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**“Infinite Miles of Unmeaning Streets:”  
Exhaustive and Tentative Surveys  
of Early Twentieth-Century London**

One may sail easily round England, or circumnavigate the globe. But not the most enthusiastic geographer... ever memorised a map of London. Certainly no one ever walks around it. For

of course, had long been characterised by its vastness and its variety. As Malcolm Bradbury writes of the city at the time of modernism, its size and its heterogeneity were part of its “essential attraction,” “the world’s biggest city, still expanding with extraordinary rapidity ... not simply a national capital, but a cosmopolitan city ... the capital of an Empire and the centre of world trade.”<sup>6</sup> The expanse of London writing is matched by a correspondingly vast critical literature that engages with London in particular, and the city in general, as a locus of modernity and of modernism.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Richard Lehan suggests that “perhaps the major modernist theme is that of the artist, or the equivalent of the artist, in the city”.<sup>8</sup> By “equivalent” he means an observer who brings “a distinct consciousness to the city,” or “a consciousness in pursuit of the effect of urban activity on another location or place,”<sup>9</sup> and he cites Marlow’s consciousness in the Congo as an example of the latter stance. *Heart of Darkness*, of course, frames its tale of colonial exploitation in Africa (originating from Brussels, a city that for Marlow’s “distinct consciousness” evokes a “whited sepulchre”<sup>10</sup>) with a vision of London itself as a place of overwhelming darkness. As the Thames seems to flow out to meet the Congo, and, indeed, “the uttermost ends of the earth,”<sup>11</sup> the space and time of London are expanded by juxtaposition with colonial activities overseas, and with earlier Roman explorations along the river. The city is far from being a simple space that can be demarcated by conventional boundaries.

If any consensus emerges from the vast body of writing on the modernist city (and any summary, of course, will fail to do justice to the variety of arguments articulated within this field), it is that the course of modernism shifted the nature of the fictive city from “an essentially static object, fixed in space, to that of a fragmented and subjective kaleidoscope, constantly shifting in time,”<sup>12</sup> a domain in which objective mastery of urban material becomes impossible. Malcolm Bradbury

describes this process as a shift from the city as a source of “material,” its very specificity as a location determining an artistic shape for the emerging work, to a more subjective, elusive space, encapsulated in T. S. Eliot’s “unreal city.”<sup>13</sup> Writing from the perspective of a literary naturalist, Emile Zola describes the coherent composition of an artistic whole from the ordered material of the city: “the story composes itself out of all the collected observations, all the notes, one leading to another by the very enchainment of the characters, and the conclusion is nothing more than a natural and inevitable consequence.”<sup>14</sup> Lehan contrasts such a coherent, “centripetal” naturalist city, where “life is controlled from a centre of urban force,” with the “centrifugal” modernist city, where “the centre moves us outward to symbolic correspondences in space and time,” correspondences such as those Conrad establishes between modern London, Roman Britain and the Belgian Congo. The modernist Tmapthan a 01 p2ends“the e Cebc

cultural importance of any project which would seek to engage with it, and yet it is also a marker of the enigmas of modernity, and of the aesthetic crises that such enigmas provoke, as those seeking to write the city struggle to maintain imaginative coherence. The infinite city becomes a fiction whose radically restructured urban environment permits writers to redefine their reactions to urban spaces, and, in turn, to invite their audiences to redefine their own responses to this familiar world made strange. Sharing a registration of the illimitability of London, each of these writers seeks to engage with this infinite city in related, but distinct fashions. A range of methodologies, and a spectrum of confidence about these aesthetic challenges, emerges as the trope of illimitability reconfigures the excessively charted city into something altogether more enigmatic.

Ford and the others are writing at a time when London is being conscientiously charted through statistical surveys and personal and professional investigations. Mark Seltzer writes of the ways in which statistical surveys became part of the “professionalisation of the problem of the city,” from the formation of the Statistical Society in 1834 to Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People of London* of 1889-1903. “The investigator constructs an interpretive matrix covering virtually every area and activity in the city from the average traffic on the London streets and the cubic feet of air circulated in the London tenements to a detailed classification of criminals, delinquents, and other deviants from the specified norm,” so that “even as the city continues to be spoken of as an impenetrable enigma, the enigma has been systematically penetrated.”<sup>17</sup>

It is precisely in reaction to such strategies that Ford and George Sims articulate their projects, but they retain a concern with the statistical surveys’ characteristic of comprehensiveness. “Statistics have no place in these pages,” writes

Sims in the prologue to his project, “the decimal has been deliberately kept in the background.”<sup>18</sup> In his introduction, Ford rejects such a hypothetical sentence as “there are in the city of — 720 firms of hat manufacturers, employing 19,000 operatives,” in favour of “a personal image of the place.”<sup>19</sup> Eschewing a statistical methodology, they turn instead to a self-consciously impressionistic, defiantly amateur enterprise, attempting, in their different ways, to summon up the sorts of spaces that slip through, and are ignored by, such an “interpretive matrix.”

