

# Southey Versus London: Proto-Romantic Disaffection and Dehumanisation in the British Metropolis

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## Article abstract

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## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **Southey Versus London: Proto-Romantic Disaffection and Dehumanisation in the British Metropolis**

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#### **Abstract**

This article explores Robert Southey's attitudes to London, using his often negative reactions as a means of examining his construction of his identity while also employing his works as a prism through which to consider the social and representational problems that the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century city presented for literary writers. It places Southey's handful of London-related poems in the context of his wider oeuvre by analysing his correspondence, his *Letters from England* (1807), and the *Colloquies* (1829). Through looking at consonances with works by William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Edmund Burke, among others, the article shows how Southey constructed a vision of London as a place of perverted sublimity, where scale and repetition served to grind down confidence in one's individual value, leading to sickness, disaffection and alienation. While examining fluctuations in Southey's attitudes over time, it contends that his fear of the London mob, his distaste at urban pollution, and his disgust at the condition of the poor remained relatively constant over the course of his career, causing him to develop attitudes to the metropolis that shaped both his own later conservatism and larger Romantic ideologies that positioned cities as uncongenial environments for the comfortable operation of poetical minds.

#### **Biographical Note**

Matthew Sangster is a Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Material Culture at the University of Glasgow. He has recently published articles on reading in eighteenth-century Saint Andrews (*Review of English Studies*), marginalised lives in Romantic-period London (*Life Writing*), and John Tallis's *London Street Views* (*Journal of Victorian Culture*). His current research includes the AHRC-funded 'Institutions of Literature, 1700-1900' network (with Jon Mee), a Carnegie Trust-funded project transcribing and interpreting Glasgow's eighteenth-century library borrowing registers, and the digital mapping resource 'Romantic London' (<http://www.romanticlondon.org>).

1. Discussing Robert Southey's literary relationship with London is in some respects a relatively straightforward proposition, as he spent little time considering the city in his poetry. He mentions London by name in 1790s verse such as his epic *Joan of Arc*, his drama *Wat Tyler*, and the shorter poems "The Death of Wallace" and "Vision of the Maid of Orleans," but in these works the city is evoked principally as a historical scene or a metonymic referent for the English state. There are a few relatively minor poems in which he does explicitly address the burgeoning contemporary metropolis (which this article will discuss at a later stage), but London is a long way from being one of Southey's principal poetic subjects. In common with many of his Romantic-period contemporaries, he shied away from the types of urban scenes frequented and created by early eighteenth-century versifiers like John Gay, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift, locating his own inspirations in environments both more domestic and more exotic. For the kinds of epic, personal, and political poetry that Southey was invested in producing, London presented a series of uncongenial complications. An unprecedentedly large and diverse city of a million souls was not an easy place within which to uncover heroism, define clear meanings, or assert the value of one's individual subjectivity. Southey responded rationally, if somewhat disappointingly, by locating the vast majority of his effusions elsewhere. An article that confined itself to Southey's London-related poetry would be a brief and tenuous one, from which it would be difficult to draw out much that was conclusive.
2. Fortunately, Southey was far from being exclusively a poet and his other public and private writings paint a substantially fuller picture of his marked antipathy towards London. Examining his attitudes—which shifted in their focus but only modestly in their negativity over the course of his career—allows us to trace some plausible explanations as to why Southey usually avoided composing city-based poetry while also providing means for understanding the larger implications of the criticisms he levelled at the city. These reflected and at times informed wider social, cultural, and aesthetic anxieties about metropolitan living.
3. As he aged, Southey moved from espousing a radical critique of London as a factory of dehumanisation to endorsing a sceptical line on the value of metropolitan representation and innovation, a position generally associated with conservative commentators. As is generally true of his thinking, this movement was less contradictory than it might initially seem. Southey's shifting spectrum of critiques had a common root in his consistently anxious

responses to the new kinds of class relations and systems of specialisation that were emerging within the expanding metropolis. Throughout his active career, he expressed concerns regarding the healthiness of society in London, seeing the city as an environment that placed substantial and disabling mental and physical pressures on its inhabitants. As he aged, his view of London as a place where the strong oppressed the weak shifted to one that focused on the difficulties of maintaining a mutually beneficial civic order in “[a] populous and a smoky city” (Shelley, “Peter Bell the Third” 103), but both of these views were grounded in his sense that the metropolis attenuated the social bonds uniting the unfortunate souls who were forced to dwell within its precincts.

4. In this respect, Southey was largely in agreement with William Wordsworth, who argued in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that “the encreasing accumulation of men in cities” was one of the main causes of a modern malady that served to “blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and ... reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor” (I xviii). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth’s collaborator on *Lyrical Ballads* and its philosophy, argued along similar lines elsewhere, contending while reflecting on canals in *The Watchman* in 1796 that “Thousands, and even millions, of new hands, not pent up in corrupt, and corrupting towns, but every where scattered in villages and hamlets ... would nourish up health and happiness with simplicity of manners” (223). Conversely, he believed that in Britain’s present circumstances, men were assembled in great numbers “in crouded cities full of diseases contagious to body and mind ... for the interest and convenience of the master” (224). While Nicola Trott has argued convincingly that Coleridge later came to admire the “polytheistic or polymorphous resources” (52) of the metropolis, this was not a journey on which he was joined by his brother-in-law, who maintained his early objections to London’s systemic unhealthiness. Southey consistently figured London as a place of sickness and overstimulation, which he was keen to absent himself from both physically and within his written representations.
5. While Southey was able to intellectualise his attitudes towards London in the fashion sketched in the previous two paragraphs, his personal correspondence demonstrates that he also had a number of more idiosyncratic reasons for intensely disliking the city that resulted from his own particular experiences (which included both sickness and overstimulation). His responses encode aspects of the effects of the metropolis in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

centuries that are often passed over while also suggesting some of the reasons why London presented a particularly formidable cultural and representational challenge for writers of Southey's generation. In order to engage with the wider implications of Southey's interactions with the city, this article will pursue three intertwined strands of inquiry. Firstly, it will examine the manners in which Southey's London writings can illuminate aspects of the culture in which he worked that are often occluded by Romantic paradigms. Secondly, it will analyse the ways in which the different genres Southey used to address London serve to provide a range of valuable perspectives on the particularities of the burgeoning metropolis. Finally, it will consider the ways in which Southey's characterisations of the city fit within larger patterns of disenchantment that developed as literary writing became increasingly preoccupied with the complex representations of individual consciousnesses.

