The Imagination of Class

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The poor were always with the English. Poverty had been of broad social concern since the Elizabethan period at least: the topic of ongoing debate, periodic legislation, sporadic philanthropy. But the London poor of the nineteenth century—particularly from the 1840s on—seemed to present a different phenomenon. The spectacle of poverty and associated degradation in Central and East London, and later in South London, gave rise to a new set of imaginative and cultural representations. It developed from and in turn created new relationships between an ascending urban middle class and the worst victims of the metropolis. Poverty became, as Gertrude Himmelfarb notes, “a cultural rather than an economic condition” (Idea of Poverty 366). The character of the London poor broke into the public consciousness as if it were a discovery, which was “at once painful and alarming” in the words of one observer, and the “sense of novelty did not seem to disappear till the 1890’s” (Victorian City 1: 18). New terms, such as “slum,” entered the vocabulary, and from the Victorian period on, almost as one conceived of the big city, one conceived at the same time of a festering, teeming, sullen nether world within it. The state of London’s poor came to exercise a strong imagistic influence, shaping the discourses of journalism, social work, government activity, and high culture.

At the heart of this development is the consciousness of class itself. The change in the relationship of the middle class toward those around it, such as the urban poor, ensues from the awareness, most strongly felt in the growing urban bourgeoisie, of itself as a class, in opposition
to other classes and in need of defining and asserting its own imperatives. Such an awareness had been forming for some time, but it began to solidify into what we have since come to associate with middle class culture only in the mid-nineteenth century. The city was crucial to this development, for its growth corresponded in large part to the rise of the middle class, and it was also the field in which the middle class carved out new ideals and new personal relationships that would replace the old ones of a society dominated by the rural-based upper classes. Moreover, the city’s dynamism was destabilizing older class relationships. The new middle class order was supplanting the old relations of paternalism and special influence, and this new order felt pressed to define the ways in which it would represent itself, how it would exercise power, what means of control it would be able to impose.

One of the early survey/studies of the East End slums illustrates how closely the construction of this imagined community was tied to middle class ethical imperatives. Hector Gavin’s *Sanitary Ramblings: Being Sketches and Illustrations of Bethnal Green* appeared in 1848, on the heels of the first systematic analyses of the deplorable sanitary conditions of East London, and in the wake of a cholera epidemic. Gavin was a practitioner of forensic medicine, and his study, a street-by-street description of the filth, stench, overcrowding, incidence of disease, conditions of buildings, and sanitary facilities, is one of the most praised and thoroughgoing instances of reportage. Yet he indicates in the opening paragraph of his report that more is at stake:

> To believe that the middle and upper classes were fully cognizant that multitudes of their fellow-beings have their health injured, their lives sacrificed, their property squandered, their morals depraved, and the efforts to christianize them set at nought by the existence of certain well-defined agents, and yet to find them either making no effort to alleviate, or to remove these misfortunes, or with a stern heart denying their existence, would be to charge these classes with the most atrocious depravity, and the most cruel heartlessness and selfish abandonment. It is impossible to suppose that love and charity are so utterly unknown to this great Metropolis . . . and I believe that the hearts of many will be warmed and their spirits aroused to assist those who have undertaken the great work of sanitary improvement and social amelioration. (Gavin 3)

The ethical and pragmatic challenges are neatly joined here. Social responsibility is directly linked to class self-definition. Furthermore—
and this is crucial—the discarded poor of Bethnal Green, the people often characterized during the century as the “residuum” and “outcast London,” are now brought directly into the broader body politic; they are made part of our human condition as residents of “this great Metropolis.” Gavin is, as well, no dry statistician; his mode of assessing the conditions shares with many of the journalistic explorers of the slums whom we shall read a personal, lively eye for vivid writing. Of Diby-St, Globe-Road, he writes, “In this most dirty street, exists one of the most atrocious nuisances which it is possible to create. A person named Baker, lately dead, here formed a receptacle for every kind of manure. . . . The decomposing organic particles which are always being set free from this putrescent mass, are wafted by each wind that blows, over a population to whom they bring disease and death, as surely as, though more insidiously than, the deadly simoon” (Gavin 9–10). Even so, at another spot, Whisker’s Gardens, amidst this putrescence, a “few gentlemen” have cultivated flower gardens. Of one Gavin says, “When seen in his damp and dirty home, he is generally accused of personal uncleanness, and a disregard of the commonest appearances of decency and regularity; yet, in his garden, he displays evidences of a refined taste and a natural love of beauty and of order. The two are irreconcilable, and as the one sentiment is natural and spontaneous, we are irresistibly led to regard the personal uncleanness of the poor, and the impurities which surround their houses, as the results of agencies foreign to the individual” (Gavin 12). This disclosure of a slum-dweller’s “evidences of . . . a natural love of beauty and of order” places him on a cultural continuum with his betters. He and his kind are for a moment absorbed into the values—beauty and order—of the middle class, even as they display an absence of the other essential virtues of cleanliness and regularity. And the forces which distance the slum-dweller from “decency” and “regularity” are explicitly identified here with agents beyond the individual’s control that infect him from without.

It is not our intention here to suggest that the work of slum clearance, sanitary reform, and private charity in the Victorian age served only to soothe the consciences of the middle classes and had no benefits to the victims of poverty. Nor are we arguing that the middle class professional stance of detachment—the aspiration for objectivity inherent in sanitary reports, for example, the ethical imperative to understand social conditions accurately, independently of the writer’s own biases—is invariably meaningless ideological illusion, a “pseudo-detachment” disguising class bias and darker desires lurking beneath.
The Victorian age was one of the great ages of reform and the achievements of many of its reformers were genuine and helpful to actual people. Moreover, what we call the “professional middle class ethos,” to which figures like Gavin subscribe, can be seen as part of a larger commitment within Victorian culture to the ideal of “detachment.” As Amanda Anderson has recently reminded us, “detachment” had a range of meanings, most of them quite positive, to the Victorians themselves:

The cultivation of detachment involves an attempt to transcend partiality, interests, and context: it is an aspiration toward universality and objectivity. The norms through which that aspiration finds expression may be situated, the aspiration may always be articulated through historically available forms, but as an aspiration it cannot be reduced to a simple form of illusion, or a mere psychological mechanism. (Powers of Distance 33)