In 1903 Sims begins editing his discursive survey of the capital, *Living London*, initially published in the form of a monthly magazine. It takes the form of a long series of illustrated articles, arranged in no systematic order, from a number of different contributors. A few sample titles suggest the range of these articles. In rapid succession members of the reading audience could pass through “Russia in East

With this aim in mind, Sims's investigators peruse a particular sort of territory. The strolling narrator will retread pathways that may already be familiar to the assumed audience: "we have gone once or twice perhaps to the musical service at the Italian Church."<sup>22</sup> The territory to be elucidated by the informed gaze of the various narrators is not, in general, completely unexplored. Instead, new spaces are opened up in more or less familiar streets, as the privileged gaze passes beyond house fronts and even into the inner lives of the city's inhabitants. The credibility of the investigator is established through the way in which new insights may be drawn from even familiar locations.

A score of times we may have walked through Soho and wondered at the mix of races. But now we are to do more than pass on our wandering way. We are to step into the old houses and peep into the strange rooms, to note how these people live and earn their daily bread ... to study with our own eyes the daily life of this strange colony—"the Continent" in London.<sup>23</sup>

Skilful investigation and reportage will be brought to bear on streets hitherto only walked in a casual and curious fashion. This investigation will serve not to dispel the mystery associated with these spaces, however, but to enhance it, as the repetition of the word "strange" in the quotation suggests. The reader is held in a double condition, both familiar with, and estranged from these new spaces, what Arthur Machen calls the "continents of strange extent,"<sup>24</sup> that these perambulations open up in the streets of London. "The West and the East will alike deliver up their mysteries,"<sup>25</sup> but these will be mysteries maintained and valued *as* mysteries, not as questions requiring solutions of the sort that might be provided by a statistical survey.

In a reversal of Seltzer's observation regarding contemporary statistical surveys, that "even as the city continues to be spoken of as an impenetrable enigma, the enigma has been systematically penetrated,"<sup>26</sup> Sims stresses his successful decipherment of London mysteries, while at the same time depending upon their





no phase of life will be beyond the artist in the city, exclusion is necessary for the production of an imaginatively coherent work. Morrison's "realism" recognises that "facts" do not reach the reader in an unmediated fashion. He is not averse to setting his book with traps for the unwary sceptical reader. In cases where he saw "reason to anticipate a charge of exaggeration" in an incident depicted, he admits that "if I touched my fact at all, it was to subdue it,"<sup>36</sup> thus providing himself with a preemptive defence against such a charge. Morrison excludes and subdues the material of the city so as to shape his text, and to shape the responses of his readers. Sims too, of course, shapes his text, and the theatrical voice wh

Mark Seltzer draws attention to this “fantasy of providential supervision” in relation to Sims’s writing, and also to the passage in *Dombey and Son*

of such transcendence allows, in Sims's optimistic account of representation, an exhaustive survey of "living London." The ambitious and triumphant tone of his prologue evokes the vertiginous prospect of a city of infinite detail, only so as to emphasise the potency of the methodology that can encompass it. This is very different from the tentative note struck by Ford Madox Ford's introductory essay to his contemporary survey of London and its inhabitants.

To judge from its title, Ford's book *The Soul of London: A Survey of a Modern City*, published just two years after Sims begins *Living London*, will be undertaking a similarly optimistic enterprise, a totalising, idealising project, a search for a metaphysical essence of "Londonness." From the table of contents onwards, however, the reader is presented with a hopelessly proliferating excess of detail, as the simple thematic summary of each chapter title ("Roads into London;" "Work in London;" "London at Leisure;" ...) breaks up into an elaborately particular account of the observations and speculations that the chapter contains: "The cloisters of our Valhalla—The unknown author—The Waste of individualities—The pleasantest size for a graveyard—The cemetery—Athens versus Kensington High Street—The alla—T0.000Tdx—Thti-3.0.0ingAoT0.00Toico29ingccountSpiri( account Plan)-..."2(et—The 67 0 TD0



