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Wayne Michael Charney
charney@ksu.edu

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Doré After London

Wayne Michael Charney

There was, perhaps, no other city in the world so thoroughly studied, chronicled, and recorded in 19th-century literature and art than was the city London. Charming, picturesque descriptions of London from the first half of the century eventually gave way to more sober and unattractive views by the 1860s. London had become an industrial behemoth, and many a *magnum opus* endeavored to capture that giant's ugly underbelly in both printed words and pictures. Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* of 1851-1862 had been illustrated with woodcuts after daguerreotypes taken by Richard Beard. This great compilation not only was among the first to present a trustworthy view of London's more appalling conditions but was also representative of the most advanced attitude of mind among London's social reformers. It tried to understand the poor rather than reject them. Adolphe Smith's *Street Life in London* of 1877 was accompanied by John Thompson's photographs. It, too, demystified the poor and divested them of their filth and demonic associations.

Between these two masterpieces of social commentary, in 1872, came the best known study of all — *London: A Pilgrimage* written by Blanchard Jerrold and illustrated by Gustave Doré. Their work has achieved an enduring familiarity primarily because of the impact of just one plate — “Over London—By Rail” (Fig. 1). No other illustration from that same period of time seems better able to convey the quintessence of what Lewis

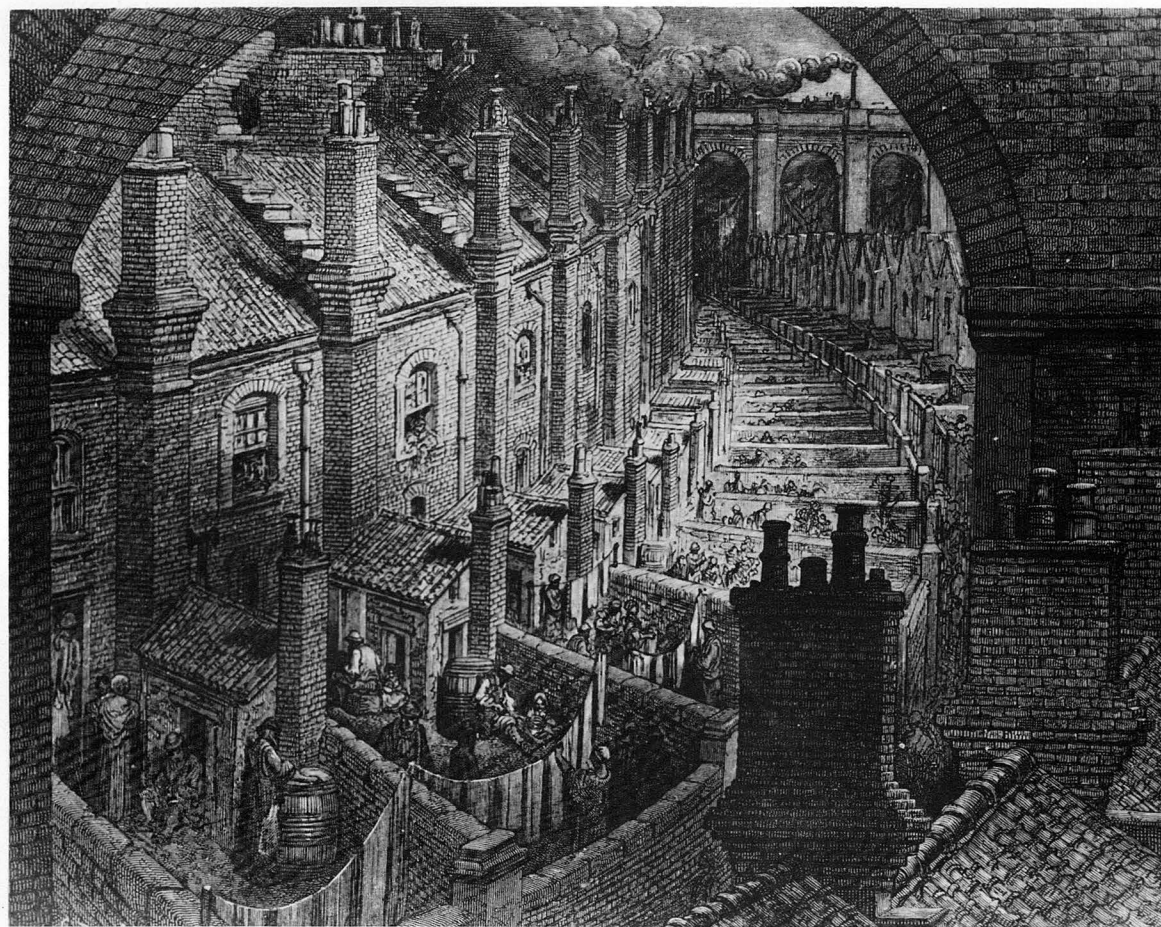


Fig. 1 “Over London—By Rail”