However, our contention here is that no discourse attains total transparency to its object, no matter how fervently the writer may aspire to achieve it. Discourse is a complex symbolic phenomenon in which the triangulated relationship among writer, reader, and object of representation must be taken into account. And when these elements are taken into account, the writings we discuss here reveal a complex picture in which postures of detachment were deployed as much to stage the virtue and comprehensive vision of the urban explorer as to bring the reality of urban poverty to the urgent attention of the British reading public. The writerly persona and its inscribed reader are fictive constructs but powerfully compelling fictive constructs. We analyze these constructs not to dismiss the real service reform brought to the victims of urban poverty, but to point out how the discourse on urban poverty also infused middle class writing about that social problem with an urgency and symbolic imagery that, in retrospect, can now be seen as contributing to middle class self-definition.

While the Victorians wrote about the slums for a variety of reasons and motives, our central contention here is that many of the images that they constructed served the purpose of self-definition of an emerging—and largely male—professional class. We have chosen the title we did to emphasize that our focus is on an imaginary construct. Since the publication of Benedict Anderson’s influential Imagined Communities, the term “imaginary” used as a noun has come to refer to the complex way in which people experience their relationship to others.
on a variety of psychological levels, some of which are governed by assumptions that are not subject to question, assumptions, in many cases, never rising to conscious articulation. Commonly held beliefs about the shape of time and space—new ideas about simultaneity, for example—help to construct a shared, but ultimately authorless, lived “imagination” of the “nation,” in Anderson’s view. These assumptions or beliefs are lived but seldom more than sporadically interrogated. To cite another example, the philosopher Charles Taylor justifies his choice of the term “imaginary,” in the title of a recent book, because he is interested less in what social theorists have consciously articulated about how one is to judge human behavior according to certain norms than he is in how ordinary people “imagine” their relationships to others in a way that is often best expressed in shared “images, stories, and legends” (Taylor 23). We cite Anderson and Taylor not to suggest that none of the representations of urban poverty that we discuss here are accurate. Far from it. Rather, what we assert is that the representations may tell us at least as much about what it meant to be middle class in the nineteenth century as they tell us about what it meant to be poor. Anchored in commonly held middle class assumptions about “character,” “space,” “temporality,” and so on, the middle class imaginary of the urban poor is very revealing—although only partly revealing about the lives of those who would seem to be the main objects of its representations. In that sense we are examining a discourse that is notably situated.

The male middle class imaginary of urban poverty presents a complex picture, one in which anxieties about competition, violence, class-based resentment, individuality, and the need to differentiate oneself from the scions of inherited wealth influence the ways in which the urban poor are represented. As James Eli Adams notes in *Dandies and Desert Saints*, the growth of the professional middle class in the Victorian age was accelerated by the decay of fixed distinctions of rank, as the new industrial class system gradually supplanted the traditional patriarchy dominated by the landed aristocracy and gentry. New definitions of “the gentleman,” associating him with, for instance, a new internalized ethic of self-control, are put forth to differentiate the new middle class “gentlemanly” class from the older, rank-based status category. Along with this comes a significant set of new anxieties, as the “manliness” of the mainly intellectual labor performed by this Victorian professional class “gentleman” is called into question (Adams 1–9). The new rising class, in Adams’ view, is an anxious class, concerned with its social and political legitimacy, its ability to command the fealty of the
lower classes it would hope to command, its identity riven by the tensions that unrestricted competition breed.¹

As we will see in this book, one response to this anxiety was to hollow out a new sphere of manly adventure. The descent into the “slum” (and later, the “nether world” or “the abyss”) became a means of asserting that intellectual labor—indeed, the act of writing itself—could entail manly exploration, requiring the exercise of extraordinary self-control if not personal courage. Social exploration in the urban slums became an act of adventurous roaming unfit for the more genteel readers whom Pierce Egan mocked in 1823 in *Life in London* as “fireside heroes and sprightly maidens, who may wish to ‘see life’ without receiving a scratch” (Egan 19). Egan is, of course, mocking his own readers, whose experience of the slums is beholden to his representations of them as a realm apart from middle class experience. Despite his taunts, the book nonetheless invites his readers to visit this realm cautiously but vicariously—with Egan as docent. Many of the writers we examine here, from Dickens and Mayhew through Greenwood, London, Masterman, and others, cast themselves in the role of reporters on a realm of experience that is either not immediately available to their own readers or too threatening for the more genteel among them to risk visiting in person. The “immediacy” of life in the slums becomes a carefully constructed experience to be widely shared in an age of growing literacy and the proliferation of newspapers and journals: its smells, its criminality, its outrages to the sense of decency presented by a writer who often parades his own mediating role between classes as his prime credential. Such a discursive strategy often shifts the focus somewhat from the poor, the object of these representations, to the affect of the reader and the risk-taking of the reporter, as if the main point of the writing were to demonstrate the manly courage of the reporter and the possibility for sympathy—or moral outrage—latent in the reader. In *The Imagination of Class*, we explore, above all, the ways in which the discourses on the urban poor create distance and the illusion of vicarious immediacy: how they “spectacularize” the urban poor for a growing Victorian readership.²

