cloak for moral degeneracy, deviance and murder. Fog even reduces light to a signifier of bloody violence: 'She could see the lamplights on the other side of the Marylebone Road, glimmering redly.'<sup>89</sup> When Sleuth gives Mrs Bunting some money for the use of her kitchen, the light from the winter sun, 'a scarlet ball hanging in the smoky sky, glinted in on Mr Sleuth's landlady, and threw blood-red gleams, or so it seemed to her, on to the piece of gold she was holding in her hand'.<sup>90</sup> The combination of the sunlight and the smoke gives the money a red tinge that makes it look bloodstained.

Mrs Bunting's acceptance of the money, and her continuing protection of him as her lodger, makes her an accomplice in his bloody deeds. When Mr Sleuth eventually disappears, the murders abruptly cease; Mrs Bunting implicitly

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<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118.



acknowledges her complicity by anonymously donating the money Mr Sleuth has left on his dressing-table to the Foundling Hospital.<sup>91</sup> Fog in *The Lodger* serves not merely as a simple means of concealing transgression and signalling the difficulty many of the characters have in identifying the transgressor, it also signifies the murderous immorality that Mr Sleuth brings into the home, as it seeps into the hallway and mingles with the noxious vapours generated by the murderer in his upstairs room.

### *The Secret Agent*

#### I

Many contemporary reviewers commented on the presence of fog in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907). Edward Garnett, a friend of Conrad, wrote for *The Nation* of 'the murky gloom of old London's foggy streets and squares' which, for him, reflected the main theme of exploring human motivation in its dim recesses.<sup>92</sup> The *New York Times Book Review* highlighted Mrs Verloc's escape after killing her husband, noting 'the murderess flying through the night and the fog'.<sup>93</sup> The point being that the novel was associated with fog on its publication, and still is. The narrative of the novel concerns Mr Verloc, who is not only a secret agent of an unnamed country (one very like Russia), but also supplies information to the police. Verloc is forced by his new superior at the Embassy to agree to commit a terrorist act on a building of scientific worth – it turns out to be the Greenwich Observatory – the blame for which will be placed on revolutionary groups working against the government the Embassy represents.

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<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>92</sup> Edward Garnett, 'The Novel of the Week' in *The Nation*, 23 September 1907. Cited in *Conrad: The Secret Agent: A Casebook*, ed. by Ian Watt (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 43.

<sup>93</sup> *New York Times Book Review*, 21 September 1907, p. 55.



Verloc dupes his simple-minded brother-in-law, Stevie, to carry the bomb to the Observatory and leave it there. An accidental fall causes the bomb to explode prematurely and Stevie is blown to bits. On discovering the death of her beloved brother, Verloc's wife stabs her husband to death. Two representatives of the police investigate the explosion. The Assistant Commissioner, frustrated by his office job, takes on the role of chief investigator unbeknown to his deputy, Chief Inspector Heat. Verloc's wife attempts to escape but realising she cannot escape the horror of her actions, drowns herself in the Channel on the crossing to France. Like Stevenson, Conrad uses fog not simply, as commentators suggested, to signify the setting of the action in London, but in far more subtle and complex metaphorical ways.

## II

Stevie's death takes place on a foggy day. The revolutionary Ossipon reads of the events from the newspaper. The lack of concrete information is reduced to time, weather and the impact of the explosion: 'Half past eleven. Foggy morning. Effects of explosion felt as far as [...] Enormous hole in the ground.'<sup>94</sup> This same 'fog though not very dense' is an aid to Verloc, helping him to escape without being seen after he has left Stevie within a hundred yards of the Observatory walls.<sup>95</sup> Chief Inspector Heat's investigation of the bomb site is prompt, so the fog has still not been dissipated by the sun. He has not had time to breakfast and the fog takes on the metaphor of food: 'he had swallowed a good deal of raw, unwholesome fog in the park'.<sup>96</sup>

The fact that the sight of the scattered parts of Stevie's body is likened to 'an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast', gives the consumption of the fog a

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<sup>94</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 65.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.



cannibalistic quality.<sup>97</sup> As Rosenfield comments: 'Both fog and corpse are the unhealthy nourishment provided by a nightmare world.'<sup>98</sup> Ironically, earlier, Karl Yundt, another revolutionary in the novel, describes the present economic conditions as 'cannibalistic. That's what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people – nothing else.'<sup>99</sup> On overhearing this, Stevie 'swallowed the terrifying statement with an audible gulp'.<sup>100</sup> And later, the impact on Stevie on overhearing this, is described by her sister: 'He was out of his mind with something he overheard about eating people's flesh and drinking blood.'<sup>101</sup>

The fog is reminiscent of Stevie's previous exploit when persuaded to let off fireworks at his employer's business: 'he was discovered one foggy afternoon, in his chief's absence, busy letting off fireworks on the staircase. He touched off in quick succession a set of fierce rockets, angry Catherine wheels, loudly exploding squibs.'<sup>102</sup> The two episodes are tied not only by the foggy weather. In both cases it is Stevie having been persuaded that there is an injustice to be punished which leads him to carry out orders whose consequences he cannot anticipate. In the earlier instance 'two other office-boys in the building had worked upon his feelings by tales of injustice and oppression till they had wrought his compassion to the pitch of that frenzy'.<sup>103</sup> In the latter instance it is Verloc, his surrogate father, who persuades Stevie to carry the bomb which leads to his singularly messy death. The minor explosions of the fireworks are a precursor to a much larger explosion on a later foggy day.

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>98</sup> Claire Rosenfield, *Paradise of Snakes: An Archetypal Analysis of Conrad's Political Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 95.

<sup>99</sup> Conrad, p. 50.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.



The world of *The Secret Agent* is very Dickensian, especially in the way it uses the weather, more specifically fog, to sum up the condition of England, more precisely London. Fog and mud are allied in a world where fog is often reduced to its component parts: dirt and water. Even when the sun does appear it is described as ‘a peculiarly London sun [...] it looked bloodshot’.<sup>104</sup> More often than not, the sun struggles against the mist or fog in the text: ‘The rusty London sunshine struggling clear of the London mist shed a lukewarm brightness.’<sup>105</sup> The fog is rusty because of the amount of dirt in the air, and red-tinted like dried blood; as in Belloc Lowndes’s *The Lodger*, the red colours of the sun mirror the bloody crimes being committed beneath it.

This creates a world in which the inhabitants are imprisoned, like Mrs Verloc, unable to get out from ‘the bottom of a black abyss’, or worse still, the crushing of ‘the lofty pretensions of a mankind oppressed by the miserable indignities of the weather’.<sup>106</sup> This is a world without hope. Even a respected professional like the Assistant Commissioner feels trapped by London and his job. His inclination is to return to the colonies, where he will not feel chained to a desk, overwhelmed by administrative duties. He has been forced to move back to London because of his wife’s sensitivity to the colonial climate.

In a telling final paragraph of the novel, the Professor, a man who both makes explosives and carries them around to set off should he be caught, cannot look the ‘odious multitude of mankind’ directly in the eye. He is ‘terrible in the simplicity of his idea, calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world,’ a world that is still

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, p. 218.



without hope and whose 'lofty pretensions ... [are still] oppressed by the miserable indignities of the weather'.<sup>107</sup>

### III

In *The Secret Agent* fog often leads to rain; mist is introduced where its moistness can be emphasised. Thus when the Assistant Commissioner looks outside: 'It was a very trying day, choked in raw fog to begin with, and now drowned in cold rain.'<sup>108</sup> The London which discloses itself to the Assistant Commissioner seems like a scene after a Biblical disaster: 'The panes streamed with rain, and the short street he looked down into lay wet and empty, as if swept clear suddenly by a great flood [...] The flickering, blurred flames of gas-lamps seemed to be dissolving in a watery atmosphere.'<sup>109</sup> Slightly later, the Assistant Commissioner goes out, the street is likened to 'a wet, muddy trench.' 'His descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off. A murky, gloomy dampness enveloped him. The walls of the houses were wet, the mud of the roadway glistened with an effect of phosphorescence.'<sup>110</sup> His assimilation into the locality further extends the metaphor of the aquarium: 'He might have been but one more of the queer foreign fish.'<sup>111</sup> In a symbolic parallel, the Assistant Commissioner's own superior, Sir Ethelred, the Secretary of State, is currently pushing through a Bill for the Nationalization of Fisheries. The Assistant Commissioner is fishing on the state's behalf in the muddy, watery underworld of London, with its foreign terrorists and revolutionaries.

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 249, 88.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p. 124.



The emphasis on the mud and moistness of London resembles the opening of *Bleak House*. It is well-known that Conrad enjoyed Dickens's work and had read this particular novel 'innumerable times, both in Polish and in English'.<sup>112</sup> The opening of *Bleak House* – 'As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus' – harks back to the beginnings of earth, a postdiluvian swamp. Fog is here reduced to an aspect of a wider liquidity, in which the contours of time and space have been blotted out, reducing humankind to insignificance: 'And the lofty pretensions of a mankind oppressed by the miserable indignities of the weather appeared as a colossal and hopeless vanity deserving of scorn, wonder, and compassion.'<sup>113</sup>

At the end of the story, not surprisingly, in a world dominated by water, Winnie Verloc chooses to drown herself: 'She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could hope to scramble out.'<sup>114</sup> The alliterative 'm' words link the seemingly unlinkable – 'marvels and mud'. This darkness, as, throughout the book, represents the condition of London – dark, gloomy and without hope. After the revolutionary Comrade Ossipon has deserted Winnie Verloc he is swallowed by the urban gloom: 'His robust form was seen that night in distant parts of the enormous town slumbering monstrously on a carpet of mud under a veil of raw mist.'<sup>115</sup> Neither 'carpet' nor 'veil' offers the protection or comfort that it usually promises. London, or more precisely, London fog, is shown to be fragmenting into its basic parts – mud and water. In the

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<sup>112</sup> Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p.116. Conrad refers to Dickens as 'the master for which I have such an admiration, or rather such an intense and unreasoning affection, dating from the days of my childhood'.

<sup>113</sup> Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 88.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.



same way, after the explosion, Stevie's body is further reduced from the fragments of skin and bones picked up at the scene of the crime, to 'Blood and dirt. Blood and dirt,' a description mumbled by his sister, Winnie, after his death.<sup>116</sup>

Yet the danger posed by the mist should not be overlooked; this is indicated when Mr Verloc advises his wife to go to bed. "What you want is a good cry," he says to her after she has overheard the details of her brother's death.<sup>117</sup> In a world described in terms of its water content, the significance of crying is not lost on the reader. The author goes on to comment: 'This opinion had nothing to recommend it but the general consent of mankind. It is universally understood that, as if it were nothing more substantial than vapour floating in the sky, every emotion of a woman is bound to end in a shower.'<sup>118</sup> Verloc misunderstands the depth of his wife's emotions just as the danger of vapour in the sky is misunderstood.