Mumford called the “paleotechnic town.”¹ The illustration has been used time and again as a sort of indisputable proof that with great technological advances inevitably come great social and environmental responsibilities. It remains, to some degree still, the standard by which success and failure of city-scale planning projects are judged, at least

superficially. For all its meticulously detailed and unflinching realism, the engraving nonetheless possesses what Joanna Richardson has called a “symbolic intensity.”² That is, the engraving exhibits an almost legendary intent; its overarching artistic vision finds its complement in other icons of the modern era. For instance, when compared to one of

Giovanni Battista Piranesi's visionary *Carceri*, or *Prisons*, etchings, “Over London—By Rail” has validated that 18th-century Italian master printmaker's fear that the world of the future would be a confounding place and an unpleasant by-product of a tyrannical industrialism. Such a comparison presents modern man as a victim without choice. However,

when contrasted with views of the 1851 London Crystal Palace or the 1889 Galerie des Machines in Paris, "Over London—By Rail" has demonstrated that industrialism could have two faces, one brooding and ominously ugly but one benevolent and triumphantly beautiful. Such a contrast confronts modern man with a choice and with a challenge.

In *London: A Pilgrimage* Gustave Doré, the most prolific illustrator of his time or of any time before or since, recorded with his engravings a sprawling city of

tions of urban reality with literary allusions and so punctuated them with cultural signposts throughout that *London*, in contrast to its contemporary reform-minded treatises by Mayhew and Smith, reinvested the poor with a mantle of mystery and the city with mythic dimensions. And in the final analysis, this duality in *London* documented a transformation of the artist's psyche, brought about by his very personal confrontation with monumental facts, as much as it embodied the artist's ability to transform reality into legend.

enough to fill ten lives. Over the course of 30 years he illustrated 221 works, some of which contained as many as 500 drawings; yet he never took a drawing lesson in his life, and he never drew from live models. His success was legendary, for it was rumored that he drew with such speed that he could earn a small fortune before breakfast.⁴ He drew directly upon wood blocks with pencil and wash and then entrusted the actual engraving to his own school of delineators. Konrad Farnet, in an allusion appropriate to the times, called Doré "a romanticist on a mechan-

Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the Bible that the English called him a "second Michelangelo."⁸ It was on his second trip to London in 1869 that Doré was asked by Blanchard Jerrold to consider the idea of a book on London.⁹ Jerrold envisioned a panoramic journey through the city including a look into fashionable society as well as a survey of all of Mayhew's working class categories, that is, "those who work, those who cannot, those who will not work." When the book was completed a few years later, it was sold at first in 13 monthly installments each costing five

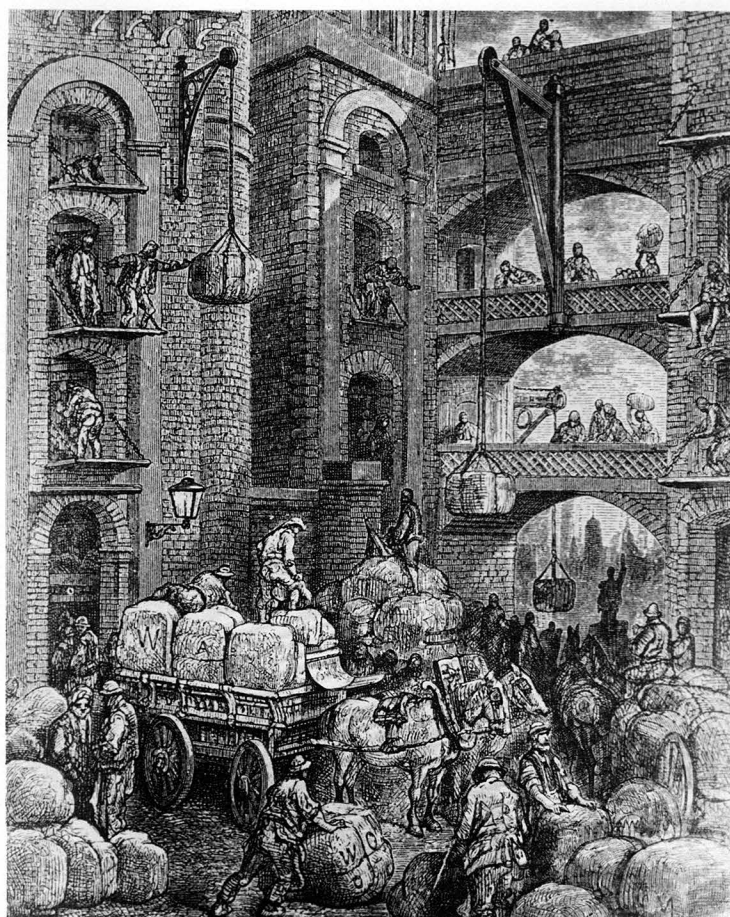


Fig. 2. "Pickle Herring Street"

anonymous people. His masterful backdrops of early industrial architecture are the greatest strength of the book, for the intensity of activity that fills them reveals just how well or how poorly 19th-century London functioned (Figs. 2 and 3). Still, Doré's approach transcended the merely documentary. He so layered his otherwise reasonably accurate observa-

