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Place and Space in Nineteenth-Century Representations of Old London: The Thieves' House on West Street

Introduction

The proposed demolition in 1844 of the infamous 'Thieves House', a dilapidated structure situated on West Street in the notorious London slum of West Smithfield, was the focus of great public interest (figure 1). An unremarkable facade belied its strange internal construction, which incorporated trap doors, false walls and secret passages. These were described in detail in several journalistic accounts in which the house was imagined as a lair of thieves and murderers, fitted out for the commission and concealment of crime. In the days prior to and during its demolition, it became a sensation and was reportedly attended by thousands of curious spectators with lamp-lit tours for the likes of the Duke of Cambridge, 'parties moving in the higher walks of literature', and other high-ranking figures.¹ It seized the imagination of both authors and artists, becoming the inspiration for serialised fiction, three dramas, and a large body of drawings and prints. While the various representations of the house foreground the familiar 'slum' narratives of dereliction, degeneration and criminality, this article uncovers a counter-narrative of nostalgia and regret for the old city as a space shaped by the needs of its inhabitants, in contrast to the emerging metropolis designed for the circulation of labour and capital.

My account focuses on two main bodies of material. A collection of drawings by the amateur antiquarian Anthony Crosby intended to illustrate his history of the river Fleet combine to offer a topographically accurate account of the house and its environs. Alongside Crosby's representations, I look at the staging instructions included in melodrama scripts inspired by the house, which tell us how it might have been presented to the largely working-class audiences that frequented the East End and transpontine theatres for which the plays were intended. While the house's notoriety meant that none of the three scripts were able to gain a licence, they nevertheless offer a set of coordinates by which it is possible to determine how these playwrights wished to represent it. I also look at a fourth play by Samuel Atkyns, the author of one of the

Thieves' House scripts, which this time did gain a licence. Here, the author recast the house on West Street as another old London location – the bakery on Pudding Lane (by the 1840s, long lost, of course) in which the Great Fire of London began. It would appear that, transposed to the pre-fire city, the sinister 'Thieves' House was now considered as safely consigned to history. Yet, through this change of context, ATKYNS' conception of it as a touchstone of the past amid the disorienting effects of urban transformation is not only maintained, but also gains resonance, as consonances are drawn between the catastrophe of the Great Fire and the urban 'improvements' of ATKYNS' own time.

These two types of material – antiquarian topography and melodramatic stage spectacle – would perhaps not normally be considered side by side. However, by working across both media boundaries and those of elite versus popular culture, it is possible to identify a common set of viewpoints designed to create an immersive experience for the viewer/spectator. Panoramic views of old London, which appear across antiquarian and theatrical iterations, responded, I argue, to nostalgic yearning for a lost environment, while inviting comparison between the respective values of past and present. I also examine the 'divided' set, a relatively new theatrical configuration that invited audiences to imaginatively enter and move through an enclosed architectural structure, incorporating separate 'rooms' and multiple levels as if seen in cross section.² In the 'Thieves' House plays, the stratified structure of the divided set was used to dramatise the idea of descent into the London 'underworld', while the use of trap doors and sliding panels invoked the common identification of the old city as a labyrinth, or, more rightly, a maze, designed to cause confusion and bewilderment (an idea that is also evident in Crosby's work).³ By moving between these bodies of material, I offer unexpected readings of each. Popular melodrama emerges as at least as complex and multi-layered in its response to urban transformation as antiquarian topography, while analysis of Crosby's simple pencil sketches reveals his engagement with the kind of immersive strategies more commonly associated with theatre and with large-scale technically innovative entertainments such as the Panorama.

Given its refraction through a diverse range of forms, the 'Thieves' House offers a useful case study for thinking about the relationship between the arts in this period. The circulation of images from one art form to another is, of course, a familiar feature of

nineteenth-century visual culture. Martin Meisel's influential book *Realizations* of 1983 offered a comprehensive account of this practice and remains the only over-arching treatment of the subject. As his title suggests, Meisel's focus was on 'realisation', defined as the 'translation into a more real, that is more vivid, visual, physically present medium' of a given image.⁴ Typically, this meant a painting or print rendered in three dimensions on stage. Although the effect of realisation was to ratify the veracity of both the source image and its stage realisation, there is a sense in which the theatrical version, as the more 'physically present', can be said to trump the reality effect of two-dimensional images. Thus, Meisel's understanding of realisation anticipates in some respects the idea of 'remediation', as defined in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's work on new media, according to which each new technology presents itself as a 'refashioned and improved version' of the previous generation.⁵ However while realisation was certainly a dominant model in the period, it cannot be easily applied to this episode since responses to the Thieves' House appeared simultaneously and in unconnected circumstances. Instead, I want to suggest Henri Lefebvre's theory of space, as well as Gaston Bachelard's nostalgic writings on the house of dreams and cultural memory, as ways of conceptualising both the nineteenth-century city and its representation.⁶

In invoking Lefebvre, I adopt the approach taken by the cultural historian David Pike in his book on urban underworlds, *Metropolis on the Styx*.⁷ Pike's brief discussion of the Thieves' House focuses on literary rather than visual representation and is therefore not directly concerned with the repetition of motifs between the arts; however, his use of spatial theory has important repercussions for our understanding of this phenomenon. For Lefebvre, meaning is produced not only by fictive accounts, but also by the real spaces of the city. His framework is therefore useful in cases such as this one where there are for the most part no direct connections between individual iterations since it allows us to consider all of them, and indeed, the house itself, as aspects of a wider conceptualisation of urban space.