6. Southey first arrived in London in April 1788 at the age of thirteen, "never having been more than a mile east of Bath before" (Speck 14), to continue his education at Westminster School. This was the commencement of his longest sustained period of residence in the capital. During his schooldays, he struck up acquaintances with a number of young men who would become lifelong supporters and confidants, including Peter Elmsley, Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, and Grosvenor Charles Bedford. Only a limited amount of Southey's writing from this period survives, but it reveals a somewhat conflicted attitude toward his school that inflected his later writings about London more generally. In the "Farewell to Westminster" that he included in a letter to his friend Charles Collins in January 1793, he made it clear that he valued the community he had built with his compatriots: "my soul / Parts with reluctance from the scene belovd / Where every bliss of social joy I provd" (*CLRS* 39). However, Westminster and its systems also had more anxious associations. In his "dream book," Southey wrote that "Westminster often makes a part of my dreams, which are always uncomfortable. Either I have lost my books, or have Bible exercise to do, and feel that I have lost the knack, or am conscious it is not befitting me to continue at school, and so determine to leave it of my own will" (qtd. in Speck 25). While he made friends at Westminster, he saw its authorities as a despotic regime. In his "Farewell," he describes the school as being ruled by "Pedantry & Pride," seeing it as a place "Where well-wiggd Folly fills the elbowd chair / Where stern Intolerance glows with monstrous stare" (*CLRS* 39). These particular lines were written while the sting of his ejection from Westminster's precincts was still relatively fresh. They can be read helpfully alongside the

reason for his expulsion—an essay condemning the practice of flogging—to characterise his nascent modes of thinking about urban authority.

7. In Southey's essay, published in the fifth number of an ill-fated collaborative periodical called *The Flagellant* that he produced with his school friends, his persona, Gualbertus, works towards the following crescendo:

after an open and candid examination, have I proved the practice of flogging to have originated with the Devil; and I defy the Devil himself to deny it! that it is a custom equally unprofitable and impious; and that it is *unfit to be practised in a Christian country*. Though the cry of "The church is in danger" has raised thousands in the streets of London, and spread conflagration over the houses of unfortunate Roman Catholics: through regard for the church led on the mob in Birmingham, to destroy the effects, and to seek the life of a man, whose philosophic researches *alone* had entitled him to respect and esteem, yet flogging still continues. ([Southey et al.], *Flagellant* 87-88)

The charge Southey seeks to level in this slightly awkward passage is one of hypocrisy, contending that the ruling classes are happy to decry barbarity while employing its instruments, spouting Christian rhetoric while violating Christian values. In this, he placed himself self-consciously in line with the proponents of the French Revolution. He saw the expulsion that resulted from this passage as a sacrifice (albeit a relatively ineffectual one) in the cause of liberty. As he put it in a poem in a letter addressed to Bedford: "To hope that Truth would shelter me how vain / When Truth & Eloquence both faild for Paine" (*CLRS* 37). In this respect, the oppressive establishment elements of London—the undisputed centre of political and social power in Britain—represented an obvious focus for Southey's self-righteous ire.

8. However, this extract also displays an interesting wrinkle in Southey's advocacy for the people through his figuring cities as locations where misinformation, ignorance, and intolerance could easily lead to spectacular violence. Despite his revolutionary sympathies, it is clear that Southey harboured a considerable distrust of the power of the mob, which in his formulation could be roused as easily to oppress as to further the cause of freedom. As Andrew McCann has written of William Godwin, Southey feared the ease with which "rational communicative exchange" could devolve into "mindless uniformity" (61). For him, city populaces would always have the

potential to become instruments for silencing men like Joseph Priestley, annihilating the deference due to the intellectually gifted through numbers and violence. While Southey sought to better the condition of the less fortunate, it is evident that even at this very early stage in his career, he associated himself more comfortably with reform directed from above by men of the class into which he was being educated than with the wholesale overthrow of the civic order through the actions of a roused populace. The people as a whole could not be trusted to be just or judicious in an urban context. In line with many elite print-cultural commentators, Southey generally figured the city's crowds, in Mary Fairclough's words, as sites of "pernicious variance from time-honoured affection, rational debate or obedient compliance with authority" (227).

9. While Southey displayed a consistent fear of the London crowd's potential for unruly violence, he also genuinely deplored the city's systemic inequalities. His letters of the 1790s expand on the relatively cloistered concerns of *The Flagellant* in order to advance harsh and politicised critiques of the metropolis. Addressing his friend John Horseman in 1794, at the height of his explicitly radical period, Southey blustered that he would "rather dwell in the poorest hovel to which Monarchy & Aristocracy have condemn'd honest labour, than in the proud palaces of London" (CLRS 87). At this point in his life, Southey characterised the city as "a large sink of folly dissipation & iniquity," describing it as "an overgrown monster devouring its own children"—a metaphor that becomes particularly interesting when related back to his experiences at Westminster, with the school's disciplinary practices and his expulsion representing, in Southey's own view, monstrous impositions by the authorities upon the young. Contending that "Large cities are inevitably destructive to morality," Southey saw London as a concentrated incarnation of everything that he thought was wrong with the wider world: "if you have ever passed thro the wretched lanes & alleys of St Giles's ... the pestilential haunts of Depravity Misery & Disease, tis utterly impossible but you must yourself have cursed the state of society & wish'd it alterd." Southey's voice here resembles those of other radicals; this tone is perhaps most familiar to modern readers from what would have been at the time a relatively marginal piece of writing: William Blake's poem "London." Southey's contrast between "proud palaces" and the "poorest hovel" closely resembles the contrast struck in Blake's lines "And the hapless Soldiers sigh / Runs in blood down Palace walls" and his comments on cursing in the wretched streets around St Giles chime with Blake's youthful harlot, whose own curse "Blasts

