Abyssal Discourse and the Flâneur/Prophet

Gissing’s response to East End poverty was, like Hardy’s to rural poverty, to associate energy with antisocial behavior and enervation with the requirements of goodness. There was a type of active energy that writers could deploy, however: the energy required by social investigation and reporting. The combination of culturalist critique, moral judgment, and risk-taking that these activities required and called forth signifies a change in the conceptualization of working and lower class life among male intellectuals in the 1890s, especially among those we associate with what we are calling the “discourse of the abyss.” If the model of the earnest social investigator offered a possible male (and female) role for middle class writers, the dangers posed by life in the East End, dangers underlined by the writing of naturalists like Morrison, made the role of the reporter implicitly a risk-taking adventure: those who harrowed hell did so presumably because the news they had to report was of immediate, if not apocalyptic, importance to their middle class readers, and it was purchased at the price of an adventure which the investigator must narrate, an adventure which stages his own heroic persistence in the face of unbelievable degradation and danger.

The 1890s is also the great decade of the aesthetic flâneur. Inspired by an earlier generation of dandies such as Disraeli and Count D’Orsay and invigorated by the example of Baudelaire and the Goncourt brothers in France, a generation of aesthetes, of whom Oscar Wilde became
the most infamous, took to the streets of London and Paris, intent upon a form of costumed self-display that paradoxically centralized the male gaze. As the case of Huysmans’ fictional Des Esseintes reveals, a paradox underwrites the dandiacal self-fashioning of the late nineteenth-century aesthete: to take the stage and become the object of others’ gazes serves to justify the rigorously judgmental and invariably tasteful exercise of one’s own critical gaze. Baudelaire notes the paradox when he writes in the 1860s that, for the aesthetic flâneur, “to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits, who do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions. The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes” (Baudelaire 400). For the dandy, it was the visibility of his costumed self that allowed him the freedom to be unknown and unobserved. That duality—the cynosure of all eyes, yet unknown to the world—gave him a special perspective and a special relationship to knowledge. As critics such as Jonathan Freedman have noted, the late-Victorian aesthete is yet one more manifestation of the advancing professionalization of English society: “For what is the aesthete but the consummate professional: the possessor of a ‘monopoly of knowledge’ about the provenance and extent of this mysterious entity, ‘the aesthetic’” (Freedman xix).

The flâneur’s duality—seen yet unseen—manifests itself as a dual relationship with the object of one’s gaze. To become an aesthetic “boulevardier” was to adopt a posture that seemed to offer an uneasy compromise between passionate engagement with a variety of experiences and detachment from experience, which unfolds before one at something of an emotional distance, like a scientific experiment. However paradoxical the stance, there is no question that it is precisely this practice which Pater is urging “a few young men” to adopt in his justly famous—and later suppressed—“Conclusion” to The Renaissance: A Study, and which Wilde would later represent through the split dandy figure of Lord Henry Wotton, the leisured, insouciant, but rigorously detached experimenter, and Dorian Gray, the initially innocent Faustian character, who gives himself over to direct involvement with a variety of experiences too delightful/shameful to be detailed in any direct way in the novel.

In a recent article in Victorian Studies, George Levine argues that Walter Pater was engaged in a rigorously ascetic epistemological project that bears a great deal of resemblance to the stance of Karl Pearson. What both figures share is a dedication to grasping the object of knowl-
edge through understanding the role of the subject in constructing the world. Neither fits, of course, the “dandyesque” model because neither was interested in the public visibility for which Wilde was noted. Nevertheless, Levine underlines the point that a rigorous epistemological project with at least scientific pretensions lay at the heart of Aestheticism. The voracious appetite for knowledge which Pater celebrates is, one might argue, what makes both Huysmans’ Des Esseintes and Wells’ Dr. Moreau parallel figures despite their many obvious differences.

In the case of Wilde and others, East London held more than the promise of spectacularized criminality and deplorable poverty. It offered the prospect of pleasure, precisely because it was populated by boys willing to offer sex for money. In his interesting and wide-ranging book The Wilde Century, Alan Sinfield argues that “the queer” was constructed, or rather made visible, through a process that required the Wilde trial of 1895 to stamp its meaning on “the queer.” While Wilde himself marked the public transition from “aesthete” to “dandy” when he postured in bright green pantaloons and lace in his 1882 journey across America while lecturing boorish Americans about art, it was the revelations of the 1895 trial—in particular the dramatic testimony of the three East End rent boys, Alfred Wood, Charles Parker and Fred Atkins, about how they performed sexual services for Oscar, reinforced by the testimony of a hotel chambermaid about certain “stains” she found on Oscar’s bedsheets—that clinched the case against him. As Sinfield puts it: “The image of the queer cohered at the moment when the leisured, effeminate, aesthetic dandy was discovered in same-sex practices, underwritten by money, with lower-class boys” (Sinfield 121). Trevor Fishers has recently concluded that Wilde was most likely covering for his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, who was the one who had actually engaged the boys for sex (Fishers). Douglas took advantage of upper class immunity and was never called to testify about who stained the sheets, although he did make an eleventh hour offer, telegraphed from Paris and rejected by Wilde’s lawyer, to offer new testimony in the libel trial. What he offered to testify to has never been revealed publicly. Whatever he had to offer, it was Wilde finally who took the punishment and Wilde who came to stand in the public mind thereafter for the combination of leisureed “effeminacy,” aesthetic religiosity, and same-sex passion that conditioned the popular image of “the homosexual” for generations. Building on the reputation it had already acquired in the “Maiden Tribute” scandal for being a treasure trove of available lower-class female prostitutes, East London, thereafter, represented a rich
quarry of sexually available males as well. Anything and anyone in the East End could be had—for money—and the masculine gazer stands as both spectacle and spectator in relationship to this scene.

The notion that East London’s own disadvantages could afford opportunities for the middle class subject intrepid enough to risk exploring its possibilities was of course implicit already in the more socially respectable goals of the missionaries and philanthropists. The East London we discussed in chapter 2 is a particular kind of nether world, a place in need of economic redemption, and because of that, a place of philanthropic enterprise for earnest middle class crusaders such as Samuel Barnett’s young university men, or the COS and Salvation Army. As we saw, in Walter Besant’s view East London is a city unto itself, but one which lacks precisely what the investigator can bring to it, and thus, East London creates opportunities for middle class philanthropy of all sorts including such “culturalist” projects as the People’s Palace. While we have already discussed (in chapter 3) the attempts by Gissing and Morrison to reject this image in favor of a thoroughly exteriorized East End, a city of hopelessness that lies outside of, and indeed resists, middle class resituation of it within a narrative of redemption, we want to focus here on a particular strategy for recuperation that implicitly concedes this exteriority near the turn of the century but nonetheless resituates East London within a rich fantasy discourse: the discourse of the “abyss.” What this discourse offers is a particular mode of engagement for the middle class “reporter,” an opportunity for middle class subject construction that will feature a combination of engagement and self-display and detachment. In other words, in this discourse, the experience of descent yields a type of frisson, however attenuated, that is largely absent from the work of Gissing and Morrison.

Indeed, a moralistic repudiation of exactly the type of sexual pleasure this hell invites one to witness was what W. T. Stead’s “Maiden Tribute” series in the 1880s was ostensibly about. Sensationalist discourse of the “Maiden Tribute” sort, however, typically invites its audience to participate vicariously in the same thrills that adhere to the vices it is ostensibly preaching against. Whether it be Wilde’s real (or imagined) use of East London youth for sexual pleasure, or Richard Jefferies’ and H. G. Wells’ construction of East London as an alien space of barbarism, or Charles Masterman’s, Jack London’s, and Sherlock Holmes’ use of the East End as an opportunity for self-liberating disguise, the East End comes to occupy a particular fantasy niche: a hell that is not without its pleasures, one of which is the opportunity it
opens for the middle class male observer to manage it through the
twin activities of self-display/disguise and knowledge construction.

We associate this particular male subject position with the boulevardier in order to differentiate it from the more earnestly self-effacing explorations of Charles Booth and his army of investigators (including his cousin-in-law Beatrice Webb). What Booth and the Webbs shared, above all, with the missionaries, the University men of Toynbee Hall, and the Salvation Army, was an earnest dedication to the amelioration of the worst aspects of poverty in the midst of plenty. The “explorers of the abyss”—both fictional and historical—that we will discuss in this chapter, however, do not quite share that ameliorative faith (with the possible exception of Charles Masterman, who was committed to amelioration as a political project, although, as we shall see, his 1902 work *From the Abyss* is anything but hopeful). Engaged in a process of professional class subject construction they, like the aesthetes who were their contemporaries, have substituted for that faith a rigorously detached critical consciousness that necessarily entails a great deal of skepticism about certain well-accepted narratives of social progress. Moreover, the subject which they construct for themselves is one that would become increasingly visible as a “male” type in the late Victorian period: professional, detached, but also adventurous (in a childish way, perhaps) in the risking of his identity. We have referred to this stance as a “male” stance both because it involves emotional distancing and because it often involves embracing a play of identities such as that associated with the actual adventures of Richard Burton and the fictional adventures of writers such as Stevenson and Kipling in the Victorian age. Moreover, it entails, for the most part, a self-conscious rejection of the “melodramatic” or “sentimental” conventions discussed in chapter 1. Its stance of antagonism to sentimental convention and a coldly distanced attitude toward suffering is part of what leads us to associate it particularly with a certain construction of male subjectivity in the late nineteenth century.

The differential relation of men and women to these issues is even more pronounced in the 1890s than before. As Judith Walkowitz has argued in her analysis of the Men and Women’s Club of the 1880s (a group which included Maria Sharpe, Olive Schreiner, and Karl Pearson), Stead’s “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” provided women intellectuals with a “melodramatic voice” to be used in discussing heretofore forbidden topics of sexual danger in ways that often put these women at odds with males. These gendered differences often came to the surface in club debates in the 1880s:
“Maiden Tribute” set the scene for the club’s inauguration and gave women in particular the courage and incentive to undertake such a daring venture. “Maiden Tribute” and the feminist politics of prostitution had made public discussion of sexual danger possible for women, and brought into the open the ominous “shadows,” “spectres,” and “haunting fears” that darkened their views of heterosexual relations. In the club and elsewhere, melodrama provided women with a cultural resource, a language of emotion, in stark contrast to the disembodied voice of reason and science that presumably set the tone of the club. Melodrama was also a politicized language that drove women “by fear into [public] speech.” The women of the club brought to their discussions and debates a pervasive sense of sexual vulnerability, organized around a specific melodramatic script of sexual danger. (Walkowitz 144)

This meant that discussions in the Men and Women’s Club tended to cast males and females into separate groups, with males, like Pearson, articulating the detached, “scientific” view while women such as Olive Schreiner found themselves speaking melodramatically about sexual danger for the first time. The detached tone had become a signifier of a certain male professional posture of objectivity. Not surprisingly it was the male members of the club who were comfortable seeing themselves as daring critics of conventional views about birth control and sexual conventions, while the women, more often than not, found themselves pressed to defend conventional moral codes because they contained built-in protections for otherwise vulnerable women.