This also has implications for the way we think about immersive representations of the city in this period, be they Panoramas or stage simulacra of urban locations. Scholars have tended to think about this sort of popular realism as somehow at odds with the equally prevalent demand for signification and intense emotional experiences. As Meisel argued in *Realizations*, the nineteenth-century artist 'found himself between an

appetite for reality and a requirement for signification. Specification, individuation, autonomy of detail, and the look and feel of the thing itself pulled one way; while placement in a larger meaningful pattern, appealing to the moral sense and the understanding, pulled another'. This view of the 'double injunction' of nineteenth-century visual culture is implicit in readings that refer to the 'theatricalisation' of urban space, the process by which the increasingly unknowable metropolis was imaginatively made over and rendered legible according to the vivid hues and broad categories of popular entertainment.⁸ In Michael Booth's memorable phrase, '[t]he real achievement of the theater in this age of cities was to make theaters of the cities themselves'.⁹ Similarly, in her book *Victorian Babylon* Lynda Nead notes the theatricalising effect of gaslight, which, she writes, 'turned the London street into a stage [...] viewed by gas, streets seemed like sets, people became characters, and clothes were costumes'.¹⁰ More recently, in her work on stage adaptations of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Joanna Hofer-Robinson has explored the way in which audiences were invited to 'imaginatively map melodramatic associations on to the neighbouring built environment'.¹¹ As she demonstrates, Field Lane, immortalised as the location of Fagin's lair and a stone's throw from the Thieves' House, became imagined through the lens of Dickens' novel and particularly through theatrical adaptations that recreated those localities on stage.

According to this account, the city is made legible to its inhabitants, whether by acquiring the sort of feverish intensity that Nead describes or by association with a set of vivid characters and sensational narratives. Such a reading could certainly be applied to the Thieves' House, for contemporary reports were quick to associate it with eighteenth-century celebrity criminals such as Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild, figures already mediated through theatrical performances such as those adapted from Harrison Ainsworth's novel, *Jack Sheppard*. Moreover, while the house certainly lent itself to stage representation, it was felt that there was already something theatrical about it. In Robert Blemmell Schnebbelie's drawing, crowds enjoying the spectacle of its half-demolished state seem to be viewing a cross-section of the house in the manner of a divided set (figure 2), while lurid stories concerning the aperture into the Fleet Ditch, imagined to have facilitated the disposal of murder victims, recalled the well-hole scene in Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*, memorably pictured by George Cruikshank, whose engraving of it was realised on stage in theatrical adaptations (figure 3). Indeed, an account of the

'Thieves' House in the *Illustrated London News* described it as having 'as many trap doors as in the stage of a theatre'.¹²

However, while a dialectical relationship did sometimes operate between the real city and its stage simulacra in the manner described by Booth, Nead and Hofer-Robinson, my argument with regard to the Thieves' House departs from their accounts in that, rather than thinking in terms of an intractable modern metropolis rendered meaningful through a process of 'theatricalisation', I show that certain sites were already charged with significance. This may seem like a subtle distinction; however, it has important implications for our understanding of nineteenth-century popular realism, a mode that has traditionally been regarded as a somewhat crude commercial form in which the complexities of modern experience are simplified and sensationalised for consumption by a wide audience. In this view, the charged realism of melodrama is regarded as inferior to more canonical movements such as Realism in art or Naturalism in the theatre. Considered through the lens of spatial theory, melodramatic spectacle emerges not as an opportunistic response to popular demand for novelty and excess, but rather, as a reflection of complex contemporary attitudes to urban space in a period of accelerated change.

The Thieves' House

The Thieves' House was situated in West Street to the west of Smithfield Market. As the ancient site of execution for heretics, Smithfield had long enjoyed what Thomas Beames referred to as a 'melancholy notoriety'.¹³ The locality was also identified with Bartholemew Fair, suppressed in 1852 owing to its association with public disorder, and the famous livestock market, also abolished in the 1850s and noted by Thomas J. Maslen for its 'cruelty, filth, effluvia, pestilence, impiety, horrid language, danger, disgusting and shuddering sights'.¹⁴ Yet the connection between city and country that the market represented held an enduring appeal. As Thomas Miller wrote in 1852, a few years prior to its closure:

To our ears there is something in the lowing and bleating sounds that fill
Smithfield on a market-day that carries us away into the green quietude of the

country [...] They call up images of homesteads and thatched granges, far off amid the dreamy murmur of open fields¹⁵

These contrasting accounts may seem difficult to reconcile, but, as we shall see, the idea of West Smithfield as a parody of the rural, which in its degenerate state nevertheless calls to mind an idyllic pastoral vision, is embedded in dramatic and artistic representations.

West Street itself appears on eighteenth-century maps under the innocuous-sounding name of Chick Lane as a long, narrow road opening off the market at its eastern end and running west as far as Saffron Hill (figure 4). The street and its environs had long had a dubious reputation. A newspaper account of 1828, which purports to quote from a pamphlet by William Blizard of 1780, describes the area as follows:

The buildings in these parts constitute a sort of distinct town, or district, calculated for the reception of the darkest and most dangerous enemies to society; in which, when pursued for the commission of crimes, they easily conceal themselves, or from which, by the construction of the houses, they can as readily escape. The houses are divided from top to bottom, into many apartments, with doors of communication among them all, and also with the adjacent houses; some have two, others three, many four doors opening into different alleys.¹⁶

Charles Dickens chose nearby Field Lane as the location of Fagins' den in which Oliver is instructed on the arts of pickpocketing, while in his *London Street Views* of 1839, John Tallis writes that in the reign of George II the place was the 'terror of the whole city'.¹⁷ In his *Vestiges of Old London*, written in 1851, John Wykeham Archer framed his account of the area as an expedition into a strange and disorienting territory. First describing the 'debatable land' bordering the 'unclean region', he invites the reader to follow him imaginatively into the slum proper:

diving among the sinuosities of a labyrinth of narrow lanes and alleys, pent thoroughfares, which have no title in the street nomenclature, blind passages, ways which lead through tenements ruined and deserted, and over the roofs of half

buried hovels, stumbling among the decaying timbers of houses, roofless, and shattered, but still continuing to serve as roosting places for the vestiges of humanity that people this forlorn region, amid filth indescribable, and the accumulated garbage and congestion of all imaginable and unimaginable odours, we approach the innermost parts of the land, and espy somewhat of its murky wonders.¹⁸