the new-born Infants tear / And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse” (Blake 41). Radical critiques of London in the 1790s often tried to drive home contrasts between the rich centres of established power and those who struggled in their shadows. Such critiques, and the experiences from which they arose, left a permanent mark on Southey. While he modified his position on state authority as he grew older, his disgust at unfeeling treatments of the urban unfortunate remained consistent. In his 1829 *Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, one of Southey’s dialogists and mouthpieces, Sir Thomas More, states that it is a “disgrace of the age and country” that “[n]ot a winter passes in which some poor wretch does not actually die of cold and hunger in the streets of London!” (STM I 63). The younger Southey might not have believed that these deaths resulted from a “want of police and order,” but he would certainly have agreed with More that such avoidable fatalities were “to the opprobrium of humanity.”

10. However, unlike Blake, Southey’s feelings about London were those of a man who desired to be at a personal remove from city’s operations and who often felt estranged from and disgusted by its inhabitants. While, like Charles Lamb, Southey was generally keen to be seen as a man who “look[ed] with no indifferent eye upon things or persons” (Elia 152), he also resembled his friend in recognising that his ability to feel sympathy was a self-confessedly imperfect one. Writing to Grosvenor Bedford in 1796, Southey articulated a similar set of ideas about the metropolis’s social fabric to those expressed in his letter to Horseman, but he shifted in small but significant ways from the attitude he had previously espoused:

one of these days Grosvenor you & I will explore the haunts of poverty in London — & see what Society is. it is composed of two classes — they who oppress & they who suffer. perhaps neither of them conscious of ~~what~~ their guilt & folly. I hate the one class for active evil — I despise the other for *patient* suffering. such are the two species of the humanum genus. you & I are Nondescripts. (CLRS 168)

While Southey’s depiction of class divisions might prefigure *The Communist Manifesto* in certain respects, his version does not seem to include the potential for any kind of productive proletarian uprising; neither does it actively advocate for or valorise the oppressed classes. Instead, Southey condemns both classes while explicitly excluding himself and Bedford from the order that he depicts. One way of reading this exclusion might be to see Southey’s positioning as an assertion of proto-Romantic superiority, with their independence and mobility



affording Southey and his friend privileged and elevated perspectives, analogous in some respects to Wordsworth's perch above Tintern Abbey. Through anticipating the results of his proposed explorations, Southey is able to delineate the larger structures of social relations in the city, splitting its population along Linnaean lines while positioning himself outside the system that he observes. However, the word that Southey chooses to classify himself and Bedford—"Nondescripts"—denotes a more anxious positioning, carrying as it does negative connotations that reflect the difficulties that young writers faced in establishing themselves in London. Southey's hatred of patient sufferers and active oppressors certainly emerges partly from his inability to reconcile their manners of being with his own moral sensibilities, but it also arises in part from the fact that both groups were relatively uninterested in his subjectivity and opinions. The scale of London in the 1790s, when its population was over twice that of Paris and more than ten times that of any other British settlement, mandated kinds of division and specialisation that were not yet current in other, less densely populated, locales. It took Southey a long time to make a reputation in the city, and until the later phases of his career, the metropolitan experience was one that commonly brought home to him the limits of his own capacity for effecting change. To be a self-consciously literary writer or a proto-intellectual in the rapidly expanding London of the turn of the nineteenth century was to experience profound alienation before this had become a defined and respectable ideological position and before the languages for articulating it had fully matured. Southey disliked the city for a substantial number of reasons, but two of these were the ways in which its scale had slipped beyond many of the existing resources of the literary forms in which he worked and the ways in which it remained both the most lucrative and the most challenging market in which authors were required to sell themselves.

11. Despite his wish to carve out his own identity through refusing to implicate himself in the struggle of dominant and dominated classes, in the 1790s, Southey felt compelled to engage extensively with the metropolis in pursuit of a stable income. Before the rise of an alternative centre in Edinburgh in the early years of nineteenth century (Duncan), London was Britain's unchallenged print-cultural nexus. As Southey recognised, the vast majority of the publishers and the preeminent sources for and subjects of their publications were located there. Writing to Bedford in February 1795 about his desire to raise money for utopian schemes, he opined that,

London is certainly the place for all who like me are on the world. ... London must be the place — if I & Coleridge can only get a fixd salary of 100 a year between us our own industry shall supply the rest. I will write up to the Telegraph. they offerd me a reporters place but nightly employments are out of the question. my troublesome guest calld honesty — (that starving quality) prevents me from writing in the True Briton. (CLRS 124)

While there is some ambivalence here, Southey is clear that London offers opportunities for professional and personal advancement that are not generally available in other parts of the country. For an educated man of modest means, the city offered numerous potential routes to profit through serving as a cog in its machinery of communications. However, as Southey's comments about the desirability of a fixed salary indicate, many such employments were temporary and unstable. He was far from being a complete nondescript in the eyes of the London print industry, as demonstrated by the offers he received and his ability to access the people he described to Joseph Cottle in 1797 as "the London lions, or literati" (CLRS 203). However, the kinds of engagements that he was invited to take threatened to compromise the sense of individual autonomy that he figured in his letter to Bedford and that remained important to him in his later relations with publishers. Writing to John Murray in 1819, he was keen to assert that while the pay he received for writing for the *Quarterly Review* was "very liberal, & the price which I receive for my writings is by no means a matter of indifference to me ... it can make no difference in the manner of my writing" (CLRS 3201). In context, this assertion was somewhat disingenuous, but it reflects the value that Southey placed on his intellectual independence, an independence that would have been severely threatened by succumbing indiscriminately to the financial inducements offered by London's print-cultural institutions.