### Males and the Urban Poor

The male experiential relationship with the urban poor thus takes on a special significance in this context. In the early Victorian period, the writings of Dickens and Mayhew spread out before the male reader a
lively otherworld or sphere of masculine experience. As Richard C. Maxwell observes, “street life comes to embody dreams and desires that London brings out generally; dramas of freedom, reconciling an environment that ‘assassinates you with reality’ and an individual sensibility that wants alertness and mobility” (Maxwell 102). It lures the reader with its imagery of undiminished personal vitality. The vision of the underworld of the 1850s and early 1860s follows the brief efflorescence in the 1820s and 1830s of the so-called Newgate novel, in which the protagonist was often larger than life, modeled after the criminal MacHeath of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, Henry Fielding’s Jonathon Wilde, or Dick Turpin and other fabled blackguards chronicled in the *Newgate Calendar*, a popular record of infamous careers of crime. Their bravado, their charisma embodied, as much popular literature does, a set of desires, fantasies, and anxieties of the time—albeit ambiguously indulged by the middle class male reader. These scoundrels, like Edward Bulwer Lytton’s Paul Clifford, were often committed to sentimentalized and obscurely political schemes of social reform. They actually wanted to do something about the state of neglect and inequity, rather than recline in the immobility of guilt. They represented as well a kind of flamboyantly asserted subjectivity, much as the Byronic myth did on a more romanticized (and socially elevated) scale during the same period. The Newgate novel came on the scene at a moment when the possibility of assertive, individual agency was threatened by the growing constraints of modern society, with its divisions of labor, its enhanced domesticity, its diffusion of authority and affect. It seemed to arrest, for a moment, the descent into a nation of clerks and bureaucrats. Among men, the spectre of the loss of the capacity to act independently, even aggressively, acquired almost a mythic status, and the spurious image of a freer, bolder realm in the recent past found voice in the bravura renditions of such literature.

Another chronicler of the London slums, J. Ewing Ritchie, muses, in *The Night Side of London* (1861), “I should not like a son of mine to be born and bred in Ratcliffe-highway. That there would be a charming independence in his character, a spurning of that dreary conventionalism which makes cowards of us all, and under the deadly weight of which the heart of this great old England seems becoming daily more sick and sad, a cosmopolitanism rich and racy in the extreme—all this I admit I should have every reason to expect, but, at the same time, I believe the disadvantages would preponderate vastly” (Ritchie 98). So compelling is this myth of the bold and free male of worldly experience that James Greenwood, probably the most influential journalist
writing on the slums after Mayhew, finds himself compelled to fight off the residual influences of the earlier versions of romantic roguery:

The literature of the country is from time to time enriched by bragging autobiographies of villains confessed, as well as by the penitent revelation of rogues reclaimed, but, according to my observation, it does not appear that perseverance in the humbler walks of crime leads invariably to the highway of infamous prosperity . . . It is almost impossible to exaggerate the amount of mischief that is likely to result from such false and inflammatory pictures of . . . evil. . . . It tends to magnify the thief’s importance . . . with precisely the same kind of gallows-glory as is preached by the authors of ‘Tyburn Dick.’ . . . (Seven Curses 71)

Gallows-glory is certainly not being sought in any bourgeois reverie, but the allure of a vital realm of adventure, mobility, and action cannot be discounted. It splices onto the mentality of the 1850s that nostalgized image of what was always a mythic masculinity. It seems to provide a spectacularized male subjectivity, as a cover for, or evasion of, the contradictions that beset the ideology’s construction of established capitalism’s bourgeois subject. Tellingly, it also introduces an element of social resistance—overtones of outlawry, nomadry, even misogyny—into middle class masculine discourse. The urban slums (and the literature of imperialism) provide the ingredients for such a rebellious fantasy, although it would not be fully developed until the latter part of the nineteenth century.

To be sure, these literary constructs owe some of their appeal to changes in the bourgeois household that took hold especially between the 1830s and 1860s, changes which increasingly separated, for bourgeois males, the spheres of home and work, and which attempted to confine their emotional lives increasingly within the bosom of the middle class nuclear family. That era is identified by John Tosh as the “heyday” of masculine domesticity: “Never before or since has domesticity been held to be so central to masculinity. For most of the nineteenth century home was widely held to be a man’s place, not only in the sense of being his possession or fiefdom, but also as the place where his deepest needs were met” (Tosh 1). While this would change somewhat after the 1870s as increasingly men were bidden to embrace, at least imaginatively, “the view that domesticity was unglamorous, unfulfilling, and—ultimately—unmasculine,” that change itself testifies to unsettling emotional accommodations that surely lay just under the calm surface of the period of masculine domesticity of the previous
three decades (Tosh 7).

If the outlaw nature of these discourses suggests that they served as emotional or psychological compensation for the increasingly domesticated nature of male middle class life, we cannot, nonetheless, look at the relation of the bourgeois male with the East End as simply an encounter with the Other, an encounter which, by contrast, provides the observer with a definition of what he is not. It should be seen as a discourse: a set of negotiated, ambiguously phrased, imaginary relationships. Like any such discourse, this one favors certain figural and spatial patterns that sustain, in a displaced form, the desires and anxieties that inform it.

One of these patterns is that of the labyrinth: the East End coiled and twisted in narrow, dark streets in alleys and courtyards, in dead-ends, and then, deeper, into cellars, sewers, rat-ways. The journalist James Greenwood loved to chart those hidden passages. He describes in Low-Life Deeps a “condemned” alley in which it was discovered that underneath the street and many of the houses was a walled pit in which a brewery had once stored beer, and which was known to be haunted by the ghosts of at least two suicides. All these mazes glimmer with the luminosity of submerged life. “It must have startled innocent folk to learn that, but a year or so ago, no less than a hundred and seventy of the notorious St. Giles’s cellars were still in use as human habitations, and that, after the manner of rats and other burrowing animals, as many families, consisting of mother, father and a more or less numerous swarm of big and little children passed their lives in these dismal holes under the houses . . . all in the damp and dirt and dark” (Low-Life Deeps 168).

What connects the middle classes to such a spectral existence? Again, and again, they tell the tale of the immersion, of the plunge into the maze, of the attraction of being “lost” for a spell in the cellar of the City. Greenwood styled himself as the “Amateur Casual,” a master in disguise, who was so adept at passing as a slum dweller with petty criminals that he could move unnoticed among them, and participate in their awful mysteries. His most famous sketch is that of “A Night in the Workhouse,” in which he treats his readers to the processes of transformation, to that strangely exquisite moment when one passes out of respectability and security—out of “bourgeoisdom”—and into the vulnerability and frisson of another state:

