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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 England is a small island, the world is infinitesimal amongst the planets. But London is illimitable.¹

One can never tell everything.²

“We live in spacious times,”³ writes Ford Madox Ford in *The Soul of London*, his impressionistic survey of the modern imperial capital, published in 1905, and it is the nature of this spaciousness that presents Ford and his contemporaries with their most pervasive aesthetic uncertainties as they attempt to sketch the urban world in words. In this article I will examine the rhetoric of urban spaces as it is articulated by several fictive and documentary writers of the turn of the twentieth century, most notably George R. Sims, Henry James, H. G. Wells and Ford Madox Ford himself.

Ford describes London as “the apotheosis of modern life,”⁴ and the significance for the modern western literary imagination of the urban space in general, and of London in particular, has often been remarked upon. These writers are working within a tradition that equates London walking and London writing, familiar from the writing of Thomas de Quincey and Charles Dickens in preceding decades.⁵ London,

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.”⁶ 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.⁷ Indeed, Richard Lehan suggests that “perhaps the major modernist theme is that of the artist, or the equivalent of the artist, in the city”.⁸ 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,”⁹ 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”¹⁰) 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,”¹¹ 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,”¹² 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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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 narrator finds “the centre becoming more complex and opaque, his or her own vision more subjective.”¹⁵ In short, the city “no longer encourage[s] imaginative coherence.”¹⁶

This article must be selective in its approach to the extensive fictional, documentary and critical literature of the city. In particular, it does not seek to examine those texts which celebrate or denigrate London for simple vastness, whether this is articulated in social, political, cultural, economic or other terms. Each of the writers discussed extrapolates further than this, and renders London as a space of the greatest possible size and complexity. It becomes a city not only where *anything might* happen, but where *everything must* happen. This exhilarating and exhausting myth of the infinite city penetrates both fictive and documentary discourses in a manner which demonstrates contemporary fascination with its construction and its consequences. The city without boundaries is a marker of imperial prestige, and of the

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.”¹⁷

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.”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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 London” by Count E. Armfelt; “The House of Commons” by Alfred F. Robbins; “Midnight London” by Beckles Willson; “New Scotland Yard” by Major Arthur Griffiths; “Underground London” by Eric Banton; “Lunatic London” by T. W. Wilkinson; “Ballooning London” by Rev. John M. Bacon; even “Cat and Dog London” by Frances Simpson. There are over one hundred and seventy such articles in total. Sims claims this survey is exhaustive. The purpose, set out in his prologue, is “to present for the first time to the English-speaking public a complete and comprehensive survey of the myriad human atoms which make up this ever-changing kaleidoscope, the mightiest capital the world has ever seen.”²⁰ This capacity to be all-encompassing is one of the reiterated claims made for the survey: “no detail may be lacking, no phase overlooked.”²¹ To have any value at all by these self-imposed standards, Sims’s survey must be able to open up *all* the scenes of London to its curious audience.

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."²² 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.²³

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,"²⁴ that these perambulations open up in the streets of London. "The West and the East will alike deliver up their mysteries,"²⁵ 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,"²⁶ Sims stresses his successful decipherment of London mysteries, while at the same time depending upon their

perpetuation *as* mysteries. The concept of a city brimming with uncommunicated secrets underwrites the documentary project, and opens up new spaces in an already charted urban world. Writing still of the “Continent” in London, Sims insists upon the capacity of his investigators to “know these aliens as they are.” “We shall go down into their cellars and up into their attics. . . . We shall penetrate that inner life of theirs of which even the policeman who night after night paces the street outside has no idea.”²⁷ While suggesting that his project is simply probing existing secret spaces, Sims is also, of course, creating these spaces for his audience, opening up spaces for mystery within the familiar, charted matrix of the city. Michel de Certeau’s urban analysis is useful here in drawing a distinction between officially sanctioned and constituted spaces, and subversive, legendary, or mythological spaces. He writes that “it is through . . . their capacity to create cellars and garrets everywhere, that local legends . . . permit exits, ways of going out and coming back in, and thus habitable spaces.”²⁸ In this way a “metaphorical” city can slip into “the clear text of the planned and readable city,”²⁹ so that “a second, poetic geography” comes into being “on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning.”³⁰ Walking with an awareness that the city constitutes such a “sieve-order,” “punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts and leaks of meaning” is “a substitute for the legends that used to open up space to something different,” and a practice which itself “invents spaces.”³¹ It is this sort of metaphorical city that Sims’s rhetoric of mysterious cellars and attics and inner lives calls into being, remythologising regions already thoroughly investigated by earlier surveys.