12. Fortunately for Southey, he was able to secure the regular income that would in various forms underpin his literary labours for much of his career through the offices of his Westminster friend Charles Wynn, who agreed to pay him a yearly annuity that eventually became a government pension. In return for this support, Southey undertook to study law, a vocation about which he was at best unenthusiastic, not least because it required his entering one of London's Inns of Court and residing in the capital for an extended period (Speck 66). Writing to Bedford in July and August 1796, he wrote that "the law will neither amuse me nor ameliorate

me nor instruct me — but the moment it gives me a comfortable independance — & I have but few wants — then farewell to London!” (*CLRS* 168).

13. When faced with the reality of living in the capital in 1797, Southey sought to keep himself at as great a distance as possible, both in spatial terms (he chose to live on the edge of the city, at Newington Butts) and in affective ones. Even anticipating his period of residence seems to have triggered a further hardening of Southey’s negative attitudes. Explicitly contradicting his 1795 assertion that London must be the place for him, he wrote to Bedford in June 1796 that “London is not the only place for me. I have an unspeakable loathing for that huge city” (*CLRS* 159). He went on to quote William Cowper, whose life he would later write, and to associate himself with the older poet’s view:

“God made the country & Man made the town —” now as God made me likewise I love the country — here am I in the skirts of Bristol — & in ten minutes in ~~th~~ a beautiful country — & in half an hour among rocks & woods with no other company than the owls & jack daws with whom I fraternize in solitude. but London — it is true that you & Wynn will supply the place of the owls & jack daws — but Brixton is not the country — the poplars of Pownall Terrace — cannot supply the want of a wild wood — & with all my imagination — I cannot mistake a mile stone for a rock. (*CLRS* 159)

In this passage, Southey sets himself explicitly against the metropolis and its artificiality, choosing instead to league himself with nature and with the poetic tradition into which he would try to write himself as his career progressed (Fairer). Both of these connections are commonly occurring tropes in much of Southey’s writing about the city insofar as it relates to his own desires. In the 1794 letter to Horseman in which he critiques the metropolis’s inequalities, he approvingly quotes (or slightly misquotes) John Donne: “Sir I do thank God for it, I do hate / Most righteously the town” (*CLRS* 87), a sentiment he repeats in a 1796 letter to Bedford (*CLRS* 178). In a 1797 letter to his brother Thomas, written shortly after he commenced his legal studies, Southey exclaimed:

a man must be made of very strange materials who would remain one hour longer in this accursed city than he can possibly avoid. I hate it & always hated it, with all my heart & with all my soul & with all my strength. I long & labour to be independant that I may quit it for ever. (*CLRS* 206)

In a letter to Bedford written from Bath in November 1797, when he was on his way into the city, Southey fumes, “I have a more deep hatred for a London life than I <can> well express. I lose half the happiness of existence by it. shall I ever be settled where I can see from my window green fields & the setting sun?” (*CLRS* 271). In 1799, writing to Coleridge, he confided that “London always oppresses my spirits like a prison” (*CLRS* 466), echoing sentiments that Coleridge himself had expressed in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” and “Frost at Midnight.”

14. Reading expressions of abhorrence like these makes it clear why Southey was relatively content with the situation he later found himself in at Greta Hall, where the distance to the city meant that he could not be expected to visit regularly. These expressions also serve to align Southey with an emergent kind of sensitive literary understanding that portrayed the city as being ultimately vacuous. Southey never wrote an autobiography on the scale of Wordsworth’s in *The Prelude*, but if he had done so, it is easy to imagine that he might have taken a similar line to his friend, veering repeatedly away from urban overstimulation and ultimately abominating it while extolling instead the play of the natural (or bookish) world upon the mind. Southey’s works and attitudes often sit awkwardly with our expectations of canonical Romanticism, but in his approach to the city, he positioned himself as being largely of a mind with his Laker colleagues and with a carefully-constructed lineage of great poets who set themselves against the metropolis in pursuit of more exalted forms of thought. Southey wanted to be recognised for his individual brilliance and sensitivity; the city mitigated against this both through the quantities of competitors that it contained and through the pressures that its population and its collaborative systems of production placed on the confident expression and acclamation of individual desires. While Southey did engage with metropolitan print-cultural systems, perhaps most explicitly in his collaboration with Bedford on *Specimens of the Later English Poets* (1807), his relations with them were often vexed; Raymond D. Havens opines that the month spent in London in 1804 working on the *Specimens* “nearly finished the poet” (1066). Perhaps one reason why Southey settled relatively comfortably into his later relationship with Murray, despite his occasional anxieties about the publisher’s exploitation of his labour, was that Murray was willing to act as a buffer between Southey and London, providing access to its gossip and publications while allowing him to affect a gentlemanly distance.

15. While existential, social, and aesthetic discomforts were major factors in Southey's disliking London, he also found the city irritating for more quotidian and trifling reasons. In some of his slightly later letters, he is more explicit about the ways in which spring and summer in the city disturbed his peace of body and mind. Writing to Edith in May 1799, he made it clear that he did not enjoy experiencing the back of his neck getting dirty and gritty:

this accursed London! I cannot walk a street without wanting to wash my hands—the air is so thick that my very lungs feel dirty. nothing but noise & nastiness. even the sight of my friends is fatiguing—after absence there is so much to say that I hear & talk till my head throbs with the unremitting exertion. one never enjoys ~~the~~ the company of a friend till we have been long enough together to be silent. ... I am city sick—troubled with the London complaint—that is that my head aches my feet ache my limbs ache—that I am <as> tired as a dog & as dirty as a ... pig. (*CLRS* 403)

Communicating with Charles Danvers while visiting the city in 1806, he wrote in a similar vein:

London never agreed with me so ill—I caught a severe cold & cough, & felt my breathing much affected by that cursed composition of smoke, dust, smuts, human breath, & marsh vapour, which passes for an atmosphere in the metropolis. For ten days I was unwell enough to render it quite prudent to abstain from animal food & all fermented liquors; so wherever I went I dined upon fish & vegetables like a Catholic in Lent, & drank water as rigidly as a Turk. (*CLRS* 1179)

Extracts like this show that Southey's reasons for objecting to London were born from his embodied experiences as well as from his cogitations and self-fashioning desires. London was smelly, dirty, noisy, and busy, assaulting the senses of the relatively sedentary Southey in manners with which he was distinctly uncomfortable. His belief that the city was psychologically unhealthy was bolstered by the physical discomfort and concomitant mental unease that he felt when residing there. London evidently troubled Southey on numerous levels; it is hardly surprising as a consequence that when he wrote about it, it was principally to define himself in opposition to it.