Louis-Christophe-Gustave-Paul Doré was born in 1832 in Strasbourg. Had he been born just six miles farther to the east, he would have been German instead of French, and his family would have been known more likely as Durer, Doré being one of its variations.³ Although his life was short (d. 1883), just 51 years, Doré's productivity and range of imagination were

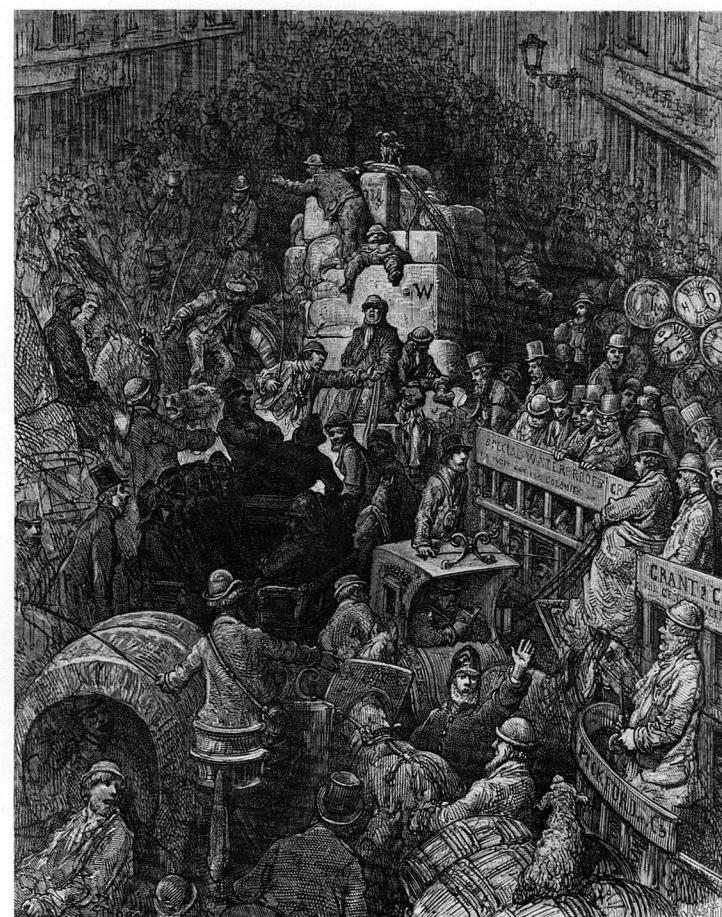


Fig. 3. "A City Thoroughfare"

ized, steam-driven chariot."⁵ Similarly, Emile Zola claimed that Doré's *atelier* resembled a factory.⁶

By the mid-1860s, several of Doré's works had been published in English editions.⁷ In 1868, when Doré made his first trip to London, he was treated as a conquering hero. So popular were his illustrations of

shillings.¹⁰ This serialization was something of a publishing custom at the time in that Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* had already made its appearance by means of a very similar mass production and mass distribution system.¹¹ Doré's illustrations for *London* were also close in sentiment to the writings of Dickens. Lacking only Dickens's tendency toward