Archer's account of West Smithfield is typical of the genre of slum writing in that the area is described as a labyrinth, a disorienting network of narrow alleys and passageways. Its dead ends contrasted with the wide roads then being laid out as the arterial thoroughfares of the modern metropolis in which the circulation of goods and labour were paramount. The whole of West Street and much of the surrounding area was destroyed, starting in 1844, in preparation for the building of Farringdon Road, which joined Clerkenwell to the north with Holborn to the south. While the improvements were intended primarily to facilitate the circulation of traffic in the city, it was also argued that, in the interests of hygiene, progress and respectability, it would do well to demolish the whole area by driving a road through it and relocating the inhabitants.¹⁹

Of all the houses on West Street, the one that attracted particular attention was that known as the 'Thieves' House', or sometimes the 'murder house', or the 'old House on West Street'. If West Street could be thought to lie at the centre of a maze, the Thieves' House was a maze within a maze. In the days leading up to its demolition, an article in *The Times* described it in detail, and a further piece appeared a fortnight later in the *Illustrated London News*.²⁰ These accounts described its strange interior construction, reportedly a network of secret passages and chambers, trap doors, and sliding panels. It had contraptions, shoots, and spouts, which commentators supposed were designed for the disposal of stolen property, and several exits by which an individual could escape into the alleys and courts surrounding the house. The missionary Andrew Provan was particularly taken with the staircase, which, he wrote, was 'very peculiar, scarcely to be described'. Though a pursuing policeman might be only a few steps behind a fleeing criminal, once inside the house, a pivoted door worked in such a way that the former, though believing himself to be hot on the heels of his quarry, would suddenly find himself back in the room in which he had started. While the policeman scratched his head, the fleeing criminal could escape through an aperture made in the attic leading to

an adjacent house, which, according to Provan, contained twenty-four rooms with four separate staircases, thus ensuring the escapee's getaway.²¹

By far the most fascinating aspect of the house was its situation on the banks of the Fleet River, known by this time as the Fleet Ditch and little more than an open sewer. While most of it ran underground to the Thames, the few yards that traversed West Street were as yet above ground, as can be seen on Rocque's map of London (see figure 4). The demolition of the house entailed the disappearance of this remaining stretch of the river, for the 'improvements' involved the levelling of the whole area so that Farringdon Road now runs directly along its course, twenty-five feet above it. An aperture in the cellar of the house was said to open directly onto the Fleet Ditch. Its purpose, according to contemporary accounts, was to facilitate the disposal of dead bodies, but it was also reported that a wooden plank could be thrown across it in such a way as to provide a means of escape for fleeing criminals. An illustration in Thomas Peckett Prest's serialisation *The Old House on West Street; or, London in the Last Century* imagines the 'murder bridge', while a topographical drawing by Robert Blemmell Schnebbelie showing the back of the house with children playing on a makeshift wooden bridge made out of a plank may offer a less sensational view of this feature (figures 5 and 6).

Accounts of the house generally associated it with notorious criminals and highwaymen of the previous century. Drawings by Schnebbelie, for instance, refer to it as having belonged to Jonathan Wild, although there was no evidence to support this idea (see figures 1, 2 and 6), and at the time of its purchase for the building of the new street it was a cheap lodging house in which, like many others in the locality, dozens of people shared each room. Having restated the supposed notorious associations of the house, the author of the *Times* article nevertheless warned against literary treatments on the grounds that they would inevitably seek to glorify crime: 'We trust that the curiosity which these dens of infamy have excited will not be turned to account by any of those horror-mongers, who [...] make heroes out of house breakers and highwaymen'.²²

This warning notwithstanding, several works of fiction inspired by the house appeared in the days and months following its demolition. Peckett Prest's serialised novel featuring illustrations of the house, mentioned above, first appeared in the autumn of

1844. G. W. M. Reynolds' *Mysteries of London*, which opened with a scene in the house, began publication the same year. Its theatrical potential was quickly recognised by playwrights, for three dramas were written and submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office within days of its demolition: William Leman Rede's, *The Old House of West Street* was intended for the transpontine Surrey Theatre, Samuel Atkyns' *The Thieves House! Or the Murder-Cellar of the Fleet Ditch* was written for performance at the Royal Albert Saloon on Shepherdess Walk, and George Dibdin Pitt's version, *The Murder House or the Cheats of Chick Lane*, was meant for the Britannia Saloon, another East End theatre.²³ None of these were granted a license by the Lord Chamberlain, however, probably owing to the association of the subject matter with 'Jack Sheppardism'. An article in *The Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times*, referred to Leman Rede's play:

We are not informed of the precise reason which has operated with that functionary in refusing to sanction the production of the piece, and can only conjecture it to have been from an exceedingly sensitive regard for the morals of the public. The rare and striking pictures of villany and crime which may have been suggested to the mind of the dramatist by the contemplation of his subject, have resulted, perhaps, in some stirring scenes which the licenser, in his profound knowledge of human nature, deems too dangerous for stage representation. It is possible, likewise, that he may regard the play-going population around the Surrey as peculiarly susceptible to the charms of a new "Jack Sheppard" sort of drama²⁴

As was customary, theatrical productions likely to attract working-class spectators were subject to more stringent control than fictional treatments aimed at a literate audience.

As Pike has demonstrated, Lefebvre's spatial theory offers a useful method for conceptualising the nineteenth-century city, converging, as it does, with the material conditions of the metropolis. According to the spatial triad identified by Lefebvre, 'conceived space' is associated with maps, urban planning, and the 'institutional apparatuses of power', and thus with the workaday 'aboveground' of the nineteenth-century metropolis. His category of 'perceived space' is defined as that which is produced by the body and determined by its natural rhythms, as well as by its intrinsic understanding of up and down, left and right, inside and outside. In Lefebvre's account,

industrial capitalism is responsible for the decorporealization of space and an urban environment designed for the circulation of commodities rather than in response to the needs of the body. As far as some interpretations are concerned, perceived space alone has the potential to subvert the dominant ideology since to reassert those needs is to offer resistance to authority.