At about nine o’clock on the evening of Monday, the 8th inst. (Jan. 1866), a neat but unpretentious carriage might have been seen turning
cautiously from the Kennington Road into Princes Road, Lambeth. The curtains were closely drawn, and the coachman wore an unusually responsible air. Approaching a public-house which retreated a little from the street, he pulled up, but not so close that the light should fall upon the carriage door. . . . From [the carriage] door emerged a sly and ruffianly figure, marked with every sign of squalor. He was dressed in what had once been a snuff-brown coat, but which had faded to the hue of bricks imperfectly baked. . . . Between the neckerchief and the lowering brim of the hat appeared part of a face, unshaven, and not scrupulously clean. The man’s hands were plunged into his pockets, and he shuffled hastily along in boots which were the boots of a tramp indifferent to miry ways. In a moment he was out of sight; and the brougham, after waiting a little while, turned about, and comfortably departed. This mysterious figure was that of the present writer. He was bound for Lambeth workhouse, there to learn by actual experience how casual paupers are lodged and fed, and what the ‘casual’ is like.7

Of course Greenwood is only impersonating poverty. He can return to his middle class life; the brougham will fetch him back at the end. But many a reader must dwell upon the excitement of this experience, torn from the moorings of one’s customary context and behavior, into the realm of danger, adventure, irresponsibility itself.

Whether escorted by Greenwood, or Mayhew, or Ritchie, or Dickens’ Inspector Bucket, the English reader could venture across the line of class life and find a stimulation and connection. The trajectory is a symbolic one; it signifies interaction, penetration, imaginative participation. The discourse remains open in a special way, allowing a mode of psychic extension, for the middle class male, at least, which makes the excursion more than an adventure, more than a vicarious thrill. The motif of impersonation signifies an imaginative dissolution into the situation of the Other, a displacement of aspects of one’s own desires. Although the later discourse from the 1870s on retains traces of this transference, it does not accommodate the full play of the masculine myth. From then on excursions into the urban slums are inflected by the language of the sociologies, the social service worker, the education inspector, and the cultural arbiter, even when, as in the case of Jack London (as we shall see in chapter 4) the reporter is a well-practiced novelist attempting to duplicate Greenwood’s feats of impersonation.
Mayhew, Dickens, and Male Competitiveness

Henry Mayhew is perhaps the most important writer on the slums during the early-to-mid-Victorian period. While he is interested in the domestic lives of the poor, he is particularly interested in what they do for a living: how labor shapes them as people. He catches a phase when all manner of economic mobility appears possible—and when it seems that mobility and exchange are themselves the tokens of individualism. Eileen Yeo, writing of “Mayhew as Social Investigator” in The Unknown Mayhew, argues that he came upon the scene during a crucial transition between two phases of capitalism, when a more regulated and humane economy was giving way to a stage of intense competition, and that he had the rare insight to capture this change in terms of the social relationships of production (Yeo and Thompson 95). In the studies of the silk-weavers, needlewomen, tailors, and boot and shoe makers of Spitalsfield who make up the contents of The Unknown Mayhew, he chronicles the demise of independent craftsmanship in the face of cheap labor piecework and market instability. In London Labour and the London Poor, he records a different facet of this transitional period: the sudden, almost aberrational explosion of individualistic commercial activity. He ponders over it himself:

It would be itself a curious inquiry to trace the origin of the manifold occupations in which men are found to be engaged in the present day, and to note how promptly every circumstance and occurrence was laid hold of, as it happened to arise, which appeared to have any tendency to open up a new occupation, and to mark the gradual process, till it became a regularly established employment, followed by a separate class of people, fenced round by rules and customs of their own, and who at length grew to be both in habits and peculiarities plainly distinct from the other classes among whom they chanced to be located. (Mayhew II: 147)

London Labour and the London Poor links together laborers, criminals, destitute victims, and street-sellers, but it is the latter, the costermongers and the various small entrepreneurs, hawking along the margins of the new economy, that dominate his account. As Stallybrass and White note, there is a carnivalesque quality to the study. That quality links the old cultures of country peddlers and small tradesmen to
something new, to the emerging subculture of the sellers of trinkets, souvenirs, leftovers, and cheap imitation goods. As Richard Maxwell remarks, the subeconomy that Mayhew describes engages in the metamorphosis of the jetsam of a culture that is speeding up its mass production of goods, that is beginning to waste things. The street folk survive on findings, on rags and discarded clothing and cigar butts and human and animal excrement. “The street-people, like London itself, could be defined through their relationship to junk. The class was itself a form of waste, individuals thrown out by the economic machine of the city as superfluous human beings. This economic irrelevance became a source of identity, pointing such people towards the universe of excrement or cast-off things—a universe they were specially equipped to transform, since only they could feel towards it that combination of empathy and miserly delight which London Labour describes” (Maxwell 96).

Marginalized as these people are, they parade a kind of cocky *joie de vivre* in their resourcefulness. Consider this antic example from Mayhew:

Fly-paper came, generally, into street-traffic, I am informed, in the summer of 1848. The fly-papers are sold wholesale at many of the oil shops, but the principal shop for the supply of the street-traders is in Whitechapel . . . A young man, to whom I was referred, and whom I found selling, or rather bartering, crockery, gave me the following account of his experience of the fly-paper trade. He was a rosy-cheeked, strong-built young fellow, and said he thought that he was “getting on” in his present trade. He spoke merrily of his troubles, as I have found common among his class, when they are over.

“I went into the fly-paper trade,—it’s nearly two years ago, I think—because a boy I slept with did tidy in it. We bought the papers at the first shop as was open and then got leave of the deputing of the lodging-house to catch all the flies we could, and we stuck them thick on the paper, and fastened the paper to our hats. I used to think, when I was in service, how a smart livery hat, with a cockade in it would look, but instead of that I turned out, the first time in my life that ever I sold anything, with my hat stuck round with flies. I felt so ashamed I could have cried. . . . I could hardly cry ’Catch ’em alive, only a half-penny!’ But I found I could sell my papers to public-houses and shopkeepers, such as grocers and confectioners, and that gave me pluck. The boys caught flies, and then came up to me, and threw them against my hat, and if they stuck the lads set up a shout.” (Mayhew I: 435–36)
The fly-paper lad is only one of many Mayhew characters who lift our spirits with their intrepid ingenuity in the face of insecurity and humiliation. They speak the spirit of commerce, even of capitalism itself, in their own small-bore way. They sing the song of individualism. And yet they will be the first victims of capitalism. Most of these one- and two-man operations will be squeezed out, or if commercially viable (like fly-papers) they will be taken over by "legitimate" businesses that will mass produce and mass market. Those who make a living by sweeping the street, or disposing and trading in refuse, will disappear as these functions are assumed by municipalities or large contractors. Some labor-intensive marginal "occupations" such as match-box making will persist for several decades, and the English slums and lower working class areas will support its own subeconomy of services and trades, but essentially the commercial fair of Mayhew is doomed. After all, Maxwell is right: these people are themselves a form of waste. They are the tailings of the commodified economy.