16. While in the 1790s Southey's responses to the city were principally rehearsed in his private correspondence, when he began to write in more various forms during the 1800s, some of his metropolitan discomforts began to bleed into his published work. His most extensive account of

London can be found in *Letters from England* by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella (1807), a travel book written from behind the mask of a travelling Spaniard through which Southey rehearsed many of his favourite critiques of the existing state of things. While the generic form of the travel account regulated Southey's antipathy toward London to a certain extent, *Letters from England* nevertheless provides an interpretation of the city that is at best ambivalent. It depicts the metropolis in far less exhaustive detail than was common in accounts by genuine foreign visitors, like Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz's *A Picture of England* (Leipzig, 1785; translated 1789), Jacques Henri Meister's *Letters Written during a Residence in England* (Zurich, 1795; translated 1799), or Christian August Gottlieb Goede's *The Stranger in England* (Dresden, 1806; translated 1807). While Espriella spends some time walking the streets, discusses the execution of Joseph Wall, and makes set-piece visits to Westminster Abbey, Drury Lane Theatre, and St Paul's Cathedral, he has little time for many of locations that diverted other visitors, like the British Museum, the pleasure gardens at Vauxhall, the London Docks, or the Royal Exchange. Neither does he spend many words speculating on the city's sex trade or high society, common obsessions in other contemporary accounts. Goede's book states explicitly in its subtitle that attention will be paid "chiefly to [the] metropolis," but *Letters from England* is far more interested in Espriella's journey to the Lakes (which Carol Bolton characterises as a "comprehensive exploration" (*LFE* 46)) and in analysing the religious denominations that Southey would later discuss more fully in the *Quarterly Review* (from 1809), his *Life of Wesley* (1820) and *The Book of the Church* (1824). Lip service is paid to London's centrality, but in the construction of the book, the city performs a bracketing role, with Espriella's residences occurring at the beginning and end of his stay and London scenes serving to wrap more extensive and general considerations.

17. When *Letters from England* does directly address London, its tone is often either directly critical of particular aspects of the metropolis or indirectly critical through its describing the negative effects the city has on Espriella's mental state. While Southey's Spaniard anticipates that he will find London to be "the most wonderful spot upon this habitable earth" (*LFE* 104), he quickly discovers numerous things that cause him to moderate this view. His disaffection begins even as he approaches the city, with his account of his journey into the capital echoing many of the sentiments that Southey had expressed privately in his letters:

It was now almost one continued street to London. The number of travellers perfectly astonished me, prepared as I had been by the gradual increase along the road; horsemen and footmen, carriages of every description and every shape, waggons and carts and covered carts, stage-coaches, long, square, and double, coaches, chariots, chaises, gigs, buggies, curricles, and phaetons; the sound of their wheels ploughing through the wet gravel was as continuous and incessant as the roar of the waves on the sea beach. Evening was now setting in, and it was dark before we reached Hyde Park Corner, the entrance of the capital. We had travelled for some time in silence; J—’s thoughts were upon his family, and I was as naturally led to think on mine, from whom I was now separated by so wide a tract of sea and land, among heretics and strangers, a people notoriously inhospitable to foreigners, without a single friend or acquaintance, except my companion. You will not wonder if my spirits were depressed; in truth, I never felt more deeply dejected; and the more I was surprised at the length of the streets, the lines of lamps, and of illuminated shops, and the stream of population to which there seemed to be no end,—the more I felt the solitariness of my own situation. (*LFE* 103-104)

Before Espriella passes through the Hyde Park turnpike, he is already modelling the city as a place of proliferation and concomitant alienation. Metropolitan profusion, evoked through the extensive list of modes of transport, places his equanimity under pressure both through breaking in upon him sonically and through oppressing him with the presences of a great mass of individuals whose view of the world he figures as being irreconcilable with his own. The final sentence establishes an explicitly negative relationship between the scale of the city and Espriella’s psychological health. As he encounters further unencompassable quantities, he becomes increasingly aware of his self as an entity strongly differentiated from his surroundings. Like his creator, Espriella becomes a solitary in the city, but one who is unable to benefit from the solace of genuine solitude. Estranged by metropolitan scale yet unable to escape it, he models the city to his reader as an unpleasant and overbearing psychological imposition.

18. While the emotion Espriella expresses is not quite the “astonishment” that Edmund Burke associates with the sublime in his *Philosophical Enquiry* (47), Espriella’s evocations of vastness, succession, and uniformity recall several of Burke’s major categories. His descriptions

of the city often have affinities with Burke's account insofar as they model sensory overload as possessing startling and disabling powers. However, Southey demonstrates that London's potential for disquieting forms of artificially-inflected sublimity contrasts poorly with the overwhelming creative emotions inspired by natural phenomena. In a later passage, Espriella strikes an explicit contrast between the splendour of weather outside the city and the ways that it manifests within London's bounds:

I happened to sleep in the country when the first snow fell; and in the morning when I looked out of the window, every thing was white, and the snow flakes like feathers floating and falling with as endless and ever-varying motions as the dance of musquitoes in a summer evening. And this mockery of life was the only appearance of life; and indeed it seemed as if there could be nothing living in such a world. The trees were clothed like the earth, every bough, branch, and spray; except that side of the bark which had not been exposed to the wind, nothing was to be seen but what was perfectly and dazzlingly white; and the evergreens in the garden were bent beneath the load. White mountains in the distance can give no idea of this singular effect. I was equally delighted with the incrustation upon the inside of the windows. Nothing which I have ever seen equals the exquisite beauty of this frost-work. But when I returned to London the scene was widely different. There the atmosphere is so full of soot from the earth coal, that the snow is sullied as it falls; men were throwing it from the top of every house by shovels full, lest it should soak through the roof;—and when it began to melt, the streets were more filthy and miserable than I could have conceived possible. (*LFE* 322-323)