Fog has reduced London and its inhabitants to insignificance, frustrating their aspirations, both imprisoning them and obscuring the moral boundaries that separate sanity from madness. Fog signifies the blurring of Verloc's and Stevie's moral perceptions, and the confusion of identities that they experience, caught between the police and the Embassy, a foreign country and their own.

## Sherlock Holmes

### I

If the exploits of any fictional character are associated with London fog, those of Conan Doyle's detective Sherlock Holmes certainly rank high amongst them. In his discussion of the history of the detective story, J. K. Van Dover comments: 'There are many who read, or reread, the Holmes stories for their evocation of the humdrum

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<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, p. 196.



background – the fogs and hansom cabs and domestic interiors – of gaslit Victorian London.<sup>119</sup> Vincent Starrett (1886-1974), a noted ‘Holmesian’ and writer of a Sherlock Holmes pastiche, wrote in a similar vein:

I’ve always wanted to do a synthetic Sherlock [...] The reason would be to produce a Holmes adventure that I could completely admire, and which would contain everything I like – the opening at the breakfast table, with a page or two of deduction; the appearance of Mrs Hudson, followed instantly by the troubled client, who would fall over the threshold in a faint; the hansom in the fog, and so on.<sup>120</sup>

Gavin Brend claimed in 1951 that Sherlock Holmes will always be connected with ‘the greasy, brown, swirling fog’.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Christopher Frayling notes ‘the foggy surroundings of Baker Street’.<sup>122</sup> Conan Doyle’s son, Adrian, set up a film company whose productions included *Fog*, or *A Study in Terror* (1965) and has Holmes investigating the Jack the Ripper murders.<sup>123</sup> In this film, the opening title credits form themselves from the fog. A French biographer of Conan Doyle also noted on the connection between the stories of Sherlock Holmes and fog: ‘In spite of the variable weather, Conan Doyle likes best to show us Baker Street in the morning dimness of all-pervading, mysterious fog.’<sup>124</sup> As recently as 2004, the *Radio Times* announced a new Sherlock Holmes story by describing the setting in ‘London 1902: A pea-souper swirls,

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<sup>119</sup> J. K. Van Dover, *We Must Have Certainty: Four Essays on the Detective Story* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 2005), p. 71.

<sup>120</sup> Cited in *The Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: After Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, collected and introduced by Richard Lancelyn Green (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 20-1.

<sup>121</sup> Gavin Brend, *My Dear Holmes: A Study in Sherlock* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1951), p. 136.

<sup>122</sup> Christopher Frayling, *Nightmare: The Birth of Horror* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1996), p. 164.

<sup>123</sup> *A Study in Terror*, Dir. James Hill. John Neville, Donald Houston and John Fraser. Compton-Tekli/Sir Nigel (Henry E. Lester), 1965.

<sup>124</sup> Pierre Nordon, *Conan Doyle: A Biography*, trans. by Francis Partridge (London: John Murray, 1966), p. 264.



another debutante has been murdered.<sup>125</sup> In his introduction to *The Sign of Four*, Peter

Ackroyd comments:

In fact, the urban fog has become part of the mystery of the Holmes adventure; it represents the impenetrability of the city, its viscous materiality as well as its pallid obscurity. These in turn become the metaphors for those opaque and clandestine elements which Holmes in the course of his activities, manages thoroughly to disperse.<sup>126</sup>

In *The Abbey Grange* (September 1904) Conan Doyle even harks back to his Scottish roots and refers to the fog as a ‘the opalescent London reek’ – thus recalling the nickname of Edinburgh – ‘auld reekie’.<sup>127</sup>

In *A Scandal in Bohemia* (July 1891), Sherlock Holmes is described as ‘the most perfect reasoning and observing machine the world has seen,’ a ‘sensitive instrument’ in possession of ‘high-power lenses’ capable of ‘extraordinary powers of observation’.<sup>128</sup> It is his powers of observation that set him above plodding policemen like Lestrade. Yet even Sherlock Holmes admits in *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans* (December 1908), that London fog might frustrate even his powers of observation, and create circumstances in which a clever and ruthless criminal might even bring about his death:

“The London criminal is certainly a dull fellow [...] Look out of this window, Watson. See how the figures loom up, are dimly seen, and then blend once more into the cloud-bank. The thief or the murderer could roam London on such a day as the tiger does the jungle, unseen until he pounces, and then evident only to his victim.

“Suppose that I were Brooks or Woodhouse, or any of the fifty men who have good reason for taking my life, how long could I survive against my own pursuit? A summons, a bogus appointment, and all would be over. It is well

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<sup>125</sup> *Radio Times*, 18-31 December 2004, p. 26. The Sherlock Holmes story was *Sherlock Homes and the Case of the Silk Stocking* with Rupert Everett as Holmes.

<sup>126</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four*, introduction by Peter Ackroyd (London: Penguin, 2001), p. viii.

<sup>127</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, ed. by Leslie S. Klinger, 2 vols (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), II, pp. 1158-1188 (p. 1158). *The Abbey Grange*, first published in the *Strand Magazine* in September 1904 and in *Colliers Weekly* on December 31, 1904.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, I, pp. 5-40 (p. 5). *A Scandal in Bohemia*, first published in the *Strand Magazine* in July 1891.



they don't have days of fog in the Latin countries – the countries of assassination'.<sup>129</sup>

Holmes likens London to a jungle – a metaphor commonly employed by writers of this period (indeed, the 'urban jungle' has since become a cliché). Here the fog appears in a simple and relatively obvious way as a cloak under which deviants and criminals can carry on their business unobserved. But Conan Doyle can use the metaphor of fog in more sophisticated ways too, as we shall see.

## II

*The Sign of Four* (1890), an early Holmes novella, begins in fog:

It was a September evening and not yet seven o'clock, but the day had been a dreary one, and a dense drizzly fog lay low upon the great city. Mud-coloured clouds drooped sadly over the muddy streets. Down the Strand the lamps were but misty splotches of diffused light which threw a feeble circular glimmer upon the slimy pavement. The yellow glare from the shop-windows streamed out into the steamy, vaporous air and threw a murky, shifting radiance across the crowded thoroughfare.<sup>130</sup>

Holmes himself comments: "Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-coloured houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, Doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them?"<sup>131</sup> Holmes complains that "Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth."<sup>132</sup> The city is described here in terms which emphasise its melancholy condition – 'dreary', the clouds 'drooped sadly' – but also the light which should bring relief serves only to add to the fog in its 'misty splotches' and emphasise the 'slimy pavement' underfoot. Even the light from the shop windows throws out a 'murky, shifting radiance' – language

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<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, II, pp. 1300-40 (p. 1301).

<sup>130</sup> Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, p. 21.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.



which is disturbing not reassuring. Everything is incomplete – ‘diffused light’ – or in constant movement – ‘shifting radiance’ – so nothing whole can be grasped.

This is not only the grey, murky and commonplace London as despaired of in the opening pages by Holmes, but it is also a description by Watson of the condition of the city and the psychological state of its inhabitants: ‘There was, to my mind, something eerie and ghostlike in the endless procession of faces which flitted across these narrow bars of light – sad faces and glad, haggard and merry. Like all humankind, they flitted from the gloom into the light and so back into the gloom once more.’<sup>133</sup> The flitting from gloom into light is reminiscent of Utterson’s glimpses of the ‘women of many different nationalities’ in *Jekyll*, but here the people of London, equate with ‘all humankind’ and Watson’s description is as despairing as Holmes’s description of the ‘commonplace’ earlier – all are doomed to retreat back ‘into the gloom once more’. As earlier, there is a sense of constant movement, ‘flitted’ is used twice of the human throng which can only be seen in brief moments and not wholly seen. This is the gloom of the fog but also the gloom of the ‘commonplace’. The ‘narrow bars of light’ suggest imprisonment.

When Holmes, Watson and Mary Morstan make their way to the house of Thaddeus Sholto, Watson admits to being affected by the foggy drive to Sholto’s house, as is the progenitor of the story, Miss Morstan, ‘Holmes alone could rise superior to petty influences.’<sup>134</sup> This is in marked contrast to the beginning of the story, when Holmes seems to succumb to the gloomy scene outside. This fog also provides an effective contrast to the opulence and brightness of Thaddeus Sholto’s accommodation. But is it so different from the outside just described? They enter Sholto’s room: ‘A blaze of yellow light streamed out upon us’, contrasting with the ‘the

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<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.



yellow glare from the shop-windows' which 'streamed out' into the streets.<sup>135</sup> Like humankind on the streets outside, Sholto is also full of movement – 'He writhed his hands together' and 'his features were in a perpetual jerk'.<sup>136</sup> We read from this that Sholto may try to isolate himself within his richly furnished room: a homage to his Indian background and his love of all things Indian. He describes it: "An oasis of art in the howling desert of South London."<sup>137</sup> But, in fact, he is still part of the flitting humankind outside.<sup>137</sup> The fog remains specifically tied to London, and as they journey away from the city, we are told by Watson that 'We had left the damp fog of the great city behind us.'<sup>138</sup> Here too, fog has become a metaphor for the state of London and its inhabitants.

The action of *The Copper Beeches* (June 1892) mostly takes place outside London. The fog appears only at the beginning of the story and is not integral to the plot. Holmes and Watson sit around a 'cheery fire' just like an old married couple.<sup>139</sup> The scene is cosy and warm. The gas lamps are lit and the items on the breakfast table glimmer from the light of the gas and the fire. Holmes complains: 'Man, or at least criminal man, has lost all enterprise and originality.'<sup>140</sup> This fog is not a winter fog. We are informed that it is 'a cold morning of the early spring' and, we know by Miss Hunter's appointment time, that it is just before 10.30am. Through this spring fog it is possible to see the loom of the opposite windows although these windows are 'dark, shapeless blurs'. The inability to make out the windows reflects Holmes's own mysteries that often seem 'dark' and 'shapeless' before the great detective throws light

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<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>139</sup> Doyle, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, I, pp. 351-383 (p. 353).