In all cases, with the notable exclusion of statistical methodology, the reader is told that the medium of investigation and representation best suited to the subject has been adopted. Versatility is a necessity in dealing with the variety of London. Yet, the

claim to this versatility, the capacity to deploy a variety of contributors, and, indeed, to deploy the written word, the sketch or the photograph as appropriate, incorporates an unsubstantiated claim to the adequacy of these methods. The sheer extent and variety of London are some of the reasons that Sims gives for the interest and value of his survey, but this variety does not present any fundamental problems for the processes of representation. The variety of London can be addressed by employing an appropriate variety of commentators and a commensurate variety of methods of observation. Nothing need escape the eye if these methods are pursued. London is immense and various, certainly, but it is not beyond the capacity of Sims's documentary enterprise to encompass it.

Sims's rhetoric of exhaustiveness is altogether different from those contemporary urban investigators, who, while claiming as wide as possible an ambit for their work, nevertheless stress the process of selection that is central to their methods of composition. A brief comparison will throw Sims's method into sharper relief. Arthur Morrison, for example, prefaces the third edition of *A Child of the Jago*, published in 1897, with a polemical defence of his work in response to critics of earlier editions, who had charged him with an obsession with the immoral aspects of London life: "I have been asked in print, if I think that there is no phase of life which the artist may not touch. Most certainly I think this."³² Having declared that *no* phase of life may be out of reach of the artist, however, Morrison insists that his "technical method" was simply to lay before the reader "typical facts,"³³ that is, selected incidents that will stand also for the vast number of incidents that must be excluded. The nature of the included "facts" ("ordinary," not "extreme instances," Morrison reiterates³⁴) will register a set of exclusions from the text. A "realist," who has been through a process of "seeing things with his own eyes,"³⁵ Morrison stresses that, while

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,"³⁶ 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 which he adopts in his opening words suggests that he too has an eye to his audience, but his approach can now be seen to be very different from Morrison's careful orchestration of the typical instance.

To gain the exhaustive insight into the lives of the inhabitants of London that Sims requires, the observer must be able to pass beyond, or through, the solid city among which they move. The narrator who is capable of observing movements through various sorts of hierarchically, legally or conventionally demarcated spaces must be immune from such demarcations: "all forms and phases of London life, from the highest to the lowest, will be brought before us. For us, the gates of the palace and the prison will fly open."³⁷ The most famous of fictional London investigators of this time, Sherlock Holmes, experiences a similar fantasy of supervision, seated by the fire in Baker Street.³⁸ He imagines an aerial tour of the surrounding city, during the course of which he and Watson will have privileged access to the interiors of houses and, by implication, the interior lives of the inhabitants.

If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most *outré* results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable.³⁹

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*, in which Dickens imagines “a good spirit who would take the housetops off, with a . . . potent and benignant hand . . . and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes.”⁴⁰ Raymond Williams points out that this “potent and benignant hand . . . is the hand of the novelist” himself,⁴¹ and the vision here is certainly reminiscent of Zola’s programmatic declaration that his story will compose itself through an observation of the “enchainment of the characters,” leading to a “natural and inevitable” conclusion.⁴² Holmes’s vision, however, is both a revelation of the means of omniscient literary creation, and a measure of fiction’s redundancy. The reality revealed by Holmes’s tour would render “all fiction . . . stale and unprofitable.” Omniscience entails futility.