In Espriella's vision of the countryside, the snow can operate as a provocation to the mind in manners that evoke the "secret ministry" of the frost in Coleridge's poetry ("Frost at Midnight" 453). However, in the city the possibility of dazzling reflection is compromised by industry and population density. What is white and pure in the countryside is stained and corrupted by the city environment. This distinction is hardly subtle, but it makes apparent Southey's sense that the experience of the city was fundamentally one of disillusionment and disappointment, with potential treasures of insight being rendered quickly down into dross.

19. This evocation of the soot from earth coal is not the only point at which Espriella recalls Southey's letters in expressing a disgusted sense of the city as a hotbed of pollution. Southey's



epistolary sentiments are also echoed in the account of the ever-present noise that Espriella encounters while trying to sleep after his arrival:

The clatter of the night coaches had scarcely ceased, before that of the morning carts began. The dustman with his bell, and his chaunt of dust-ho! succeeded to the watchman; then came the porter-house boy for the pewter-pots which had been sent out for supper the preceding night; the milkman next, and so on, a succession of cries, each in a different tune, so numerous, that I could no longer follow them in my inquiries. (*LFE* 104)

This sonic tapestry is another moment of disappointing semi-sublimity. While Burke associates sublime sound principally with “vast cataracts” and “raging storms,” he also allows that the “shouting of multitudes has a similar effect” (67). Here, though, the multitudes do not cry out in unison; instead, the succession of noises grinds down Espriella’s ability to monitor and understand while also keeping him from slumber. This degradation of Espriella’s faculties maps on both to Southey’s own descriptions of city sickness and to Wordsworth’s assertions about metropolitan overstimulation. While certain people might flourish in London, all these accounts imply that to do so would mandate a dulling of one’s sensibilities that would be a significant price to pay for those who prided themselves on their powers of observation and discernment. Such assertions are hardly unique to the Romantic period; similar arguments have been advanced recently in accounts like Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows*, which decries the attenuating effects that Carr asserts the Internet has on its users’ ability to maintain attention and think deeply. For many Romantic-period writers, the city environment represented a similar kind of dangerous technological imposition on human psychology, with metropolitan systems facilitating a vast increase in the speed with which communications could be established and connections made. In Romantic critics’ eyes, the city’s overwhelming potential arose from thousands of small stimuli, rather than single startling experiences. The psychological effects that it had tended to be configured as deadening or depressing rather than enlightening or inspiring, rendering minds generic rather than reinforcing their particularity. Rather than shocking thoughts into new formations, as the true sublime could, Southey configured the effects of urban scale as potentially causing a death of individuality by a thousand cuts.

20. On a related note, *Letters from England* saw the return to print of Southey’s objections to the group sensibility of the London mob. Espriella is not as straightforwardly critical as Southey is

in his private correspondence on this subject. Objecting to the characterisation of the mob at the execution of Governor Wall as “inhuman and disgraceful,” Espriella contends that while their “revengeful joy” may have been “unchristian” it was “founded upon humanity” (*LFE* 116). However, this assertion follows on from Espriella’s recording the establishment fear that the mob might have prevented Wall’s execution and “pulled him to pieces,” and from the crowd’s sinister supporting role in a previous letter describing the celebration of the Peace of Amiens. Espriella is “disappointed” by the morning pageantry on this occasion, but believes himself to have been “amply rewarded by the illuminations at night” (*LFE* 111). However, he makes it clear that the illuminations were not without tensions:

This token of national joy is not, as with us, regulated by law; the people, or the mob, as they are called, take the law into their own hands on these occasions, and when they choose to have an illumination, the citizens must illuminate to please them, or be content to have their windows broken; a violence which is winked at by the police, as it falls only upon persons whose politics are obnoxious. (*LFE* 111)

While the mob is initially figured relatively benevolently—although a question remains about who determines which political views qualify as obnoxious—Espriella goes on to ascribe disturbing powers of movement and perception to the urban populace. While describing his passage through an obscure side street, he remarks that “had there been a single house unlighted, a mob would have been collected in five minutes, at the first outcry” (*LFE* 111). This threat is made good when Espriella and his hosts seek to wrap up their engagement with the festivities:

It was three in the morning before we reached home; we extinguished our lights and were retiring to bed, believing ourselves at liberty so to do. But it did not please the mob to be of the same opinion; they insisted that the house should be lit up again, and John Bull was not to be disobeyed. (*LFE* 113)

In this passage, the liberties that the mob take cancel out Espriella’s own liberty to retire, overruling his sense of propriety and coercing him with the threat of violence into aligning himself with a kind of representation purporting to be popular opinion. As Carol Bolton notes, Southey drew this anecdote directly from his own experience of London in 1802; in his interleaved copy of the first edition of *Letters from England*, he recorded that “This was our own case. We had lodgings in the Strand at that time” (*LFE* 113). While Espriella dismisses this as an instance of “unreasonableness,” it is followed in the *Letters* by numerous other

references to the mob's uncertain temperament (see *LFE* 182, 267, 269, 296, and 330). Like Coleridge in *The Watchman*, Southey's Spaniard eventually contends that "It will be well for England when her cities shall decrease, and her villages multiply and grow" (*LFE* 334).