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*, p. 353.



on them. 'A thick fog rolled down between the lines of dun-coloured houses, and the opposing windows loomed like dark, shapeless blurs, through the heavy yellow wreaths.'<sup>141</sup> We are invited to imagine the unimaginative London criminals going about their routine, commonplace transgressions of the legal order under the cover of fog, failing entirely to provide the great detective with the mental stimulus he needs. Only when Miss Hunter arrives to tell her tale does the situation change. Apart from Holmes, none of the characters in *The Copper Beeches* is affected by the fog; even their visitor, Miss Violet Hunter, appears unperturbed at having had to make her way to Baker Street through the fog. The fog, indeed, is among other things a signifier of Holmes's state of mind when he does not have a case to solve, listless, lacking in focus, dissatisfied, and on occasion moving into the transgressive itself through the use of cocaine. When Holmes's mind finally latches onto a problem, all this vanishes. Only the most difficult of cases ('a three-pipe problem') generate yet more obscuring vapour, sometimes discovered by Watson when he comes into the Baker Street rooms in the morning, through which Holmes slowly moves his mind to a clarifying solution.

Doyle was an admirer of Dickens, remarking in a speech of 1921 that he gave 'way to no one in my admiration for that great man'.<sup>142</sup> At one point, in his mid-twenties, he even came up with an ending for Dickens's unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. He clearly did not remember in later life that he had written it, or did not feel it was good enough, because when Doyle allegedly spoke directly to the dead Dickens, through a psychic medium, he agreed to finish this novel only after he had talked to Joseph Conrad and completed his unfinished work *Suspense*.

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<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>142</sup> Daniel Stashower, *Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 75.



### III

In *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans* (December 1908) fog is much more integral to the plot.<sup>143</sup> The date and weather conditions are directly described:

In the third week of November, in the year 1895, a dense yellow fog settled down upon London. From the Monday to the Thursday I doubt whether it was ever possible from our windows in Baker Street to see the loom of the opposite houses [...] But when, for the fourth time, after pushing back our chairs from breakfast we saw the greasy, heavy brown swirl still drifting past us and condensing in oily drops upon the window-panes, my comrade's impatient and active nature could endure this drab existence no longer.<sup>144</sup>

In this fog it is not even possible to see the opposite houses, in contrast to the earlier story of *The Copper Beeches*. The description of this November fog captures the essence of being trapped by a dirty London fog. Its viscosity – ‘greasy’ and ‘oily’ – and its dirtiness, its yellow colour which changes to brown when closer to it, and its action of filthy condensation that indicates the physical danger to the lungs.

The ‘Partington fog’ has an imprisoning effect on Holmes and Watson with their room being described as ‘fog-girt’.<sup>145</sup> They spend the first three days of the fog deliberately employed in indoor activities, much to Holmes's frustration. Yet it is perfectly possible to go out, as Cadogan West and his girlfriend show, when they make their way to the theatre, although the fog does force them to walk since ‘a cab was useless’ in such conditions. In reality it is not the fog which imprisons Holmes and Watson but, again, the lack of a good crime.

The story concerns the disappearance of the plans for the Bruce-Partington submarine. Seven of the plans are found on the dead Cadogan West, whose body is

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<sup>143</sup> First published in the *Strand Magazine* in December 1908 and in *Collier's Weekly* on December 12, 1908.

<sup>144</sup> *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, II, pp. 1300-40 (p. 1300).

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1314.



discovered next to the railway lines just outside Aldgate Station. As Colonel Walter says, at the end of the story, when admitting to the murder and disposal of the body, the fog ‘was so thick that nothing could be seen, and we had no difficulty in lowering West’s body on to the train’.<sup>146</sup> Three of the most important plans for the submarine are missing and presumed to be on the way to the continent to be sold, probably to the German government. As usual, Lestrade is mistaken in his conclusion that Cadogan West is guilty, referring to West’s plan to take his fiancée to the theatre as a ‘blind’.<sup>147</sup> In fact, the fog has left all of the detectives blind apart from Holmes. In order to discover the truth of the matter, Holmes and Watson are forced to break in through a downstairs window to a house lived in by Oberstein, a known foreign spy, thought to be involved in the mystery. Watson, who has been instructed to bring the usual tools that would be used to commit a burglary, comments wryly: ‘It was nice equipment for a respectable citizen to carry through the dim, fog-draped streets.’<sup>148</sup> Watson notes: ‘The fog still hung about and screened us with its friendly shade.’ This supports the view that fog did aid the criminal, although in his tirade against the dull criminals of England, at the start of this story, Holmes is thinking of less trivial crimes than breaking and entering.<sup>149</sup> In *The Bruce-Partington Plans*, fog provides a conventional cover for criminal activities and a straightforward metaphorical representation of the mystery that Holmes has to solve.

In *The Red Circle* (1911) the fog initially saves the true victim of the story from his enemies by causing them to mistake the landlady’s husband for him in the fog: ‘It is clear now that some danger is threatening your lodger. It is equally clear that his enemies, lying in wait for him near your door, mistook your husband for him in the

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<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1332.

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1310.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1322.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1324.



foggy morning light.<sup>150</sup> In *The Dying Detective* Holmes is able to convince Watson and his landlady, Mrs Hudson, that he is dying partly because of the dull weather: 'In the dim light of a foggy November day the sick-room was a gloomy spot.'<sup>151</sup> The fog also affects Watson's view of Inspector Morton whom he glimpses through the murky weather. When Morton asks about Holmes, Watson informs him that he is very ill. Watson misjudges Morton's reaction: 'He looked at me in a most singular fashion. Had it not been too fiendish, I could have imagined that the gleam of the fanlight showed exultation in his face.'<sup>152</sup> The exultation is because Morton is in on the plot to convince the villain that Holmes is dying to hopefully persuade him to give a full confession before Holmes's supposed demise. Poor old Watson is, of course, left in the fog of ignorance until the dénouement.

London fog is only used as a plot device in three Holmes stories – *The Bruce-Partington Plans*, in a more cursory way in *The Red Circle* and, even more briefly, in *The Dying Detective*.<sup>153</sup> Of the two stories where fog is described in depth, *The Bruce-Partington Plans* describes the realities of a London fog in its greasy and oily viscosity. But it is only in *The Sign of Four* that Doyle extends his description of the fog to convey a sense of the imprisoning nature of London life. Watson may open the description to include 'all humankind' but in essence this is a comment on London urban living. London may seem impenetrable to Watson and Miss Morstan on their journey to Sholto's house, but Holmes is already on his way to seeing through the fog of the mystery by reeling off names of streets unseen by anyone else through the fog.

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<sup>150</sup> Doyle, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, II, pp. 1272-99 (p. 1280). Published in the *Strand Magazine* in March and April 1911.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*, II, pp. 1341-61 (p. 1342). First published in the *Strand Magazine* in December 1913.

<sup>152</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1350.

<sup>153</sup> The most obvious use of fog and one which is very much integral to the plot creating suspense, impeding the plot at a crucial moment and almost leading to the death of the victim rather than the villain, appears in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, however this is not a London urban fog but a natural country fog.



Most of the Sherlock Holmes stories were written after the turn of the century, when, as we have seen, fog became less significant as a metaphor for social fears. In *The Bruce-Partington Plans* it serves as an indication not merely of a criminal mystery, but also of the murky and indeterminate world of traitors and spies, where even a seemingly respectable and honourable military gentleman turns out in the end not to be what he seems. When he is finally trapped by Holmes, the weather is still foggy, reducing a gas-light to no more than a 'pin of light', and the traitor Colonel Walter is wearing his cravat over his nose and mouth, not only to protect his lungs against the fog but also to conceal his true identity.

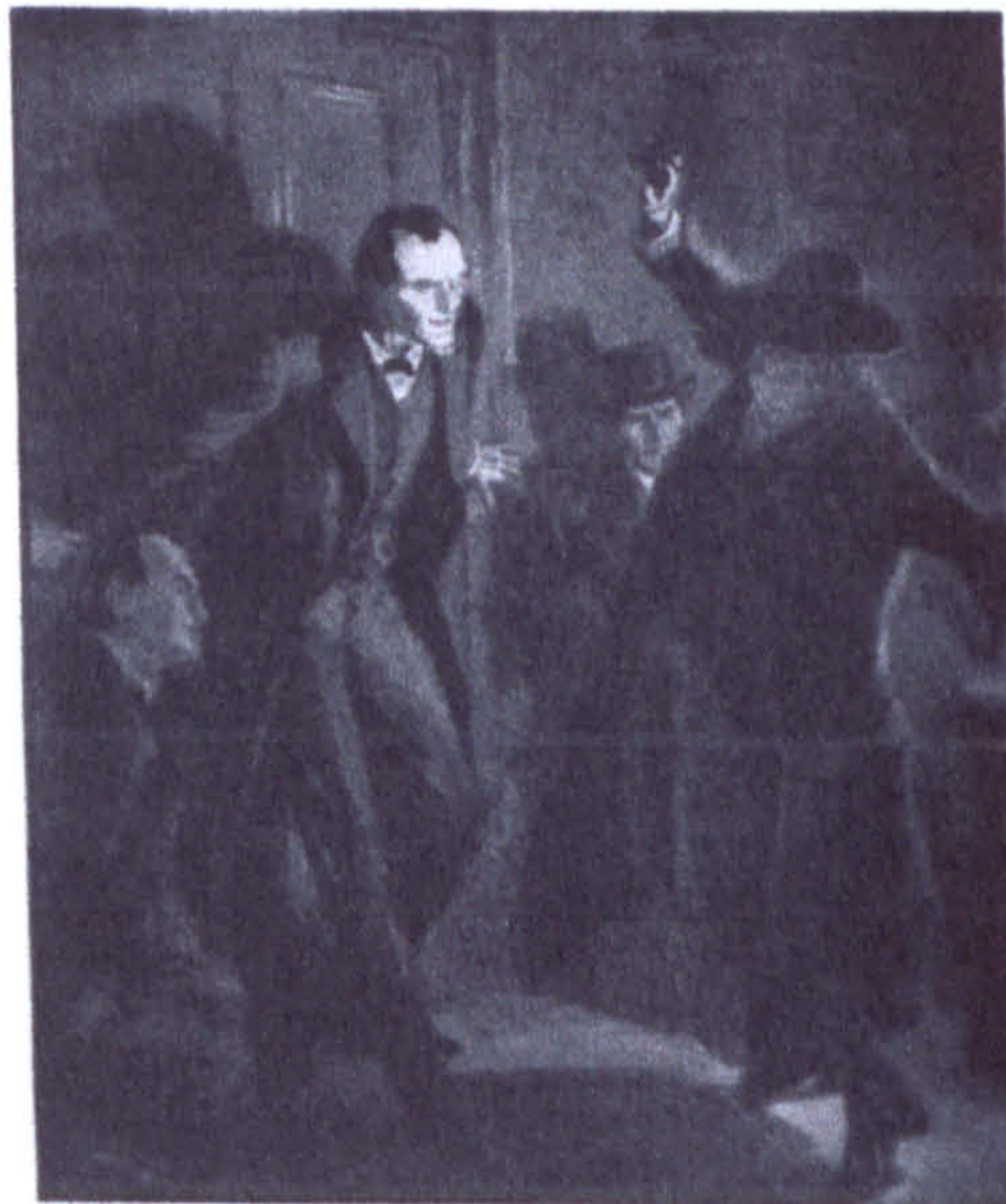


Fig 49: From *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans*<sup>154</sup>

This story was written in 1908. Five years before, Conan Doyle, weary of the popularity of what he thought of merely as his pot-boiling stories about the fictional detective, had killed Holmes off at the Reichenbach Falls. After he returned, as one critic commented, he never seemed quite the same again, but as Daniel Stashower remarks: 'For Sherlock Holmes, only two years had elapsed. He was now a figure of the past, rooted in the era of gaslight, swirling fog, and hansom cabs, rather than the

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<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*, II, pp. 1300-40 (p. 1330).



modern, forward-looking detective who first captured the public's imagination.<sup>155</sup> But in *The Bruce-Partington Plans* at least, fog is used in an altogether different way, in a story that, far from harking back nostalgically to a lost Victorian past, looked forward to the war that was to break out between Britain and Germany just a few years later.

