

Romantic poets and the poetic problem of representing london

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Writing on nineteenth-century London poetry, William Sharpe comments that 'Regardless of shared reference to sublimity, fog, of Babylonian blindness, each poet's London is different. Each time we read 'London' we have to begin again.' For poets in the late eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, London was a frustratingly difficult subject to capture, as it was a city that dealt in confusing excess and masses. Many of the Romantic poets of this period had a disdain for capitalism and its practices; something which London seemed corrupted by. As Michael Ferber comments, 'The Romantics looked everywhere – to the guilds of the Middle Ages, to the cities of Ancient Greece, to the tribes of 'noble savages' in America of Tahiti, to the clans of Scotland, even to the mysterious Gypsies – for models uncorrupted by capitalism and cash.' Yet for poets like Wordsworth and Blake, the city of London constituted a large part of their identity, and seemingly could not be dismissed or exiled from their poetry. If the distaste for capitalism and commercialism was not enough of a source of frustration in London, Sharpe also points out that not only did these poets experience a 'mind forg'd aversion' to the city, but also suffered from quite literal blindness, as 'not only was the city in its obstreperous plenitude and ceaseless mobility resistant to efforts to view it poetically, it was also quite simply hard to see, thank to fog, smoke, and darkness.' With its 'ceaseless motion', thick fog, and persistent growth and change, London was seemingly inimitable and indescribable. Wordsworth and Blake were somewhat forced to cast the faculty of vision aside in their poetry of London and treat it in different ways, in an attempt to capture at least an essence of their impression of it. Whilst Wordsworth's 'Prelude' attempts to encapsulate too much, and culminates

in frustration, despair, and distaste for the city, Blake's famous affection for working in 'particulars' awards his poetry some sense of the whole by capturing floating snippets of London life just as the individual would have apprehended it. Romantic poetry found an anti-sublime, or urban sublime in London, as it similarly presented an unmeasurable realm, yet attempts to apprehend or understand did not bring about any sense of greatness or joy. Ensnaring voice, sounds, and close, perceptible objects bring the poets close to gleaning an impression of London, yet both Wordsworth and Blake find themselves receding into death, or exile from the city which partially escapes imitation and can offer no comfort or greater knowledge as perhaps the 'Romantic' mountains and lakes are able to.

One of the most crucial features of London in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (and continuing today) is its perpetual movement and change. As Sharpe notes, 'Although poets often paused to stare at the city, whether from a window or in the midst of a crowded street, motion was what they saw; it was the city's key feature and its essential literary identity'. In addition to this, Richard Schwartz points out that 'the eighteenth-century Londoner was subjected to what would seem to be an intolerable amount (and volume) of street noise'. The confusion and discomfort leading from these conditions become apparent in the seventh book of Wordsworth's 'Prelude' where he apprehends Bartholomew Fair:

What a hell/For eyes and ears, what anarchy and din/Barbarian and infernal -
'tis a dream/ Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound

Wordsworth perceives the fair as offensive to every faculty, demonstrated by his fervent listing of 'colour, motion, shape, sight, sound'. In fact the motion and noise is so odious to him that he gives up on attempts to describe it, removing it instead to the realm of a 'dream', as his perceptions are so overwhelmed that they do not seem in line with reality. Blake, instead of trying to perceive the whole all at once, utilises a kind of tunnel vision in his poem 'London', which picks out particular sounds, and by merit of doing so, presents them as representative of the most important, or prominent sounds of the city:

In every cry of every man,/In every infant's cry of fear,/In every voice, in every ban,/The mind-forged manacles I hear

He begins here with a focus on one 'man's' cry, then attributing this to a collection of 'every voice', creating a sense of only hearing one or two cries, yet acknowledging that this is one as part of many 'cries' in the city. Blake does not only hear the simple cries either, but hears 'the mind-forged' manacles within the sound, making sense of the noise by building from pinpointed apprehensions in a way that Wordsworth does not in his writing of Bartholomew Fair. Blake also creates a kind of hierarchy of sense in the poem, writing:

But most, though midnight streets I hear/How the youthful Harlot's curse/Blasts the new-born infant's tear [13-15]

The 'Harlot's curse' has now risen above the other cries in the poem as the 'most' frequent, and presumably, by note of its 'blast', the loudest sound to

Blake. Again, the sound also has an action in the poem, blasting the 'new-born infant's tear', making sense of the sound rather than leaving it as meaningless noise. Deprived of vision in the foggy streets of London, Blake thus draws attention to minute sounds then 'zooms out' to reveal them as representative of something larger in the city, something also exemplified in his poem 'The Chimney-Sweeper':

A little black thing among the snow,/Crying! 'weep! weep!' in notes of woe!
[1-2]

The young chimney-sweep was a stark and common symbol of the woes of Industrial London, and here Blake again zooms in in order to zoom out by first presenting 'a little black thing', then placing it 'among the snow', perhaps the mass 'blank' that London presents in attempts to view it as a whole. In the singular voice of the chimney-sweep, Blake is able to convey a sense of shared London experience, as he touches on the abysmal practice of selling children into the trade, 'they are both gone up', [4] the darkness and soot of London, 'clothed me in the clothes of death', [7] and perhaps even the blind eyes of the church to these latter two miseries, 'they are gone to praise God and His priest and king' [.][11] Where London cannot be imitated by means of his own vision or voice, Blake instead appropriates the voices and 'cries' of those most representative of living London; the chimney-sweep, the prostitute, or the soldier, working in particulars in order to reach a fuller portrait of the city.