21. When addressing the mob in *Letters from England*, Southey certainly pulled some of his punches, constrained perhaps by his persona and his attendant need to conform to the generally laudatory tone employed in foreign authors' accounts of Britain. City dwellers in Southey's accounts are often presented as a species apart, and it is clear from his correspondence that he did not think that the widespread adoption of London's systems was in any way desirable. Writing to his brother Thomas in 1818, he presented a rather more pointed characterisation of the discriminating powers of London's populace:

The proposed object of Parl: Reform is, as far as possible, to make all elections popular, like those of Westminster & Middlesex. The effect of this would be that the mob would then be the electors, would elect none but those who engaged to vote as they were instructed by their constituents,—& this leads to direct & immediate anarchy, ending in the destruction of the state as at Athens & Carthage. (*CLRS* 1899)

For Southey, metropolitan forms of representation were ultimately inimical to the business of good government. In his eyes, such expansions of the franchise could only lead to reductions to the lowest common denominator, with individuals' abilities to think for themselves being disastrously circumscribed by fallible general opinions. For Southey, London's popular elections were harbingers of a chaos in which judgement would be cast aside in favour of prejudice.

22. The concerns about the tyranny of uniform representation that Southey's letter addresses and that seep through in some of Espriella's accounts of the mob manifest more straightforwardly in the Spaniard's critique of central London's architecture:

Yet this metropolis of fashion, this capital of the capital itself, has the most monotonous appearance imaginable.—The streets are perfectly parallel and uniformly extended brick walls, about forty feet high, with equally extended ranges of windows and doors, all precisely alike, and without any appearance of being distinct houses. You would rather suppose them to be hospitals, arsenals, or public granaries, were it not for their great extent. (*LFE* 121)

For Espriella, the appearance of the city proves that the “merchants of this modern Tyre” are deficient in “the spirit of princely magnificence” (*LFE* 121). Instead, they have unwittingly created a mind-numbing spectacle of “succession and uniformity” that evokes what Burke calls the “artificial infinite” (61)—another example of the numbing or perverted version of the sublime that for Southey characterises and mars urban representations. By depicting the city as “an emporium of trade” lacking in genuine character, he makes it seem like a place of ultimately empty exchanges. London magnificence, such as it is, lies in wealth and in scale rather than in details. The city might in certain respects be efficient, but only insofar as its excesses are ultimately self-cancelling, barred from splendour by their generic nature. When Espriella eventually ascends to the top of St Paul’s to survey London, the experience again presents a discouraging kind of sublimity “which completely fills the imagination to the utmost measure of its powers” (*LFE* 181). However, the Spaniard’s summation of the city is also a kind of balance sheet, in which every virtue is cancelled by a vice:

In every direction the lines of houses ran out as far as the eye could follow them, only the patches of green were more frequently interspersed towards the extremity of the prospect, as the lines diverged further from each other. It was a sight which awed me and made me melancholy. I was looking down upon the habitations of a million of human beings; upon the single spot whereon were crowded together more wealth, more splendour, more ingenuity, more worldly wisdom, and, alas! more worldly blindness, poverty, depravity, dishonesty and wretchedness, than upon any other spot in the whole habitable earth. (*LFE* 181)

This moment provides a fitting climax to Espriella’s visit, and it does contain elements of grandeur. However, it makes excess the metropolis’s main quality while also characterising it as a place of profound oppositions. Espriella makes it clear that for him the quantities involved in city calculations will always mitigate against the prospect of genuine improvement. Later writers, like Pierce Egan, would employ similar lines to glorify the city as place of fruitful heterogeneous mixing. However, for Southey, the seething co-existence of the great and the wretched was an implicit rebuke both to the former and to any attempt comprehensively to orient oneself within the profusion of urban space.

23. When Southey did occasionally write poetry about contemporary London, it was with a profoundly satirical bent. His intensely-felt disaffection found an appropriate outlet in the form

of his modifications to his 1799 collaboration with Coleridge, “The Devil’s Thoughts,” which became “The Devil’s Walk” when Southey revised the poem in 1826-7 (*EPW* V 452). In the original version, published in the *Morning Post and Gazetteer*, the Devil roams freely over the world, and while he passes the prison at Coldbath Fields, the metropolis is not really particularised (although in his notes to his own revisions, Coleridge attributes the stanza containing the Coldbath Fields reference to Southey: see Shelley, *Devil’s Walk*). In Southey’s far longer reconfiguration, during the course of observing his “little snug farm of the World” (*EPW* V 457), the Devil spends a considerable amount of time in the city, walking “into London leisurely” (*EPW* V 459) during the poem’s thirteenth stanza and remaining there for the rest of the fifty-seven stanza poem. The Devil finds the city both to his liking and curiously inspiring, as Southey reorders stanzas from the original to locate further outrages specifically within London penitentiaries:

As he passed through Cold-Bath Fields, he look’d  
At a solitary cell;  
And he was well pleased, for it gave him a hint  
For improving the prisons of Hell.

He saw a turnkey tie a thief’s hands  
With a cordial tug and jerk;  
Nimbly, quoth he, a man’s fingers move  
When his heart is in his work.

He saw the same turnkey unfettering a man  
With little expedition;  
And he chuckled to think of his dear slave-trade,  
And the long debates and delays that were made  
Concerning its abolition. (*EPW* V 459-460)

In Southey’s revision, London proves to need no lessons from the Devil; in fact, many of the people he meets are more ingenious tempters than he is himself. There are a number of moments in the poem where the Devil is challenged on strategies of corruption and readily admits the virtues of his interlocutor’s arguments. While these moments are generally played for laughs, there is an undercurrent that might be read as aligning the Devil with the two poets

who authored him insofar as he proves to be somewhat alienated by his urban surroundings. At the end of the poem, the sight of a general's "burning face" strikes him "with such consternation / That home in a hurry his way he did take, / Because he thought, by a slight mistake, / 'Twas the general conflagration" (*EPW* V 467). This is obviously a comic moment, but also one that speaks to the city's power to frighten those who visit it by exposing them suddenly to unfamiliar and overwhelming sights. The Devil, like Southey in his Linnaean breakdown of class species in his 1796 letter to Bedford, seeks to engage with the city as a privileged nondescript, but he is not able wholly to maintain his separation from it. Instead, the city challenges him to recognise his own limitations, ultimately outdoing the Devil himself as an agent of terror and malignity.

