

# *The Literary London Journal*



---

## **Conference Review**

### **Literary London: Representations of London in Literature 2013**

**Reviewed by**

**Lisa Robertson  
(University of Warwick, UK)**

***The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 2 (Autumn 2013)**

<1>If misery loves company, crisis summons a crowd. This year's Literary London Conference, which focused on the theme of 'London in Crisis and Disorder', drew its own rout of scholars from around the globe – but so too did the conference theme make clear the degree to which any crisis or disorder is necessarily generated by, endured or resolved in the company of others.

<2>The conference, hosted by the Institute of English Studies, University of London and held between 17 and 19 July 2013, brought together papers from a range of disciplines that supported the Literary London Society's objective to foster interdisciplinary research into any literary manifestation of London. The event opened with a public lecture given by author Courttia Newland emphasising the production and experience of working-class literature. Speaking less about his own writing than about those people and places that influenced him – family, school rivals, teachers, writers – Newland described the cultural process of 'digging in the crates' to read the past into the future and in doing so give voice to marginalised communities. At the following morning's plenary address, Vic Gatrell (University of Cambridge) drew on his forthcoming monograph *The First Bohemians* (2013) to investigate the eighteenth-century cultural hotbed of Covent Garden. This heterogeneous social group, with its level of cultural production and sexual freedom, qualifies as an early bohemia in which artists like William Hogarth represented (and thus exposed to the market) the vibrant social milieu of their own neighbourhood.

<3>As at any large conference, a number of parallel panels forced delegates to make difficult choices between sessions – but the rather ingenious organisation by conference organiser Martin Dines ensured it was almost impossible to choose based on subject or period. The individual panels thus knit together diverse topics thematically to produce engaging, and often surprising, unities. The panel 'Unruly Boroughs', for example, brought together nineteenth-century realism and a contemporary interpretation of the Condition-of-England novel: Eliza Cubitt (University College London) commented on the

disruption of 'a totalising judgement' by 'nomadic' subjects in urban literature and street photography, whereas in Craig Melhoff's reading of *Lionel Asbo* (2012) the world that is unable to be totalised – the 'floating world' – is one culturally adrift and cut-off from history. A later panel on 'Disorderly Homes' included Jane Jordan's compelling paper which suggested that the very class of women condemned by the blue of Booth's poverty map participated in a 'moral policing' of the street and 'functioned as auxiliary parents' in the Eliza Armstrong Abduction Case. Jivitesh Vashisht (Warwick University) commented on the ways that a similar 'moral policing' generates anxieties of surveillance that become an organising principle for anarchists' homes and in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and 'The Informer' (1906).

<4>Through a consideration of new wave science fiction, Amy Butt (bpr architects) traced the transformation of the high rise from utopian promise through its graceless unfurling into a site of social stigma – and addressed how the residents of these buildings 'exist in a relationship of mutual influence with their environment'. To conclude the first day of the conference, a round table discussion brought together Susie Thomas, Jerry White and Anne Witchard in a panel chaired by the BBC's Philippa Thomas, all of whom have contributed to the recent publication *London Fictions* (Five Leaves 2013), edited by Andrew Whitehead and Jerry White. While Anne Witchard explained that Thomas Burke's *Limehouse Nights* (1916) seeks in part to control a district considered a blight to a city that wished to see itself as an ordered hierarchy, Jerry White reminded us of the devastating race riots that haunted the pages of *Absolute Beginners* (1958) and that became a palpable articulation of oppression for other marginal or 'outsider' groups. In *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), as Susie Thomas suggested, collective identity is as mutable as those individuals who participate in its creation; and although Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) might pivot on the experience of alienation in the modern city, Philippa Thomas proposed that the novel represents its inhabitants as at least united by the restrictions of poverty and preconception.

<5>The final day of the conference opened with a plenary address given by Matthew Rubery (Queen Mary University of London) who recontextualised the historical legacy of investigative journalism in a reconsideration of the relationship between 'the sensational and the serious'. Through a case study of the undercover reportage of Elizabeth Banks in the 1890s, Rubery demonstrated that while the work may have been (and still is) dismissed as sensational, the article provoked a serious response from its readership that resulted in important social change. The day continued with creatively arranged panels that stimulated cross-disciplinary discussion. The panel 'London Settings', devoted to dramatic literature, raised important questions about urban individualism and isolation: the National Theatre's recent production of *Timon of Athens* (2012), noted Andelys Wood (Union College), offered an effective critique of the self-interest of modern capitalism; although Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* (1978) documents personal abandonment, Radmila Nastic (University of Kragujevac) demonstrated the degree to which memory is necessarily relational in the play; Rudolf Weiss's (University of Vienna) reading of Simon Stephen's *Pornography* (2007) considered urban alienation to explore the extent to which personal and public transgression overlap. The panel demonstrated that the necessary quality of theatre as shared experience belies any emphasis on individualism; theatre underscores instead that individual crises are predicated on our relationships with others.

<6>The panel 'Peripheral Visions' presented the subject of city limits, both socially and geographically. G. Kim Blank (University of Victoria) introduced us to the London coterie from whom it was necessary for Keats to distance himself – Leigh Hunt and the Cockney School – in order to *avoid* being a London poet and write something beyond 'fantastic fopperies'. In *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), as Jason Finch noted (Åbo Akademi University), London's limits are 'related together in unique layers' that attest to their interdependence. The later panel 'Queer London' reflected on the degree to which the

city defies both geographic and temporal limitations. Both James Polchin (New York University) and Katharine Stevenson (University of Texas at Austin) discussed semi-biographical texts that might be described as 'Coming-to-London' novels. In a reading of Neil Bartlett's *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988) James Polchin considered how the text's use of meta-narrative forges a relational identity across centuries for men in the city's gay community. For Christopher Isherwood, as Katharine Stevenson suggested, the city instead represents the 'tyranny of the past', something romantic yet sinister, that nevertheless required and enabled him to piece together personal and social identity.

<7>This rich and inspiring (and, given the heat, somewhat perspiring) three-day event concluded with custom rather than crisis: three post-graduate students – Eliza Cubitt (University College London), Andrew Glazzard (Royal Holloway, University of London) and Laura Ludke (St Anne's College, Oxford) – formed a final panel to reflect on their experience and give some order to disordered thoughts. This panel helpfully distilled the extraordinary amount of assimilated knowledge to offer delegates what Virginia Woolf refers to as that 'nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever'; that is, we love London's crisis and disorder, for it is immensely generative. The crisis keeps us interested; the disorder makes us work.

### **To Cite This Article:**

Lisa Robertson, 'Literary London: Representations of London in Literature 2013 Conference Review.' *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 10 Number 2 (Autumn 2013). Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/autumn2013/robertson.pdf>.

---

### **About The Literary London Journal**

*The Literary London Journal* is the free, online, open-access journal of the Literary London Society. Founded in 2003 by Lawrence Phillips, who edited the journal between 2003 and 2011, it is the first and only journal to provide a common forum for scholars and students engaged specifically in the study of London and literature. From the start, *The Literary London Journal* has aimed to publish the best new research relating to London and literature.

The journal is online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

*The Literary London Journal* is fully peer-reviewed. It is published twice a year, in spring and autumn, and is indexed by the MLA International Bibliography. For past issues and information about submissions, please visit the journal home page.

ISSN: 1744-0807 | <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/>

---