As Mayhew himself often passionately argued, the underclasses of London illustrate the effects of the modern competitive society: the toll on the body of the worker, the displacements brought on by the caprices of the market and the introduction of more efficient mechanical production, the psychological deprivations of piece-work and of the marginality of the costermonger existence. Gagnier and Thompson and Yeo have described Mayhew's complex and shifting attitude toward the English economic order, as he intensifies his attack on the unregulated and exploitative market and yet revels in the vitality he witnesses in its most chaotic realms. The *London Labour* vision of the underworld is governed by an ambivalent response that Dickens and other contemporary writers share toward the competitive ethos itself. Anyone working with the novel of mid-century England must remark to himself how strange it is that the great "plot," the central narrative paradigm of male bourgeois life, is so rarely told in mid-Victorian England: the story of the man rising in the business world, whetting himself on competition, defining his subjectivity by the competitive process itself. The story is being told in actual lives all over England; it is the grist for books such as Samuel Smiles' popular *Self-Help* (1859). But it is rarely the epistemic text of cultural expressions; the middle class man on the make almost never becomes the protagonist. This is the denied element in the representation of the middle class male. This is the contradiction in the bourgeois capitalist ideology of mid-Victorian England.

While competition, and the acquisitive urge that Max Weber contends is imbricated in capitalism, are not foregrounded in the great
novels and much of the cultural discourse of the period, they are nonetheless present there as sites of highly contradictory energy. If one were to take the pulse of the Dickensian text, were to analyze those modulations that tell of the loci of libidinal investment, one could find the muffled, irregular rhythms of the contradictory attitude by the author—and of his ideology—toward competition. There were few men as competitive as Dickens, few who could squeeze or summarily cashier a publisher as he did, few who reveled more in the give and take. Whenever the text acquires a darkly dramatic intensity in Dickens, we are likely to be in the city of individual competition and the driven man. Dickens can never fully mediate the immense psychic attraction the competitive struggle has for him. That is the reason why the “dark” scenes of his novels register so much more energy than the domestic ones, and why he so rarely ventures (after *Pickwick Papers*) into the “merry England” countryside. That is the reason why, as well, the endings of his novels prove so dissatisfying, why they never seem to produce an abatement of the energies he has unleashed in them. He has not worked through the contradictions of his attitude toward competition and economic struggle.

Nor has the ideology of the English middle class worked through the contradictions in which it sheathes competition. Capitalism and competitive business activity are socially constructed in terms of the deferral of pleasure that is innate to the middle class ethos. Embarrassed by the distasteful, “unChristian,” and ungenteel aspects of the marketplace and finance, the official culture sought to shift value away from the process of competition, often crude and selfish, and onto its goals. John Stuart Mill and others tried to temper the deterministic, result-oriented elements of utilitarianism. Competing and getting and building and investing were to be considered significant not in themselves, but as a means toward a better life. On the individual level this often meant a better home, a larger carriage, more money for the advancement of one’s children. Thus the pleasure associated with competition was deferred. Correspondingly the meaning of the activity was registered in something other than the effort itself: in its rewards. If value then does not inhere in the process itself, how can it be a basis for self-definition? Such a definition would by its nature be inchoate, only potentially realizable, and difficult to represent, for it is only from its termination, its closure as a social discourse, its result, that we can judge its true nature and submit it to ethical analysis. Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847) provides the classic contemporary
example of this dilemma, for its protagonist Rebecca Sharp embodies the entrepreneurial spirit beautifully; she is in life not for the results of her social and economic successes but for the pleasure of the game itself. She establishes her identity in the competitive process. But Thackeray, sharing the Victorian upper middle class cultural unease with such an ethos, finds himself at a loss as to how to close off his novel, and does so unsatisfactorily, where he is disconcertingly ambiguous in his assessments of Rebecca. Though he finally condemns her, she engenders, as Dickens’ competitive villains often do, much of the energy of the narrative; she is where the psychic action is.

Middle class entrepreneurialism often accounts, in fact, for the “gap” with which Dickens’ novels begin. The orphaned protagonists of his books, unable to find their origins, evolve in late Dickens into men, like Pip and Little Dorrit’s Arthur Clennam (both containing biographical traces of the author himself), who immobilize themselves with an indefinable guilt, or sense of “fault.” What agonizes them is the dim apprehension that the relationships of production of bourgeois capitalism themselves have led to the social inequities and engendered the alienation of modern urban existence. As a kind of punishment for this “primal crime”—and that term has particular resonance because of the guilt associated with the usurping by the middle class male (the son) of the old (the father)—both Pip and Arthur fail in their business aspirations: Pip never finds gratification in his quest for a gentlemanly life (the “gentleman” is a code in the Victorian period for someone who is worldly, who can still operate in the experiential realm, but not in the competitive/acquisitive); Arthur ends up in debtor’s prison. They must be “punished” because at some buried level, they surmise that their male class identity is bound up with the acquisitive urges of competition. This goes as much for the members of the professional class, whose position requires that they disavow it in public, as for the members of the entrepreneurial class, who are more given to celebrating publicly the virtues of competition.

In his earlier novels, such as The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens tried to maintain some kind of distinction between “good” business activities and “bad” ones. Quilp, the arch-villain of that novel, engages in the undesirable activities of commerce and money lending. Similarly, James Carker stands for what has been denatured by the new economy: he represents unbridled ambition; he is a manipulator of texts—not a builder but a schemer. But both cases expose the Dickensian ambivalence, because Quilp is the source of much of the vital energy of the
novel, and Carker not only fascinates us, but shares with his creator certain writerly qualities of voyeurism and artistic talent. And both are imbricated in Dickens’ own repressed phantasm. Quilp lasciviously stalks the prepubescent Little Nell, who is explicitly inspired by Mary Hogarth, Dickens’ adoring young sister-in-law, who died in his arms, and who became for him an ambiguous symbol as sexual object and paradigm of purity. Carker, too, embodies illicit desire and debauchery, and his death under the wheels of a steam engine is rendered in language of intense sensuality.

