

“The Pretence of Civilisation”: Gothic Progress in G. W. M. Reynolds’s *The Mysteries of London*.

In the late 1840s, artist Charles Bigot travelled to Farringdon with the aim of capturing an image of “[p]art of the ground cleared for the new street to Clerkenwell” (Figure 1). The road referred to in the inscription of Bigot’s work is Farringdon Road, and the “ground cleared” for its construction is the product of one of the first major slum clearances in Victorian London (White 2008, 42-3). Despite the work’s caption, however, Bigot does not merely render cleared ground. His vision also includes medieval houses, uneven skylines, and for-sale signs.



Figure 1. Charles Bigot. *Part of the ground cleared for the new street to Clerkenwell*, illustration, British Museum, London.

Bigot’s illustration neatly exemplifies a tension of early-Victorian slum clearances. “Creative destruction,” as Joana-Hofer Robinson has explored, “exposed the built environment’s palimpsestuous layers to view, even while improvements were conceived as forward progress” (Hofer-Robinson 2018, 25). In Bigot’s work, London’s past can be read in the

roughshod appearance of the houses that form the sketch's background. Narrowly escaping clearances, these properties are remnants of London's past and have, evidenced by the piles of rubble partially obstructing the houses from view, been newly exposed. We can see the space's present in the foreground: the empty plots, the debris, and the new road that has not yet been paved. The city's future is here too, in the for-sale signs that line the recently constructed road and motion towards a time when the empty plots will be filled. In other words, as London modernised more of the city's past came into view.

This chapter focuses on a setting a few feet away from the location depicted by Bigot – “Old Death's Establishment” (Reynolds 1846-8, 3:82). A criminal haunt located in a region that epitomised the dynamics of early-Victorian metropolitan improvements, Old Death's Establishment appears throughout volumes three and four (1846-8) of G. W. M. Reynolds's penny-serial *The Mysteries of London/The Mysteries of the Court of London* (hereafter, *Mysteries*). This Establishment is formed of two terrace properties and “mysterious subterraneans and dungeons” (Reynolds 1846-8, 3:208). Situated directly east of Farringdon Road, in a court at the south end of Turnmill Street/Red Lion Street, the setting reflects the perspective on urban spaces that slum clearance encouraged and facilitated; Old Death's Establishment blends old and new London in unexpected ways.

Examining the chronology of *Mysteries*' third and fourth volumes alongside Reynolds's rendering of Farringdon, I argue that the chapters set in Old Death's Establishment (hereafter the Turnmill Street episode) serve to establish a continuity between benighted epochs and the present day. This chapter interrogates each temporal marker within the episode, exploring the historical paradigms through which mid-nineteenth century Victorians viewed the slum, and examining Reynolds's use of gothic disorder as a means of critiquing modern Britain. In this

“Establishment,” I posit, ‘the establishment’ is rendered barbaric. Far from indicating how far London had progressed, in *Mysteries*, metropolitan improvements expose modern society as backwards.¹

In the 1840s, Farringdon and its neighbouring regions were notorious sites of destitution, disease, and crime. The area housed the tellingly named districts of ‘Little Hell’ and ‘Jack Ketch’s Warren,’ and Farringdon Road was (and is) just a stone’s throw from Saffron Hill and Field Lane – streets made famous as the home of London’s criminal underworld in *Oliver Twist* (1837-8). As with the majority of metropolitan improvements in this period, the aim of the Farringdon Road works was thus twofold: to allow for more efficient circulation of goods by replacing densely-packed medieval alleyways with an easily-traversable thoroughfare, and to rid the area of the social ills plaguing its lower-class inhabitants (White 2008, 30; Nead 2011, 163). These goals were intimately interlinked. The Select Committee on Metropolis Improvements (who endorsed Farringdon Road’s construction in the late 1830s) optimistically announced, for instance, that the establishment of “great thoroughfares” would improve social conditions: “The moral condition of these poorer occupants must necessarily be improved by immediate communication with a more respectable inhabitancy; and the introduction at the same time of improved habits and a freer circulation of air” (Select Committee 1838).