Of course, the “social purity” campaign of Josephine Butler against the Contagious Diseases Act had set the stage for this measured form of female frankness. It was Butler who risked—and, indeed, encountered—public opprobrium for attempting to hold men, at least rhetorically, to the same standard of sexual morality to which women of the middle class had always been held in the Victorian age, and it was Butler who was accused of immorality for daring to speak publicly against sexual immorality. When Stead’s “Maiden Tribute” series publicly announced the fact that it was possible for men to buy young working class girls for purposes of sexual exploitation, it seemed to authorize respectable women to speak about even more acute sexual horrors than the double standard that so preoccupied Butler—the sexual slavery of young working class girls—and it gave middle class women an authorized rhetorical mode in which to speak about it. The language of melodrama had never been a language of measured
rationality and distanced objectivity, but it did pay lip service to conventional moralism by working as much through allusion and indirection as through direct representation. As we have already discussed in relation to The Bitter Cry of Outcast London, the unmistakable markers of the Stead style are the eliciting of powerful emotional reactions from his readers by asserting boldly but somewhat evasively and generally and then leaving many of the details to the imagination of his readers—to create the impression that boldness of mind goes along with the ability to imagine details that must be withheld from public expression in the interest of good taste.

A good example of typical Steadian overstatement occurs in the first letter on the topic in the Pall Mall Gazette of July 6, 1885: “It is a veritable slave trade that is going on around us; but as it takes place in the heart of London, it is a scandal—an outrage on public morality—even to allude to it” (“Maiden Tribute” 1). The metaphor of the “slave trade” provokes a canned reaction of moral outrage from the reader while the notice of the geographic location—“in the heart of London”—locates that outrage “at home,” indeed, almost in the domestic space itself. Like Josephine Butler, Stead is targeting male lust, the lust responsible for the prostitution industry to begin with, and thus his language insinuates that his implied reader—whether male or female—already has an intimate familiarity with this domestic devil. The Pall Mall Gazette’s reporting on a seemingly distant phenomenon—the forced enlistment of working class girls from East London in the ranks of prostitutes—is thus immediately resituated close to home, in the heart of the bourgeois family whose members presumably know something about that domestic devil whether or not they allow themselves to discuss it publicly. The second clause (“it is a scandal—an outrage on public morality—even to allude to it”) performs the characteristic rhetorical gesture of sensationalism: insinuating at once that he will tell and that he won’t, that he will speak in a language of indirection that is the tribute virtue pays to the middle class reader’s sense of delicacy. Moreover, that last clause implicitly concedes that telling is itself transgressive—even in the interest of the greater public good—and thus constructs his subject position as a Butlersque heroic figure, willing to risk public opprobrium for introducing a distasteful subject, but solely in the interest of a higher moral duty to the public. After all, Stead himself did face trial in the Eliza Armstrong case in September of 1885 after the Pall Mall Gazette had published its account of the success of his attempt to “purchase” her. The reader is implicitly invited to participate in the guilty pleasures of
such a stunted disclosure, his or her curiosity awakened by the promise of horrors too indelicate to be revealed, yet too pressingly real to be avoided. Like much melodramatic discourse throughout the century, this is radically conservative: producing a scandalous titillation effect that ultimately works to reinforce conventional moral codes.\(^5\)

Three of the writers we will examine in this chapter visit an East London that has already been constructed as “hell” in the imagination of their middle class readers by generations of social investigators who have gone before: a place of godlessness, acute suffering, disease, and sexual depredations, not only those associated with prostitution, but those reinforced in 1888 and 1889 by the *Times*’ (and other newspapers’) lurid coverage of the so-called “Whitechapel Horrors.”\(^6\) However, the male writers we will discuss here by and large eschew the conventions of melodrama in favor of a spare discourse that substitutes a more coldly distanced form of subject construction that we have identified as a “male professional” perspective on poverty. This writing does not eschew sensuality, by any means. Indeed, a central appeal of the “descent” literature is its careful delineation of abject phenomena, a careful detailing of the middle class subject’s own sensual reaction to that abjection. The pull of the popular image of the East End imposed certain constraints on the writers we will discuss in this chapter, constraints that pull Jack London toward Dantesque clichés and H. G. Wells toward ethnographic conventionality. However, the dominant tone is a distanced tone and the style a spare one. The explorer who boldly descends into the abyss and returns shaken but intact, returns also to place that experience in a political perspective that, not surprisingly, is given purchase by the intrepid explorer’s willingness to run personal risks to bring his readers the truth.

**Darwinism and the Residuum**

The increasing cultural separateness of the East End, its place as a home to a “de-moralized” working class, an embruted residuum, was at least partly a result of social changes created by London’s unique role in Britain’s growing industrial economy. We have already noted Gareth Steadman Jones’ argument that the process of spatial division between social classes was exacerbated, both by suburbanization and by London’s economic niche as a small manufacturing city. The former accelerated the spatial withdrawal of the middle class from the precincts of the poor, leaving the poor to live in increasingly over-
crowded slums by the 1880s, in effect concentrating them in an area which increasingly was seen as the abode of crime, degradation, and sin by many middle class people. These social changes had much to do with the traditionally “casual” nature of much London labor and consequently with many of the social problems created by the impermanence of employment. As Jones argues, “The effect of the industrial revolution on London was to accentuate its pre-industrial characteristics” (Jones, *Out of London*, 26). Even the great Dock Strike of 1889, an important moment in British labor history, ironically reminded Londoners that, however important London remained as a world port, it was no longer the shipbuilding capital of Britain, having surrendered that title to smaller cities decades earlier.

At the same time, the Darwinian revolution had given birth to new biologicist explanations for social problems, the most popular of which, the theory of urban degeneration, seemed to offer the hope of explaining the pathological effects of poverty within the city. Those who subscribed to this theory believed that city life led to the hereditary weakening of the working classes, and that this process was stemmed only temporarily by periodic infusions of “better blood” in the form of immigrants from the countryside. The term “degenerate” had been introduced into evolutionary discourse in 1857 by the Frenchman Morel, but it was given new life by the investigations of “the criminal mind” of the Italian Darwinist Cesare Lombroso, who influenced a variety of English thinkers and writers in the 1880s including Robert Louis Stevenson, whose Mr. Hyde has become the classic literary example of the “criminal degenerate” (and who is notably a member of the professional class, not the working class). However, few at the time could ignore the close correlation between poverty and crime, and thus “degeneracy” was rather easily seen as, alternately, cause and effect of the physical depredations of life in the “abyss.” As J-P Freeman-Williams argued in “The Effect of Town-Life on the General Health,” an essay he published in 1890:

The child of the townsman, . . . is bred too fine, it is too great an exaggeration of himself, excitable and painfully precocious in its childhood, neurotic, dyspeptic, pale and undersized in its adult state, if it ever reaches it . . . If it be not crossed with fresh blood, this town type, in the third and fourth generations becomes more and more exaggerated . . . it has been maintained with considerable show of probability that a pure Londoner of the fourth generation is not capable of existing.

(Quoted in Jones, *Outcast London*, 127)
This is one formulation of a theory embraced by a number of intellectuals at the end of the century including Charles Booth, Alfred Marshall, and Llewelyn Smith (who was one of Booth’s investigators). Although the argument was usually cast in terms of fears that the London working class was growing physically weaker with every generation, as Jones reminds us, what actually troubled employers most about the London workingman was a more “active” trait: his truculence. Immigrants from the countryside were welcomed precisely because they were believed to be more pliable than the sullen townbred type (Jones, Outcast London, 130).

The debate that raged over the hypothesis of urban degeneration often relied on statistics emerging from Army and Navy recruiting offices. This became especially pronounced in the years leading up to and following the Boer War of 1899–1902. In an essay called “The Cult of Infirmity” which he published in the National Review in October of 1899, Arnold White, a Liberal imperialist, cited the statistic that 403 out of every 1,000 recruits in Manchester were rejected as unfit by army recruiters. Most estimates of the degree of urban working class debility cited figures in the range between 30–40 percent, although White himself later raised his estimate, eventually claiming that three in five urban working class males were unfit to meet the minimal physical requirements set by the army and navy (Soloway 140). Karl Pearson complained about the lack of scientific rigor of people like White, although he himself remained deeply troubled by the neo-Malthusian prospect that the more productive middle and upper classes, whose falling birthrates he documented, were on their way to being demographically engulfed by unfit lower class people—“race suicide” was the term usually used for this unwelcome social trend.

In 1905 at the end of the Balfour administration, a report called the Interdepartmental Committee Report was issued. It was a summary of views of the subject current at that time. While not explicitly endorsing the biologistic argument that the poor were “degenerate” (that remained an important minority view on the committee), it nonetheless managed to orchestrate many of these contentious voices into one anxious chorus:

Nearly everyone agreed that while there was indisputable evidence of deplorable ill health and physical inadequacy, it was unsatisfactory for resolving the conflicting diagnoses and prognoses responsible and learned people offered to the public. Nevertheless, a minority of witnesses ranging from physicians to factory inspectors were sure that city
life had altered the course of evolution and created a smaller, weaker labouring class whose diminished physical and mental capacity was being transmitted to an ever-expanding number of unfit people. While some authorities took comfort in the thought that these degenerates would eventually die off in accordance with the laws of natural selection, others were fearful that their proliferation would actually be facilitated by the more humane values and institutions of modern civilization. (Soloway 149)

To its credit, the report did endorse some “environmental” explanations for the deplorable physical condition of the working class, and thus inspired some of the first steps toward welfare state amelioration. For example, prompted by the report’s conclusions, the new Liberal administration, in 1906 and 1907, decided to provide for the feeding and medical inspection of school children for the first time in British history. However, the hopeful call for government action after decades of inaction sat uneasily on the same pages with ruminations about inevitable hereditary “weakening,” for government attempts at amelioration would presumably only exacerbate that problem by helping to preserve more “degenerates” who would then presumably reproduce themselves.