For Pike, however, the 'Thieves' House exemplifies Lefebvre's third category of 'lived space', which is understood through an emotional register and often incorporates myth, symbol, imagination and cultural memory. As Pike argues, the 'underworld' locations of the city – sites that were literally subterranean, such as the homeless encampments of the Adelphi arches, as well as those that were merely imagined as such – correspond to this category. With its sinister cellar and trap door into the Fleet, the Thieves' House represents the convergence of literal and figurative underworlds that Pike identifies as typical of such spaces, which, in his account, represent the 'unconscious' of the modern city, 'the place to which everyone, everything, and every place posing a problem or no longer useful to it is relegated'.²⁵

For Pike, the Thieves' House does not constitute a 'coherent space of otherness or opposition' since it merely divulges in coded form the problems of the 'aboveground'.²⁶ However, I argue that, in its subtext of nostalgic yearning for an older way of life, it should be seen a site of resistance to the dominant narrative of progress and modernity. The fascination with slums in general was partly owing to the sense that they provided a point of connection to the past, and especially to the pre-fire city. In *The Rookeries of London*, Beames referred to modern slums as 'monuments of this olden time' and 'sad heralds of the past'.²⁷ Their connection to the old city was signalled not only by their decayed architectural grandeur, but also by the fanciful names of some slum locations, redolent of the age of chivalry – 'Villiers, Dorset, Buckingham, Norfolk'.²⁸ The supposed great age of the Thieves' House lay at the heart of its appeal. Some accounts claimed that it dated to Tudor times, though the Agas Map of London in the 1560s shows no houses on that part of Chick Lane and Provan's suggestion that it, and the house with which it communicated via a passageway in the attic, had been built by a man named McWaulen, or McWelland, 'chief of a tribe of Gypsies', in 1683 may be closer to the truth.²⁹ The list of objects that were reportedly found in the house is a testament to popular perception of it as a relic of an older, more glamorous time. Newspapers related the discovery of an

‘old, rusty, nearly worn-out knife, the blade of which bore the name of “Rippam,” and on the handle “J. Wilde.”’ (this last detail, a reference to the eighteenth-century thief-taker and master criminal, Jonathan Wild), apparently of ‘very peculiar make, and evidently of ancient manufacture’.³⁰ A butchers’ steel, a type of weapon, bearing the inscription ‘Benjamin Turtell, July 19, 1787’ was also said to have been found in the house, along with two human skeletons supposedly found in the cellar. Provan doubted the veracity of the latter report, but both Atkyns and Dibdin Pitt made much of this detail in their melodramas, in which the other found objects also feature.³¹

In many respects, the objects listed – rusted weapons and old bones – correspond to Pike’s identification of the underworld as a space redolent of violence and criminality, the locus of all that is suppressed or denied in the aboveground. However, as precious relics of the past, they could also offer a reassuring connection with the city’s history. The appeal of the house was, as I have mentioned, in large part owing to its relationship to the Fleet River and I would argue that this, too, offered a reassuring sense of continuity with the past. Presented in drama and fiction as the dank repository of the city’s brutalised victims, the Fleet Ditch may, like the house itself, be understood as a typical underworld space, but it also functioned as a memorial to the old city. While streets, buildings and landmarks may change, we imagine that features such as rivers remain the same, or at least adhere to a slower rate of transformation. Behind the tone of horrified fascination, accounts of the river, or the few yards of it that remained above ground next to the Thieves’ House, reveal nostalgia for old London and a sense that even in its degraded state the Fleet, as an aspect of the original topography of the city, could offer a reassuring connection not just to the past, but also to nature.

The old city may have signified obsolescence, but it also represented an environment that had grown and evolved in response to the physical and social needs of its inhabitants. Indeed, the word ‘rookery’, commonly applied to such locations, though ostensibly a derogatory term for a densely inhabited slum, suggests just such a subtext. Denoting an untidy, over-populated environment, it is nevertheless suggestive of an organic habitation created by and for its residents in contra-distinction to the rationally designed modern city. Other organic metaphors were also in use. Beames, writing of the rookery-to-end-all-rookeries, St Giles, described it as a ‘honeycomb, perforated by a number of courts and blind alleys, *culs de sac*, without any outlet other than the

entrance'.³² Timbs, similarly referred to St Giles as 'one dense mass of houses, through which curved narrow tortuous lanes, from which again diverged close courts—one great mass, as if the houses had originally been one block of stone, eaten by slugs into numberless small chambers and connecting passages'.³³

Such metaphors call to mind Gaston Bachelard's writings on nests and other such shelters in *The Poetics of Space* as primal images rooted in myth and cultural memory and offering consolation in an age of rapid transformation.³⁴ In their evocation of an organic habitation, evolved in response to both its human residents and to the natural environment, they also suggest the most fundamental of Lefebvre's spatial categories, perceived space, that which is produced by the body and which therefore has the potential to subvert the dominant ideology. The careful reconstructions of the 'Thieves' House with which I am concerned, whether presented in topographical drawings or on stage, speak to a nostalgic yearning for the past that was being swept away, offering counter narratives that, through telling contrasts between past and present, implicitly critiqued the values of the new city.