The traversing of images of the competitive world and of sexual desire permeates Dickens’ writing and complicates the ideological contradiction that underwrites it. Figures such as Quilp and Carker epitomize desire. The objects of their lust are often implicitly commodified objects such as the idealized girl-child Little Nell, or explicitly commodified figures such as Edith Granger, who complains at one point that “I am a woman . . . who from her childhood has been . . . offered and rejected, put up and appraised, until my very soul has sickened. Hawked and vended here and there . . . until . . . I loathe myself” (*Dombey* 382). Even Lady Dedlock is commodified, on display at Chesney Wold as an elegant and beautiful possession, reflected in her expensive portraits, bound into the silence of the bought woman. An uneasy correlation exists between the commodifying and consuming of women as a form of sexual pleasure, and the aggressive excitements of the competitive world.  

In Dickens, then, sexuality is transposed onto competitiveness/acquisitiveness, deepening the psychic pull of the latter, but producing immense instability in the distribution of textual energies. For both these urges are repressed; they are both fraught with contradictions at the ideological level. Consequently, erratic displacements occur within the text. The sexual and economic axes are sometimes aligned, and sometimes opposed, and there is a frequent transposition of one upon the other. Women in the novels become fetishizations of economic desires; on other occasions, desire shifts away from the female human body onto economic objects; in still other instances, the association of sexual urges with competition produces a kind of displacement that has homoerotic overtones (through “bondings” with male fellow competitors, such as that between Bradley Headstone and Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*).

Although such instability and conflation is to be expected when an already contradictory conceptualization is consistently elided, the crisis over male roles and male subjectivity necessarily charges these issues
with remarkable intensity. The guilt and anxiety that the middle class male author registers over the social conditions of England acquire added psychic energy from the libidinal issues tied up with them. In addition, the difficulties of representing competition as a process, as a meaningful mode of behavior in itself, and the refusal to acknowledge or come to terms with sexuality, produces a set of texts in which a powerfully energized range of signifiers exist without signifieds. The excess of floating signifiers is organized through one common affect: that of desire. Desire, as we know, sustains the consumer market—it is an unfulfilled desire, stimulated by constantly substitutable objects, which are appropriated, used for the consumer’s gratification, and wasted—a desire that is eroticized even on the economic level. The convolutions of this process clearly cannot be traced without close examinations of each text, which is not our purpose here, but it is enough to confirm that such a nexus of fundamental ideological contradictions militates against a stable construct of the bourgeois male subject.

By reading the ideological contradictions aroused by the competitive ethos of modern industrial society through Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor, we are able to see more readily the positive and negative qualities that the ethos connoted for the Victorian middle class observer. The openness, mobility, adventure, and apparent freedom of untrammeled economic activity could be shown alongside its destructive and dehumanizing social effects. The world of the costermongers, the marginally employed, and the poor becomes a theatre in which the dynamics of bourgeois entrepreneurship and commodification in some of their most primitive forms are played out. In such an arena, class, as it is customarily designated in Victorian social discussion, is elided. Although Mayhew was one of the first reporters to give us a systematic description of significant segments of the working classes, his effort in London Labour to set up the new categories of nomadic and settled indicates a disposition to approach the relation between the upper and lower spheres of society on new terms. As Regenia Gagnier has pointed out, by the time he began working on Book Four of London Labour Mayhew was deeply into a reorientation of working relationships that jumbled the normal class hierarchies (so that pure capitalist investors along with shopmen and goods transporters were grouped together as the Auxiliary class). 9

Certainly his groupings of occupations and types, his attention to their habitats, their work and leisure patterns, their particular customs and languages, furthers the objective of designating the street people and slum dwellers as a kind of subculture—a collective that has shared
attitudes, patterns of living, and common experiential possibilities. They are portrayed as an enclave with its own internal dynamics. Such a narrative and analytical approach had sharply differentiated his depiction of the urban underworld from those largely anecdotal, largely imaginative, often touristic accounts of his predecessors such as Pierce Egan.

Mayhew himself persistently talks in terms of "class": he says he defines "those who obtain their living in the streets of the metropolis . . . as a very large and varied class." But given his predilection for biological terminology, it is quite likely that he is using the terms in the sense of a pseudo-scientific classification. As Gertrude Himmelfarb has shown, Mayhew is working in the midst of a general uneasiness about the appropriate terms for the poor, as distinguished from the marginal workers, the lower working class proper, and so on, and he is probably trying to impose some of his own sense of things within the welter of terms. In any event, as Mayhew represents the London poor and the street folk (as distinguished from the weavers, tailors, et al. of the earlier *Morning Chronicle* articles), he denies them that group self-awareness, that oppositional nature that E. P. Thompson postulates as the determinant of class. The elision is critical, for it means that the lowest stratum in English society will be fixed in a representation that deprives them of the characteristics of group consciousness necessary for class identity. If they are not seen as a class in the ways that the working class is, then they can be treated differently—and used differently discursively.

Nothing arrests the attention in Mayhew’s book more than the capacity of the street-sellers to mimic and rework the images of the dominant culture. The street people embody, in a distorted way, some of the displaced desires for masculine freedom; they are often bizarre pastiches of the cult of individuality; they engage in a ludic extension of the mercantile competitive ethos. The engaging account of the fly-paper vendor casts an almost parodic reflection upon commercial activity. He seems to be caught up in the self-propelling replication of commodification itself, for the commodity reproduces itself endlessly, and elaborates upon itself in variations and by-products, all in the highly self-reflexive market economy, in which use value has been replaced by exchange value—an arbitrary construct of worth. Commodification fires the energy of self-parody.