A truly omniscient investigator of the type Sims posits would undermine a number of the qualities of the experience of London which Sims evokes as entertaining, in fact as central to the world of the city. The following of a mystery, like the following of an unknown street, is one of the aesthetic appeals of Sims’s London: “there is always a fascination about the unravelling of a mystery, tracking down a criminal and bringing him to justice.”⁴³ It is a fascination that Holmes himself would share, and yet it is a fascination that would be impossible if Sims’s or Holmes’s fantasies of supervision were entertained. There would be no mystery to unravel: the crime itself could be witnessed, wherever it took place, and the investigator’s access to the inner life of the perpetrator would clear up any lingering enigmas about motivation. The transcendent powers of the narrator have to be suspended, so that aesthetic rewards may be accrued. Nevertheless, the construction of narrators capable

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 Londoner—The impossibility of finding him—The death of the Spirit of Place ..." and so on. All this is consistent with Ford's reservations about his capability to provide a definitive single survey of the city. The informal table of contents provides the reader with a guide to the book's variety, but it also dizzies with the prospect of such multiplicity. This is the first of many indications that Ford's qualms about representing the city run much deeper than those of George Sims. The title *The Soul of London*, then, is optimistic or even misdirecting. Faced with an illimitable city, about which generalisation or abstraction is impossible, the only completely appropriate title would be the content of the text itself, and the only completely

satisfactory text would be the entirety of London itself. This being impractical, Ford grudgingly accepts a title that Alan Hill suggests was forced on him by his publisher at a late stage,⁴⁴ and, confronting its inadequacy, advances the somewhat paradoxical argument that the essence of London is that it has no essence.

Even as Ford writes his text, his subject is expanding around him and away from him: “whilst the pen is actually on my paper London is spreading itself from Kew towards Hounslow, towards Richmond, and towards Kingston, and on its other bounds towards how many other outlying places?”⁴⁵ His juxtaposition of the action of his pen, expanding the content of his study, with the expansion of the city itself, the subject of that study, not only registers the insistent contemporaneity of urban growth, but also hints at a dynamic relationship between the two processes. The unprecedented scale of the city, the result of this expansion, is one reason for its importance, one reason why it haunts modern consciousness, and one reason why it seems to demand a study such as that undertaken by Ford. But Ford’s study is itself increasing the content of the city, adding to its possible meanings and to the audience’s possible interpretations of, and interactions with, its spaces. His conception of the scale of London extends further than the suburban sprawl, however. He sees the products and practices of the city exported to the Empire, extending the urban vistas further still.

Highbury, I should say, is London, because the greater part of its inhabitants get their “supplies” from The Stores, and go for their intellectual stimulants to a place in Oxford Street. Thus the stores and the circulating library make London extend to Jubbulpore and to the married officers’ bungalows on the Irawaddy.⁴⁶

There is a tension here, of course. If the city is expanding, the ambit of Ford’s work is also expanding, and so too, he can argue, is the importance of his material and his subject. But this continual expansion, to the point where the parameters of the city

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.”⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹ 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 knowledge, for purposes of comparison, of other cities. He must have an avidity and sobriety of intellect, an untirable physique and a delicately tempered mind. These things are antitheses.⁵⁰

This is certainly a daunting checklist of characteristics, and it is a checklist that is used to define the shape of an impossibility, another of Ford’s fascinating absences. For Ford, to attempt to exhaustively render the infinite city is “to add a new morbidity to life.”⁵¹ Literary creation would be halted if the substance of the city were to be pursued in the detail which it seems to demand: “one would, quite literally, never get any for’arder if one stayed to inquire to the end of every tragi-comedy of which, on one’s road, one caught a glimpse.”⁵²