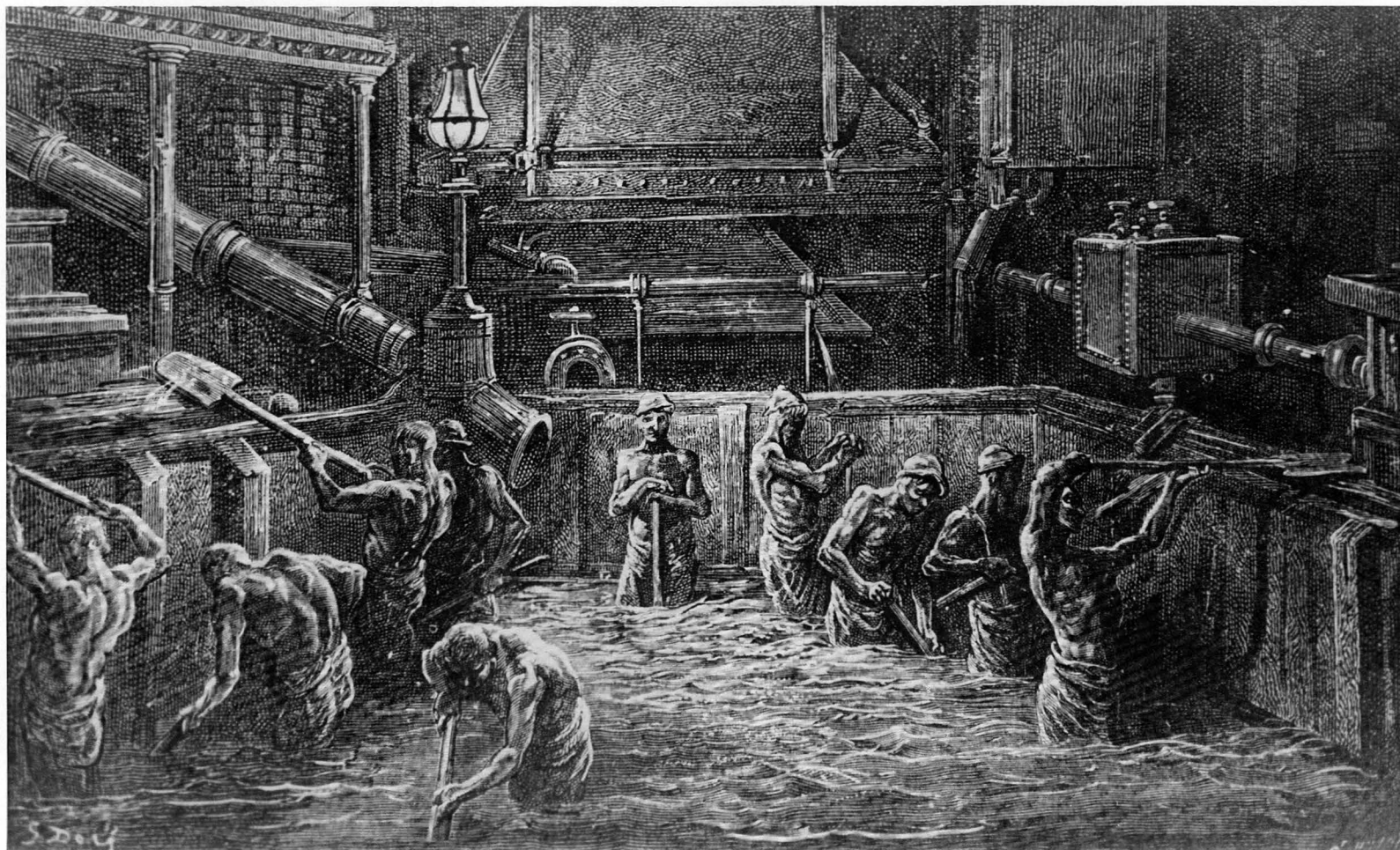


Fig. 4. "Mixing the Malt"

caricature, Doré's figures might have easily populated the pages of any of that English author's socially conscious novels.¹²

London became Doré's masterpiece. It contained 180 engravings which attempted to go after the real London. Jerrold noted that he and Doré were seeking both a panoramic breadth and startling contrasts of detail.¹³ *London* does, indeed, depict a sprawling city of incomprehensible size, and nearly every page of the book documents or contrasts the life of the wealthy and that of the poor. The sprawl and the striking contrasts were not necessarily the contrivances of authors who had appropriated for themselves a high degree of artistic liberty. Friedrich Engels had shown that the *London* of Doré was a very real London. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England* of 1845, Engels wrote:

London is unique, because it is a city in which one can roam for hours without leaving the built-up area and without seeing the slightest approach of open country.¹⁴

Industry and commerce attain their highest stage of development in the big towns, so that it is here that the effects of industrialisation on the wage earners can be most clearly seen ... In these towns there are only rich and poor, because the lower middle classes are fast disappearing.¹⁵

And again, of the city of London, Engels wrote:

I know of nothing more imposing than the view one obtains of the river when sailing from the sea up to London Bridge ... The traveller has good

reason to marvel at England's greatness even before he steps on English soil.¹⁶

It is only later that the traveller appreciates the human suffering which has made all this possible. He can only realise the price that has been paid for all this magnificence after he has tramped the pavement of the main streets of London for some days and has tired himself out by jostling his way through the crowds and by dodging the endless stream of coaches and carts which fills the street.¹⁷

