

**Erasure and Preservation in Early Victorian Bloomsbury:
Bulwer Lytton's *What will he do with It?* and the Politics of Improvement**

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He sometimes took them to the street where she had lived; but new improvements had altered it so much, it was not like the same. The old house had been pulled down, and a fine broad road was in its place. At first, he would draw with his stick a square upon the ground to show them where it used to stand. But, he soon became uncertain of the spot, and could only say it was thereabouts, he thought, and that these alterations were confusing.

Such are the changes which a few years bring about, and so do things pass away, like a tale that is told!¹

The Old Curiosity Shop

Charles Dickens ends *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1) on a curious note, choosing unexpectedly to narrate the demolition of the novel's titular space and to draw attention to a new construction that arises in its place. Kit is drawn back on occasion to this place with which he most associates Little Nell, but since her death it has been transformed into a 'fine broad road'. The road presents itself as both an aid

authoritative discourse.²

‘Improvement’ was indeed a word that would have struck contemporary readers as being coloured with a sense of officialdom, and a officialdom with quite a specific remit. While *The Old Curiosity Shop* appears to be set in the early 1820s, its preoccupation with new roads is highly redolent of the time in which it was written, when the Metropolitan Improvement Select Committee in Parliament was actively planning to restructure London by way of new roads like the one to which Kit confusedly returns. The committee’s second report of 1838 argued that road building was the solution – if not quite the romance ending – not only to the traffic problems of the city, but also, through the slum clearance involved, to the problems of poverty:

There are some districts in this vast city through which no great thoroughfares pass, and which being wholly occupied by a dense population, composed of the lowest class of labourers, entirely secluded from the observation and influence of wealthier and better educated neighbours, exhibit a state of moral and physical degradation deeply to be deplored... 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, will tend materially to extirpate those prevalent diseases which are now not only so destructive among themselves, but so dangerous to the neighbourhood around them.³

Whereas Dickens’s novel is vague about the actual whereabouts of the new road it mentions, the Metropolitan Improvement Select Committee was very specific in its recommendations. In their 1838 report they selected three sites of particular ‘degradation’ that most urgently required this urban development: the rookery of St. Giles, on the southern edge of Bloomsbury; roads around Spitalfields; and the notorious slums behind Westminster Abbey. Chief among these and first to be actually restructured was St. Giles’s, a notorious area in the heart of London – worryingly close to middle and upper class districts – to Bloomsbury and the West End. Since the mid eighteenth century St. Giles had declined into vice, criminality and squalor. A number of urban commentators, including Dickens and Henry Mayhew, highlighted the area as being the most shocking of the pockets of destitution in London. Indeed, in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels made the rookery of St. Giles the subject of his first and most intense description of London poverty, noting that it was (in 1844, when he wrote the famous book) ‘at last, about to be penetrated by a couple of broad streets.’⁴ One of the streets he anticipates, and the first of those planned by the second committee to be

² Mikhail M. Bakhtin ‘Discourse in the novel’ in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (University of Texas Press, 1981). Bakhtin’s theory of the polyphonic novel was expounded with recourse to another later Dickens novel, *Little Dorrit*.

³ *Second Report from Select Committee on Metropolis Improvements; with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Plans*, 1838 p. iv, quoted in Jerry White’s *London in the 19th Century: A Human Awful Wonder of God* (London: Vintage, 2008) p30

⁴ Friedrich Engels *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* (London: Penguin Classics, 1987) p71

built became named New Oxford Street. It was built between 1843 and 1847, and was the pioneer of the committee's proposed morally inflected (if fiscally challenged) spatial reformation of the city. The 'fine broad road' Dickens inscribed into the last lines of *The Old Curiosity Shop* cannot perhaps be seen as a straightforward fictional dream or blueprint of the road James Pennethorne,⁵ its architect, had planned. Still, the two roads, fictionally complete and actually unbuilt in 1841, share an aura of early Victorian energy and serious-mindedness. It seems no great fancy to hazard that the sense of cautious hope about the new road Dickens achieves through the uneasy juxtaposition of his narrator's praising adjectives and Kit's confusion, is of the same ilk as the mixed enthusiasm and apprehension with which many interested Londoners followed the proposals and the allowed road.

Guy Darrell, the central character of the novel, is walking alone in London, 'at first mechanically, in the restless desire of movement'. 'Chance-led', he '[finds] himself in the centre of that long straight thoroughfare which connects what once were the separate villages of Tyburn and Holborn'⁶ – a description of Oxford Street that, if not oblique to a reader with some knowledge of the city's historical geography, is nonetheless peculiar enough to draw attention to itself. Here, acting on a whim born of his 'reverie', Darrell determines to make his way to a place associated with his past, the district of London in which he settled down and established his successful career in law, Bloomsbury. The narrator – like those of Dickens's mature multi-plot novels - intriguingly chooses not to anticipate his character's movements by telling us the location of Darrell's destination, but instead shadows him as he makes his way through the streets, like a ghost:

He had now gained a spo

of lanes and passages'⁸ – the slum area of St. Giles, or perhaps nearby Seven Dials, both of which lay to the south of the recently constructed New Oxford Street. It is significant that this area is described as a 'maze', as it is thus clearly meant to remind the reader of the narrator's earlier reference to the 'labyrinth of courts and alleys' that existed before New Oxford Street was constructed through them. This is the place that was meant to have been erased, the place that – in the 1838 committee's vision – was meant to have been ventilated and enlightened out of itself. The resemblance of what had been to what remains seems to imply that the plans of wider improvement the road represented have not been fulfilled.