In arguing that ostensibly derogatory descriptions and representations of the 'Thieves' House contain embedded within them other narratives that run counter to the author's apparent aims, my argument accords with those made by Seth Koven, Richard Kirkland and other scholars of nineteenth-century slums and 'slumming'. Koven, for instance, is concerned with the 'attraction of repulsion' that underpinned 'slumming' as an elite activity. Noting the fascinated tone of much slum writing, he explores how these localities offered the potential for sexual freedom to 'respectable' commentators, the forced intimacy of life in such places offering a tantalizing glimpse of what was lost by adherence to their own highly regulated habits. Similarly, Kirkland argues that while the St Giles rookery stood for 'the residual, the decaying and the uselessly medieval', it also signified resistance to the dominant metropolitan narrative of progress and capitalism.³⁵ In what follows, I consider the counter-narratives embedded in two contrasting viewpoints, the panoramic mode and the divided set. The former recreated the old city in loving detail, inviting a comparison with the new, which, despite often being presented in ironical tones, reveals nostalgic longing for what had been lost. The divided set, the device used to represent the 'Thieves' House itself on stage, invited audiences to plunge

into its maze-like structure. While drawing on the typical underworld associations of violence and irrationality, this, too, offered a reassuring sense of historical continuity.

‘Reconstruct it in your imagination [...] Then compare’: The Panoramic Mode

Most of the work carried out on panoramas of nineteenth-century London has focused on the 360-degree paintings in the round, of which Thomas Hornor’s panorama of London from the top of St Paul’s cathedral shown at the Colosseum in Regent’s Park is a famous example (figure 7). As an image of the modern metropolis executed from a commanding viewpoint and showing London as it would have appeared under conditions of preternatural clarity, scholars have tended to consider it as an attempt to gloss over the contradictions and shapelessness of the modern city, lending it a coherence that it did not in reality possess. For instance, Deborah Epstein Nord argues that the ‘bird’s-eye view from St. Paul’s [...] worked to obscure the problem of poverty that was built into the very structure of the modern city’.³⁶ The panorama is thus most often seen as an aspect of Lefebvre’s category of conceived space, an instrument of ideology offering an illusory sense of mastery over the city, rendering by sleight of hand the fragmented and provisional cityscape into a coherent whole.

There has been much less attention to panoramic images of old London, although they were quite common throughout the century. The production of *Henry VIII* at Covent Garden in 1831 incorporated a moving panorama of old London by the Grieve family of stage designers assisted by A. W. N. Pugin. Charles Kean’s *Henry VIII* at the Princess’s theatre in 1855 also included a ‘Grand Moving Panorama Representing London in the Reign of Henry the Eighth’, as did Henry Irving’s 1893 Lyceum production (designed by Henry Hawes Craven).³⁷ Unlike 360-degree paintings such as Horner’s, moving panoramas were long scenes that were unrolled to simulate the effect of a journey through the city. Often, as in the examples cited above, they were intended to create the sensation that the spectator is sailing down the River Thames. While these were frequently incorporated into theatrical productions, they were also presented as stand-alone entertainments. Clarkson Stanfield’s view of ‘London in 1590, comprising its Old Bridge covered with Houses, Old St. Pauls’ and many other objects equally curious’, formed part of his Poecilorama exhibition at the Egyptian Hall in 1826.³⁸ William James Lucas’ play *The Traitor’s Gate; or the Tower of London in 1553*, performed at the Royal

Pavilion theatre in 1834, won praise for its panorama of the sixteenth-century city, while the Adelphi production of *Jack Sheppard* in 1839 incorporated a moving ‘diorama’ of eighteenth-century London from the Old Bailey to Tyburn. A panorama of *London in the Olden Time* appeared as a stand-alone spectacle at the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens in 1844 (figure 8) and a full-scale model of an old London street with houses that visitors could enter featured as an attraction at the International Health Exhibition in South Kensington in 1884. Although in this last example visitors were ostensibly invited to consider the superior sanitation and convenience of the modern city, its popularity is at least as indicative of the on-going fascination that the old city held for modern spectators.

On a smaller scale, Anthony Crosby’s panoramic view of Clerkenwell, made from the roof of the ‘Thieves’ House fulfils a similar need to memorialise a part of the city that was about to disappear forever (figure 9). This drawing is part of a collection of sketches, diagrams and notes by Crosby held by the London Metropolitan Archives. Made between the late 1830s and 1844, they were intended to illustrate his history of the River Fleet. Crosby was not a professional artist; indeed, it appears that he may have worked as a solicitor on behalf of an earlier (unrealised) ‘improvements’ plan for a Holborn Viaduct, a short distance from West Street, and his drawings are often made on the reverse of legal letters dealing with wills and bequests, or, as in one case, on the back of a shopping list. Crosby’s book was left uncompleted when he died; however, his drawings did have an afterlife, for some of them were subsequently engraved and used to illustrate Walter Thornbury’s *Old and New London: A Narrative of its History, its People and its Places* of 1873, John Ashton’s *The Fleet, its River, Prisons, and Marriages* of 1888, and, in the twentieth century, Ellic Howe’s *A Short Guide to the Fleet River* of 1955.

Many of Crosby’s drawings of the house were made in the days leading up to its demolition. It is therefore possible to place him among the fascinated crowd of spectators who visited the site during that time. According to some accounts, the locals took advantage of public interest by charging fees for access to the best viewpoints. The authorities soon put a stop to their entrepreneurship, but one wonders how many of those who sought access to the house were artists, whether professionals or amateurs like Crosby.³⁹ This drawing is taken from the roof of the ‘Thieves’ House; the house, the street, the River Fleet, which may be seen flowing between the houses in the centre of

the composition, and, indeed, nearly the whole urban landscape that can be seen from this viewpoint was about to be demolished and levelled, the entire cityscape lost to history. Along the top, Crosby has written ‘View of the Valley of the River Fleet from the chimney of No. ... in West Street looking toward the North April 29th 1841’, presumably intending to fill in the house number at some future date (it was actually number 3). Crosby’s pencilled annotations list local landmarks, such as St Peter’s Saffron Hill, the Sessions House, St James Clerkenwell, the Fleet River, the Workhouse of St Sepulchre Without, and Galloway’s engineers. In Atkins’ play manuscript, intended for the Royal Albert Saloon in East London, the same panoramic view of the Fleet valley is evoked. Looking out of the window from the garret of the adjoining Red Lion tavern, two characters describe the scene, their commentary taking the form of a sardonic appreciation of landscape scenery: ‘Oh beautiful – right over the knackers yard and the roofs of the houses into Saffron Hill – a grand prospect’.