24. Much of Southey's later writing on London reiterated his established complaints in a similar manner. In his 1828 "Epistle from Robert Southey, Esq. to Allan Cunningham," another of the handful among his poems that deal directly with the modern city, he writes publicly about the problems of dirt and noise that he had previously noted in his private correspondence and from behind his Spanish mask:

Needless it were to say how willingly  
I bade the huge metropolis farewell;  
Its dust and dirt and din and smoke and smut,  
Thames' water, pavours' ground, and London sky!  
Weary of hurried days and restless nights;  
Watchmen, whose office is to murder sleep,  
When sleep might else have 'weigh'd one's eyelids down;  
Rattle of carriages, and roll of carts,  
And tramp of iron hoofs; and worse than all,  
(Confusion being worse confounded then  
With coachmen's quarrels, and with footmen's shouts)  
My next-door neighbours, in a street not yet  
Macadamized, (me miserable!) *at home!*  
For then had we, from midnight until morn,  
House-quakes, street-thunders, and door-batteries. (*LPW* I 275)

Similarly, in the *Colloquies*, Thomas More rehearses ideas and imagery familiar both from Espriella's climactic description of the city as seen from St Paul's and from Southey's 1790s letters:

London is the heart of your commercial system, but it is also the hot-bed of corruption. It is at once the centre of wealth and the sink of misery; the seat of intellect and empire: and yet a wilderness wherein they, who live like wild beasts upon their fellow-creatures, find prey and cover. ... [I]gnorance and misery and vice are allowed to grow, and blossom, and seed, not on the waste alone, but in the very garden and pleasure-ground of society and civilisation. (*STM* I 61)

By this point in his career, Southey's objections to the city had been extensively rehearsed, with his later writings often returning to a few key arguments, reinflecting them only lightly. For example, in the *Colloquies*, Thomas More instructs Montesinos to ask himself "what security there is that the same blind fury which broke out in your childhood against the Roman Catholics may not be excited against the government, in one of those opportunities which accident is perpetually offering to the desperate villains whom your laws serve rather to protect than to punish!" (*STM* I 60). This reference to the Gordon Riots harks back directly to the attitudes to the mob expressed in Southey's youthful writings in *The Flagellant*, showing his continuing discomfort with what he assumed to be the psychological tendencies of large groups. While in this passage the mob has become unambiguously a threat to the government, rather than a potential tool for the operations of state oppression, it remains consistently an agent of chaos.

25. Despite the persistence of negative characterisations in his later published works, it is evident that as he grew older Southey came to enjoy his visits to London rather more than he had done in his youth. In his account of his father, Charles Cuthbert Southey quotes an 1830 letter to Andrew Bell as an example of "how restless a life [Southey] was compelled to lead in London" (*LCRS* VI 122), perhaps echoing complaints made by Southey within his familial circle. However, in the letter itself, Southey stresses the opportunities that being in the city had afforded him:

I see men who are going into office, and men who are going out, and I am familiar enough with some of them to congratulate the latter, and condole with and commiserate the former. I meet with men of all persuasions and all grades of opinion,

and hear their hopes and their fears, and have opportunities (which I do not let slip) of seeing the mechanism of government, and observing how the machine works. (*LCRS* VI 123-124)

As a greying eminence, Southey was no longer an urban nondescript; instead, he was feted and given opportunities directly to observe the engines of authority whose machinations he had railed against in the 1790s. The circles of power evidently insulated his ego to a certain extent from the alienating effects of the city at large, allowing him to experience the metropolis as a man of consequence. Despite the poem's litany of complaints, the "Epistle to Allan Cunningham" indicates that Southey quite enjoyed the opportunities that his celebrity provided for dressing up and hobnobbing with influential figures. "Of the cup of social joy," he claims in the poem, "No man drinks freelier, nor with heartier thirst" (*LPW* I 277). He also dedicates a number of lines to the joy of watching his bust being crafted, recalling "some golden hours ... while the clay / Beneath the patient touch of Chantrey's hand / Grew to the semblance of my lineaments" (*LPW* I 277).

26. Nevertheless, despite the consolations of drinking and vanity, Southey remained unwavering in characterising London as the "loathed metropolis" (*LPW* I 277). For him, the mixed character and overwhelming human scale of the city would always end up mitigating against genuine distinction by threatening to overwhelm the ability of individuals to represent themselves as feeling beings. It is telling that in his final major work—his sprawling novel-cum-miscellany *The Doctor, &c.*—Southey was careful to locate his protagonist well away from London and to assert that his story of a good, kind, and idiosyncratic man could not reasonably have been set on Harley Street. Had Daniel Dove been a city physician, in Southey's opinion, "the course of such a life would have left him no leisure for himself; and metropolitan society, in rubbing off the singularities of his character, would just in the same degree have taken from its strength" (138). Almost seventy years later, Georg Simmel would write in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* that "The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life" (11). While Southey might not have put it in quite these terms, his objections to the city rested on similar grounds. London for Southey manifested a milieu wider than he was comfortable with, a milieu containing elements that challenged the manners in which he wished



to frame and justify his own subjectivity. In reacting against London over the course of his life, he framed a gamut of different political objections while also carving out a space for literary individualism that was defiantly anti-urban. Other writers would later come to terms with the vast nineteenth-century city as a literary subject, but Southey's reactions against it aligned him with and helped to feed a notion of genius as vesting in sensitivity, delimitation, and alienation: key terms in the formulation of the discourse of Romanticism in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Southey's city experiences can also be seen as influencing his later conservatism. The vision of London as a destroyer of intellectual autonomy that he developed along with Wordsworth and Coleridge led all three men to valorise smaller communities beyond its bounds and to seek for means of regulating and constraining potentially debasing metropolitan energies. While the older Romantic generation is generally seen as having moved from being rebels to being reactionaries, their early attitudes to the metropolis indicate that their support for the populace at large had always been qualified.

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