Arnold White was perhaps the most vociferous exponent of this Darwinist Malthusianism at the turn of the century. Attracted to Francis Galton’s science of eugenics, White came to public attention in the 1880s with a book that offers a eugenic explanation of London’s social problem. His 1886 book, The Problems of a Great City, joins the discussion of the plight of the urban poor inaugurated by Mearns’s contemporary Bitter Cry of Outcast London, but offers, in place of that pamphlet’s tone of hysterized melodrama, a brutally rational eugenic solution to the problem of the poor: forced sterilization. Addressing the issue of high birthrates among the pauperized classes, White writes:

Criminal and pauperized classes with low cerebral development renew their race more rapidly than those of higher nervous natures. Statesmen idly stand by, watching in such moments as they can spare from the strife of party the victory of battalions destined to misery and crime over the struggling army of the prudent and the self-controlled. Birth into certain quarters of London is birth into an environment from which there is no escape. At three years old baby lips lisp oaths so bestial as to be coarse in the betel-stained mouths of the crew of a Coromandel dhoney. At six, little girls are initiated by their mothers
into practices so loathsome the gorge rises at the thought. At ten, girls and boys alike are unclean spirits limited in their power for evil only by their abilities. Dynasties of criminals and paupers hand down from generation to generation hereditary unfitness for the arts of progress and all that brings greatness to a nation, and engage themselves in warring against all forms of physical and moral order. Where a man is criminal himself, the cause of crime in others, and the begetter of criminal posterity, it seems to be an act of mere self-protection on the part of this generation to segregate him. (White 49)

The rhetoric here, of course, has its own hysterically edge, and the vision of the future in this paragraph seems to be structured almost as a “eugenic melodrama.” Blurring the distinction between Darwinian natural selection and Lamarckian inheritance of acquired traits in its use of the term “hereditary,” this passage gradually builds a sinister vision of the future, reinforced by military metaphors (the “battalions destined to misery and crime” successfully overcoming the “struggling army of the prudent and the self-controlled”), and aided by the swift and steady march of the unfit, from one three-year-old spewing oaths to many ten-year-old boys and girls already actively at war with civilized values. The threat of engulfment of the “prudent” middle class reader by the uncivilized spawn of the degenerate classes is reinforced here in the way White evokes growing poor children of grotesque vitality. In White’s vision, poor children are not weak, stunted gutter-snipes, likely to drop in the streets at any moment from inanition. Rather they are very vital degenerates, brimming with antisocial energy, mass-produced in the slums of London, and sent out to prey on the neurasthenic middle classes whose own civilized qualms, expressive of their “higher nervous natures,” presumably cause them to hesitate about taking actions to protect themselves as bold as those recommended by White. In short, the lesson of his book seems to be that civilization has no choice but to protect itself through a systematic form of eugenic barbarism, even if “barbaric” behavior is precisely what civilization claims to eschew.

Despite the faith in social engineering displayed by eugenicists like White, the theory of urban degeneration would help to underwrite a particular attitude of hopelessness toward the East London residuum, an attitude which emerges in a variety of discursive forms at the end of the century, ranging from the proto–science fiction fantasies of Richard Jefferies and H. G. Wells, to the urban exploration narratives of Jack London and Charles Masterman, to the work of Llewelyn Smith in
Booth’s great study. The work of these figures is steeped in the assumptions of this late-century degeneration hypothesis, and that is precisely what makes them different in significant ways from the work of Gissing and Morrison. Despite the abundant sympathy of some of these writers—London and Masterman most notably—for the plight of the poor, they nonetheless find themselves harrowing a “hell” which can only absorb but never disgorge lost souls. Whatever their differences, most of these writers shared the belief that the pathologies of the East London poor are far greater and far more intractable than can be accounted for by “de-moralization” and the culture of criminality. The “abyss” into which the urban poor have fallen puts its seal upon their foreheads, marking them as its own forever. At the same time, these writers inevitably are led to celebrate, indirectly usually, the brave reporter who, like Dante without his Virgil, descends into the depths to illustrate the depravities of East End life (in London’s case this is done literally with a number of photographs). In other words, their writings foreground the experience of poverty as an opportunity for the male reporter/hero to register his disgust as the reader’s disgust with the spectacle before him, a disgust which the emburded locals seem largely unable to register themselves, to detail (to a greater or lesser extent) his own self-fashioning to make the descent, and to offer a summary account of the reasons why reform is impossible and redemption ultimately unthinkable.

Science Fiction, the Abyss, and the Male Imagination

The theme of urban degeneration and the centrality of the detached scientific observer, one might say, were both present at the birth of science fiction. They inform the work of two writers—Richard Jefferies and H. G. Wells—most responsible for developing the dystopic novel in the direction of what would come to be known as “science fiction.” Set in imagined futures which have seen a significant degradation of the conditions of life in Britain, Jefferies’ After London (1885) and Wells’ The Time Machine (1893) offer visions of an urban industrial society fallen into desuetude largely because of the failure of industrial culture to solve the problem of class. Moreover, both novels underline the idea that economic specialization is implicated in this process. The very specialization that is so central a feature of advanced industrial society cuts people off from a more comprehensive knowledge of the material conditions of life, and that ignorance is rendered in stark terms in both
novels: in Jefferies, for instance, British society has reverted to an anarchic Dark Age, its countryside menaced by dangerous “bushmen” descended from the urban poor who fled London as it collapsed into a viscous ooze, the remnants of its “civilized” citizens huddled behind palisades made of tree trunks, living in gross ignorance of the state of technological sophistication once possessed by the ancients. In Wells’ novel, Britain has degenerated into “two nations,” populated by the parasitical and inebriated “Eloi” and the foundational but resentfully dangerous “Morlocks,” who are pitted against one another in a deadly, but curiously listless, war. Both novels feature heroes who have triumphed somehow over the limitations of a highly specialized division of labor, and *The Time Machine*, at any rate, deliberately figures the main character, the Time-Traveler, as a professional—a scientist—comfortably ensconced in a social circle of other male professionals (including an editor and what the text calls a “new journalist”) who eagerly await his reports on conditions in Britain many centuries in the future.

Richard Jefferies was best known in his day as a chronicler of the virtues of rural life. Born in rural Wiltshire in 1848, he produced a series of novels, newspaper articles, and nonfiction essays which vaunted the superiority of rural to town life. Such novels as *Hodge and His Masters* (1880) reveal an obvious political preference for farmers and a hostility to the values he associated with the city (this sympathy for the plight of freeholding and tenant farmers makes him less than sympathetic to the rural working class as well). His novels *Wood Magic* and *Bevis* established his reputation as a notable writer of children’s tales. In 1885 just two years before his early death, he published *After London; or, Wild England*. It is a novel which extends the plot of his earlier boys’ adventure tale *Bevis* but supplies the kind of dystopic detail that could hardly have had much appeal to children.

The state of cultural and political degeneracy into which England has lapsed in the novel is implicitly traced to the collapse of London. As the narrator tells us, one day the eastward flow of the Thames became blocked, causing London to revert to a greasy swamp and creating the vast inland lake which covers much of what was once England at the time the novel opens. No image of fecund possibility to Jefferies, the city is rather nothing more than a “dead” swamp sitting on top of buried cloacae, and, in some mysterious way the novel is not very clear about, the source of Britain’s historic reversion to barbarism (Jefferies 69).
The narrative traces the adventures of young Felix, the son of a local baron, who builds a canoe one day and sails off across the inland sea in search of adventure. What he discovers along the way comes in a series of revelations that register as a story of British cultural degeneration. He finds, for instance, that Britain has declined into a neo-medieval state of baronial rivalry with no centralized kingly authority. He also discovers that much of the countryside is haunted by people known as the “bushmen,” the evolutionary “survivals” of what once were the urban poor and working class. These “bushmen” are a menacing bunch who attempt to set upon anyone who leaves the protected confines of the wooden palisades that surround Felix’s father’s baronial estate. Interestingly, they carry what are called “spuds”: tools which are themselves implicit signs of cultural and technological degeneration because of the fact that they serve multiple, rather than singular, functions (killing enemies, killing animals for food, cutting up food, and so on). Even Morrison’s “cosh,” the weapon of choice of the Jago thug, serves a more specialized function than the spud. Indeed, differentiation of function—different tools for different purposes—is implicitly treated in After London as a lost art associated with a more civilized past. Only the main character, Felix, is somehow able to surmount the technical and social ignorance which seems to enclose all the other characters in the book, and to do so in a way that joins the utopian technical experimentalism of Crusoe, the heroic middle class figure who surmounts all divisions of labor, with the journalistic social adaptability of Mayhew: alone, Felix is able to explore the shores of the vast inland sea by teaching himself to build a canoe and improvising, à la Henry M. Stanley or Winwood Reade, ways of ingratiating himself with the savages he finds himself thrown among.

This theme of “overspecialization” is one of the more peculiar notes of complaint in the middle class discourse on urban poverty. Like much else we examine in this book, it seems to reveal less about working class conditions of life in East London than it does about middle class nostalgia—in this case, for a preindustrial way of life, a nostalgia which accounts on some level for the popularity of the Robinson Crusoe story in the nineteenth century. As Martin Green has demonstrated, the Robinson Crusoe story was an extremely popular motif in nineteenth century adventure literature, inspiring hordes of imitators. It was often recycled either directly (as in domesticated knock-offs such as Wyss’s Swiss Family Robinson) or indirectly (in such popular fictional updatings as R. M. Ballantyne’s Coral Island). Green locates
the appeal of these stories in the compelling fantasies they nurture of preindustrial life charged with the values of adventure, of life lived before the alienating effects of modern production had separated the workman from his handicraft and narrowed both his skills and his knowledge to a very small part of the production process, before the scope of middle class worklife had been narrowed to a desk in a dimly lit office. The Crusoe figure seems to surmount this narrowing of vision, and the Crusoe story offers an expanded and exciting narrative of world-scale economic endeavor infused with breathtaking adventure. Moreover, Defoe’s hero implicitly recapitulates the history of the development of Western technology on his island by himself, achieving self-sufficiency all by hand. Indeed, the very notion that readers might find Crusoe’s story of his—ultimately futile—struggle to carve a canoe out of a tree trunk enjoyable says much about the changing nature of the economic world in which the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reader was embedded. It testifies to the phantasmic appeal of a hard-working subject who must overcome the narrowness that is a condition of life in an urbanized capitalist economy—the condition of life of the middle class reader—in order to survive. Crusoe’s painstaking detailing of the pains he took to procure food and protect himself on the island presumably would not appeal to people who still bake their own bread, weave their own cloth, and build their own houses. Such activities lack the requisite novelty. Not only do such people lack the leisure time that middle class people of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were able to devote to reading novels, but the representations of everyday work in the first two-thirds of the novel would seem banal to such a reader: a recapitulation of his everyday reality rather than a very “tellable” tale of novel experience. For the presentation of “novel” experience by the novel had been central to its cultural mission since the end of the seventeenth century. As Lennard Davis points out, eighteenth century fiction emerges out of what he calls an originally undifferentiated “news/novels” discourse, and the reading pleasure it afforded was very much tied to its ability to impart “novelty” to its readers, the etymological kinship between the term “novel” and the word “news” testifying to a kinship that was only later sundered under pressure from the legalistic invention of “fictionality” (through the passage of the Stamp Acts) (Davis 131–36).