In practice, although Farringdon Road’s construction (which began c.1840) succeeded in offering an unobstructed connection between the Thames and Clerkenwell, the works did little to alleviate social ills. As contemporary Victorian commentators and modern historians have alike observed, so-called metropolitan improvements often exacerbated the very

¹ By 1846, ‘slum’ had yet to acquire its modern meaning. Both ‘slum’ and ‘slum clearance’ have, however, long been used retrospectively in accounts of this period.

problems they sought to solve (Stedman-Jones 2013, 180-181; Hofer-Robinson, 10).

Farringdon Road's construction was preceded by the mass eviction of lower-class populations as properties along the Fleet valley were levelled; the state offered no alternative accommodation. As was the case across London, areas that abutted clearances subsequently became intensely overcrowded as displaced communities flocked to the closest available housing. Placing unprecedented strain on already densely populated locales, slum clearance aggravated public health problems, and led to an increase in multi-family occupancies and criminal activity. Friedrich Engels summarises this phenomenon neatly in 'The Housing Question': "[t]he breeding places of disease, the infamous holes and cellars in which the capitalist mode of production confines our workers night after night, are not abolished; they are merely shifted elsewhere!" (Engels 1878).

It is against this tumultuous backdrop of improvement that *Mysteries'* Turnmill Street episode plays out. The episode details Tom Rain/Rainford's exploration of "The Mysteries of Old Death's Establishment" and his brother's subsequent imprisonment within the property (Reynolds 1846-8, 3:82). Old Death – or Benjamin Bones as he is otherwise known – is volume three's central antagonist, and oversees a city-wide network of thieves. Tom is no less of a criminal than Bones and is first introduced to us as a highwayman. Nonetheless, Tom is the volume's hero and is explicitly presented as a victim of circumstance. This episode follows Tom and Old Death from a pub in Lock's Fields across Blackfriars Bridge and into Farringdon. Held at gunpoint, Old Death is coerced by Tom into revealing the location of his residence, reception house (where stolen goods are received), and store-rooms – all of which, we discover, are situated within the Establishment. Purportedly, Tom merely intends to gain leverage over the old fence; as readers will later learn, however, Tom is motivated by a much more personal objective. In a later chapter, Reynolds returns his narrative to the Turnmill

Street property. This time we follow Tom's brother Arthur, who has been imprisoned by Old Death, as he escapes the Establishment and navigates London's sewers.

Stagnation and Degeneration

The historically-aware, forward-looking perspective that we see in Bigot's work is reflected in the Turnmill Street episode's unstable chronology. *Mysteries*' third volume begins with the assertion that "[i]t was about nine o'clock in the evening of the 2nd of November 1826" (Reynolds 1846-8, 3:1). Reynolds's choice to immediately situate his reader in a distinct historical moment is unremarkable. A significant portion of *Mysteries* takes place in the past. Volume one begins in 1832, and volume five in 1795. Neither *Mysteries* as a whole, nor volume three, are straightforwardly historical texts, however; the serial differs from Reynolds's legitimate historical novels in significant ways (e.g. *The Days of Hogarth: or; The Mysteries of Old London*, *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf*, *The Necromancer*). Employing a narrator who writes explicitly from the reader's present, Reynolds draws on contemporary journalism, references and fictionalises current events, and cites recent publications. *Mysteries* pulls forward to contemporary London even as it narrates the city's past. The Turnmill Street episode thus joins the majority of *Mysteries* in shifting between a historical time-setting and the reader's present. This episode is nonetheless noteworthy as the number of temporal markers in Reynolds's prose increases dramatically. The serial's already complicated relationship to time setting intensifies; the sequence is crowded with references to historical moments, contemporary politics, and visions of the future.