## Conclusion

### I

Light was a source of great pride to the Victorians. By the 1890s it was the wonder of the world. As Richard Le Gallienne (1866-1947) wrote in 1895:

Lamp after lamp against the sky  
Opens a sudden beaming eye,  
Leaping alight on either hand,  
The iron lilies of the Strand.<sup>156</sup>

The gradual replacement of dim candlelight by gas lighting and later, in the century, by electric lighting, was not only a practical achievement, it held symbolic value as well. Light represented 'a conquest of the environment, an announcement to the world that here at home lightness and order triumphed over the forces of darkness and chaos without'.<sup>157</sup> God had said: 'Let there be light!' Now human society was saying it too. As the city became more visible through better lighting, it also became more controllable. At home, light gave artisans 'a means of enabling them to preserve cleanliness in their persons and their dwellings'.<sup>158</sup> In public, brightly-lit streets allowed dangers to be quickly perceived, crime and disorder banished to obscure corners of the city, and

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<sup>155</sup> Stashower, p. 242.

<sup>156</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, 'A Ballad of London', in *Richard Le Gallienne: A Centenary Memoir-Anthology*, ed. by Clarence R. Decker (New York: Apollo Head Press, 1966), p. 38.

<sup>157</sup> John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 113.

<sup>158</sup> Report by A.J. Jones and S. Clegg on the Wolverhampton Gas Bill, PP 1847 XXII, p.iv. Cited in M. J. Daunton, *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working-Class Housing 1850-1914* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 238.



respectable people to go about their daily business in safety. As streetscapes became ever more brightly lit, Victorians could rejoice in the progressive triumph of order and civilisation.

Fog denied this efficacy of light. Early in the century it simply overwhelmed the street lighting of London. 'The thickness of the fog', it was reported in 1806, 'obscured entirely the light of the street lamps; and it was with difficulty that the glare of a shop window, full of patent lamps, could be discovered across the street.'<sup>159</sup> A report of a fog in 1829 went on to describe how the horses had to be 'led by their drivers, the lamps not proving of the slightest use'.<sup>160</sup> Remarking on the same 1829 fog, Luke Howard noted that 'the most brilliant gas light could scarcely penetrate the gloom.'<sup>161</sup> In his *Picturesque Sketches of London*, in 1852, Thomas Miller pursued the idea of light trying physically to penetrate the fog, when he wrote that 'the gas burns faintly, as if unable to pierce the fleecy fog which surrounds it'.<sup>162</sup> Despite the spread of gas and then electric street lighting, fog continued to plunge the city into darkness at certain moments of the year, making it seem like a dungeon in which its inhabitants were imprisoned, helpless and at the mercy of dark forces.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault uses the concept of the Benthamite 'panopticon', a prison, very much on the model of the new jail at Pentonville, where the occupants would be visible constantly from a central point but would remain invisible to each other. He went on to comment that 'it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions – to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a

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<sup>159</sup> *The Times*, 6 November 1806, p. 2, col. c.

<sup>160</sup> *The Times*, 15 December 1829, p. 2, col. c.

<sup>161</sup> Howard, III, p. 341.

<sup>162</sup> Miller, *Picturesque Sketches* p. 245.



trap.<sup>163</sup> Fog was often perceived as a frighteningly imprisoning experience. In 1840, Peter Styles in his mock-epic *The Bachelor's Walk in the Fog*, sees fog metaphorically imprisoning, with Londoners as inmates; 'sable canopy, wherein|Its inmates are confined'.<sup>164</sup> But for Foucault the dungeon was very different from the panopticon: dark, dank, deprived of light. It did not allow for the observation and control of the prisoner. Efficient surveillance only came in when the dungeon became obsolete. Fog created conditions which were similar to a dungeon. It intensified this concept by appearing to provide solidity. In this context, smoke or vapour takes on a similar role. In a passage from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) all the negative attributes of the industrial city, including vapour, conspire to make the city seem a hopeless prison to Nell and her grandfather, 'when the noise and dirt and vapour, of the great manufacturing town [...] hemmed them in on every side, and seemed to shut out hope, and render escape impossible'.<sup>165</sup>

With the triumph of fog came a reversal of social hierarchies. The lower classes asserted their superiority over the respectable and the well-to-do, the young over the old and the middle-aged. The threat it posed was not just a social threat, however, but also a individual one. It allowed the criminal, the deviant and the transgressive to roam the streets unhindered and unobserved. And it placed them in a position to impose their authority on the respectable. This was particularly the case with link-lighters, who pressed their services upon the middle-class individual trying to find his way in a fog. George Gissing, on a journey home one foggy evening in 1880, described how: 'Boys made an admirable trade with links and lanterns, which, were however, of little use. I had to give such a boy a penny to be taken over King's Cross.' He admitted that 'I

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<sup>163</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Peregrine Books, 1979), p. 200.

<sup>164</sup> Styles, stanza 25.

<sup>165</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 422.



should *never* have found my way into the right street, though I am as familiar with the place as with my own study.<sup>166</sup> Yet he presented it almost as a form of coercion. And indeed, lower-class boys and young men took charge of the situation in a fog, as the sketch from *Punch* below illustrates:



Fig 50: Link-boys (Masters of the Situation). “If yer don’t give us a shillin’ we’ll singe yer whiskers!”<sup>167</sup>

The sketch shows two boys who feel that they are ‘Masters of the Situation’ enough to make them behave like highwaymen, commanding the bewhiskered gentleman to stand and deliver or suffer the consequences. In this and other, similar cartoons, the link-boys who appeared on the streets every time there was a fog were portrayed as dark and smutty urchins, wielding torches that gave out as much smoke as light, or top-hatted chimney-sweeps, transformed from their usual subordinate status in the

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<sup>166</sup> Gissing, *Letters*, p. 58. Letter to his brother from G.G. dated 7 February 1880.

<sup>167</sup> *Punch*, 18 February 1865, p. 72.



visible world into tiny demons wielding flaming torches, leading the well-off and the respectable through the foggy darkness. Whether they were actually of any real use was sometimes a matter for doubt, as this sketch from *Punch* illustrates:



Fig 51: 'I'm Monarch of all I Survey.'<sup>168</sup>

Lighted torches were also seen as reminders of riot and revolution. In *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) a novel set in the eighteenth century, but written from the perspective of the nineteenth, the mob carries 'lighted torches; tow smeared with pitch, and tar, and brimstone'.<sup>169</sup> *The Old Curiosity Shop* echoes this imagery 'when bands of unemployed labourers [...] clustered by torchlight round their leaders [...] when maddened men [are], armed with sword and firebrand'.<sup>170</sup> In *Barnaby Rudge* the torches are smeared with 'brimstone', an image reminiscent of hell. Even as late as the end of the nineteenth century, George R. Sims describes the carrying of torches in devil-like

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<sup>168</sup> *Punch*, 8 November 1856, p. 182.

<sup>169</sup> Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 569.

<sup>170</sup> Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 424.



terms: 'Boys and men wander here and there with torches, and lend a diabolical element to the Cimmerian gloom.'<sup>171</sup>

Thus fog not only transformed people and buildings but also light. In this situation, light could not overcome the gloom, and could take on a threatening aspect. In *Royalty Fog-Bound: Or, the Perils of a Night and the Frolics of a Fortnight*, Peter Pindar described a journey undertaken by the Prince Regent to Belvoir Castle in 1813.<sup>172</sup> In Pindar's mock-epic, written the following year, the torches are not only unable to remedy the situation but even appear to be in league with 'The daemon of the fog' whilst 'The torches shed a ghastly light|And lent new horror to the night'.<sup>173</sup> The torches carried by the link-boys illuminated the fog itself, rather than the ground under people's feet, or the way they had to go. They shone in people's faces and spread confusion rather than clarity. In 1837 *The Times* reported:

The persons walking to town were repeatedly dazzled by the lanterns and links borne by those who were proceeding therefrom, and the consequence was, that many persons, among whom were several females, were precipitated from the high footpath by the side of the park into the carriage road, and narrowly escaped being run over.<sup>174</sup>

In 1852, Thomas Miller described a foggy scene in a similar way. The lights could not only confuse people, they could also alarm them, creating an effect of chaos and disorder:

The number of lighted torches which are carried and waved at the corners and crossings of the streets add greatly to the wild and picturesque effect of the scene, as they flash redly upon the countenances of the passengers, and, in the distance, have the effect of a city enveloped in a dense mass of smoke, through which the smouldering flames endeavour in vain to penetrate.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> George R. Sims, 'London Under the Weather', *Living London*, 2 vols (London: 1901), II, pp. 262-3.

<sup>172</sup> *The Times*, 29 December 1813, p. 3, col. c.

<sup>173</sup> Peter Pindar, *Royalty Fog-Bound: Or, the Perils of a Night and the Frolics of a Fortnight* (London, 1814), Vs. 16.

<sup>174</sup> *The Times*, 4 December 1837, p. 6, col. d.

<sup>175</sup> Miller, *Picturesque Sketches*, p. 247.