While the tendency of nineteenth-century middle class history was toward a greater and greater specialization which fostered the development of the modern professional with his own claims to unique expertise, the nightmarish mirror image of middle class professional
specialization is “proletarianization” within the working class: the “de-skilling” process, central to the initial success of the steam-powered textile industry and then later adapted to the needs of other manufacturing industries, that reduced workers’ skills to a narrower base of abilities appropriate to only one job and consequently left them less adaptable to the demands of new types of work. A classic instance of this complaint occurs in Walter Besant’s book *East London*, a work to which we referred in chapter 2. While noticing that East London is a city of many crafts (22–23), Besant argues that these can only be practiced by a specialized labor force. However, it is overspecialization that ultimately—and ironically, we might add—debilitates East Londoners, making them inflexible and unable to learn new skills and adapt them to new jobs, ultimately leaving them vulnerable to the vagaries of seasonal unemployment, which was the distinguishing feature of London’s working class life. Thus, in inventorying the types of casual labor associated with different areas of East London, Besant says,

In watchmaking, which belongs to Clerkenwell, a man will go through life in comfort knowing but one infinitesimal piece of work—how to make one small bit of a watch; so in these East End trades a man or a woman generally knows how to do one thing and one thing only, and if that one piece of work cannot be obtained the man is lost, for he can do nothing else. (*East London* 23)

The irony here is that “expert” discourse on the causes of poverty will increasingly identify “expertise” itself among the working class and the “residuum” as one of the root causes of poverty. The middle class professional, we might say, establishes his own claim to expertise by diagnosing the “problem” of expertise among the poor. As we shall see, this paradoxical discourse on “expertise,” which vaunts the specialized knowledge of the middle class observer while denigrating that of his working class subject, is ultimately related to an emerging anxiety in the 1890s, as the hopes once entertained for culturalist philanthropy give way to fears that “mass” culture can only produce a parody of high culture.

Thus, what we see in Jefferies is the same issue turned around: the sign of degeneration in the bushman is the inability to specialize, to use tools for specialized purposes. Yet, ironically, that is precisely what the Crusoe figure, Felix, does not do either. His more “comprehensive” vision of the social order represented in *After London* is achieved precisely through his ability to surmount the narrow vision
that overspecialization imposes, and this involves his having to learn a variety of new handicrafts—sometimes with a great deal of initial awkwardness. To deconstruct for one moment: lack of specialization is associated here both with the comprehensive vision of the Crusoe character and with the “savagery” of the degenerate bushman. This paradox was of course the paradox of Besant’s own career. While he waxes nostalgic in East London about the days when one man made an entire shoe from scratch, we would do well to remember that Besant was the man more responsible than any other for establishing authorship as a specialized profession when he served as the influential president of the Society of Authors in the late nineteenth century.7

Lest we forget, it is important to note that the complaint that the division of labor in modern societies is inherently stultifying goes back at least to the Age of Reason, and that a vigorous criticism of “proletarianization” emerges from the work of the man who is most identified with the founding of political economy and with the celebration of comparative advantage. In Book 1 of the Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith tells us why the specialization which is so useful to the economy in general is so stultifying to the worker who becomes overspecialized:

The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become . . . His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. But in every improved and civilized society this is the state in to which . . . the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it. It is otherwise in barbarous societies . . . [here] invention is kept alive, and the mind is not suffered to fall into that drowsy stupidity, which, in a civilized society, seems to benumb the understanding of almost all the inferior ranks of people. (Quoted in Gagnier, Insatiability 23)

What would emerge in the nineteenth century as the critique of “proletarianization” is itself already adumbrated in the “primitivist” theme in Smith, whose most important work nonetheless provided the most compelling arguments for encouraging worldwide economic specialization.10 As Regenia Gagnier reminds us, however, Smith’s vision of industrial society is a profoundly ironic one: what “proletarianization” brings is a vast increase in productive power, and consequently, wealth,
that compensates for the social ills of overspecialization ("Law of Progress" 316).

Underwriting the ideological incoherence that afflicts Jefferies' novel is a reactionary "republicanism" akin to Cobbett's: a belief that ultimately virtue resides in the countryside, in a more "simple" way of life that enables civilized virtue, one that dampens ressentiment by assigning each individual an important place in a traditional hierarchical order, and that puts a brake on growing social discord by assigning the landlord responsibility for caring for his lesser charges. While the landscape depicted in the novel hardly resembles the ordered and civilized way of life evoked in the moment of its loss in Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," there is little doubt that the same nostalgic values inform Jefferies' anti-urbanism in the novel. Felix's own abilities have little to do with his education and everything to do with a kind of native risk-taking empiricism: a willingness to go out and learn by experiencing first-hand the strange world beyond his father's palisades. Felix's own technical knowledge, which springs from that same native empiricism, is far in advance of the people he moves among, and his innate skill in improvising solutions to military and economic problems only he completely grasps make him ultimately victorious over the savages he finds himself facing. Yet the contradiction remains. Incapable of offering a consistently reactionary vision of the social order because of its implicit but undisguised commitment to the ideology of progress, this book nonetheless attempts to paper over its ideological contradictions with a purely imaginary resolution: the success of the heroic main character.

Wells's The Time Machine, a more complex and interesting "dystopic" novel, was published in 1893, and it relates the issue of class division to the theme of division of labor in a more trenchant, if just as unsatisfying, way. Its main character, the Time-Traveler, is presented as a courageous scientist/journalist venturing forth into an unknown and frightening future from the comfort of his own drawing room where stands that remarkable testament to his technological prowess—the time machine. The novel was written by a man with a strong scientific background (he studied with none other than T. H. Huxley) and strong socialist credentials (an early member of the Fabian Society, he later alienated many of the other members and went off on his own). Like the other writers discussed here, Wells tends to foreground the values that underwrite his main character's "professional class" heroism: his scientific detachment, his demystifying fearlessness, his
energy, and his ability to bridge worlds and to register as a regrettable absence what none of the other characters in the main narrative are capable of considering: peace between hostile social classes. As with Jefferies, the world of the future which he explores is presented as one in which a dramatic gulf has opened up between social classes analogous to that separating distinct species. The gentle people he meets at first, the Eloi, are presented as physically delicate and sexually undifferentiated. Indeed, the Time-Traveler at first celebrates this lack of sexual differentiation as a sign that these people have achieved a utopian triumph over the need for reproduction of the species, and consequently, freed themselves from the yoke of the sexual division of labor which, in the Time-Traveler’s own day, largely confines “respectable” women to the home and men to the workplace:

Seeing the ease and security in which these people were living, I felt that this close resemblance of the sexes was after all what one would expect; for the strength of a man and the softness of a woman, the institution of the family, and the differentiation of occupations are mere militant necessities of an age of physical force; where population is balanced and abundant, much childbearing becomes an evil rather than a blessing to the State; where violence comes but rarely and off-spring are secure, there is less necessity—indeed there is no necessity—for an efficient family, and the specialization of the sexes with reference to their children’s needs disappears. We see some beginnings of this even in our own time, and in this future age it was complete. This, I must remind you, was my speculation at the time. Later, I was to appreciate how far it fell short of the reality. (74)

The gender-based division of labor that marks patriarchal societies such as Victorian Britain’s seems to have significantly eroded in the future society of the Eloi. He sees no evidence that the Eloi treat each other with violence, and, indeed, no evidence that they are governed by strong passions at all, whether sexual or fiercely maternal and protective. No one, male or female, works. The land seems conventionally “edenic” in many ways, with no signs of insects, no evidence of disease, no signs even of commerce:

Social triumphs, too, had been effected. I saw mankind housed in splendid shelters, gloriously clothed, and as yet I had found them engaged in no toil. There were no signs of struggle, neither social nor economical struggle. The shop, the advertisement, traffic, all that com-
merce which constitutes the body of our world, was gone. It was na-
tural on that golden evening that I should jump at the idea of a social
paradise. The difficulty of increasing population had been met, I
guessed, and population had ceased to increase. (79)

Indeed, the entire population has a childlike quality—they possess a
peculiar innocence without childish curiosity—and the truth of that
observation is reinforced when the Time-Traveler saves one of the Eloi,
Weena, from drowning as the nearby Eloi stand idly by, incurious and
unwilling to help. Weena’s subsequent docile attachment to the Time-
Traveler is finally more disturbing than gratifying. In her parasitical
attachment to him and in her physically “immature” body, which
clearly lacks secondary sexual characteristics, she seems to function as
a satirical vehicle for Wells to use in lambasting both the conventional
Victorian notion of the ornamental female and the Victorian notion of
innocent childhood on which she is modeled.12

What the Time-Traveler gradually comes to understand, though, is
that the future state of social organization represented by the Eloi is
finally undesirable and demoralizing, precisely because the triumph
over “pain” and “natural necessity” takes the “keen” edge off human
intelligence:

What, unless biological science is a mass of errors, is the cause of
human intelligence and vigour? Hardship and freedom: conditions
under which the active, strong, and subtle survive and the weaker go to
the wall; conditions that put a premium upon the loyal alliance of
capable men, upon self-restraint, patience, and decision. And the insti-
tution of the family, and the emotions that arise therein, the fierce jeal-
ousy, the tenderness for offspring, parental self-devotion, all found
their justification and support in the imminent dangers of the young.
Now, where are these imminent dangers? There is a sentiment arising,
and it will grow, against connubial jealousy, against fierce maternity,
against passion of all sorts; unnecessary things now, and things that
make us uncomfortable, savage survivals, discords in a refined and
pleasant life. (79)

Although Wells’s narrator does not pause long here to consider the
implications of this paragraph, they go to the heart of the project of
social amelioration (and even of the nastier projects associated with
Social Darwinists like Arnold White). To seek to relieve pain and suf-
fering, to attempt to make the human lot more bearable, is to seek to
eliminate the very conditions—"hardship and freedom"—that prompt human beings to develop their best qualities. As the Time-Traveler puts it: "We are kept keen on the grindstone of pain and necessity, and, it seemed to me, that here was that hateful grindstone broken at last!" (Wells 81). The novel is dystopic precisely because it presents what seems like a conventionally utopian achievement—the seeming conquest by the Eloi of the "animal" conditions of life—as a social outcome to be deplored. The "We" of that quote, however, is not the "We" of the whole herd. Rather, it is the "We" of the "evolutionarily fit": the small number of "keen-edged" who are able to pass on their qualities to subsequent generations.