Not only do Doré's illustrations complement Engel's words exceedingly well but the itinerary of Doré's pilgrimage also seems to parallel Engel's very own path of discovery. *London* begins with the imposing view from the river Thames, too, and eventually Doré tramps his way over

the pavement and jostles through the crowds. So crowded are Doré's street scenes that one begins to suspect some artistic exaggeration or literary allusion at work. In point of fact, Doré's interpretations of London's traffic problems were not far from the truth. Imagine how the problem of gridlock in 19th-century London must have been intensified even before Doré made his pilgrimage because, up until 1867, the practice of driving livestock through the streets of London was quite legal. A new city statute eliminated the bucolic anachronism between the hours of 10 a.m. and 7 p.m.¹⁸ Doré had captured London's disorienting vitality. However, his mastery of traffic and crowd scenes did owe not small debt to his prior experience in rendering the throngs of figures so often associated with the more sublime passages of great Christian epics such as the Bible or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. For instance, in the engraving

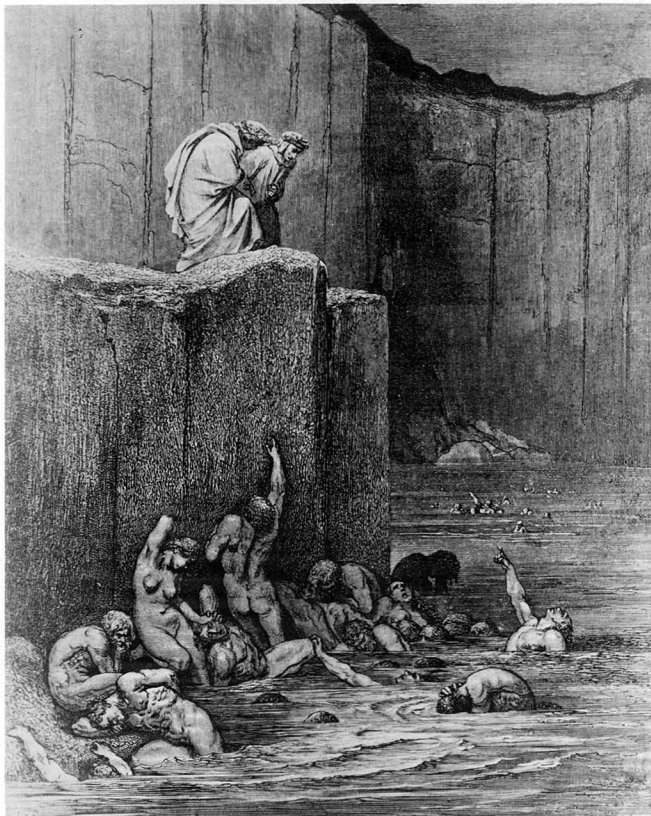


Fig. 5. "The Punishment of Flatterers"

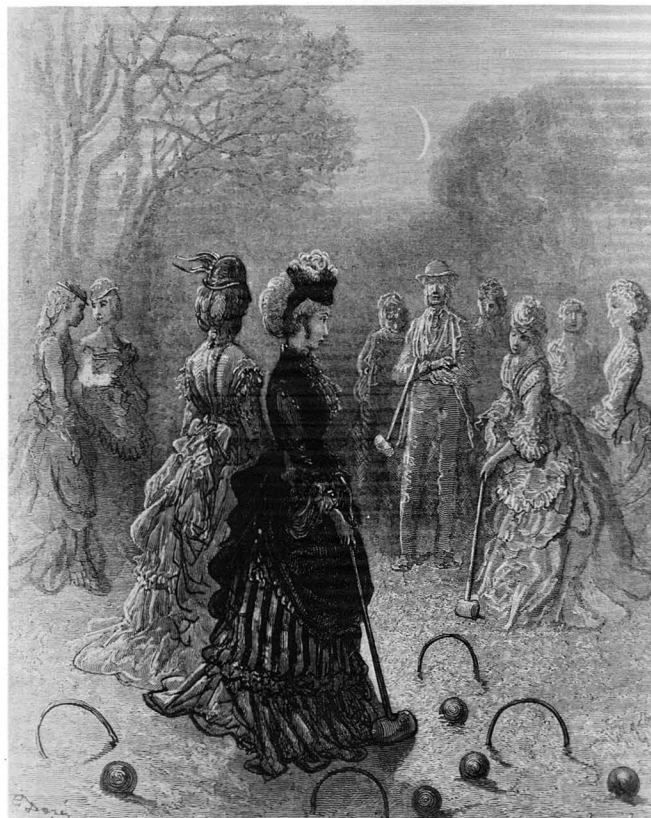


Fig. 6. "Croquet"

ing entitled "A City Thoroughfare" (Fig. 3), a lone traffic officer is so nearly overwhelmed by the press of the crowd that one suspects he once led a past life as Moses in one of Doré's Biblical illustrations; but this 19th-century Moses almost drowns in a flood of people which he cannot hope to control through the vain and merely mortal gesture of a single upraised hand alone.¹⁹