In Dickens's final, uncompleted novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), the sense of mystery and hidden terror at Staple Inn is heightened on a 'December afternoon towards six o'clock, when it was filled with fog, and candles shed murky and blurred rays through the windows of all its then-occupied sets of chambers'.<sup>176</sup> Later in *New Grub Street* (1891) electric lighting fails to illuminate the fog-bound Reading-Room of the British Museum but only inflicts pain on Marian as she tries to concentrate: 'But then flashed forth the sputtering whiteness of the electric light and its ceaseless hum was henceforth a new source of headache.'<sup>177</sup>

Light was a universal form of control, sanctioned and created by the state. As Foucault noted, creating an apparatus of surveillance and control to keep the unruly in order but it also obliged the respectable to conform as well, since they too were potentially, or in the case of light, actually under observation themselves. When the street lighting proved of no help in a fog, the link-lighter appeared to reclaim the control of the street, but to many this could seem no more than changing the means of placing oneself under the gaze of others.

The idea that light might be an instrument of mutual surveillance is pursued by Gaston Bachelard in *La flamme d'une chandelle*. He notes an ambivalence in the light from other people's lamps. He describes the impact of a light in the distance: '*La lampe attend et surveille. Elle surveille, donc elle est malveillante.*'<sup>178</sup> This, of course, is reminiscent of Foucault's argument that: 'Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness.'<sup>179</sup> But here the lower classes are controlling their social superiors, transgressing the suddenly opaque boundaries of authority and respectability. In the

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<sup>176</sup> Dickens, *Edwin Drood*, p. 134.

<sup>177</sup> Gissing, *New Grub Street*, p. 108.

<sup>178</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La flamme d'une chandelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975), p. 102.

<sup>179</sup> Foucault, p. 200.



fog, the light of the link-lighter not only seems to survey everything it encounters, it is actually moving threateningly towards other pedestrians, who are themselves without light since they have been unable to procure link-lighters during the fog, such has been the demand. They feel not only confused and frightened by the darkness imposed on them during the day, but also under attack from the aggressive lights of the links as they grope their way home.

For some, the fog was ‘the burglar’s season’, as this cartoon from *Punch* in 1887 illustrates. The atavistic, simian thug is blinding a policeman with his light before hitting him with a life-preserver.



Fig 52: The Burglar's Season.<sup>180</sup>

In normal conditions, it is the policeman's lamp that illuminates the scene. Here it is used by the forces of darkness and social disorder to attack the representative of the state. Fog has reversed the normal function of light. The criminal remains invisible, the policeman is in plain view, but not as the enforcer of the law, rather as the victim of an imminent crime perpetuated by a creature from a past era. Here, too, fog has abolished time as well as the social and moral order.

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<sup>180</sup> *Punch's Almanack for 1887*, 6 December 1886, [n.p.].



## II

'We haven't had a good juicy series of sex murders since Christie', says one of the characters in Peter Shaffer's film *Frenzy*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock and released in 1972, 'and they're so good for the tourist trade. Foreigners somehow expect the squares of London to be fog wreathed, full of hansom cabs, and littered with ripped whores – don't you think?'<sup>181</sup> As John Douglas and Mark Olshaker remark, the Ripper murders will be forever associated with the 'swirling London fog'. Yet each crime was actually committed on a night without fog. On only one of the nights was it even raining. Otherwise the skies were clear.<sup>182</sup> Regardless of this fact, the first novel based on the Ripper crimes, *The Lodger*, is saturated with fog, and many versions of the story have continued to present a fog-bound scenario. In the case of the Sherlock Holmes stories, critics and media producers constantly link the exploits of the detective with London fog, and frequently wreath the action in fog even where there is none in the written version. In fact, there is very little fog within the corpus of Holmes stories as a whole – only 8 of the 60 Holmes stories feature fog. A television adaptation of *The Blue Carbuncle* with Jeremy Brett as Sherlock begins with a foggy London scene, despite the fact that Conan Doyle did not even mention fog in the original short story. Similarly, critics identify fog as part of the world of Jekyll and Hyde, and often wrongly insist on the murder of Danvers Carew taking place on a foggy night.

Why do later authors and screenwriters portray fog where there was none? By 1914, fog had become an easy, simple, universally recognizable signifier. When we see it on the television screen or in the cinema, accompanied by a dim street light and a horse-drawn cab, we know instantly not only that we are in Victorian London but also that we are about to witness a criminal act of transgression. As London fogs decreased

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<sup>181</sup> *Frenzy*, Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Jon Finch and Alec McCowen. Universal, 1972.

<sup>182</sup> Douglas and Olshaker, pp. 19-20.



in severity and intensity, they lost their power in the present and took on the role of signposts to the past. Writing two decades after the Ripper murders, the Edwardian Lowndes employs what Christopher Frayling refers to as a 'historically specific prop' by seeing the recent past through the haze of fog.<sup>183</sup> As we have seen, she still used it to build a metaphorical element into her narrative; but Mr Bunting's complaint that fogs weren't what they used to be signals clearly to the reader that Lowndes is writing a book that is set in the past.

After 1900, indeed, scientists began to comment on the decrease of London fogs. The year 1900 was especially noted for its absence of fogs. Meteorological Clerk Mr F. J. Brodie attributed this change to the efforts of the Coal Smoke Abatement Society, founded in 1899. If this was the case, the Society obviously had an immediate and dynamic influence. On the whole, it seems unlikely. Others simply noted a slight change of weather.<sup>184</sup> Whatever the cause, fog appeared to have lost its power, just at the time when social tensions and fears of social conflict were declining as well. By 1904 the link-lighter was no longer the threatening figure of Victorian times.

The illustration below shows how he had become a Cockney 'character', respectably dressed and expressing humour rather than menace. The hansom cab may beam out a light more powerful than the torch wielded by the link-lighter, but it does not dispel the fog any more efficiently. Nevertheless, the cabman is only going round in circles, not running into danger. If fog was beginning to become a cliché signifier of Victorian London and the threat of crime by 1914, its complexity was reduced still further after the First World War. The influence of cinema, which exploited easy visual

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<sup>183</sup> Christopher Frayling, 'The House that Jack Built: Some Stereotypes of the Rapist in the History of Popular Culture' in *Rape*, ed. by Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 174-215 (p. 176).

<sup>184</sup> Henry T. Bernstein, 'The Mysterious Disappearance of Edwardian London Fog' in *The London Journal* vol. II, No. 2 (November 1975), pp. 189-206 for more details.



signs like fog to set a scene, helped in this process. The advent of the First World War and the use of real poison gas clouds, conversely, made fog much less powerful as a means of conveying apocalyptic scenarios; it simply seemed less dangerous in comparison.



Fig 53: Fogged.<sup>185</sup>

The prominence of fog in Victorian London made it easy for authors to use it in complex and subtle metaphorical ways. Robert Louis Stevenson uses the fog to symbolise a fear of disclosure and a level of concealment that is a significant part of the world of the novella. The fog blurs forms and distinctions, signifying mystery and indeterminacy, but also surrounds Utterson, conveying a sense that he is confined and threatened by the law himself. The momentary lifting of the fog does not provide relief, but only reveals the deviant existence of a socially and morally transgressive female underclass in the capital city. Stevenson, and later, Joseph Conrad in *The Secret*

<sup>185</sup> *Punch*, 7 December 1904, p. 411.



*Agent*, both use fog to identify London as a city which is part of a nightmare, and in a state of dissolution. Conrad shows a world which has almost been reduced to water, the main constituent part of fog – a world likened to an ‘aquarium’ – one which is confined, limited and in which the participants seem, as in *Our Mutual Friend*, to be drowning. The *dramatis personae* within Conrad’s novel may be ‘oppressed by the indignities of the weather’ but the fog indicates that they are much more oppressed by the confines of the world which they inhabit and from which they cannot escape, except by accepting the inevitable and drowning themselves, as Winnie Verloc does in the end. In *The Bruce-Partington Plans*, Conan Doyle joins with Conrad in employing fog as a metaphor for a world of spies, secret agents, deception and double-crossing, in which it is unclear which side people are on. In all these works, fog dissolves moral, legal and conventional boundaries and signifies that they are being crossed, even abolished, by the dangerous deviancy of a transgressive individual.



## Conclusion

### I

In 1891, in an essay on 'The Decay of Lying', published in the form of a dialogue, Oscar Wilde declared that fog had only become perceptible when the Impressionists had reinvented it as a thing of beauty, transforming London's prosaic contours into ones of magic and mystery. Before then, it was not to be found in the visual arts, or, if it was, it was not seen as a thing of beauty:

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art [...] Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist until Art had invented them. Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold.<sup>1</sup>

These words of Wilde's echoed the earlier lines of Robert Browning from his dramatic monologue 'Fra Lippo Lippi' written in 1855 - 'we're made so that we love/First when we see them painted, things we have passed /Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see'.<sup>2</sup> Both Wilde and Browning demonstrated the concern of a number of Victorian and Edwardian writers with the nature of seeing and its relationship to the arts.

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *De Profundis and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 55-87 (pp. 78-9).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Browning, 'Fra Lippo Lippi', in *Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), p. 186, l. 300-302.



Contemporary reviews of 'The Decay of Lying' saw that Wilde was raising important issues. One reviewer, Agnes Repplier, wrote in the *North American Review*:

My own ineffable content rests with 'The Decay of Lying', because under its transparent mask of cynicism, its wit, its satire, its languid mocking humor, lies clearly outlined a great truth that is slipping fast away from us—the absolute independence of art—art nourished by imagination and revealing beauty.[...]To degrade this shining vision into a handmaid of nature, to maintain that she should give us photographic pictures of an unlovely life, is a heresy that arouses in Mr. Wilde an amused scorn which takes the place of anger.<sup>3</sup>

In this dialogue, as Repplier astutely acknowledged, Wilde was opening up fresh arguments on the nature of representation and experience. These arguments have continued until the present day. Writing in 1995, Susan R. Horton warns of the dangers of viewing 'visuality' as a reference 'either just to the visual or to the physiological characteristics of vision.'<sup>4</sup> She elaborates further:

To use the word *visuality* rather than the word *vision* is to signal an attempt to problematize the act of seeing and to turn into a field of inquiry such issues as how human beings construct and then construe both their seeing and their being seen and, in particular, the ways in which artists take as their subject the nature of seeing itself.<sup>5</sup>

In the Victorian era there was thus, Horton argues, much discussion and experimentation on ways of seeing, building on the development of optical gadgets, especially those that created optical illusions, such as the thaumatrope, the zoetrope, or the camera obscura.<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Crary has refined this perception by arguing that there have been two different accounts of the history of visual imagination in the nineteenth century. As Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan put it: 'One has stressed the

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<sup>3</sup> Agnes Repplier, 'North American Review' (New York) January 1892, in *Oscar Wilde: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Karl E. Beckson (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 103-6, (104).