The Time-Traveler later infers, though, that the seeming ease of the Eloi is somehow enabled only by the underground work of the loathsome, apelike, Morlocks who inhabit the nether regions and make a habit of surfacing at night to dine on stray Eloi. The brutal nature of this future world, inhabited not only by Carlyle’s "dandies" but also by his "drudges," is exemplified in the Eloi’s loss of technical knowledge which the professional class of Victorian Britain still possesses in abundance. The Time-Traveler’s escape in the end is made possible only when he starts a massive fire which neither the Morlocks nor Eloi seem to understand how to put out. Unlike the Victorian professional middle class, the Eloi seem not only to inhabit a lotus-land which requires no work of them, but to have lost the capacity for suppressing the very underclass which is slowly preying on them. The nightmarish nature of Wells’s imagined world seems to lie not in the fact that life in this society of the future is rendered awful by a brutally binary class structure, but rather in the fact that the ruling class has lost the will and the technical means to efficiently suppress the lower classes (the Eloi are, among other things here, Wells’s parody of Victorian Aesthetes). The Eloi have lost their "keen edge" in all metaphorical senses of that term: an "edge" which the novel hints ought to be used for the suppression of the lower classes and the preservation of class privilege for the genteel elite (a strangely elitist position for a man who claimed to be a socialist, although that particular paradox of professionalism runs through much of this literature and was of course constitutive of Fabian socialism). The epilogue finds Wells confusedly celebrating Weena’s gift of flowers as a sign of the gratitude and "mutual tenderness" between her and the Time-Traveler: the genteel aspirations of Victorian professionalism, represented above all by the Time-Traveler’s own social group, find their dim echo in the etiolated, reduced affect of the Eloi, condemned to wither rather than to rule efficiently and effectively.
So far so good. The novel then can be read as a proto-fascist call to reinvigorate the ruling classes and to celebrate danger and conflict as the elements which keep the human “edge” keen. However, one can also press this reading of the book one step further in a deconstructive direction. As the book he wrote the next year, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, reveals, Wells was quite capable of taking a conventional cultural opposition and turning it on its head to reposition his critique. Prendick, you may recall, in that novel initially thinks that Dr. Moreau is a vivisectionist, experimenting, as Moreau himself puts it, with “lower animals” in order to move them “up” the evolutionary continuum—to “humanize” them. Yet, Prendick’s initial disgust with Moreau stems not from hearing the latter’s crimes detailed but from hearing the cries of pain of the pumas on which he is experimenting. It is the feral cry of pain that humanizes the animal for Prendick and produces a sympathetic reaction that suspends category distinctions—if only temporarily. Moreau himself assumes that he is doing good for these creatures by giving them the opportunity to “rise” up the evolutionary ladder. However, that motive is shown to be monstrous rather than philanthropic. Not only do the creatures inevitably revert to type, especially after tasting blood, but the process of humanization itself is revealed as so inhumane—it involves nightly torture of innocent creatures in the “House of Pain”—it induces Prendick to flee the company of Montgomery and Moreau out of disgust in order to join the much more welcome society of his fellow creatures, his fellow animals. The novel inverts the conventional hierarchy of the human and the animal and convict Moreau of inhumanity precisely for suppressing his animality—his ability to imagine the other’s pain. That this imaginative ability has two antithetical sides to it—the “blood lust” of the predator and the “sympathetic suffering” of one who can imagine himself as potential prey—means that it is a more complex phenomenon than human binary categories—and most models of unitary subjectivity—can easily account for.¹³

In a strangely similar way, *The Time Machine* initially foregrounds the Time-Traveler’s rather too-confident assumption that the Eloi constitute a ruling class who have achieved a utopian triumph of sorts over what used to be the controlling condition of human life: the need to work. Believing that the viciously binary class structure of Victorian society—“capital” and “labour”: the West End and the East End—has reached its logical conclusion in this land, he naturally assumes that the Eloi are the ruling class and the Morlocks the descendants of the long-oppressed working class, having worked underground so long
their eyes have grown lidless and their flesh pallid. He sums up this tentative hypothesis midway through the book:

So, in the end, above ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots, the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour. Once they were there, they would no doubt have to pay rent, and not a little of it, for the ventilation of their caverns; and if they refused, they would starve or be suffocated for arrears. Such of them as were so constituted as to be miserable and rebellious would die; and, in the end, the balance being permanent, the survivors would become as well adapted to the conditions of underground life, and as happy in their way, as the Upper-world people were to theirs. As it seemed to me, the refined beauty and the etiolated pallor followed naturally enough.

What he discovers, though, when he descends to the land of the Morlocks disturbs this rather too-tidy binary vision of "dandies" and "drudges" somewhat. As he submits briefly and with rapidly increasing unease to being inspected by the curious Morlocks, the Time-Traveler speaks of feeling an "instinctive" loathing for these beings with chinless faces and lidless eyes (113). In fact, this episode makes him feel "like a beast." When he then discovers that the white meat the Morlocks had been eating was actually Eloi flesh, he reacts with revulsion, realizing now that the Morlocks are surely human, for apes are much more "discriminating" than humans in their tastes and would presumably not dine on their own kind (129):

And suddenly there came into my head the memory of the meat I had seen in the Under-world. It seemed odd how it floated into my mind: not stirred up as it were by the current of my meditations, but coming in almost like a question from outside. I tried to recall the form of it. I had a vague sense of something familiar, but I could not tell what it was at the time. (chapter 7)

The Time-Traveler’s reaction here can no longer be read as a simple recoil from contact with creatures of a different species in their difference, a recoil that is easily understood within the terms of a logic that preserves the subject in its own sense of separateness from the too-easily vilified object. Rather a more profound transvaluation of experience is going on here, as the Time-Traveler suddenly awakens to the
possibility of kinship, not with the Eloi, but with the Morlocks. A trans-
mutation of basic categories is occurring, precipitated by an experience
governed by the logic of abjection, of the Time-Traveler’s “vague sense
of something familiar” that “float[s]” in as if from outside. As Kristeva
argues, true abjection is not caused by lack of cleanliness or health.
Rather it is caused by “what disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva
4). The Time-Traveler is having exactly that experience here: an experi-
ence of revulsion that precedes differentiation, an experience that is
complexly tied up with his own realization of his own desires—i.e.,
any desire:

There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in
fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or
desire is founded. (Kristeva 5)

What disturbs order here is precisely the inability to differentiate his
own desire for “meat” from the Morlocks’ desires for his “meat.” The
momentary suspension of the boundary between self and other, man
and ape, Eloi and Morlock, he who desires meat and he who fears
being meat, places him momentarily in an indefinable space, oscillating
between antithetical categories of being, subject and object, predator
and prey. His revulsion cannot be explained any longer as the revul-
sion of a human from an anthropophagous ape, for that “other,” that
anthropophagous ape, is also himself. Rather, revulsion is bound to
desire, a binding that inevitably means that the subject is no longer
one. Revulsion here is a complex marker of identity, really of identifi-
cation. I am one with those who make me sick. As we have discussed
earlier, the flâneur’s simultaneous occupation of antithetical
categories—subject and object at one and the same time—
characterizes many attempts to report on the abyss while descending
into it, and Wells’s Time-Traveler, although earnest rather than insou-
ciant, runs a similar risk of identity.

His decision, then, that the Morlocks are malign is, odd as it may
sound, his way of marking his identity with them. It is the Morlocks
who, after all, have hidden away his time machine in hope of learning
how it works. It is the Morlocks who are enterprising and energetic in
response, no doubt, to the fearful conditions of their lives. It is the
Morlocks who fit the Time-Traveler’s definition of a people who have
not lost their vigor and intelligence because their lives are governed by
hardship. Not surprisingly, then, it is the Eloi who now strike the
Time-Traveler as leading merely a bovine existence (156). In fact, he
decides, finally, that they are the Morlocks’ cattle: a decision that implies a complete inversion of his initial assumptions about the relationship between the two classes, and which retrospectively revalues his edenic ideal by investing it with the meaning of a childish wish to put an end to desire. What but human vanity could have led him to assume that a herd of pacific cattle comprise the dominant class in this strange world, that those who dwell above ground in a state of moral and aesthetic anesthesia should be taken to be the rulers? This leads Wells’s Time-Traveler to a final biological sermon about adaptation:

It is a law of nature we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble. An animal perfectly in harmony with its environment is a perfect mechanism. Nature never appeals to intelligence until habit and instinct are useless. There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change. Only those animals partake of intelligence that have to meet a huge variety of needs and dangers. (149)

While he leaves the land ablaze, the trail behind him littered with lifeless Morlocks, brained by his iron bar in his escape, the novel ends with this tragic implication: the scientist returns to his circle of professional colleagues bearing the implicit message that social amelioration is the wrong road, that class warfare is what preserves the keen edge of human curiosity, and that struggle rather than social peace is necessary to human progress. It is a strangely bleak vision inspired by the “naturalistic” (and perhaps very “Victorian”) idea that the class conflict we carry on is always a conflict with ourselves, although it does break with conventional “othering” to some extent by dramatizing the main character’s uneasy identification with the downtrodden but vigorous.

Insofar as it acts as a warning to the present, the novel is also, by virtue of that fact, a complex apology for the Mandarin class and for the perpetuation of class distinctions which, ostensibly, it is the sworn purpose of professionals to attempt to alleviate (although it should go without saying that this professional ideal justifies class privilege on the new grounds of merit, not inheritance). It unfolds all the central contradictions in the ideology of the late-Victorian professional class, contradictions evident in the Fabian plan for “permeation,” which required the installation of prominent socialists in positions of social power and influence so that they can then allow their ideas to “permeate” the ruling class; and in the settlement movement, which was
based on the modeling of upper class tastes to a working class presumed to be in need of such education because unaware of what it ought to desire. In what follows we will discuss two writers who usher the Victorian age to a close at least partly by embodying these unresolved contradictions in their writing.