This maze or labyrinth, then, has not been destroyed totally, but exists in all its criminality and disease-harbours squalor not far from its original site. The squalid labyrinth survives in the near vicinity of its polar opposite spatial symbol, the new well-lit street, which was supposed to ventilate the city, and cancel out the noxious threats associated with poverty. But as the narrator commented earlier on in the novel about a different town, the well-to-do-ness of main 'improved' streets should always be recognised as something of a screen, and a front, to the much less presentable reality that lurks in their midst: '...lost amidst those labyrinths of squalid homes which, in great towns, are thrust beyond view, branching off abruptly behind High Streets and Market Places, so that strangers passing only along the broad thoroughfares, with glittering shops and gaslit causeways, -exclaim, "Where do the Poor live?"'.⁹

Darrell is stalked by someone who emerges from an alley in this maze. Indeed, our protagonist seems about to be attacked, when – unbeknownst to him – a policeman intervenes by placing himself between the 'tatterdemalion' and his intended victim. The policeman stays in this position between the two until Darrell reaches the well-lit streets near his home, where Jasper Losely gives up hope of approaching him, and '[flees] like a guilty thought' back to the labyrinth from which he came. The scene is one of the most memorable in the novel, even though it is also, in a sense, a non-event. Its significance is in the dramatisation of what Walter Benjamin identified as 'the phenomenon of the border'. From safe, even dull Bloomsbury, to the heart of darkness in dangerous St. Giles, Darrell's walk home stages the problem of geographical proximity and porosity - the problem that in London, regions of wealth and order exist very close to havens of poverty, disease and disorder. Darrell's error of itinerary is such a

⁸ *WWHDWI* (I.388)

⁹ *WWHDWI* (I.235)

slight one, and yet it almost delivers him into the clutches of his nemesis. This sense of threat and danger lurking around the corner is partly what drove the Victorians in their efforts to improve both the built environment of their cities, and to improve the minds, bodies and souls of the people these cities contained. Bulwer Lytton in *What will he do with it?* implicitly holds a light up to the 'improvement' represented by New Oxford Street and finds it wanting.

Some early prophets had seen flaws in the Metropolitan Improvement Select Committee's plan even before the road's construction was fully underway. *The Builder* warned as early as January 1845 that though 'St. Giles's...is gradually disappearing...unless timely means are taken, the evil is only removed to another quarter of the metropolis, not eradicated.'¹⁰ *Punch*, with a rhetorical flourish later that year, eloquently put its finger upon the same problem:

The battle of the streets...is revolutionising the metropolis. Unfortunately for the narrow, the broad carries, or rather knocks down everything before it. We shall soon be utterly without a lane or alley throughout the whole of London; while as to architecture, the old brick and tile order will be utterly superseded by the modern stuccoite. It is all very well to enlarge the streets if we can sufficiently enlarge the means of the people to live in them; but...[the] old police principle of 'move on', 'you can't stop here', seems to be now generally applied to those of humble means, and the question is, 'where are they all to go to?' So as they are got rid of somehow, this is a question which gives little trouble to those who are bent on 'improving' a neighbourhood.¹¹

Bulwer Lytton's 'Where do the poor live?' is a not distant relative of *Punch*'s 'Where are they all to go?', and both are pertinent questions, in the face of such apparent revolutions in town planning. Building a road through an overcrowded part of town is one thing, but by not making any plan or bearing any responsibility for the re-housing of the unfortunate tenants that were evicted, the planners raised more questions than they answered. Where *did* the poor go, with all their miasmatic problems, of vice, disease and crime? Not far, in the main. A sensationalising report in *The Times* from May 1848, entitled 'DARING ROBBERIES', hints that the criminal underclass who were the real target of St. Giles's demolition were not defeated or dispersed at all. Instead, they stayed nearby and – in the armchair opinion of the ever-shocked ever-complacent establishment - actually appropriated advantage from the 'improvement' on their doorstep:

The public, and especially visitors of the British Museum, are warned that several very impudent street robberies have

¹⁰ *The Builder* January 18, 1845 p29

¹¹ *Punch* 9, 1845, p64

lately been committed in broad day in that vicinity. New Oxford-street and the west end of Great Russell-street are the

by penetrating them with broad roads looked to many in 1856 as though it had not been successful (later, after concerted attempts through the decades, the poor were essentially rooted out of central London, and ghettoised in the East end or parts of the south). There remained places to hide, dens away from the 'light of day' in which a population could still 'shrink'. The improvement was, in 1857, only cosmetic, and partial. Moreover, influence, it was demonstrated, could work both ways, and it was just as likely – or more so – that urchins would 'issue' from the poor areas into the rich ones nearby, as that the health and morals of the rich would flow into the slums. As the *Times* report above from 1848 had said, New Oxford Street should not be thought safe for visitors to the British Museum, even if it looked it, for, while on the one hand it could be seen positively as having penetrated and ventilated a bad neighbourhood, on the other, it could equally be seen as the penetrated party – by a whole host of 'suspicious-looking' connecting streets. As a solution to the problems of a divided society, of class instability and conflict, its form of urban development left much to be desired, although the inequalities revealed through the eviction of poor tenants would not be thoroughly or standardly attended to by the state until the twentieth century. Darrell's hair's-breadth escape from Jasper Losely on his way back from a Bloomsbury square is precisely a narrative exposition of the continuing problem posed by New Oxford Street, and the partial failure it represented for the ambitious Victorian doctrine of urban 'improvement'.