Like a 19th-century Dante and his Virgil, Doré was led by Jerrold through a world entirely new to him. They began and ended their journey on the river, as Dante had in the *Inferno*; and they explored all levels of this strange realm from bottom to top. Sometimes protected by plainclothes detectives and dressed in rags themselves, Doré and Jerrold went a-slumming before it became a morbid form of entertainment for the upper classes.²⁰ Wrote Jerrold:

We plunge into a maze of courts and narrow streets of low houses — nearly all the doors of which are open, showing kitchen fires in the interior, and strange figures moving about. Whistles, shouts, oaths, and growls, and the brazen laughter of tipsy women ... black pools of water under our feet ...²¹

[M]emories of the illustrious dead crowd upon you, while you are arrested at every turn by curious specimens of the living ...²²

The same black spaces, murky caverns, and wretched creatures appear in Doré's illustrations for both the *Inferno* and his *London* study. London malt workers, depicted by Doré waist deep in dark pools of wort (Fig. 4), might just as well have been the tortured, demonic inhabitants — the "illustrious dead" — Doré had conjured up to populate his earlier graphic interpretations of Dante's Hell (Fig. 5).

But if there was a Hell in London, there was also a Heaven. Doré rendered Heavens in lighter, feathery tones of gray and misty white backgrounds even if the

Heaven was really nothing more than a corner of Hyde Park. Doré's depiction of London's upper classes owed something, perhaps, to his earlier work on Dante's *Paradiso*; the same vast and pleasantly vapid backgrounds and the same poverty of figural drawing are apparent in both sets of illustrations. Ironically, Doré's poor tormented souls, whether residents of London's seamier side or of Dante's Hell, possess a life force that is strangely more stimulating than any of his formulaic angel or characterless upper-class figures. On occasion, Doré's depictions of cultivated, yet slightly melancholy, gentlewomen attending an opera or playing croquet (Fig. 6) are more reminiscent of his illustrations for Dante's *Purgatorio* (Fig. 7) than of those for *Paradiso*. The comparison is an appropriate one, for Purgatory is that realm, not quite Heaven but decidedly more highly and serenely organized than Hell, where the Blessed acquiesce to a certain quiet suffering and systematic discipline amidst the promise of a life of total and unrestrained happiness. Doré's wealthy classes in *London* similarly bear this purgatorial tone of resignation to a fate that, while largely pleasurable, could have mildly painful moments whenever proscribed by the mores of class behavior. The conduct of the rich, so serious in their pursuit of amusement as if in atonement for some venial sin of luxury, was explained by Jerrold in his accompanying text as the "performances of strict duty, [more] than the abandon of pleasure."²³

Holidays provided Doré with the opportunity to show what happened when the upper and lower classes met. The University Boat-Races brought not confrontation but acceptance of one's proper rung on the social ladder.²⁴ A plate entitled "The River Bank—Under the Trees" is a thinly veiled yet matter-of-fact social commentary (Fig. 8). Doré depicted the upper classes seated comfortably on the grassy banks of the Thames while up above, barely distinguishable from the limbs of the shade trees to which they cling, he placed the lithe torsos and prehensile appendages of arboreal creatures represent-

ing the lower classes. This engraving evidences the widespread notoriety of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution as applied to human beings published only the year before under the title *The Descent of Man*. In his clever visual integration of the Darwinian explanation of mankind's genesis, Doré effectively exploited a contemporary cultural milepost which added layers of new meaning to the mythical underpinnings of his vision of London as either Heaven or Hell. He had found a most timely metaphor by which to reinforce his too neatly drawn dichotomy between the rich as blessed and the poor as damnable.²⁵

As Millicent Rose has suggested, the contrasts — London as Paradise for the wealthy or London as Inferno for the poor — tend toward naive generalization and convenient oversimplification.²⁶ They make eloquent points nonetheless, for Doré's illustrations do not prevaricate about the real London so much as they expand that reality into places so perfectly monotonous or so perfectly alien that no other illustrations have been better able to capture the tempo of 19th-century urban industrialism. "Over London—By Rail" is the very best of these visions (Fig. 1). On the whole, the backgrounds of Doré's engravings present an especially identifiable and rather complete picture of a particular city's built environment; yet *London* is neither an architectural survey or the city not a tourist's guidebook to popular attractions and landmarks. There are, to be sure, glimpses of the Houses of Parliament and the interior of Westminster Abbey, luminous renderings of the floating dome of St. Paul's, and romantic silhouettes which recall the asymmetries of St. Pancras Station; but the real genius of the book is the remarkable way in which Doré revealed the everyday inner workings of the guts of the city. Through Doré's artful manipulation of facts into images, the industrial architecture of London comes to life; its forms make eminent sense; and Doré has managed to capture the wonderful harmonies and symmetries of its rhythmic functioning (Fig. 2). Whether it

is the shadowy realm of an underground railway or the airy glass and metal dome of a food market, Doré's industrial and workaday settings are activated to the highest degree by a population crowding the composition to its very edges.