Atkins’ play, like all of those written about the house, is set in the eighteenth century. Yet, of course, the nineteenth-century audience (had they been given a chance to see the play) would have been conscious of living in a very different city to the one represented on stage. While the description of the view as articulated in the play manuscript stresses its ordinariness, the mere fact that it is described with accuracy and in considerable detail suggests another agenda. For nineteenth-century audiences, aware that, like so many old localities, the scene described was about to disappear forever, their amusement is likely to have been mixed with a sense of nostalgic regret. Similarly, when one of Atkins’ villains claims that, amid the bellowing cows, baaing sheep, and squeaking pigs of the Smithfield livestock market, ‘you would almost fancy yourself in a country village’, his words are meant ironically and designed to elicit laughter.⁴⁰ Yet it was already known that the market, too, would soon be gone forever, and filthy and insalubrious as Miller’s account cited above suggests, it nevertheless represented a surviving connection not only to the city’s past but also to the countryside. This sort of double meaning is also detectable in artistic responses. A drawing by Frederick Napoleon Shepherd, for instance, shows ragged children beside the Fleet ditch just behind the ‘Thieves’ House in an image that speaks of poverty and the threat of miasma-borne disease, but which nevertheless draws attention to the existence of a grassy river bank near the centre of the metropolis (figure 10). Similarly, J. Maund’s *Chick Lane*, which shows the entrance to West Street looking east, features a motif redolent of poverty and degeneration in the

group of children playing on a dust heap in the foreground, but at the same time emphasises the village-like sociability of the area in the groups of chatting figures (figure 11).

While Atkyn's play was denied a license, as I discuss below, the playwright used the ideas developed in that script in a different production, also devoted to the subject of old London: *The Fire of London; or the Baker's Daughter*. The themes of the play are very similar to those of *The Thieves' House*, with some lines reproduced word for word. As with the earlier manuscript, the action takes place in a sinister, uncanny house that creates a vague unease in its inhabitants. Here, however, the 'Thieves' House in West Street becomes the bakery in Pudding Lane in which the Great Fire is known to have begun. Performed at the Royal Albert Saloon in 1849, the play opened with a view of 'London Before the Great Fire from the Southwarke side of the River Thames' (sic). The characters present in that first scene, religious zealots who deliberately set fire to the city the very next day, admire the view of the riverside in an implicit invitation to the audience to appreciate its beauty. As one of the plotters observes the panorama, declaring, 'The sun shines full upon London for the last time – there is light enough upon the great city – but there will be a redder and a brighter light upon it – soon', one of his co-conspirator replies:

And yet I would fain see it once more as I beheld it this morn when day arose upon it for the last time – It looked so beautiful that my heart smote me, and tears started to my eyes – to think that those goodly habitations, those towers, temples halls and palaces, should so soon be levelled with the dust – But away with thoughts like these – we have received our commission from heaven [...] Yes, London shall fall!⁴¹

Panoramic views of the old city naturally invited comparison with the contemporary environment. While, in some cases, viewers were encouraged to see in this imaginative juxtaposition a narrative of progress, a parallel interpretation also had currency. To take an example from French culture, which was well-known in Britain in translation and also through stage adaptations, Victor Hugo's description of fifteenth-century Paris from the top of Notre Dame cathedral in his novel *Notre Dame de Paris* of 1831 invited the reader to 'reconstruct it in your imagination [...]'. 'Then compare'.⁴²

Where the Paris of the late middle ages is suggested through organic and natural metaphors – a forest, a beehive, petrified waves – the city of the 1830s possesses ‘that wealth of lines, that opulence of detail, that diversity of aspect, that somehow grandiose simplicity and unexpected beauty which characterize a draught-board’.⁴³ Dilapidated and disorganised though it may seem from the vantage point of Notre Dame, the medieval city is humane and legible compared with the charmless utilitarian grid of the modern metropolis.

The influence in Britain of Hugo’s novel of old Paris and, in particular, his invitation to imaginatively compare the city of the past with the modern urban environment, is evidenced by Harrison Ainsworth’s hugely popular serial *The Tower of London*, which presented the reader with the same locations in 1553 and 1840 in paired illustrations by George Cruikshank. In his book *Contrasts* of 1836, the architect and sometime Covent Garden set designer A. W. N. Pugin had similarly juxtaposed the modern against the old to the clear detriment of the former.⁴⁴ As these examples show, the pre-Fire city was frequently eulogised during a period in which many relics of old London were being demolished in the name of progress. While slum areas were ostensibly deplored, then, their association with history and continuity nevertheless prompted narratives of nostalgia, even if these were sometimes expressed through irony, as in the case of Atkyns’ reference to the ‘grand prospect’ of the Fleet valley as seen from the ‘Thieves’ House.