become impossible to define, withholds the possibility of completion and containment, and prevents Ford from establishing a competent authority over his material, such as that claimed by Sims. “So many things—as obvious as the enormously increased size, as secondary as the change in our habits of locomotion—militate against our nowadays having an impression, a remembered bird’s-eye-view of London as a whole.”<sup>47</sup> And yet, while Sims courts omniscience, but steps back from it for the sake of narrative satisfaction, Ford, conversely, rejects the possibility of omniscience, only to be haunted by its absence. His persistent registration of the impossibility of ever constructing a complete image of London is itself a marker of the fascination such an image holds for him.

Explaining his own frustration at being unable adequately to complete the task he has set himself, Ford is also concerned with characterising the temperament that would be ideally suited to inscribing the modern urban environment. Such a figure must be subjective, in the sense of relying on individual impressions of the city, but he must not be subjective in the sense of being partial.

He should, in fact, when he presumes to draw morals, be prepared to draw all the morals. —He must not only sniff at the “Suburbs” as a place of small houses and dreary lives; he must remember that in each of these houses dwells a strongly individualised human being with romantic hopes, romantic fears, and at the end, an always tragic death.<sup>48</sup>

The perception of the suburbs as “a place of small houses and dreary lives” is familiar from the views of many literary intellectuals of the time.<sup>49</sup> In suggesting that the author of the city recognise that each suburban house in fact contains an “individualised human being” whose life and death are meaningful, Ford is not, however, advocating an alternative view, but proposing an additional one. The more familiar reading of urban spaces is not to be rejected. The author “must not *only* sniff at the ‘Suburbs’ as a place of small houses and dreary lives.” The proposed writer,

then, must *both* “sniff” at the “dreary lives” of the suburbs, *and* register their vibrancy and variety. The personality that is “prepared to draw *all* the morals” must itself be comprehensive. A temperament of this sort would be complex indeed, and Ford later admits the virtual impossibility of maintaining such a stance, when he states:

To see London steadily and to see it whole, a man must have certain qualities of temperament so exhaustive as to preclude ... the faculties which go to the making—or the marring—of great fortunes. ... he must have an impressionability and an impersonality, a single-mindedness to see, and a power of arranging his illustrations cold-bloodedly, an unemotional mind and a great sympathy, a life-long engrossment in his “subject”, and an immense

inquiry might be “unpractical,” and Ford may reconfigure his survey in recognition of this, but he still admits the allure of such a comprehensive scheme, appealing as it does to “the universal desire to ‘know.’”<sup>55</sup>

years! ... It was a matter of about three days.”<sup>59</sup> In dealing with the life and death of Winnie Verloc, Conrad stresses that he never has any doubt as to the “reality” of the story, but it nevertheless has to be “disengaged from its obscurity in that immense town.”<sup>60</sup> “I had to fight hard to keep at arm’s length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story.”<sup>61</sup> A process of careful filtration is required to separate out the essential story from the rush of pressing, but extraneous memories.

In writing of the genesis of his novel of the secret politics of London, *The Princess Casamassima* Henry James also reflects on his formative pedestrian experience of the city. He stresses that “there wasn’t a street, a corner, an hour, of London that was not an advantage” in the process: every part and particle of the city went to fuel the novel.<sup>62</sup> Its matter is presented to him as a “thick tribute of the London streets,” and his task, like that of Conrad, is one of filtration and regulation of this potentially overwhelming inspirational material.<sup>63</sup> The key component of this methodology of filtration that allows James to measure out and structure his material is the protagonist of the pavement, walker of the city streets, Hyacinth Robinson, a figure “all beset and all perceptive,” who “would note as many things and vibrate to as many occasions as I might venture to make him.”<sup>64</sup> The character of Hyacinth is central to James’s creative process because, for James, the “clearness and concreteness” of the narrative depends upon “some *concentrated* individual notation” of events. The narrative danger, arising out of the “sovereign principle the economy of interest,” lies in rendering a character “too *interpretative*” to be credible, “too divinely, too priggishly clever.”<sup>65</sup> A character who could interpret everything would not only not be credible; like Holmes in his aerial tour of the city, such a character would also render the story redundant: “it seems probable that if we were never

bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us.” Too much “intelligence,” suggests the imagined reader with whom James is debating, “*endangers* ... the subject-matter of any self-respecting story. It opens up too many considerations, possibilities, issues.”<sup>66</sup> Sims’s text is cumulative; the shape of James’s text is determined by what can be excluded. A character who too closely approaches the status of the omniscient narrator, or that of Ford’s ideal and impossible investigator, will be of no use in charting a city which itself contains so many things.