London — especially in those of its passages marked by a frank and explicit exposition of those cruelties of urban life not so easily veiled by literary or cultural allusions — was an exception to most of Doré's *oeuvre*. His youthful nature and childlike attitude had previously inclined him to illustrate romantic fables, great pieces of fiction, and the Bible. What he went after with sketchbook and pencil in his work for *London* was something so different, so sobering, and so startlingly real that Doré himself had to acknowledge how much London had changed him and how much he had matured.

As a child Doré preferred to fraternize with street vendors and itinerant entertainers. He claimed that he was able to see angels sustaining Strasbourg's cathedral; James McNeill Whistler said that the man merely had bats in belfry.²⁷ Once, Doré was arrested for attempting to climb the cathedral at Rouen.²⁸ And the news of a major commission just awarded to him elicited such a giddy and robust handspring over a dinner table filled with his mother's guests that he accidentally sent his heels crashing into a valuable chandelier overhead.²⁹

The thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians was Doré's favorite Biblical passage.³⁰ It speaks of faith, hope, and charity — charity being the greatest of these and charity being Doré's personal religion. For instance, at the age of seven he had given a street urchin his shoes, and as an adult he could be found each New Year's Day at the foundling hospitals giving out gifts and telling fairy tales.³¹ But the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians also speaks of children:



Fig. 7. "Pia in Purgatory"

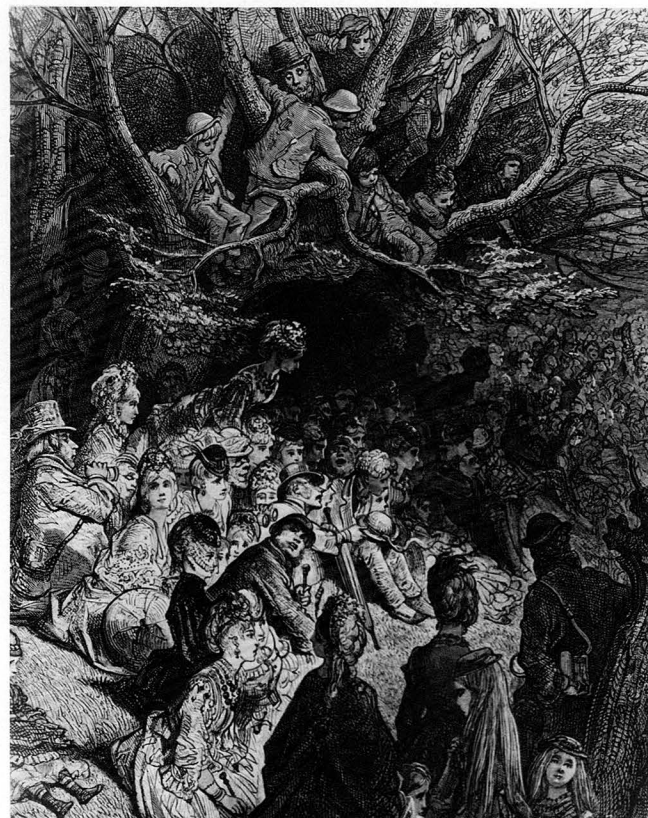


Fig. 8. "The River Bank—Under the Trees"



Fig. 9. "Infant Hospital Patients"

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child and thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

Children, poor little creatures huddled together on the cold stone benches of London Bridge, particularly touched Doré during his pilgrimage through London. He relied little upon sketches or notes, preferring to store the details of what he had seen in what he called the collodion in his head.³² However, when he did jot down the rare notation, especially of such pitiable scenes of children, he would ask Jerrold to stand in front of him in order to help mask his actions.³³

Of special interest here is the very last engraving in *London* (Fig. 9). It depicts two children in a hospital; one plays with toys while the other child has apparently just died. It would seem that this engraving, coming as it does at the end of Doré's pilgrimage, is a metaphor for the change in Doré's character. That change was documented by Jerrold in this passage:

My fellow-Pilgrim told me in one of our by-way gossips that the inevitable *désillusion* fell upon him one morning over his *café au lait*: and parted his youth evermore from his manhood ...³⁴

Doré was profoundly moved by his London experience. But because he was unable to accept fully, much less solve, the more brutish aspects of city life through the head-on pragmatic methods of a social reformer, Doré fell back, instead, upon his own natural artistic strategy to romanticize and sentimentalize those more unpleasant facts of life. His answer to the monumental woes of urbanism was naive — charity.³⁵ In the end, Doré probably realized how poorly his childlike perspectives had served him personally in confronting the squalor of back alleys, the pain of slums, and the drudgery of lives paced by modern mechanization. And more than just put away his childish things, the very child within Doré died. One has to believe that Doré never again turned another one of those youthful handspings after London.