<sup>4</sup> Susan R. Horton, 'Were they Having Fun Yet?' Victorian Optical Gadgetry, Modernist Selves', in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. by Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (California: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 1-26, (23).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Susan R. Horton quoted above sees these optical gadgets not in conflict with either the subjective or objective models of vision but more as a means of perceiving it.



predominance of realist modes of representation, culminating in photography and, in the twentieth century, the cinema. The other has emphasized a break with realism, an increasingly subjective organization of vision leading to modernism.<sup>7</sup> These issues of visuality, of ways of seeing, combined with the changing nature of art and of the spectator, echo Wilde's paradoxes and invite a discussion of the nature of the Victorian visual imagination.

Crary suggests that the 'core narrative' of modern European visual culture rests on the thesis that 'with Manet, impressionism, and/or postimpressionism, a new model of visual representation and perception emerges that constitutes a break with several centuries of another model of vision, loosely definable as Renaissance, perspectival or normative'.<sup>8</sup> It is conventional, he argues, to see modernism as 'the appearance of the new for an observer who remains perpetually the same, or whose historical status is never interrogated'.<sup>9</sup> Crary puts forward an alternative view: 'My concern is how the individual as observer became an object of investigation and a locus of knowledge beginning in the first few decades of the 1800s, and how the status of the observing subject was transformed.'<sup>10</sup> Thus the changing subjectivity of the artist was the origin of the emergence of fog as a subject for visual representation. Whatever the virtues of Crary's suggestion that this process began long before the arrival of Impression, the evidence seems to suggest that the observing artist did not 'see' fog in London before Monet and Whistler, except as an *impediment* to vision. The social and cultural obstacles that had blinded British artists to London fog did not apply to the Impressionists, who,

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<sup>7</sup> Christ and Jordan, 'Introduction', pp. xix-xxix, (xxi).

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16.



arriving in London from outside the United Kingdom altogether, tried to paint scenes as they impressed themselves on the eye of the painters.

However humorous his paradoxes were intended to be, Wilde essentially posited a complex relationship between the observer and the work of art, between art and nature, and between art and life. As Wilde argues in *The Critic as Artist*:

the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives.<sup>11</sup>

Wilde posits art as a reciprocal and subjective experience. In 'The Decay of Lying' He emphasises the role of the artist in stimulating us to new perceptions, based on the artist's creativity and imagination. Wilde reflects the increasing impatience of the nineteenth century with the possibilities of mimetic representation: 'Nature [...] imitates Art. The only effects that she can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings.'<sup>12</sup> Nature is often found wanting: 'As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a pure myth. It is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her.'<sup>13</sup> Wilde takes the aesthetic view that it is the 'Significant Form' (as Clive Bell was later to term it) that is important, rather than the subject matter of the representation.<sup>14</sup> 'Art', he declared, 'creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things.'<sup>15</sup> As Anne Varty has hinted, Wilde suggests that 'art not only extends, but actually determines, the experiential or perceptual range

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<sup>11</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist* (California: Green Integer Books, 1997), p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Clive Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis' in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc, 1995), pp. 98-110, (100).

<sup>15</sup> Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 79.



of the spectator. Wilde replaces naturalist determinism with aesthetic determinism. It is art that provides the categories which make experience meaningful, which imposes an order on natural chaos to make knowledge possible and interpretation accessible.<sup>16</sup>

Wilde pits his doctrines of aesthetics in direct opposition to ideas of realism which he perceives as 'a complete failure'. For him representation becomes the object itself: 'The metaphysical question of the existence of fog is beside the point; Wilde is arguing that fog did not "fit" into the mental canvas of London until someone put it into the literal canvas. Fog came to mean something in London, and as such is made available aesthetically rather than metaphysically.'<sup>17</sup> 'Life imitates art', declares Wilde, meaning that we compose the reality we perceive by mental structures that are cultural, not natural in origin, and that it is art which is most likely to change and renew those structures when they become inadequate or unsatisfying.<sup>18</sup>

To Wilde's half-serious assertion that our perception of fog derives from the Impressionists, the antimodernist would reply that on the contrary it derives from industrial capitalism, which built large cities and polluted their atmosphere with coal-smoke, and that it is the job of the writer to make this causal connection clear; or, if he must dwell on the picturesque distorting visual effects of fog, at least to make them symbols of a more fundamental denaturing of human life, as Dickens did. Antimodernist writing, then, gives priority to content.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Wilde's own poetry continued the aesthetic treatment of fog, in a parody of the way the Impressionists treated fog.

In 1881 Wilde included his 'Impression du Matin' as part of a collection of poems. The poem begins: 'The Thames nocturne of blue and gold/Changed to a

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (London: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd, 1998), p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Janz, 'Whistler's Fog and the Aesthetics of Place', *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, 5.3 (2005), <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/053/janz.shtml>.

<sup>18</sup> Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), pp. 6-7.



Harmony in grey'.<sup>20</sup> Peter Wagner writes: 'The very context of the poem introduces the important issues of synaesthesia and intermediality (i.e., the mingling of music, painting, and writing), issues that were central to Impressionism.'<sup>21</sup> However, there is also a much more disturbing side to this poem and its treatment of London fog. In the second stanza he continues: 'The yellow fog came creeping down/The bridges, till the houses' walls/Seemed changed to shadows, and St. Paul's/Loomed like a bubble o'er the town.'<sup>22</sup> The use of the verbs 'creeping' and 'looming' are those usually associated with fog and have a Dickensian quality to them which adds to a sinister air. The fog converts the substantial bridges and houses to shadow. The standard use of St Paul's seen through the fog, reinforces the notion that the fog dissolves solidity and reality. Its dome becomes a 'bubble' which hovers over London, but by its nature may be seen as a comment on the ethereal nature of the religion it represents, and the possibility that it may be liable to burst. The image of an ethereal London is quickly displaced by the sounds of waking up and movement, but ends with the picture of a prostitute, who had presumably been plying her trade beneath the cover of the fog, and who shows a reluctance to embrace the daylight by preferring to remain beneath the artificial light: 'But one pale woman all alone,/The daylight kissing her wan hair,/Loitered beneath the gas lamps' flare,/With lips of flame and heart of stone.'<sup>23</sup>

Writers did not encourage the reader to see fog as an assemblage of water-vapour, soot and sulphur dioxide particles, but used it as a metaphorical device to veil crime, to signify uncertainty, menace and evil. Even Wilde's poem 'Impression du

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<sup>20</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'Impression du Matin', in *Victorian Poetry: Clough to Kipling*, ed. by Arthur J. Carr (New York: Reinhart & Co. Inc., 1959), p. 338, v. 1, l. 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Wagner, 'Oscar Wilde's "Impression du matin" – an Intermedial Reading' in *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality*, ed. by Peter Wagner (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1996), pp. 281- 308, (p. 284).

<sup>22</sup> Wilde, 'Impression du Matin', v. 2, l. 5-8.

<sup>23</sup> Wilde, 'Impression du Matin', v. 4, l. 16-20.



Matin' which begins as an aesthetic description of London fog, ends with a reference to the immorality it conceals. In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) a November fog is used when Dorian Gray commits his most terrible crime of murdering his friend, the artist Basil Hallward. Even here Wilde plays with the reader over the usual expectation that a foggy night will equate with evil. Dorian Gray, realising the danger Hallward would be in if they met, believes that the fog has concealed him from his friend.

He was walking home about eleven o'clock from Lord Henry's, where he had been dining, and was wrapped in heavy furs, as the night was cold and foggy. At the corner of Grosvenor Square and South Audley Street, a man passed him in the mist, walking very fast and with the collar of his grey ulster turned up. He had a bag in his hand. Dorian recognized him. It was Basil Hallward. A strange sense of fear, for which he could not account, came over him. He made no sign of recognition and went on quickly in the direction of his own house.<sup>24</sup>

In fact the fog has failed to conceal, and Hallward recognizes Gray, and this encounter does lead to Hallward's murder.

According to Christ and Jordan: 'Nineteenth-century aesthetic theory frequently makes the eye the preeminent organ of truth.'<sup>25</sup> Yet, as the historian Daniel Pick has remarked, it was not as clear-cut as this. 'Our eyes', he writes in his essay 'Stories of the Eye', 'undergo stimulations on the retina which result in "sensations of colour". But it is our minds that transform sensations into perceptions. Our conscious vision of the world is grounded in experience and expectation; it is not simply a registration of some self-evident external reality.'<sup>26</sup> This leads him on to an examination of changing understandings of the nature of perception in the nineteenth century. During this period he remarks: 'The science of vision was increasingly understood to involve

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<sup>24</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 141.

<sup>25</sup> Christ and Jordan, 'Introduction', pp. xix-xx.

<sup>26</sup> Pick, 'Stories of the Eye', p. 187.



human physiology and psychology rather than [...] questions about the mechanics of light and optical transmission.<sup>27</sup> Vision thus became embedded in the body: 'Problems of vision then, as now, were fundamentally questions about the body and the operation of social power.'<sup>28</sup> Thus perception is not merely an act of the individual human body but also an aspect of wider collective influences. Seeing was no longer a single isolated act but one which was combined with perception, memory and knowledge, which were socially and culturally conditioned.

Ways of looking and perceiving were starting to be analysed scientifically. Science began to be applied to art. Questions of visuality concerned not only the beholder but also the artist as well. 'All one wants to know' as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) asked a century before, in 1790, 'is whether the mere representation of the object is to my liking, no matter how indifferent I may be to the real existence of the object of this representation.'<sup>29</sup> Crary describes the contribution which Herbart, Kant's successor at Königsberg, made to the subject of visuality: 'Consciousness, for Herbart, begins as a stream of potentially chaotic input from without [...] The mind does not reflect truth but rather extracts it from an on going process involving the collision and merging of ideas.'<sup>30</sup> This applied to visual processes along with others. As Daniel Pick states: [Herbart] 'wrote about how we fend off as well as take in an unmanageable stream of sensory inputs. The mind extracts as well as obscures other images in order to perceive.'<sup>31</sup> How would a blind man, suddenly given sight, perceive the world without the prior knowledge and experience of long-term sight?<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'Analytic of the Beautiful' in Neill and Ridley, pp. 269-296, (270).