People of the Abyss and Reporting as Adventuring

Queen Victoria died in 1901 after 64 years as reigning monarch—the longest reign in British history. When she assumed the throne in 1837, London was the largest city in the world with almost 2 million inhabitants. When she died in 1901, it was still the largest city in the world, having grown to accommodate 4.5 million inhabitants (Porter 186).

The first two volumes of the first modern statistically based study of the nature of class in London, Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People of London*, appeared in 1889 and 1892. As we mentioned in chapter 2, Booth’s inventory of the state of London at the end of Victoria’s reign carefully divided the population into eight social classes, four above and four below the line that Booth was the first social investigator to draw: the poverty line. Booth’s famous map of London also color-coded every neighborhood according to which of the social classes predominated there. It is safe to say that by 1902, as Edward VII officially assumed the throne that had been his mother’s possession for so many years, both the extent of London poverty and its geographic distribution had been measured and mapped. No social investigator who descended into “the abyss” of East London could convincingly portray himself as entering terra incognita—although more than a few continued to do just that. The landscape of London poverty was no longer virginal territory, and thus twentieth-century social investigators begin with a set of assumptions that are far different from those governing Mayhew’s journey 50 years earlier. The “descent” is now something of a “return,” a “return” in which the investigator must pay tribute, implicitly or explicitly, to those who have harrowed this hell before him, those who have left their footprints. Hell now has a relatively long history and a readily recognizable imagistic tradition, and part of that history is a history of investigation: more than half a century of poking and prodding at the body of the urban poor in search of solutions to the vexing question of how abject poverty persists—perhaps grows—in the face of the evident prosperity that industrialism has brought to the middle and upper classes. While Charles Booth
himself seems to have been convinced that poverty had actually decreased since Mayhew began his interviews for the *Morning Chronicle*, in this opinion he was in the minority among social investigators of the day. His map indeed shows many pockets of “respectability” on many of the blocks of East London. As Himmelfarb has argued, “the English became more conscious of poverty and more distressed by it precisely as the material, political, and educational conditions of the poor improved” (*Poverty and Compassion* 32). The carefully detailed statistical measures Booth featured in his magnum opus are, to some extent, meant to lower the emotional tone in discussions of poverty, to stick a statistical pin in melodramatic windbags such as Rev. Andrews Mearns, allowing readers to step away from close focusing on the individual tragedy of poverty to attain a more “comprehensive,” if inevitably abstracted, vision of a complex whole through statistical measures.

When the American writer Jack London visits East London in 1902 with his Kodak camera, he is deliberately treading a path already worn smooth by the footsteps of such social explorers as Mayhew, Greenwood, Sims, Mearns, and William Booth—not to mention the investigators organized by Charles Booth. Moreover, London is self-consciously aware that he is traversing a landscape already overwritten by these other writers. He makes a point of visiting the site of Arthur Morrison’s Jago, at one point, in order to comment on its transformation, he unashamedly draws liberally from Charles Booth’s statistics, and he even spends a night in a workhouse in imitation of Greenwood’s adventure of 1866. He likewise casts himself unapologetically in the role of Dante harrowing hell, his chapter headings larded with allusions to an heroic “descent” (indeed, London himself many years later credited Wells’s Time-Traveler’s descent to the underground world of the Morlocks as the inspiration for his own “descent” into East London). While this work is unusual in its time for its spare, economical prose and its attempt—not always successful—to break with the conventions of melodramatic representation, it cannot claim the freedom from prestructuration that Mayhew was able to achieve to a limited extent. Indeed, the overall movement of the narrative is from individuation to abstraction, as the story of how he disguised himself and then penetrated the rookeries of East London gradually yields to chapters which lay out statistical breakdowns of the daily diets of those who live in the abyss.

Like Wells’s Time-Traveler, London encounters a “race of people” in East London whose difference from middle class norms marks them as
irretrievably other: “short of stature and of wretched beer-sodden appearance,” they appear even more physically alien as he descends further. A typical description occurs when he visits Christ’s Church, Spitalfields Garden: “On the benches on either side was arrayed a mass of miserable and distorted humanity, the sight of which would have impelled Doré to more diabolical flights of fancy than he ever succeeded in achieving. It was a welter of rags and filth, of all manner of loathsome skin diseases, open sores, bruises, grossness, indecency, leering monstrosities, and bestial faces” (London 62). While descriptions of the poor as bestial and disease-ridden had become commonplace in the Darwinian atmosphere of 1890s Britain, what makes London’s adventures readable is the way he stages his own self-preservation in an atmosphere seemingly so conducive to demoralization, disease, and death at the hands of criminal toughs. Rather than staging himself as a transcendental subject, London devotes pages to describing a careful girding of the loins in preparation for his descent: he dilates at length on the details of how he arranged to find a room in the East End for a few months, on how he managed to dress himself as a fair imitation of a local, and, above all, on how he managed to survive confrontations with the diseased and the criminal that would have done in a lesser man. The story of the harrowing of hell is also a story of the professional heroism of the journalist. In the grand tradition of other nineteenth-century reporter/actor/ethnographers (Sir Richard Burton’s pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Mecca comes to mind), London’s “descent” comes with all the requisite ethnographic trappings that clearly establish the otherness of the other if only because of the fact that the reporter must take such pains to convince the other that he is not reporting on him.

The reasons for this are not hard to discern. The requirements of disguise impose certain conditions. London is addressing in his work a middle class reading public that largely refuses to recognize the poor as individuated subjects. In the guise of one of these “others,” he cannot address this audience. Members of the mob lack individual voices, but reporters are valued precisely for their individual voices. As a reporter defined by his individuality but disguised as one of the faceless crowd, London occupies the same uneasy subject-object status that we described above in relation to Wells’s Time-Traveler. Something like the same complicity with the imagined middle class reader that we saw in Greenwood and others is established in this book, although London takes advantage of that presumed intimacy to administer a hyperbolic tongue-lashing to his reader on more than one occasion. He
does not enjoy the same easy cosmopolitan relationship with that fictional entity, the inscribed reader, that Greenwood usually affects. Rather the relationship is constructed as a more deliberately contentious one.

Nevertheless, Jack London does not readily blend in to the scenery in East London either. He does not much resemble the mainly older, disease-ridden workhouse inmates with whom he spends much of his time. He is young, comparatively healthy, and cursed with an inexpungable American accent. When he addresses his imagined audience, he is given to reminding his middle class readers of his more abstract but also comprehensive vision of the economic and geographic dynamism of the city, of the perpetual outward expansion of degradation and despair that, although condensed in the form of the history of this particular city, is part of a larger economic process occurring throughout the world:

Far, far out on the fringe of the city, live the small businessmen, little managers, and successful clerks. They dwell in cottages and semidetached villas, with bits of flower garden, and elbow room, and breathing space. They inflate themselves with pride and throw chests when they contemplate the Abyss from which they have escaped, and they thank God that they are not as other men. And lo! down upon them comes Johnny Upright and the monster city at his heels. Tenements spring up like magic, gardens are built upon, villas are divided and subdivided into many dwellings, and the black night of London settles down in a greasy pall. (People 29)

Interestingly, this vision of the city’s dynamism is cast in terms of threat to a carefully earned class status, as the city’s very growth threatens to engulf the petty bourgeois clerks on its outer fringes. The city is a growing empire of degradation marching inexorably outward. The slumming holiday that Jack London takes in order to write the book, his carefully managed and temporary descent down the ladder of class, is implicitly presented here as the unwelcome permanent fate awaiting all the self-satisfied lower middle class clerks of East London. The geographic metaphor maps neatly onto the metaphor of class and the city’s dynamism is presented as a threat to the well-being of all who think they have escaped. And the mention of “elbow room” Americanizes the fear of falling by conjuring up the ghost of a suburbanization—the desire for greener spaces “out there” in the distant land where the dream of upward mobility necessitates leaving the “monster” city
behind—that reinvents the psychological escape from poverty and working class status as a process of moving toward gentility and its associated countryside, a movement always doomed to be ultimately self-defeating (hence the preoccupation with an always already lost “natural world” toward which the subject drives himself). Beatrice Webb’s “consciousness of sin” drove her into the East End as an act of expiation, as we have discussed in chapter 2. Jack London, though, who came from humble roots in California, lacks the sense of noblesse oblige of the wealthy railroad heiress, courted by would-be prime ministers and well-known intellectuals. Consequently, while Webb’s diary is ruminative, we see the style as appropriate for one who writes to justify her life as an act of contrition for social guilt she inherited but did not earn. London, by contrast, uses a much-celebrated spare style unsuited to the kind of staging of self-meditation that we see in Webb and in so much of the middle class fiction of the Victorian period. Rather, London casts himself as something of an impassioned—indeed, impatient—intellectual caught in an adventure tale.

London is also drawn toward greater and greater abstraction as he struggles to find “typifying” examples to illustrate his larger thesis. The following passage, a typification of the respectable working class, is an example:

In the evenings the men can be seen at the doors, pipes in their mouths and children on their knees, wives gossiping, and laughter and fun going on. The content of these people is manifestly great, for, relative to the wretchedness that encompasses them, they are well off. But at the best it is a dull, animal happiness, the content of the full belly. The dominant note of their lives is materialistic. They are stupid and heavy, without imagination. The Abyss seems to exude a stypifying atmosphere of torpor, which wraps about them and deadens them. The Unseen holds for them neither terror nor delight. They are unaware of the Unseen; and the full belly and the evening pipe, with their regular ‘art an’ arf,’ is all they demand, or dream of demanding, from existence. (43)

What galls him is the “content” of these people. The emergence of a contemptible abstraction—“mass man,” “the crowd,” really “the norm”—is being registered here, as it is even more so in Masterman’s book published the same year.