FOOTNOTES

- Mumford used this term in *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1938), passim; and later in *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1961), passim.
- Joanna Richardson, *Gustave Doré: A Biography* (London: Cassell Ltd., 1980), p. 115.
- Nigel Gosling, *Gustave Doré* (Newton Abbot, England: David & Charles, 1973), pp. 7, 39.
- Ibid.*, p. 34. Also see Lucien de Dardel, "Gustave Doré: Caricatures from his School Days," *Graphis*, 8, No. 43 (1952), 432; and Elbert Hubbard, *Little Journeys to the Homes of Eminent Painters* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), p. 471.
- "[D]er Romantiker auf dem maschinisierten, mit Dampf betriebenen Flugelrad." Konrad Farnet, *Gustave Doré: der industrialisierte Romantiker* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1963), I, 125.
- Zola, who more or less began his career as an art critic with his reviews of Doré's illustrations for *Don Quixote* (1863), reproached the artist for his ignorance of anatomy and his predilection for the imaginary. See Antoinette Ehrard, "Emile Zola et Gustave Doré," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 79 (March 1972), 188-190.
- Doré's illustrations to Dante's *Inferno*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the Bible appeared in English editions in 1866; the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* followed in 1868.
- Dardel, p. 432.
- Blanchard Jerrold (1826-1884) first met Doré in 1855 when both men were in Boulogne to cover the visit of Queen Victoria to France. Douglas Jerrold, Blanchard's father, was a journalist for *Punch* and the man who gave the 1851 London Crystal Palace its name. The younger Jerrold had written a guidebook for that exposition. See Eric de Maré, *The London Doré Saw: A Victorian Evocation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), pp. 11, 17.
- Ibid.*, p. 9.
- The works of Mayhew and Smith were also originally serialized in an effort to reduce their costs so that the lower classes, of whom they wrote, could afford the studies, too.
- Jerrold noted that Doré was always talking about the author and that Doré claimed Dickens had "powers akin to his own." See Maré, pp. 9-10.
- Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold, *London: A Pilgrimage* (London: Grant and Co., 1872), p. 16.
- Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (New York: MacMillan Co., 1958), p. 30.
- Ibid.*, p. 29.
- Ibid.*, p. 30.
- Ibid.*
- Maré, pp. 66, 70, 209.
- Cecil B. DeMille, producer of the epic Hollywood film *The Ten Commandments*, was so attracted to the larger than life melodrama of Doré's work that he sent agents to bid on some Doré paintings which were on the auction block in New York in 1947. See Mary Sanders, "Doré Regilded," *Architectural Forum*, 87 (December 1947), 126, 128.
- Maré, p. 37.
- Doré and Jerrold, p. 145.
- Ibid.*, p. 84.
- Ibid.*, p. 174.
- Doré also used the Derby to show how the classes intermingled.
- At least one other engraving in *London*, "Zoological Gardens—The Monkey House," cleverly conveys a subliminal commentary on the Darwinian theory of mankind's evolution and the public interest it generated. It depicts a huddled group of monkeys so seen from the inside of their cage looking out through the chain-link fencing toward a group of huddled human observers that one might easily be convinced of their Darwinian kinship one to another. Jerrold's corresponding text speaks of "frequenters who appeared to take an almost family interest in the fretful chimpanzee, who died in our bitter climate of consumption" and of the majority of *habitués* to the zoological collection who always ended their visits with the monkeys. See Doré and Jerrold, pp. 110-111.
- See the Introduction by Millicent Rose for *London: A Pilgrimage* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), p. ix; this Dover edition is an unabridged republication of the original work published by Grant & Co., London, in 1872.
- Hubbard, p. 471.
- Gustave Doré and Edmund Ollier, *The Doré Gallery* (London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, 1870), pp. xxi-xxii.
- Hubbard, p. 494.
- Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *The Terrible Gustave Doré* (New York: Marchbanks Press, 1943), p. 40.
- Blanche Roosevelt, *Life and Reminiscences of Gustave Doré* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1185), pp. 35, 285.
- Gosling, p. 86. "Collodion" can be defined either as a protective coating for photographic plates or as a salve for wounds. While Doré was certainly aware of the new medium of photography and even had a photographic memory, one cannot help but wonder whether he also meant to suggest that he was trying to apply a mental salve of dispassion to the scars such pitiable scenes of poor children left upon his memory.
- Maré, p. 11.
- Doré and Jerrold, p. 47.
- Millicent Rose, *Gustave Doré* (London: Pleiades Books, 1946), p. 63.