Ford’s London is not only potentially infinitely large, then, it is also capable of infinite subdivision. At what level of detail would the conscientious student of the city be able to call a halt and be satisfied? When could a survey achieve completion? Every stone of every building may hold information both fascinating and vital for the comprehensive surveyor. For Ford, resigned to the inevitable incompleteness of his work, “it is unpractical to wish that every bricklayer and mortar carrier who added his wall to the infinite number already existing should be able to sign his work as an artist signs his picture.”⁵³ Indeed, “if one stayed to think, one would like to know what kind of poor wretch set the fifth stone in the third tier of the Pyramid of Cheops.”⁵⁴ Such an

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.’”⁵⁵

Ford’s friend and occasional literary collaborator, Joseph Conrad, recalls struggling with his own aesthetic exigencies as he worked on *The Secret Agent* (1907), a novel which itself owes a debt to Ford’s investigations of the city.⁵⁶ His account of these experiences appears in his “Author’s Note,” prepared in 1920, years after the writing of the novel. Revisiting that struggle, Conrad recollects the way in which stray anecdotal fragments, oral and documentary, regarding anarchist activity in the city, gave rise to a state of visionary inspiration:

Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven’s frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world’s light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives.⁵⁷

The monstrosity of the town is specifically linked to its enormity and populousness. The sense of the notional space encompassed within this domain is inflated through the rhetorical comparison with the population of “some continents.” In this rhetoric Conrad does not refer to “many” stories or “many” settings, which would denote the merely vast, but to “*any* story” and “*any* setting,” which shifts the status of the city towards the infinite. As we have seen with Ford, this conception both compels inspiration and threatens to overwhelm all creative endeavour. The city’s size and variety permit countless stories, and yet “bury” anything that goes on within it. It is an environment that both reveals and conceals. Conrad’s “vision” gives way to a “period of deep and tentative meditations” in which “endless vistas” open before him in “various directions.”⁵⁸ “It would take years to find the right way! It seemed to take

years! ... It was a matter of about three days.”⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ “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.”⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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.”⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ 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.”⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷ 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 with—felt sometimes as if they would consume or asphyxiate him.”⁶⁸ Hyacinth’s crisis of impressions reproduces that of James himself.

Amongst James’s many methods, he places particular emphasis on what he terms “attentive exploration.”⁶⁹ Like George Sims’s correspondents, “observant travellers,”⁷⁰ he is engaged in something requiring rather more precision than would be needed for a simple stroll. The city is an active agency as long as it is juxtaposed with just the right sort of perceptive and imaginative mind. It makes an “assault” on an “imagination quick to react.”⁷¹ Again like Sims, however, James is keen to stress

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.”⁷²

What is involved here is more than the simple accumulation of details. For James, open-eyed walking, “attentive exploration,”⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ 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 London, a vast collection of things and events, is a city that is simply subject to human curiosity. James’s London is closer to that of Ford, in itself making an energetic and “urgent appeal” to the active imagination.⁷⁵ For Ford, “it is because in London there are so many things to see, so many anecdotes to be retailed, such a constant passing of material and human objects, that London holds us.”⁷⁶ As Ford attempts, however reluctantly, to consider the “soul” of London beyond the mere encyclopaedic accumulation of detail, so James suggests that the “mystic” streets may harbour irreducible mysteries, “dense categories of dark arcana,” that greet “a romantic curiosity.”⁷⁷ Like those of Sims, James’s investigations, reverse detective work, aim to point out, and therefore to increase, mysteries, rather than to solve or to reduce them.