‘Wheels within wheels and walls within walls’

The urge to map does not, then, merely reflect the need for mastery over the changing urban environment, as is often argued. It might also indicate yearning for the city of myth and memory that was fast disappearing. While Crosby’s panoramic drawings show an all-encompassing view, he sometimes places the spectator at the centre of the mysterious labyrinth of narrow streets and courts, including maps, diagrams and ‘close-up’ views, which enable the viewer to imaginatively reconstruct the locality. For instance, his drawing of *Old Brewhouse Yard* (figure 12) shows the building that lay behind the ‘Thieves’ House. Known in the 1840s as the Old Red Lion public house, it was apparently of an age with that structure, with which it communicated via an aperture in the roof, a detail that proved irresistible to melodramatists. Crosby has labelled the

drawing 'South Front of an Old House in Old Brewhouse Yard, as seen from under the Gateway in West Street. It was formerly a Public House. April 19. 1841'. By including the timber ceiling of the gateway, he creates a strong sensation for the viewer of what it might feel like to occupy that threshold between the public space of the street and the more uncertain territory of the courtyard beyond. Spaces like this were a feature of older parts of the city and writers and journalists often commented on the ambiguity of public versus private domains, with Provan, for instance, remarking on the unspeakable scenes witnessed in this very court in front of the lodging house, 'in the middle of the day in the public street'.⁴⁵ Below, he has included a facsimile of the rather uninviting sign above the door, 'GOOD LODGINGS For TRAVELERS By' in the manner of a 'close up', and also a map to show the relationship of the inn and courtyard to the street front. In another of his drawings dated 1836 we see the gateway, a darkened entrance, as viewed from the street, where it is to the left of the triangular gabled 'Thieves' House (figure 13).

The drawings thus combine to offer a set of coordinates from which it is possible to reconstruct a three-dimensional environment, inviting the viewer to imaginatively experience a type of space that was recognisably an aspect of the communal life and sociability of the old city and which was then giving place to a modern metropolis in which the distinctions between public and private were more sharply delineated. Dramatic responses to the house show a similar preoccupation with the labyrinthine spaces of the West Street locality. The versions intended for East End theatres by Atkyns and Dibdin Pitt referred to specific streets and alleys that would have been known to those familiar with West Street, in this way grounding the action within the real 'Thieves' House and memorialising a soon to be lost location.

Crosby's fascination with the intricate layout of the courts and alleys of West Street is in keeping with a more general conception of the slum as a labyrinth, an irrational space that follows the logic of nightmares. This idea was explored in theatrical representations through the device of the divided set, which all three playwrights proposed in their play manuscripts. Using this configuration, multiple rooms and levels, as well as the infamous aperture into the Fleet Ditch, could be shown in cross-section. This format was also popular in graphic representations; indeed, a print by Shepherd that appeared on the cover of the *Poor Man's Guardian* in 1847 presents a cross-section of a dwelling in nearby Field Lane and may give some idea of how the house would have

appeared on stage (figure 14). In Atkins' script for the Royal Albert Saloon, the staging directions indicate a ground floor above the cellar, connected by a trap door and practicable stairs. This was intended to occupy two thirds of the stage, while, as the script indicates, 'the remaining portion shews the Fleet Ditch and the houses and buildings contiguous. [...] Practicable window or outlet in the side of the piece of the cellar L', this last detail referring to another trap door, this time giving onto the River Fleet. This perspective, which offered a privileged view of the mysterious interior of the house, would not have been possible in real life, except, perhaps, during the demolition of the 'Thieves' House as represented in figure 2, and it is possible that connections may be made between the familiarity of such sights in the early nineteenth century and the advent of the divided set. However, I want to explore the other meanings generated by this configuration, not only the complex connotations of the labyrinth, but also the associations of descent articulated through its stratified structure.

In all the theatrical treatments, divided sets consist of a complex arrangement of connected spaces, which not only allow for business with trap doors and secret passages as the characters play tricks on each other, become lost, or (in Dibdin Pitt's version) spring unexpectedly from beneath the floor boards claiming to have found their way through the house via the space between floor and ceiling, but also set the scene for the inhabitants' unease and disorientation. All of the play manuscripts describe the house as a mysterious structure, beyond the comprehension of even the thieves that live there. In Dibdin Pitt's script, for instance, one of the inhabitants attempts a search of the house but admits defeat, describing it as having 'wheels within wheels and walls within walls'. As Anthony Vidler has explored in his book *The Architectural Uncanny*, disorientation is a feature of the uncanny or haunted house. Thus, the 'Thieves' House may be seen as encoding, as in an image of nightmare, the dislocation experienced in the modern city.⁴⁶

Vidler also cites the sense of a malign alien presence as a familiar feature of the uncanny house, in which it symbolises the threat to security engendered by modernity. This idea, too, is manifested in various ways in the play manuscripts.⁴⁷ In Leman Rede's version, for instance, an unpleasant odour permeates the house, a 'faint sulphurous smell' of unknown origin. However, Freud's spatial model of the uncanny as something that should remain buried, but which nevertheless rises to the surface, is particularly fitting to the multi-levelled structure of the 'Thieves' House as represented on stage, especially

since, as Kate Flint has written, we tend to picture depth in the mind's eye as strata seen from the side.⁴⁸ In this account, as Vidler writes, 'space is assumed to hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins, all the objects of fear and phobia that have returned with such insistency to haunt the imaginations of those who have tried to stake out spaces to protect their health and happiness'.⁴⁹ In all three plays, the house is presented as the subconscious of the 'aboveground', a space of primal fears returning to unsettle the optimism of the modernisation project. Its subterranean levels are in each case the epicentre of its violence and irrationality, the loci of 'primitive' beliefs in ghosts and the supernatural. In Dibdin Pitt's play, for instance, the thieves, trapped in the cellar, are terrorised by the spectres of the victims whose bodies have been disposed of there.

The divided set thus drew on the rich associations of descent, which could signify a return to the anarchic city of the past or a resurgence of irrational human impulses. Indeed, the Fleet River functions in all of the plays as an even deeper level, accessed via some sort of aperture in the cellar. The action of all three dramas culminates with scenes in which characters fall or are pushed into it, a final descent visualised through the device of the divided set. Considered with regard to theories of the uncanny, then, the house is a figure – either for a new set of modern anxieties, the alienation and dislocation that city dwellers were as yet hardly able to articulate – or for the dark side of progress.