In this respect, commodification at the level of the street people seems to make them a subculture of the main socio-economic system.
Subcultural movements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in England share the disposition to parody or rework the patterns of behavior and production of the middle class consumer culture. We have witnessed it in recent times in the reflexive responsiveness of England’s immigrants and working classes to the world of media, style, fashion, and cultural gesture. Out of the lower income neighborhoods and suburbs have come subcultural expressions of rock, mod, and punk, which are nurtured first among the lower classes as gestures of independence, even resistance (although often with a sense of irony), and are then co-opted and modified by the ever-adaptive mainstream, “respectable” culture. Subcultures give the styles and modes of the dominant culture a reflexive spin. Mayhew’s street people, however, do not attain to the status of a subculture, precisely because they are not sufficiently aware of the outlook of the “establishment” to be able to parody or to form a style of ironic resistance to it. They are not sufficiently cognizant of the hegemonic values to be able to work off of them in a way that critiques them. This is significant because it leads us into what he is telling us about the problematics of individual subjectivity in this urban/commercial environment.

Specifically, the urban poor lack the capacity to conceive of themselves and to project themselves symbolically. Admittedly, we are at the mercy of bourgeois representations of the East End. It is arguable that someone like Mayhew has simply blocked out the symbolic register; in later accounts, by voices from the slums themselves, a measure of conscious mimicry emerges. Nonetheless Mayhew’s most poignant or stunning accounts illustrate the limited capacities for self-conscious, reflexive awareness among the lower orders. Typical is the thirty-year-old costermonger who claims to have once served the Prince of Naples when that eminence came to London.

“But I don’t know nothing of the King of Naples, only the Prince. I don’t know what the Pope is. Is he any trade? It’s nothing to me, when he’s no customer of mine. I have nothing to say about nobody that ain’t no customers. My crabs is caught in the sea, in course. I gets them at Billingsgate. I never saw the sea, but it’s salt-water, I know. I can’t say whereabouts it lays. I believe it’s in the hands of the Billingsgate salesmen—all of it? I’ve heard of shipments at sea, caused by drownding, in course. I never heard that the Prince of Naples was ever at sea. I like to talk about him, he was such a customer when he lived near here.” (Mayhew I: 56)
Mayhew’s costermonger’s mind revolves in tight, interlooping circles, for his imaginative vocabulary is as limited as the experiential one. He lives mentally in a labyrinth that resembles the geography of his neighborhood. Without either kind of outreach, he has scant chance of transcending his immediate lot, of thinking in a symbolic register, or of achieving the kind of imaginative projection that allows him perspective on his or another social formation.

In a remarkably revelatory observation, Mayhew cautions:

We must not in the arrogance of our self-conceit condemn these men because they are not like ourselves, when it is evident that we should have been as they are, had not some one done for us what we refuse to do for them. We leave them destitute of all perception of beauty, and therefore without any means of pleasure but through their appetites, and then we are surprised to find their evenings are passed either in brutalizing themselves with beer, or in gloating over the mimic sensuality of the ‘penny gaff.’ Without the least intellectual culture is it likely, moreover, that they should have that perception of antecedents and consequents which enable us to see in the shadows of the past the types of the future—or that power of projecting the mind into space, as it were of time, which we in Saxon-English call fore-sight? (Mayhew I: 101)

The difference between “classes,” by this account, lies in qualities of mind. One quality is that of experiential and imaginative outreach—the appropriative mentality so characteristic of the middle class and significantly less developed in this lower class group. The other quality that Mayhew insists upon is that of culture, which by his terms, “perception of beauty ... intellectual culture, [seeing] the shadows of the past,” he designates aesthetic sensibility, cultivation, perspective, breadth of mind.

And so the urban poor are hemmed in by the limitations formulated by bourgeois discourse itself. Discourse effectively keeps alive masculine fantasy, the possibilities of adventure, mobility, and exuberant individualistic commerce, the experiential, and it even works them through parodic manifestations. By returning to the labyrinth formula, this discourse effectively preserves the possibility of intrusion by manly adventurers from the West End while denying, or making more difficult to emerge, symbolic expressions that might emerge from within the labyrinth itself. The geographic limitations that sustain the myth of manly adventure are reinforced in the picture of the mind of
the poor as maddeningly self-enclosed, incapable of moving outside of tightly circuitous paths.

None of Mayhew’s urban denizens quite rivals the justly celebrated “Jack Black,” self-designated “rat and mole destroyer to Her Majesty.” Black also goes by the name of the Battersea Otter, because he catches barrelfuls of freshwater fish with his hands. He lives in a flat decorated with stuffed birds and animals, many of them his favorite rat-hunting ferrets, and he is as domestic as you like, for Mrs. Black proudly shows Mayhew the costume their daughter wore as the “Ratketcher’s Daughter,” when she served behind the bar at a public house—a red velvet bodice, embroidered with silver lace. Jack bears the scars of dozens of rat bites with honor, but he has given up tobacco “since a haccident I met with from a pipe. I was smoking a pipe . . . and a friend of mine by chance jobbed it into my mouth, and it went right through to the back of my palate and I nearly dies.” Here his wife added, “There’s a hole there to this day you could put your thumb into; you never saw such a mouth.” Jack Black is one of the voices of London’s nether world that will feed a bourgeois imagination over many a sleepless night:

“One night in August—the night of a very heavy storm, which, maybe you may remember, sir—I was sent for by a medical gent as lived opposite the Load of Hay, Jampstead, whose two children had been attacked by rats while they was sleeping in their little cots. I traced the blood, which had left lines from their tails, through the openings in the lath and plaster, which I follered to where my ferruts come out of, and they must have come up from the bottom of the house to the attics. The rats gnawed the hands and feet of the little children. The lady heard them crying, and got out of her bed and called to the servant to know what the child was making such a noise for, when they struck a light, and then they see the rats running away to the holes; their little night-gownds was kivered with blood, as if their throats had been cut. I asked the lady to give me one of night-gownds to keep as a cur’osity, for I considered it a pheenomenon . . .” (Mayhew III: 17)

Jack Black is himself something of a pheenomenon. He is the very mimicry of life: a figure thriving on the margins, a production of his own dialogue and ingenuity, the enterprising small operator in its most bizarre manifestations. The circumstances of Mayhew’s interview, in Black’s domestic abode, with his proud and doting wife, his mementos of past campaigns, and his appreciation for the stories that terrorize the bourgeois imagination—the rats eating at the children’s
hands and feet—convert Black into almost a parody of the ordinary man. He is, after all, a working bloke, a family man, a small contractor. But, like all the Mayhew characters, Black is a specimen of a quirky kind of individuality. An individuality is all that he represents, for he like the others in the slums never cracks the bourgeois humanistic code for the subject: he never attains to that complexity, that self-awareness and self-reflexivity.