George Ponderevo’s narrative of his life as a newcomer to London in H. G. Wells’s *Tono-Bungay* similarly maps the relationship between increasing experience

and increasing confusion. Coming to the capital for the first time as a young man of nineteen, London offers him a wider perspective than that of his parochial early youth. Yet amid a sense of expectant wonder, the city's limitlessness contains more than a hint of futility and redundancy: "the scene broadens out, becomes multitudinous and limitless, full of the sense of vast, irrelevant moment."⁷⁸ Attempting to evoke the scale of these experiences, it is a textual metaphor that comes to George's mind: "I could fill a book, I think, with a more or less imaginary account of how I came to apprehend London, how first in one aspect and then in another it grew in my mind."⁷⁹ George is, in fact, writing an autobiography, itself called *Tono-Bungay*, and he has already commented upon his habits as an unpractised author. He warns that the book will be "something of an agglomeration."⁸⁰ Wanting to include "all sorts of things," he admits that his "ideas of a novel ... are comprehensive rather than austere."⁸¹ Indeed, he lacks "any of the discipline to refrain and omit that I suppose the regular novel-writer acquires."⁸² In James and Conrad we have seen how the abilities to "refrain" and to "omit," to filter excessive material, may be vital to the writer of the city. In Sims and Ford we have seen ambition and reservation regarding the production of a "comprehensive" textual account of the city, and regarding the possibility of a "comprehensive" temperament that can adequately apprehend the urban environment. Certainly we can perceive that a (fictional) writer such as George Ponderevo, prone to "agglomeration" and drawn to comprehensiveness may well anticipate difficulties when he, and his subject, shifts to London.

George's appreciation of London consists of "accumulating impressions," leading eventually to what he feels is "a certain comprehensive perception of London, complex indeed, incurably indistinct in places, and yet in some way a whole that began with my first visit and is still being mellowed and enriched."⁸³ A

“comprehensive perception” it may be, but it is one which is “*incurably* indistinct in places,” and, if it is a “whole,” it is a whole which is, paradoxically, “still being mellowed and enriched,” and which must therefore still be incomplete. The contradictions that emerge from George’s superficially straightforward account of his perceptions of the city register the tensions implicit in establishing a comprehensive story of urban space.

George’s explorations of London, “driven by curiosity” and “a growing sense of loneliness,” lead to temperamental changes.⁸⁴ In “the London atmosphere, tasting freedom, tasting irresponsibility and the pull of new forces,” he feels a loss of “discipline.”⁸⁵ Formerly a committed student, the lure of London leads him to neglect his work: “London took hold of me, and Science which had been the universe, shrank back to the dimensions of tiresome little formulae compacted in a book.”⁸⁶ For George Ponderevo, wouldbe student of mathematics and chemistry, the contemplation of London specifically and precisely displaces any other intellectual activity, and even a universe can be cut down to size: “I found myself in the evenings poring over a map of London I had bought, instead of copying out lecture notes.”⁸⁷ As George’s explorations continue, perusing maps and walking the streets, he is confronted with a city that defies any attempt to establish a rational structure, except perhaps the structure of a cancer, “disproportionately large ... morbidly expanded ... abundant.”⁸⁸ He encounters “endless streets of undistinguished houses” and “inexplicable people who in a once fashionable phrase do not ‘exist,’” which threaten to overwhelm him with a sense of meaninglessness.⁸⁹ A comprehensive, accumulative writer will be lost indeed. And yet, as time passes, a registration of the scale of the city, and the concomitant registration of the vast expanse of streets he will never experience, fills him with a tremendous sense of potentiality. His expeditions are undertaken amid “a

vast impression of space and multitude and opportunity.”⁹⁰ 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.”⁹¹ 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.”⁹² 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.”⁹³ Adventures must “*infallibly*” arise in such endless streets, and this provides a redemptive aesthetic with which to address their superficial mundanity. A similar sentiment is expressed by Sherlock Holmes when Watson inquires about the nature of his latest case in “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle:” “amid the action and reaction of so dense a swarm of humanity, every possible combination of events may be expected to take place.”⁹⁴ Faced with these fantastic and infinite spaces, where all possible events must take place, a writer may feel liberated from the reductive and exhaustive methodology of the statistical survey, or may, alternatively, feel threatened by the excess of possibilities.