Yet “mass man” can only emerge in response to a new form of reification, of abstraction, that allows generalization. And central to this
process was the evolution of statistics and the encouragement it gave to “normalization” throughout the century. Ian Hacking traces its emergence back to the 1820s and 1830s, and locates its birth in a fascination with deviance and criminality: “If one wanted to give frequency statistics a bad name, one might contend that nearly all the early frequencies were frequencies of immorality and ‘degeneracy,’ and that the enthusiasm for statistics was part of an operation of information and control intended to eliminate deviance. Fascination with deviance from the norm, and even the use of ‘normal’ to mean what usually happens, also began in the 1820s” (Hacking, “Comment” 452). So powerful was this new tool, that it promised to transform people’s understanding of social life. With the proclamation of Poisson’s “law of large numbers” in 1835, the possibility of a completely determined social order was on the horizon, celebrated by those, like Henry Buckle, who believed that history was governed by laws as fixed as those governing the natural world. Thus, Quetelet, in studying statistical regularities in criminality, proclaims that one can know in advance “how many men will bloody their hands with violent murders, how many will be counterfeiters, how many poisoners, just as one can enumerate in advance the births and deaths that will occur in a given year” (Hacking, “Cracks” 469). Statistical thinking made possible a new type of Victorian determinism, as the “law of large numbers” dictates deterministic patterns sometimes belied by individual stories. That approach is quite clear especially in London’s chapter called “The Hunger Wail,” which presents a depressing statistical inventory of an underfed residuum.

As a good novelist, London is certainly not unaware of the importance of the individual to put flesh on the general. However, these instances are narrated in the interest of establishing a figurative pattern—so that the individual instance takes on symbolic import, so that it “argues” synecdochically a more general point about the condition of England. Nowhere is this clearer than in the passage where London, staying overnight in the Whitechapel workhouse, meets two men fresh from the smallpox hospital:

Conversation was slack at first, standing there, till the man on one side of me and the man on the other side of me discovered that they had been in the smallpox hospital at the same time, though a full house of sixteen hundred patients had prevented their becoming acquainted. But they made up for it, discussing and comparing the more loathsome features of their disease in the most cold-blooded, matter-of-fact way. I learned that the average mortality was one in six, that one of them had
been in three months and the other three months and a half, and that
they had been ‘rotten wi’ it.’ Whereat my flesh began to creep and
crawl, and I asked them how long they had been out. One had been out
two weeks, and the other three weeks. Their faces were badly pitted
(though each assured the other that this was not so), and further, they
showed me in their hands and under the nails the smallpox ‘seeds’ still
working out. Nay, one of them worked a seed out for my edification,
and pop it went, right out of his flesh into the air. I tried to shrink up
smaller inside my clothes, and I registered a fervent though silent hope
that it had not popped on me. (London 92)

Insinuating both the common mortality of journalist and poor subjects
alike, this passage manages to particularize both the ravages of disease
to which the poor are prey, the reified consciousness of the victims of
disease themselves (the men here are said to report the “average mort-
tality” in the smallpox hospital, as if they were Jack Londons them-
selves), and the risks to life that the journalist undertakes to represent
them in print. Indeed, the act of writing itself becomes heroic, as the
journalist demonstrates unusual self-restraint in detailing how he sub-
jected himself to the same workhouse fare as the other inmates:

At eight o’clock we went down into a cellar under the Infirmary, where
tea was brought to us, and the hospital scraps. These were heaped high
on a huge platter in an indescribably mess—pieces of bread, chunks of
grease and fat pork, the burnt skin from the outside of roasted joints,
bones, in short, all the leavings from the fingers and mouths of the sick
ones suffering from all manner of diseases. Into this mess the men
plunged their hands, digging, pawing, turning over, examining, reject-
ing, and scrambling for. It wasn’t pretty. Pigs couldn’t have done
worse. But the poor devils were hungry, and they ate ravenously of the
swill and when they could eat no more they bundled what was left into
their handkerchiefs and thrust it inside their shirts. (London 110)

And if the everyday act of eating isn’t heroic enough, London goes on
to describe the delight of one of his companions, Ginger, on discovering
some pork bones with meat still on them in a pile of medical waste that
had been sprayed with disinfectant (London 111–12). These passages
serve an important symbolic function that goes beyond simply drama-
tizing the risks run by London himself, one which transcends the indi-
viduality of the scene. We see that when we connect, as readers, the
episode of Ginger hungrily gathering up pork bones sprayed with
disinfectant with the tragically ironic theme that runs throughout: the theme of sustenance for the poor as pharmakon. Insofar as it prolongs life, it protracts the suffering of the downtrodden. Tina Young Choi has recently argued that disease becomes, especially in the writings of Chadwick and Gavin, “a trope for a new urban epistemology, for describing the connective social relations, both troubling and productive, made possible and even probable by urban living conditions” (Choi 270). The function of statistics then is to impose a rational control on such risk through the notions of “percentage” and “probability,” investing even middle class existence in the city with a frisson, however attenuated, associated with running risk. Of course, disease functions to tie the middle class reader to the lower class subject, as we see in Bleak House, where Esther Summerson’s pock-marked face materializes her connection—metonymical and metaphorical—with Jo, Charley, and finally, her own father, Nemo, who dies in Krook’s boarding house. In People of the Abyss, the episode in which Jack London discusses smallpox with the two denizens of the Whitechapel workhouse suggests yet another way in which disease ties the slumming middle class subject to the lower class victims among whom he moves: by risking infection but escaping it, he not only establishes his heroic credentials but he associates the running of those risks with a larger ideological project to which his book is dedicated. The book becomes a dramatization of what we might call the successful management of disgust in the interest of a certain kind of cross-class solidarity, a public act of very political slumming.

The book is also symptomatic in some respects of the irruption of nationalist ideology in the discourse on poverty at the end of the century, an event that helps construct a certain middle class anxiety about the health of what Mary Poovey has identified as the “body politic.” The so-called Age of National Efficiency saw many efforts to tie anxiety about an unhealthy British working class to efforts to improve the health of the entire British nation: efforts ranging from the Social Darwinist nightmares of eugenicists like Arnold White to the ameliorative projects of “municipal socialism” and “imperial federation” that marked the political career of Joseph Chamberlain. Informing the whole of Jack London’s critique of London poverty is a nationalistic thesis about history that posits that Britain is rapidly losing out in a contest for world economic supremacy with the United States and Germany. Generations of poverty have, in his view, produced an irreversible physical and moral decline in the British population:
As I say, the young are high-strung, nervous, excitable; the middle-aged are empty-headed, stolid, and stupid. It is absurd to think for an instant that they can compete with the workers of the New World. Brutalized, degraded, and dull, the Ghetto folk will be unable to render efficient service to England in the world struggle for industrial supremacy which economists declare has already begun. (London 231)

The one small hope of reversing this, in London’s view, lies in what he refers to as “better management.” Typical of the Age of National Efficiency in many respects, London’s book ends with a call not for democratic redistribution of wealth but rather for efficient and farsighted management—a new ruling class of farseeing rulers. Like Wells, whose socialism was sharpened on a decidedly authoritarian whetstone, London finds himself calling for a better-managed social order. The democratic implications of his own hobnobbing with the poor of East London are eventually lost sight of as London reverts to an authoritarian vision of a rightly ordered social order, presided over by a far-seeing Mandarin class of managers.

The implications of that move are profoundly antidemocratic, as London painfully demonstrates the impossibility of the London working class rising above itself to see the social order in a broader, and more detached, view. London’s meeting with the labor leader, Dan Cullen, one of the principal figures in the Great Dock Strike of 1889, initially seems to offer hope that at least some members of the London working class are capable of a more comprehensive view of social conditions. However, those hopes are soon disappointed. London apostrophizes Cullen, whom he meets while the latter is dying in a hospital, in terms that suggest that even Cullen is incapable of the more comprehensive vision necessary to success because he was denied the means, that comprehensive “wisdom” itself may be a prerogative of a more comfortable class status:

Poor Dan Cullen! A Jude the Obscure, who reached out after knowledge; who toiled with his body in the day and studied in the watches of the night; who dreamed his dream and struck valiantly for the Cause; a patriot, a lover of human freedom, and a fighter unafraid; and in the end, not gigantic enough to beat down the conditions which baffled and stifled him, a cynic and a pessimist, gasping his final agony on a pauper’s couch in a charity ward.—‘For a man to have died who might have been wise and was not, this I call a tragedy.’” (People of the Abyss 164)
A project which begins in the psychological democracy of the age of sentiment ends with a reinstatiation of rigid psychological divisions between those who have and those who have not, and the process is aided by the very representational strategies that, in Dickens’ work, constitute invitations to share in a common humanity. The great irony of London’s writing on East London is that the humanizing strategies employed to draw the working class back into humanity’s fold, end up reifying, dehumanizing, and alienating them even further.

To be sure, London is in sufficient control of his tone to be able to use dehumanization as a deliberate, and effectively passionate, rhetorical strategy. He converts it into political anger:

And day by day I became convinced that not only is it unwise, but it is criminal for the people of the Abyss to marry. They are the stones by the builder rejected. There is no place for them in the social fabric, while all the forces of society drive them downward till they perish. At the bottom of the Abyss they are feeble, besotted, and imbecile. If they reproduce, the life is so cheap that perforce it perishes of itself. The work of the world goes on above them, and they do not care to take part in it, nor are they able. Moreover, the work of the world does not need them. There are plenty, far fitter than they, clinging to the steep slope above, and struggling frantically to slide no more. (40)

However, the question this passage raises—to what extent is this a genuine eugenic argument and to what extent mock eugenic argument?—is part of a larger question about the conflicting elements in London’s own political views (is he a committed socialist? a Social Darwinist? a Nietzschean elitist? an American nationalist?) that remain unreconciled to this day. The Malthusian argument of the text generates strange paradoxes. Because a grim Malthusian might applaud the spectacle of the starving poor pawing greedily at a pile of waste food from a hospital sprayed with disinfectant, all the better to accelerate the only known “cure” for poverty, he might be tempted to cite the evidence of London’s book as proof that the workhouse system seems to be working just fine. Eating, for the poor of London’s book, is finally governed by the logic of the *pharmakon*: food is both remedy and poison at one and the same time. And, the darkly tragic implications of such a position inevitably infect all judgments of value when it comes to the poor, as charity is grimly conceptualized as murder and murder a form of charity.
To some extent, London’s account displays the powerfully influential imprint of Gustav LeBon, whose influence on social commentators at the end of the nineteenth century can often seem ubiquitous. Indeed, an emerging critique of “mass culture,” influenced by LeBon’s analysis of the powerfully coercive force of “the crowd,” gradually comes to be conflated with the critique of the “de-moralizing” effects of abject poverty. However, it is in Masterman’s *From the Abyss*, published only a few months before London’s study, that one sees a more systematic application of the analysis of the crowd to the analysis of poverty. The result is an even more effective exteriorization of the poor in the face of the manifest evidence of the author’s sympathy for them, for Masterman adapts LeBon’s contention that the individual and the crowd are psychologically incommensurable. What makes Masterman’s work unusual is its insistence on explicitly bringing together a critique of the way Britain treats its poor with condemnation of an emerging mass culture and the economic system which gave it birth. The “poor” and the “masses” are effectively conflated, and thus Masterman’s tone inflects the tone of the sympathetic social investigator with the worldly irony typical of the late-Victorian critic of mass culture. Indeed, in Masterman’s somewhat abstract if impassioned analysis, the sins of the poor are the sins of the “masses,” and the “abyss” an ever-expanding zone of abjection complexly tied to the cyclical nature of investment and disinvestment which is the central feature of capitalism in action locally:

So in a kind of an irresistible muddy wave the Abyss rolls sullenly onward. Behind us the city is depopulated, our houses are torn down and stamped out, great warehouses and business premises huddle us forward. In front is the land of plenty, upon which we are falling as the chosen people on the nations of Canaan. (47)

Less a determinate and confined space than a place of disinvestment in an economic order which structurally requires disinvestment to complement investment, the poor of East London do not threaten the middle classes from afar but rather threaten to become them as they expand their empire geographically.