In these ways, Mayhew’s opening up of the vast and exotic territory of the urban slums has imperialistic overtones. The observing culture needs the actuality of this world outside its own; it is vital that the slums be something that one can experience, if only vicariously or through a surrogate. But the crucial difference between the London netherworld and foreign colonies is the closeness: the thin line across which the imagination can travel to fantasize the reprise of a more primitive and “free” masculine life and can explore the exhilarating yet terrifying ways in which the new economic order exfoliates and degenerates at the same time. In such a relation, the distinction between literal and symbolic blurs, and the diminution of the individual subject can speak as much of the dangers facing the English middle class male as of the dehumanization of the poor. The immense evocative power of London Labour and the London Poor issues from its experiential, symbolic force as well as from its exposure of mid-century London’s terra incognita.

The Chapters

As our discussion of Mayhew reveals, the focus of this book will be on the construction of a particular kind of urban netherworld in the Victorian age. While not all the writers we consider in these pages are biologically male, we are particularly interested in how the writings of an emerging male professional class construct the urban poor of the city of London.

In the 1860s and 1870s, the urban poor were “discovered” by journalists as a fascinating underworld. Many also used the pathos of poverty for many of their most emotionally gripping sensations. In chapter 1 we examine the rhetorical effects of this work as well as its substance. In some of the journalistic accounts, such as those of the master of disguises and intrepid explorer James Greenwood, an insulating element of culture is insisted upon as a way of keeping the reader at a psychic distance from the effects of an encounter with the Other.
But the rise of “sensational journalism” breaks down that separation, by writing private morals into public discourse, and by creating a new kind of textual effect which undermines the normative way in which the reading experience shapes the subject. The incremental construction of a centered, integral being that is the object of the realist novel is replaced by a disruptive, emotively charged discourse. And this works in conjunction with sentimentalism to dissolve the boundaries between the reader and what he or she observes. The sentimental accounts of urban poverty are particularly important to this process, for their qualities of emotional excess and their codings of private ethical and material relations expose the reader to the affect of abjection. Coded as “female,” a threatening form of abject experience is constructed and distanced through the work of a number of male writers who took as their subject the urban poor. We examine here how the male writer’s stance of detachment, carefully constructed, is always under threat by overpowering emotional forces that threaten to engulf him.

In chapter 2 we discuss how the discourse of “culturalism” in the 1880s attempts to contain a threat that is coded, not as affective excess, but as emotional deadening. As middle class writers, inspired by what Beatrice Webb calls “a sense of sin,” descend upon the East End to participate in a variety of “missions” ranging from the C.O.S. through the settlement movement through Charles Booth’s famous fact-gathering study of poverty, the East End is constructed as a land of enervation. In the Autobiography of Webb, in the novels of her cousin Margaret Harkness, in the work of Walter Besant, and in the social outreach of a variety of new agencies aligned with what Donzelot calls “the social,” East End life is seen increasingly as a feminized landscape, its redemption requiring not only empirical fact-gathering of the sort to be made famous by Charles Booth, but active intervention in the interest of moral and psychological reconstruction of an essentially feminized social order. The spatialized representation of the netherworld continues to favor figurations of miasma and labyrinth, but without the investment of sensationalized affect that had so marked the work discussed in chapter 1. Rather, in constructing a more “professionalized” relationship between middle class observer and lower class subject, this discourse seeks the material recuperation and cultural pacification of a social order, a redemptive mission often conceptualized as the fostering of the proper consumerist tastes. Webb’s Autobiography, more so than other writings of the period, registers how the conditions of East End poverty constituted a threat to the integrity
of the middle class subject, an ethical challenge to those who would remake this world, a spur to the development of an empirical descriptive project of large-scale dimensions, and an inspiration for a political project of “permeation” that would seek to displace the threat of personal enervation into political reform.

Nowhere is that redemptive narrative more dramatically contested than in the novels of Arthur Morrison and George Gissing, which we examine in chapter 3. Morrison, the first of the major writers to emerge from the poorer areas of the East End, portrays an underclass that cannot be culturally “improved” and absorbed, and in which its distance from the mores of the dominant society and economic order is so great that it can only be represented symbolically. The hostility with which Morrison’s work was reviewed indicates that he not only irritated the nerves of the middle class, but also exposed the materialism that underlay late nineteenth-century British naturalism. Gissing’s *The Nether World* shares with Morrison’s work the determination to preserve the integrity of the representation of lower class life against the distortions of culturalism, and its expressions in working class popular culture. His own ambivalence toward the social resentments of the lower classes, however, articulates itself in the feverish, melodramatic portrayal of female sexuality, and in the curiously constricted, emotionally stultified personification of male desire.

Chapter 4 addresses the dominant phantasmic construction of the urban poor at the end of the century: the East End as “the abyss.” Here we are concerned with the way a number of male writers (Richard Jefferies, H. G. Wells, Jack London, Charles Masterman) register the historical moment of bourgeois hegemony as a moment of intractable class conflict, resistant to amelioration. This moment in the history of the middle class male mind would see the poor reduced to threatening fantasy objects, consigned to a hell from which there is no escape. This “discourse of the abyss” is itself traced by uneasy contradictions that emerge in middle class professionalism: they become evident in the emergence of an “authoritarian” theme that pulls Wells toward celebrating the Mandarin class, London toward politically self-defeating, dark irony, and Masterman toward contempt for projects of “culturalist” philanthropy. Yet they have a productive side as well, as the discourse of the abyss rounds upon itself, exposing, at least in Masterman’s writing, its own self-awareness as a production of a moment in the history of middle class thought.