In his prologue to *Living London*, George R. Sims goes to a great deal of trouble to reiterate the success of his project before most of his audience will have had a chance to read it. The project’s unprecedented and unquestionable triumph, measured in terms of its exhaustiveness and comprehensiveness, becomes, for Sims, its most defining characteristic. Ford, conversely, insists upon his failure to live up to his own title, *The Soul of London*, at a similarly early stage. He attempts to requisition the very tentativeness of his approach as an alternative index of success, a means of demonstrating his recognition of the unique complexities of certain modern urban spaces. One writer seeks to gain credibility for his account through claiming sweeping success, the other, ironically, through acknowledging areas of inadequacy or even of failure. In Ford’s account, to recognise one’s inability to assemble all the features of the city in print is, in fact, to perceive one of the most important underlying features of the urban space that might escape the compiler of a mere urban encyclopaedia, that is, its defiance of such representation. “I have tried to make it anything rather than encyclopaedic, topographical, or archaeological,” says Ford of his project.⁹⁵ For Ford, wishing to claim that London is unique among cities in its complexity and in its

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.

Notes

¹ Ford Madox Ford, *The Soul of London: A Survey of a Modern City* (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), 15.

² Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (London: Penguin, 1977), 45.

³ Ford, 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵ See, among others, Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) and Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶ Malcolm Bradbury, "The Cities of Modernism," in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism* (London, Penguin, 1976), 179.

⁷ See, among others, Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1982); Graeme Gilloch *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); William Sharpe, *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Williams* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁸ Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 145.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹² Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), xiii.

¹³ Bradbury, 99.

¹⁴ Quoted in Bradbury, 99.

¹⁵ Lehan, 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁷ Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 36-7.

¹⁸ George R. Sims, ed., *Edwardian London* (London: Village Press, 1990), vol. 1, 6. The title is changed from *Living London* for this edition.

¹⁹ Ford, 3.

²⁰ Sims, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Arthur Machen, *The Three Impostors* (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), 50.

²⁵ Sims, 3.

²⁶ Seltzer, 37.

²⁷ Sims, 5.

²⁸ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1994), 160.

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- ²⁹ Ibid., 154.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 159.
- ³¹ Ibid., 160.
- ³² Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (London: J. M. Dent, 1996), 4.
- ³³ Ibid., 7.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 4.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 7.
- ³⁷ Sims, 3.
- ³⁸ Richard Lehan discusses several Sherlock Holmes stories from the perspective of their London situation, emphasising the interpolation of the spaces of London and spaces overseas, such as India and the United States (Lehan, 84-91).
- ³⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin, 1981), 191.
- ⁴⁰ Seltzer, 33.
- ⁴¹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 156.
- ⁴² Quoted in Bradbury, 99.
- ⁴³ Sims, 4.
- ⁴⁴ Alan G. Hill, "Introduction" to *The Soul of London: A Survey of a Modern City* (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), 19.
- ⁴⁵ Ford, 27-8.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.
- ⁴⁹ See, for example, John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 46-70.
- ⁵⁰ Ford, 18.
- ⁵¹ Ford, 43.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ See Hugh Epstein, "A Pier-Glass in the Cavern: The Construction of London in *The Secret Agent*," in Gene M. Moore, ed., *Conrad's Cities* (Amsterdam: Rodopi), 182-9.
- ⁵⁷ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (London: Penguin, 1990) 40-1.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 41.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² James, 48.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 33.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 36.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 41. Emphasis in original.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 37. Emphasis in original.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 48. Emphasis in original.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 157-8.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 33.
- ⁷⁰ Sims, 6.
- ⁷¹ James, 33.
- ⁷² Ibid., 47-8.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 33.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Ford, 84.
- ⁷⁷ James, 35.
- ⁷⁸ H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), 85.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.
- ⁸¹ Ibid.
- ⁸² Ibid., 6.

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