<sup>30</sup> Crary, pp. 100-1.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>32</sup> For discussion of what Crary refers to as 'the Molyneux problem', see Crary, pp. 58-9.



John Ruskin effectively dismissed this question and thought that it would be better to be able to paint without knowledge and preconceptions: "The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, - as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight."<sup>33</sup> As the art historian E. H. Gombrich suggests, this way of seeing could be thought of as an anticipation of impressionism.<sup>34</sup> One specific example Ruskin gives of this difference between knowledge/experience and sight, is of the darkness of objects to be painted:

among the tints which you can imitate, those which you thought the darkest will continually turn out to be in reality the lightest. Darkness of objects is estimated by us, under ordinary circumstances, much more by knowledge than by sight; thus, a cedar or Scotch fir, at 200 yards off, will be thought of darker green than an elm or oak near us; because we know by experience that the peculiar colour they exhibit, at that distance, is the *sign* of darkness of foliage.<sup>35</sup>

Looking at a painting involves perceiving the illusion of perspective and interpreting two-dimensional patterns as three-dimensional. How we do this depends to a degree on what culture and society have conditioned the eye to perceive. For much of the nineteenth century British artists tended to avoid the subject of fog, not only because it did not fit into the Academy's ideas of acceptable subjects to paint, but also because they found it dirty, dark and unpaintable, representing the underside of the urban – industrial world, more a hindrance to art than a potential subject. Because they had been brought up railing against the fog, their experience of it hindered their perception of its possibilities. Artists from abroad, like Whistler and Monet, could come to it without prior distaste and see it with new eyes. Turner's single painting of

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<sup>33</sup> Cook and Wedderburn, *John Ruskin*, xv, p. 27n.

<sup>34</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study of the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972), p. 250.

<sup>35</sup> Cook and Wedderburn, *John Ruskin*, xv, p. 144.



London fog was not exhibited and would not have been known at this time. In a sense, therefore, British artists did not 'see' fog at all.

Wilde wrote in 1891: 'To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing.'<sup>36</sup> Recognition of this insight, embodied well before the mid-nineteenth century, as Crary has argued, in the recognition of the subjectivity of the observer, had already opened the way to multifarious ways of seeing fog in metaphorical terms. Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* shows us the difference between looking and seeing. He is the character most identified with the act of seeing. He is described as possessing 'an unlimited number of eyes'.<sup>37</sup> When he questions Jo as to the identity of the lady whom he escorted to the graveyard where Nemo's body was placed, Jo is convinced that it was Mademoiselle Hortense. He even protests: "I am a-looking as hard as ever I can look".<sup>38</sup> But on being encouraged to look at the lady's hands, Jo is forced to revise his view. He realises that these hands are not as white or as delicate as those of the mysterious lady and the rings on her fingers do not sparkle as the lady's brilliant jewellery had done. Lady Dedlock had swapped dresses with Mademoiselle Hortense in order to visit her lover's grave. This, of course, is mirrored at the end by the dead body, dressed in the brickmaker's wife's clothes, lying in front of the same graveyard. It is again Lady Dedlock. Ronald R. Thomas views this incident in terms of Bucket being like a camera: 'So effective is his pointing finger in these linked processes that it disciplines the vision of others, constraining their eyes into a certain field, focusing them on a specific object or person in detail.'<sup>39</sup> But Dickens also uses this incident to highlight the difference not only between looking and seeing, but how reality can be

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<sup>36</sup> Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 368.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald R. Thomas, 'Making Darkness Visible: Capturing the Criminal and Observing the Law in Victorian Photography and Detective Fiction' in Christ and Jordan, pp. 134-168, (p. 142).



put into question. Mr Snagsby, who has viewed the interview between Bucket and Jo walks home 'doubtful of his being awake and out – doubtful of the reality of the streets through which he goes – doubtful of the reality of the moon that shines above him.'<sup>40</sup> This principle of doubt and uncertainty allowed other writers as well to exploit the idea of fog in metaphorical representations of visuality and blindness.

## II

Peter Ackroyd has argued that, 'fog is the greatest character in nineteenth-century fiction'.<sup>41</sup> Its emergence as a character in literature did not begin with Dickens. Earlier examples include Peter Pindar's poem *Royalty Fog-Bound: Or, the Perils of a Night and the Frolics of a Fortnight* which may primarily be a satirical verse aimed at the Prince Regent, but it is the image of the fog that becomes central to it: 'I sing the mischiefs which arise|From muddy streets and foggy skies.'<sup>42</sup> Another appeared in 1822 when Henry Luttrell writes his letters to Julia; but the central character in 'Letter II' is 'A fog in London'.<sup>43</sup> These are not claimed to be the first pieces of literature to textualize fog, but they do illustrate that Dickens was as much influenced by earlier writings as later writers were influenced by him.

Major fogs had appeared in London for a long time, and some writers, such as John Evelyn, had drawn attention to them. In the early nineteenth century, Evelyn's work was reprinted, reflecting a growing concern expressed by a number of writers, including Byron. But it was only from the 1840s that London became identified so closely with fog, and that a more or less continuous discourse began. As the nineteenth century progressed, it can be seen to have become part of the psyche of

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<sup>40</sup> Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 371.

<sup>41</sup> Ackroyd, *London*, p. 434.

<sup>42</sup> Pindar, v. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Luttrell, p. 88.



every Londoner. Fog became a useful tool for writers to provide an image of the anxieties surrounding industrialisation and increased commercialisation as well as the rapid and seemingly uncontrollable population growth of London so characteristic of the Victorian era. Its two major components – smoke and water – could be broken down and used to emphasise these problems. London became an aqueous nightmare, in which buildings and people could become engulfed, choked or drowned. Fog could also take the city to the dawn of time, when the waters of creation were slipping back. The smoke became a visible warning of the dangers of polluted air. Through the tricks that fog could play with sight, people and buildings became transformed or seemingly dissolved. It created a world in which knowledge, especially of London, seems to slip away, to create a chaotic and confused environment. Yet artists, especially from other countries, realised the potential of this visual transformation to turn it into a world of blazing colour or romantic mists. In the 1880s and 1890s, their representation of fog finally found an appreciative audience. Fog became a symbol of London's own ambivalent view of itself.

Well before this, the novels of Dickens had revealed a mastery of his use of metaphor from the very beginning. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* he portrays not a true 'London particular', but a natural fog which revenges itself on Quilp, an emblem of industrial pollution in the smoke that he produces, morally polluted by his avarice, selfishness and spite. Later, the fog in *Martin Chuzzlewit* appears to promise a fairy-tale world of London as 'a city in the clouds'. Yet the promise is shown to be false when Pecksniff and his family rush through the foggy London streets, uncertain about which way they are going. Fog becomes London in the way it promises revelation only to be followed by disappointment. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* the impact of the fog might only be called unsettling, but by the time of the later novels, Dickens's view of the city had become more negative. In *Bleak House* the fog represents much more than the



obfuscation of the law. Individuals become confused and maddened by the law; the law seeks the dissolution of the individual, which leads to blindness and death. The fog denies light: the world described in *Bleak House* is darkened not only by the fog but also by a metaphorical lack of light given to individuals – the light of religious comfort, education and simple charity. In *Our Mutual Friend*, fog defines the city. It creates borders of different colours indicating the level of pollution and moral corruption. As the description moves towards the city's centre, it is described as 'rusty-black'.<sup>44</sup> The city becomes indeterminate, 'divided in purpose between being visible and invisible, and so being wholly neither'.<sup>45</sup>

Dickens uses fog consistently throughout his works in a variety of metaphorical ways, and later writers acknowledged their debt to him. Writers who followed also found ways of expanding fog's use as a metaphor. Julian Wolfreys has written of the importance of writers, including Dickens, who 'are fascinated with exploring London itself through the written trace'. He also highlights what he refers to as 'something akin to an epistemic shift in the comprehension of the uses of the city in writing [...] those who come after [Dickens] tend to employ stock images of the city without necessarily allowing it to transform their texts'.<sup>46</sup> Yet, as this thesis has shown, the use later writers make of fog reveals its continued adaptability and flexibility as a metaphor.

In 1857 Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote of the 'great tawny weltering fog'. Her description highlights the confusion which many people, especially those strange to London, felt when the fog descended. In *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens describes

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<sup>44</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 479.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 479.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfreys, p. 210, note 10.



London as 'frowziness and fog'.<sup>47</sup> A sketch from *The Graphic* of 1872 provides a visual illustration of many of the sensations, described by the writers quoted in this dissertation, that they experienced when caught in a fog, including the confusion felt. People and horses seem to knock into each other, an umbrella has been lost on the ground and the smoke from the links, together with the horse's breath, gives it a hell-like appearance. The perspective of a small area of the street, with the swirling clouds above, enhances the sensation that events are taking place within a dungeon, or a prison, from which there is no escape. Horses and people of all types – women, upper-class men and lower-class links, children and elderly women – seem to be fighting for limited space. The moon peers through the fog, in competition with the flaring light of the links, but it, as a representative of the natural world, seems to be fading.



Fig 54: *London Sketches – A November Fog*.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 268.

<sup>48</sup> *The Graphic*, 1872.



Fog obscured form in a way that repelled connoisseurs of art in the first half of the nineteenth century. Both Turner and Constable saw the potential of muddy skies, but both were working in a market that found these views unacceptable as representations of the negative side of industrialisation. Many English artists simply found fog an obstacle to their work. Turner's 1825 painting, *The Thames above Waterloo Bridge*, reduces London to a formless entity, but one filled with movement and colour. However, Turner never finished it, and it was only in the 1870s that English painters such as John O'Connor and W. L. Wyllie began to illustrate the more industrial aspects of London in their paintings. However, their paintings failed to sell. Mist and fog became central elements in Whistler's paintings, but works such as *Nocturne in grey and gold – Piccadilly* 1881-3 also met a hostile reception. In his later series of paintings on London, Monet sought to represent the impression fog made on the eye of the beholder. He showed a fascination with the changing colours of the light and atmosphere through the fog. Again nothing stands still, and the solid reality of the bridges, buildings and people dissolve into an atmospheric chaos which is unsettling. Other artists, like Yoshio Markino, wished to show a more delicate beauty in the fogs of London. Markino was renowned for his gentleness, but even he presents a vaporous dungeon-like chasm beneath Battersea Bridge which stretches out into nothingness. The American photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn highlights a mysteriousness and isolation about fog, reminiscent of Whistler.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, the American writer, described a fog in his journal of 1857:

I went home by way of Holborn, and the fog was denser than ever, – very black, indeed, more like a distillation of mud than anything else; the ghost of mud, – the spiritualized medium of departed mud, through which the dead citizens of London probably tread, in the Hades whither they are translated. So heavy was the gloom, that gas was lighted in all the shop-windows; and the



little charcoal-furnaces of the women and – boys, roasting chestnuts, threw a ruddy, misty glow around them.<sup>49</sup>

He sees fog as a ‘distillation of mud’ but more than this, it is ‘the ghost of mud’ – dead mud, which can be called dust. To Hawthorne the fog summons up a picture of hell: ‘This fog seems an atmosphere proper to huge, grimy London; as proper to London, as that light neither of the sun nor moon is to the New Jerusalem.’ It made the living seem dead, the air seem like a solid thing.