Bachelard's conception of the 'ultra-cellar', however, offers a more ambivalent interpretation. In *The Poetics of Space*, the cellar is still the locus of irrational fears and of primitive 'subterranean forces', a place that, even as street lighting was supposedly rendering the city safer and more knowable, remained ever dark.⁵⁰ Yet, as Vidler notes, Bachelard's meditations on spaces such as cellars and attics represent early twentieth-century nostalgia for the house of memory or legend in a time of rapid change and thus may offer a way in to understanding the subtext of regret in responses to the 'Thieves' House in an earlier period of radical urban transformation.⁵¹ While subterranean locations certainly carried sinister connotations, they could also offer a sense of connectedness to the past and could thus be a source of solace to the city dweller. As Flint has argued, archaeological finds unearthed during the various modernisation projects revealed hidden seams of Roman artefacts and ancient forests, suggesting a conception of history as layered so that to descend through space might be imagined as a journey back in time.⁵² The objects and human remains supposedly unearthed from the

cellar of the real 'Thieves' House thus appear on stage as fascinating relics of a lost world. The sensational criminal histories that were spun around these found objects to some extent played to the underworld associations already described. Indeed, as Flint has shown, excavation work revealed civilization as a fragile veneer beneath which lay a violent and irrational past.⁵³ However, as she also argues, what lies beneath was not merely to be feared, since archaeology provided consolation by affirming a sense of connectedness to the past in the face of unprecedented historical rupture. Moving from the visualisation of history as layered to conceptions of mind and memory, Flint writes:

the concern with what lies underneath the city, and the desire to make it visible, is intimately connected to the ways in which memory is figured within the developing discourses of Victorian psychology. In both cases, what is at stake is a desire not just to render the invisible present to the eye, and hence to diminish the sense of threat that is anxiously present in that which cannot be seen, but a desire to restore a sense of order, of sequentiality.⁵⁴

The Fleet might be presented as a pestilential ditch and a source of contagion in need of eradication, but at the same time it, too, was a link to the past and a time when West Smithfield would have been a semi-rural riverside community. Archaeological finds attested to the Fleet having been navigable at one time. Several drawings in the Crosby collection imagine it as it apparently once was, teeming with sailing vessels (figure 15). Indeed, Crosby actually descended into the sewer at the site of Old Holborn Bridge, guided by a workman. One of his drawings shows Christopher Wren's bridge beneath ground level and the gothic arch of the medieval bridge beyond (figure 16). While Crosby's antiquarian interests are self evident, what is less recognised is that this aspect of the 'Thieves' House also appealed to popular audiences such as those who were denied a chance to see it represented on stage. While all three dramatic treatments express a horrified fascination with the criminality of the old, anarchic city, the river, as a link to the original topography of the city, invited meditation on the rural or suburban past of the area, restoring the sense of order and sequentiality to which Flint refers.

While none of the three plays that were submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office in 1844 were granted a licence, the house did appear on stage in other guises. In one case, displaced to another part of the city, it becomes the sinister hub of events in T.

P. Taylor's *The Ruined House at Millbank*, while in Atkyns' *The Fire of London*, already mentioned, the house on West Street is reimagined as the bakery in which the Great Fire begins.⁵⁵ At the end of that play, although the house has been obliterated, the cellar remains the same. In the last act, standing in that cellar, one character says to another:

Yes this identical spot – you don't know the neighbourhood of course. It would puzzle a conjuror to tell where he was if he hadn't been on the spot while the new buildings were going on – This room where we are now, is the very place on which till this night three years past and gone stood a Baker's shop

It is tempting to imagine that this speech articulates the sentiments of nineteenth-century Londoners who may have felt that it would 'puzzle a conjurer' to reconnect the city they had known with the new one that was rising up around them. Popular demand for simulacra of the old city, whether on stage or in immersive entertainments such as Stanfield's Poecilorama, suggests a yearning for lost London, against which the modern metropolis was felt to compare poorly. Yet evocations of the old city could offer consolation to the urban dweller since, as Bachelard writes of the house of myth and memory, such images 'deepen the recollections we have experienced, which they replace, thus becoming imagined recollections'.⁵⁶ Melodrama not only offered the chance to retreat into the house of daydreams, but also, in Bachelard's sense, replaced, or, rather, overlaid in the mind's eye the city itself, offering a reassuring sense of sequentiality in the face of historical rupture.

1 'The Old Houses in West Street Smithfield', *The Times*, 6 August 1844, p. 8; Andrew Provan, 'Account of the Thieves' Old Houses on West Street, Holborn, *London City Mission Magazine*, 1844, pp. 152–163.

2 The divided set first appeared in Edward Fitzball, *Jonathan Bradford; or, the Murder at the Roadside Inn*, Surrey Theatre, 12 June 1833.

3 David Pike, *Metropolis on the Styx: The Underworlds of Modern Urban Culture, 1800 – 2001*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

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5 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1999, p. 15.

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- 19 Beames, *The Rookeries of London*, p. 64.
- 20 'The Old Houses in West Street Smithfield', p. 8. The *Illustrated London News* article appeared on 17 August 1844.
- 21 Provan, 'Account of the Thieves' Old Houses'.
- 22 'The Old Houses in West Street Smithfield'.
- 23 William Leman Rede, *The Old House of West Street*, Royal Theatre, Surrey, LC Add MS 42977: ff. 476-523 b; Samuel Atkyns, *The Thieves House! Or the Murder-Cellar of the Fleet Ditch*, Royal Albert Saloon, LC Add MS 42977: ff. 182-215 b; George Dibdin Pitt, *The Murder House or the Cheats of Chick Lane*, Britannia Saloon, LC Add MS 42977: ff. 216-258.
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- 25 Pike, *Metropolis on the Styx*, p. 2.
- 26 Pike, *Metropolis on the Styx*, p. 12, p. 2.
- 27 Beames, *Rookeries of London*, pp. 12, 14.
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- 29 *Agas Map of London 1561* ([s.l.], 1633), *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/london-map-agas/1561/map> [accessed 11 April 2020]; Provan, 'Account of the Thieves' Old Houses', p. 152.
- 30 'Old House in Clerkenwell', p. 101.
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