The equating of the poor with the masses begins right away: “Whence did they all come, these creatures with strange antics and manners, these denizens of another universe of being?” (3). Informed by the same rhetoric of alarm that informed Matthew Arnold’s discussion of
the rude unenfranchised “Populace” trampling Hyde Park flower beds thirty years earlier, Masterman’s alarm causes him to suggest rather than state, “But within there is a cloud on men’s minds, and a half-stifled recognition of the presence of a new force hitherto unreckon ed; the creeping into conscious existence of the quaint and innumer able populations bred in the Abyss” (3). The ambiguous meaning of the word “conscious” here is symptomatic. Does it refer to “the crowd” becoming “conscious”—and therefore more deliberately threatening—for the first time, or does it refer to the crowd’s first becoming an object of “conscious” attention of the middle classes? We don’t know. But the context in which Masterman was writing suggests it may be both. Not only had the threat of lower class criminality and disease been increasingly impressed upon the consciousness of the middle class public over the closing decades of the nineteenth century, but the contemporaneous celebrations of the relief of Mafeking had impressed upon many of Masterman’s contemporaries (Hobson most famously in his work *The Psychology of Jingoism*) a growing realization that the lower class “crowd” was capable of mass action, of dangerous because “directed” effort. Indeed, this is one of the features of the “crowd” that most troubled the readers of LeBon: the tendency of the “crowd” to directed action, to the exercise of organized but usually malign mass will independent of the will of the individual, does not necessarily require all the individual members of the “crowd” to be physically contiguous to one another, especially in the age of the penny press: “The disappearance of conscious personality and the turning of feelings and thoughts in a definite direction, which are the primary characteristics of a crowd about to become organised, do not always involve the simultaneous presence of a number of individuals on one spot” (LeBon 15). Whipped to a frenzy of indignation by the penny press, the “just-conscious” lower class crowd is capable of almost any action that those who surrender their individual will to the general will are capable of.

Less concerned than Jack London with sensationalized reporting of the physical details of East End poverty, Masterman is much more interested, like Matthew Arnold, in a disciplinary project, in calling for the construction of a viable form of mass education that is informed by an ideal close to Arnold’s “Culture.” A graduate of Christ College, Cambridge, Masterman based his book on observations made while he was living in Camberwell to which he moved in 1890. However, the very bitterness which makes him such an acute observer and writer about the East End takes some of the sting out of his criticism as well.
Hence, Masterman dilates on the life of the fictional “John Smith,” a deliberate abstraction, a member of the “respectable working class” not yet fallen into “the abyss,” a creature invented by Masterman to embody what the settlement movement conceives as the “educable” working class man whose taste is in need of being formed by his betters. In Masterman’s view, this settlement movement “ideal” is suspect because it can never be realized:

He [John Smith] appears to regard ‘Our English Poets’ and ‘The Duties of Citizenship’ with equal disfavour: neither Beethoven nor Wagner are able to drag him from his den. So the Settlements are now pausing: somewhat perplexed, somewhat saddened, acknowledging that the first frontal attack has failed, but doubtful in what direction to initiate a flanking movement: still resolute, however, to pursue the solution of the problem, ‘to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.’ (58)

As with Greenwood earlier, the irony here is a worldly irony that establishes the speaker as not “of the Abyss” despite his repeated use of the pronoun “we.” To raise the abyss-dweller to the level of “John Smith” seems to him a goal of dubious social worth, and throws into question the wisdom of philanthropic exercises. The “we” suggests a factitious communal construct denied by Masterman’s rhetoric.

Despite his role as social ideal of a sort, “John Smith” is enervated, finally, a figure incapable of reaching after something higher and more worthwhile, unable to be “dragged from his den” by anyone. His opposite number here is the “hooligan,” a more interesting figure to Masterman, although, as Masterman concedes, as much an abstraction as “John Smith” because created to serve the self-interested propaganda interests of the settlement movement, in particular, its need to conjure up a social menace: “The ‘hooligan’ is bred in the Abyss, yet in the Abyss we never hear of the hooligan. He is a product created for the world beyond” (64). The “hooligan,” if he actually existed, would at least seem to aspire to a better life, seem to possess the energy that would make him capable of it, unlike “John Smith.” However, as a member of “the crowd,” he can only do so in a menacing collective way:

Despite this, it is, perhaps, the most welcome feature of Abysmal life. It exhibits, at least, a refusal placidly to acquiesce; a reaching out of the human spirit towards a life larger and less confined: a protest, however vague and uncontrolled, against a purely material satisfaction: a
movement resistant to that stagnation which is the precursor of inevitable death. (70–71)

Interestingly, Masterman both concedes the ideological hegemony of middle class constructions of the East End—despite the fact that he was modeled originally on Patrick Hooligan of South London, the “hooligan” is actually a production of philanthropic discourse; he doesn’t “exist” in the East End—and then seeks to unsettle that hegemony, if only in a small way, by finding subversive potential in the construct.

The essays close with an ironic celebration of a man “raised to fame” by virtue of his spectacular and grisly death—by carbolic acid. The function of the spectacle of poverty here is to moralistically embody a threat which potentially could infect the entire body politic: the threat of a debased “mass” culture which is represented here in its two opposite forms: the earnestly “private” one of “John Smith” and the spectacularly, and very publicly, threatening one of “the hooligan.” Yet, as Masterman concedes, his representations have little relationship to the Real, based as they are on bogeymen constructed by philanthropic discourse to serve its own ends. Masterman’s book is itself a “second-order” study, not so much of poverty, as of the middle class need to represent it in these antithetical reified ways. The sophisticated reader of Masterman thus becomes a participant in implicitly affirming that the poor are unknowable because all attempts to grasp them as particularized objects of knowledge end up returning us to always already conventionalized constructs, “types” which serve mainly to embody the professional desires of those who make a living claiming to help alleviate poverty (here principally the settlement movement and the COS). Yet, despite the self-enclosure of this discourse, Masterman hollows out a signifying space for the poor, who cannot exist independently of the middle class reader’s imagination of them but who can signify within that imagination possibilities of being that are ultimately not recuperable—certainly not recuperable within the terms of philanthropic categories of meaning.

The almost “Conradian” language of Masterman’s rendering thus serves to foreground his meta-awareness of the middle class consciousness of poverty as a conflicted, self-undermining discourse, much as Conrad’s description of the landscape of the Congo in Heart of Darkness (published the same year) serves to reinforce the point that, in attempting to grasp the Other, one is invariably plunged into a nightmarish, solipsistic world complexly underscored by the desires and
fears of the subject attempting to find his way. Thus, Masterman, in discussing how East London poverty saps the “vitality” of its residents, leaving them unable and unwilling to struggle manfully against overwhelming odds, converts that loss of nerve and will into a Conradian metaphorical landscape of organic enervation in which the distinction between subject and object worlds, between the desire to live and the desire to pass out of existence, have collapsed into one another:

Until at length all the glory and life and struggle of the tropical forest has passed away for ever; and in its place stretch the wide spaces of sullen swamp, and dull, gnarled, fruitless trees, and the silence of stagnant, scum-coated pools, and the salt, interminable, tideless sea. (17)

The use of organic metaphors here seems to foretell a literal “dehumanization” of the urban landscape at the very moment that the landscape itself is being complexly overwritten by the psychology of the middle class subject. The distinction between self and other, between middle class investigator and lower class subject, between the conceptual tool and the social reality it is meant to symbolize, no longer seems worth delineating, and he instead reverts to a very abstract prophetic voice, promising a Schopenhauerean nightmare resolution in which Darwinian struggle gives way to enervation and loss of energy, the gradual triumph of the law of entropy over the promise and energy liberated by class struggle.

Masterman went on to serve ably as an M.P. in the House of Commons between 1906 and 1918. In his later work called The Condition of England (1909), he adopts an even more stridently “Carlylean” tone, castigating “mediocrity” in a tone of rising despair over what his contemporary, the American social critic Thorstein Veblen, called “conspicuous consumption” of the idle classes in the face of the persistent poverty of the poorer classes and the persistent mediocrity of the middle class:

The present extravagance of England is associated with a strange mediocrity, a strange sterility of characters with supreme power in Church and State. It is accompanied, as all ages of security and luxury are accompanied, by a waning of the power of inspiration, a multiplying of the power of criticism. The more comfortable and opulent society becomes, the more cynicism proclaims the futility of it all, and the mind turns in despair from a vision of vanities. (Condition 32)
In light of the above, it is probably not so surprising that, like too many of his generation, he would welcome World War I as an event that would call forth the best in men rather than the worst, an opportunity to call upon one’s energies in defense of ideals that transcend economic self-interest. Early in the war, Masterman himself was appointed by Lloyd George to head the War Propaganda Bureau, and in that role organized an array of writers including Kipling, Galsworthy, Bennett, Hardy, Buchan, and Conan Doyle to produce pamphlets which cast Britain’s role in a positive light. Only two Army officers were allowed to take pictures of the Western Front. The penalty for anyone else doing so was death by firing squad. Instead, Masterman commissioned a number of well-known artists to draw and paint wartime scenes. Not a few of these complained about the tight governmental controls over their work, including severe restrictions on including depictions of English bodies in the final product. In effect, Masterman’s own gifts as a social critic and Parliamentary orator would lead him into work which essentially distorted the truth about the Western Front, where working class men died by the hundreds of thousands for a cause that was difficult to defend and even more difficult to explain in the postwar period, a hell that he helped to make appear less hellish than it was.