We have already seen the ways in which the city which seems to compel notation, simultaneously resists it. A near ubiquitous phantom presence in the city may generate the kind of information denied to conventional social investigation, but it entails its own difficulties: “to haunt the great city and by this habit to penetrate it, imaginatively, in as many places as possible—*that* was to be informed, *that* was to pull wires, *that* positively was to groan at times under the weight of one’s accumulations.”<sup>67</sup> Faced with the sheer scale of London, the material becomes simply oppressive, and the writer is left hopelessly groaning under the weight. For Hyacinth himself, within the text of the novel, there is the threat of suffocation under the weight of accumulation: “he had, in a word, more impressions than he knew what to do

the casual nature of his explorations. Attentive and observant certainly, senses more keenly honed perhaps than those of the average urban wanderer, James nevertheless does not pursue a systematic or organised inquiry: “I recall pulling no wires, knocking at no closed doors, applying for no ‘authentic’ information; but I recall also, on the other hand, the practice of never missing an opportunity to add a drop, however small, to the bucket of my impressions or to renew my sense of being able to dip into it.”<sup>72</sup>

What is involved here is more than the simple accumulation of details. For James, open-eyed walking, “attentive exploration,”<sup>73</sup> as long as it is carried out over large enough regions of time and space, produces “a mystic solicitation” that takes the form of an urge to interpretation and representation.<sup>74</sup> George Sims stresses the importance of the comprehensive account of the city, the text that can contain everything, but his capacious anthologising lacks a sense of “mystic solicitation.” His





vast impression of space and multitude and opportunity.”<sup>90</sup> His Sunday omnibus rides “east and west and north and south,” have the effect of “enlarging and broadening the sense of great swarming hinterlands of humanity with whom I had no dealings, of whom I knew nothing.”<sup>91</sup> It is perfectly in keeping with the myth and metaphor of illimitability that these excursions, superficially so methodical and exhaustive with their axes directed along the compass points, have the effect not of expanding the parameters of his knowledge, but of “enlarging and broadening” his awareness of regions of which he is ignorant. It is when he leaves behind the fantasy of omniscience, that the excess of London can fill him with a sense of liberating potential, rather than with the panicky sense of being overwhelmed. This poetics of the unknown street, so central to the redemptive urban aesthetic of George Ponderevo, proves a frustration instead to Ford’s more coherent attempts to generate a definitive competence of the city, as he conjures up a vision of “all the limitless stretches of roofs that you have never seen, the streets that you will never travel ... all these appalling regions of London that to every individual of us must remain unknown and untraversed.”<sup>92</sup> A city that is indefinitely extended and indefinitely divisible remains ultimately unknowable. It is a distracting, but equivocally liberating thought for George Ponderevo, but an appalling and frustrating revelation for Ford Madox Ford.

Like Ponderevo, Dyson in Arthur Machen’s episodic urban fantasy *The Three Impostors*, also finds room for aesthetic optimism in the unending streets of London. In the face of the fashionable urban pessimism expressed by his acquaintance Burton, he admits to the decadence and squalor of the times, but sees hope in “the mystery of the innumerable, unending streets, the strange adventures that must infallibly arise from so complicated a press of interests ... he who has stood in the ways of a suburb, and has seen them stretch before him all shining, void and desolate at noonday, had

not lived in vain.”<sup>93</sup> Adventures must “*infallibly*

illimitability, a text that successfully embodied such an urban space would be self-contradictory: practical success would mark a theoretical failure. To succeed in capturing that environment within the confines of a single text would be to deny the very qualities that he claims for the city, its vastness and variety.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Ford Madox Ford, *The Soul of London: A Survey of a Modern City*

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (London: J. M. Dent, 1996), 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>37</sup> Sims, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Lehan discusses several Sherlock Holmes stories from the perspective of their London

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- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., 85.  
<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 91.  
<sup>85</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>86</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>87</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 88.  
<sup>89</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 92.  
<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 91.  
<sup>92</sup> Ford, 102.  
<sup>93</sup> Machen, 98.  
<sup>94</sup> Doyle, 245.  
<sup>95</sup> Ford, 3.