Wordsworth struggles in book seven of 'The Prelude' to mark out particulars in the same way as Blake, and instead attempts to categorise all that he immediately sees:

And every character of form and face:/The Swede, the Russian; from the
genial south,/The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote/America, the
hunter Indian; Moors,/Malays, Lascars, the Tartar and Chinese,/And negro
ladies in white muslin gowns. [VII, P]

At first, his impression, or imitation, works well – he manages to categorise the mass of people he apprehends into various groups in order to make sense of the scene to the reader. However, we see that quickly, and fairly early on, vision quickly becomes a tiresome and difficult mode of expression. The 'animating breeze' that had previously met him on entry to the city, transforms into 'straggling breezes', whilst the 'almost joyous' 'quick dance of colours, lights and forms' degenerates into 'a weary throng'. [VII, P]

Imitation and description through vision becomes very shaky at the point at which the narrator encounters the beggar:

'twas my chance/Abruptly to be smitten with the view/Of a blind beggar,
who, with upright face,/Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest/Wearing
a written paper to explain/The story of the man and who he was./My mind
did at this spectacle turn round/As with the might of waters [VII, P]

The lineation here presents a very fragmented moment of perception – working in an almost inverse way to Blake. He apprehends the beggar, then only slowly is able to pick out various specific features, most importantly

noting ' the story of the man and who he was' only last, whereas for Blake, this ' story' of the person of London is inherent throughout his poetry. In addition, the sight causes the narrator's mind to ' turn round' rather than engage with the figure. We see then that vision is not completely off-limits or totally obscured, but simply an unreliable and challenging form to use in attempts to encapsulate a sense of London.

Though Blake's London poetry is highly sonorous, it cannot said to be entirely so – he also makes use of the visual, though in an entirely different way to Wordsworth. Blake again makes use of his ' roads' into representation – that is to say, he approaches one particular feature in order to express something larger. For example:

the chimney-sweeper's cry/Every blackening church appals,/And the hapless soldier's sigh/Runs in blood down palace walls. [L, I&E]

Here, Blake makes the intangible ' sigh' and ' cry' tangible, and visual in doing so. Instead of trying to apprehend the people, landscapes, and societal structures of London all at once via a visual narration, Blake takes the sound of the sighing soldier and attaches it to the building, and thus institution of the Monarchy, uniting them all in one image to both create a simple impression, whilst also commenting in a naturalized way on the faults of the ruling body. He thus uses a kind of ' road' into creating a visual image by picking up on the immediately perceptible and apparent, which in this case are the sounds of London, connecting them, again, to larger structures.

Though Blake indeed appears to get closer to imitating the inimitable scope of London than Wordsworth, both poets recede away from the subject just as they come close to grasping or apprehending it, finding that the grim realities of the city and its confounding largeness thwart a complete and satisfying impression of a 'whole', as well as stunting the desire to find beauty in it. In the case of Wordsworth, as we see his attempt to capture everything fail, he finds himself retreating into obscurity in a last ditch effort to describe what he sees:

Here, fronts of houses, like a title-page,/With letters huge inscribed from top to toe;/Stationed above the door, like guardian saints,/There allegoric shapes, female or male [VII, P]

We see an amalgamation of similes here, as he begins to look to comparisons to familiar objects for comparison in 'a title page' and 'guardian saints'. He then rests on 'allegoric shapes', and later in the poem we find that 'all the shapes before [his] eyes became/A second-sight procession such as glides/Over still mountains, or appears in dreams'. [VII, P] The scene becomes so confusing to him that all the shapes recede into the 'mountains' and 'dreams' where he clearly finds comfort, no longer even situated in the city in which he feels such discomfort. The city has shut him out, and he must retreat into the country landscapes to end his feeling of 'oppression' in being unable to grasp the city as a whole. For Blake, there is no perceptible 'retreat' in the same sense as Wordsworth's, but instead the partially-formed portraits of London simply dissolve into meaninglessness and despair. As aforementioned, Blake builds up a highly successful

impression of London in lines 9-12 of 'London' through voices leading into buildings and institutions, yet this image is overcome by the final stanza:

But most, through midnight streets I hear/
How the youthful harlot's
curse/
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
/And blights with plagues the
marriage hearse. [13-16, L, I&E]

We see a generational handing down here, with both literal and linear regression from 'harlot' to 'infant', as the innocent child is blighted by its mother's venereal disease. Blake further regresses from disease to death, as he attributes the 'plague' to the 'marriage hearse', which should be a site of new beginnings and life. The poem suddenly falls quiet as the cries stop and death consumes the poem and its images of London, having almost grasped a full impression of it.

It would of course be difficult to discern whether a poet ever could objectively grasp London, which continues to flow with perpetual movement, and as Sharpe has asserted, is different to every poet. Indeed it seems that both Wordsworth and Blake found the city difficult to tackle and apprehend in poetry, as even in the glimpses they managed via alternate means to vision, the reward was only a clearer view of the age in which, as Margaret George describes, was a period 'when many sections of opinion were agreed that the age was increasingly evil'. The city's mass and perpetual dynamism evaded them, and even when caught, provided only a gratification in faithfully presenting grim realities in stark contrasts to the mountains and sublime landscapes often at the heart of Romantic poetry. It would perhaps

take until the late nineteenth- and early twentieth- century with the budding methods and style of modernism to apprehend the city's complexities head on.