In *Cooking with Mud*, David Trotter associates the idea of mess with chance and contingency. In a similar way, the idea of fog is associated with formlessness and, hence indeterminacy, displacement, the reversal of the natural or God-given order of things. Day became night; light became a threat instead of a comfort. People likened being in a fog to being in a dungeon. Fog created walls, barriers which were not actually there but still confined and constricted, denying freedom of movement. Fog created a sense of levelling: everyone was in a dungeon created by the fog and the unspoken borders between rich and poor, normal and abnormal, the morally degenerate and the law-abiding had been displaced. At a basic level, fog could signify mystery, uncertainty about the true nature of a character, or the identity of a transgressor.

A major reason for the continued transformation of textual representations of London after Dickens was growing anxiety about rising social tensions in the city. These reached a peak in the 1880s, with the invasion of the West End by roughs taking advantage of a major fog. Fog appeared metaphorically to dissolve social boundaries and obscure the limits of order and propriety. It signified the degeneracy and corruption of the lower classes and the threat they posed to morality and society. For Hay and Barr, the fog becomes a means of showing the destruction of London

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<sup>49</sup> Hawthorne, p. 447.



because its inhabitants have become socially and morally corrupt. The fog takes the place of a biblical flood to cleanse the city streets of degeneracy and immorality. Only as this social threat receded, at the turn of the century, did these apocalyptic scenarios begin to give way to a more optimistic view, as in its representation by Owen and White, holding out the possibility of the re-establishment of the social order.

For Stevenson it becomes a symbol of concealment and secrecy within the novel. The murderous act by Hyde, when he kills Carew, is not hidden by the fog, but exposed under a clear moonlit sky. The fog shrouds Utterson on his drive with the policeman Newcomen, because he is the keeper of secrets. When fog momentarily lifts to reveal the moral depravity of the women who live within Soho, it is a reminder again that the fog is fulfilling the function of concealment.

Like Dickens, Henry James sees London in vaporous terms, as a 'distant atmospheric mixture'.<sup>50</sup> As with representations of Jack the Ripper, including *The Lodger*, it becomes a means of conveying the restrictions respectable women faced when appearing in public. In *The Portrait of a Lady* James uses the fog to highlight the confines of his heroine's life. Walking along the street in a fog provides Isabel with a sense that she is placing herself in danger, but this is also a metaphor for the danger that lies in the decision she makes for her future marriage with Osmond. Fog makes the city unknowable even to Londoners like Millicent Henning. A metaphor of indecision and uncertainty is created in 'the way the winter fog blurred and suffused the whole place'.<sup>51</sup>

In *The Secret Agent* fog also represents the indeterminate roles of the protagonists; similarly in Conan Doyle's *The Bruce-Partington Plans* it alerts the reader to

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<sup>50</sup> James, *Casamassima*, p. 401.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.



the fact that all is not what it seems to be. Thus fog's indeterminacy continued to serve as a metaphorical device in a variety of ways up to and beyond the end of the century. Fog could also be used to underline the impotence of human beings at the mercy of larger forces. Conrad uses fog to describe a world which seems to be dissolving into a world of water and where 'the lofty pretensions of a mankind oppressed by the miserable indignities of the weather appeared as a colossal and hopeless vanity deserving of scorn, wonder, and compassion'.<sup>52</sup>

### III

Why did fogs persist in London throughout the nineteenth century? This too was arguably a consequence of the standpoint of the observer. A correlation between economic prosperity and a greater prevalence of smoke-fogs was used to fight against smoke legislation throughout the nineteenth century. A smoking chimney meant a successful industrial environment that promised jobs, food and money to buy coal to burn a household fire. An industrial chimney without smoke meant the opposite. It is no wonder that many of the terms to denote fog were terms connected with food. The relationship was clear. Yet the link between fog and mortality was recognised and frequent attempts were made to push legislation through parliament. None met with any success. After the social tensions of the 1880s, fog came metaphorically to represent all the evils and dangers of urban society. In 1889, a cartoon in *Punch's Almanack* expressed this view, and suggested the remedy. To drive out fog meant to drive out a whole variety of social evils. Fog is represented as a ghost-like figure in the background, having noticeably dimmed the dome of St Paul's, but it is being moved out of London with other undesirable elements such as jerry-builders, sweated labour

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<sup>52</sup> Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 88.



(organised by a Jewish-looking character) and a simian murderer carrying a knife. All are being expelled by, amongst others: light, ozone and open spaces.



Fig 55: *New London*.<sup>53</sup>

Yet the cartoon expressed a feeling of urgency at the end of the 1880s that was not translated into action. One of the problems in pursuing legislation during the early part of the twentieth century was that really bad fogs diminished during this time. The economic hardships of the Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s and two World Wars meant a decline in industrial activity, which ensured less smoke. The increased use of gas and electricity for home fires and as power sources for industry also contributed to the decline.

Uncertainty continued. When was a fog really bad enough for something to be done about it? What was the link between fog and mortality anyway? Were fogs caused by nature, and so inescapable, or by domestic fires, or by industry? A poem in 1923 that appeared in *Punch* was a response to an assertion in the newspapers that

<sup>53</sup> From *Punch's Almanack for 1889*, in *Punch* (1889) [n.p.]. Beneath illustration is a quote from Tennyson: 'The old order changeth, Yielding place to New.'



London would never lose its fogs 'which are not the products of East End chimneys, but are born on the flats of Essex'.<sup>54</sup> The verses, entitled 'In Defence of Fog', describe the fog as:

VULGARIAN, soupy and yellow,  
Gone, gone is the hope that relies  
On Science to raise up a fellow  
Who will one day effect your demise.  
He may purge you as white as a  
primate,  
But Nature insists on her own;  
For you're part, so it seems, of our  
climate,  
And bred in the bone.<sup>55</sup>

Even as late as 1932 a civil servant wrote: 'It seems unlikely that any big drive in smoke abatement will take place until a definite relation of cause and effect has been established (it has not) between atmospheric pollution and injury to health.'<sup>56</sup> The link between fog and death had been made anecdotally to most people's satisfaction much earlier, but quantifiable proof was more difficult to come by. Statistics showing increased death rates during and after a foggy period did not necessarily prove that people had died because of the fog rather than because of the cold; or perhaps they were going to die anyway. The drive to achieve clean air faced problems like this and many more. There was a major fog as late as 1948 that led to an estimated 600 deaths.<sup>57</sup>

Fog resisted nineteenth-century scientists' attempts to try to measure their blackness. In the following century, in the late 1940s, scientists came up with an

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<sup>54</sup> *Punch*, 21 March 1923, p. 275.

<sup>55</sup> *Punch*, 21 March 1923, p. 275.

<sup>56</sup> W. A. Ross to I. G. Gibbon, 7 November 1932: HLG 55/8. Cited in Ashby, p. 100.

<sup>57</sup> 'Killer Smog' in *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 20 April 1963, 88, pp. 857-8, 857.



equally subjective test, the Ringelmann Chart, which displayed four shades of grey to black. If smoke was deemed to be darker than Ringelmann 2 on the chart, then it could be deemed illegal.<sup>58</sup> Yet precise measurements remained impossible to achieve. It appeared that a cartoon in *Punch* of 1889 showing fog thumbing its nose at Science, shown wearing for-glasses, could still be apposite many decades later. Fog is represented in this cartoon as Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant, ‘deriding Ulysses’ – but we know that Ulysses subsequently blinded the giant and secured his victory over him. Thus fog remained a characteristic of London life long after other nuisances had been removed, further strengthening its identification with the capital.



Fig 56: ‘Fog thumbing its nose at science.’<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Ashby, pp. 106-9.

<sup>59</sup> *Punch's Almanack for 1889*, 6 December 1888.



#### IV

On Friday, 5 December 1952 a fog descended on London and lasted five days. This coincided with the preparations for the annual Smithfield Show at Earl's Court. By the time the show officially opened on the Monday an Aberdeen Angus had died, and twelve other animals had had to be slaughtered. Many other animals were suffering from breathing difficulties. This was reminiscent of the 1873 Smithfield Show when even more livestock lost their lives due to the foggy conditions. During the weeks that followed it became clear that not only animals had lost their lives. It was estimated that up to 4,000 people died as a result of the fog from circulatory or respiratory disorders.<sup>60</sup> The fog of 1952 led to an outcry and finally government felt that it had no choice but to put into place legislation that would rid London (and other cities) of fogs. In 1956 the Clean Air Act came into force and it specified clean air zones in which only smokeless coal could be burnt. It took some time for enough smokeless coal to be produced and an effective policing system to come into effect, but essentially the days of the 'killer fogs' were numbered. After 1960, London particulars, pea soupers or London ivy had truly become things of the past. They were seen purely to represent the condition of London as it had been in the decades before the First World War.

It is true that the Victorian period is now often signposted by the use of fog. Its use in representations of Victorian crime partly highlights the mystery that is about to unfold. The decline in the intensity and frequency of London fog after the turn of the century began a process by which it became little more than a hackneyed way of telling readers or viewers that the setting of a story was Victorian London. Nicholas Freeman claims: 'Dickens invested fog with symbolic properties; later 'realist' writers

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 104.



had used it for practical demonstrations of the difficulties of urban life, or else, in a version of the antipathetic fallacy, to suggest the environment's malign incompatibility with human wishes.<sup>61</sup> But its use as a complex metaphor was fully explored by later writers. They took up from where Dickens left off, and transformed it to not only suggest the environment's hostility to individuals, but also to suggest an ambiguity in attitudes towards the city and to express anxieties regarding social and moral degeneracy, xenophobic fears and later still, worries of a future war. It was only in the twentieth century that the epistemic shift described by Julian Wolfreys really took place.

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<sup>61</sup> Freeman, p. 91.



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### **3. Films and Television Programmes**

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