

‘CLOSE UP FROM A DISTANCE’: LONDON AND ENGLISHNESS IN FORD, BRAM STOKER AND CONAN DOYLE

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What can be seen designates what is no longer there. . . . You see here there used to be. . . . Demonstratives indicate the invisible identities of the visible: it is the very definition of a place.

Walking in the City, Michel de Certeau

Famous turn-of-the-century depictions of London do not necessarily bring to mind Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Yet Stephen Arata’s reading in ‘The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonialism’, foregrounds notions of identity, invasion and Englishness, which tally with similar themes to be found embedded in Conan Doyle’s detective narratives (1886-1926) – and Sherlock Holmes stories *do* famously represent London – notably in the description of criminals and foreigners. Anxiety about the influx of foreigners into the English metropolis, their gradual assimilation, the threat or bonus this might pose to native inhabitants, as well as the alternately elusive or fixed identity of the city to be found in these narratives, serve as useful points of comparison with Ford’s 1905 work, *The Soul of London*.

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London, in Conan Doyle’s and Bram Stoker’s narratives, is characterized both by notions of the archaic and of the modern. That is, the amalgam of the past, through the fantasy of the fixed and historical identity of certain parts of the city, and the possible future (represented by science and technology), create for the reader a distinct sense of both London and ‘Englishness’.

Dracula and the Sherlock Holmes series were both, and are still, bestsellers, whereas Ford’s literary investigation is not a ‘popular’ fiction. Yet in *The Soul of London* Ford explores the idiosyncratic, the fragmented, the effect of technology on ways of perceiving – or gaining multiple impressions of – the city, and occasionally also,

notions of crime and the criminal. As a personal and journalistic inquiry into English identity and the city, however, Ford's work articulates what is perhaps only implicit in the two fictional texts: an historic investigation of national identity, as well a modernist recognition of the impossibility of capturing the true spirit of the place, if not of the age whilst – in a sense – doing exactly that.

Ford may write of London as 'illimitable', but there are ways in which all these texts juggle with representations of 'limitability', notably in how the boundaries of identity are constructed: what is it to be English in London, how can one distinguish the native from the stranger and what dangers circulate around these labels?

London, in all three authors' work, is represented as a magnet not just for the provincial English. 'Foreigners' are as attracted to the capital city where they are seen alternately as threatening if not downright criminal, or as safely assimilated and tamely 'Londonised'. In reaction to this we also find that representations of national characteristics grow stronger alongside this influx of 'strangers'. Bram Stoker's and Conan Doyle's heroes protect London and celebrate the particular virtues of being 'English'. In *Dracula* this is achieved through the triumph of a London solicitor and his wife over a foreign aristocrat, and is indicative of a new type of Englishness, as represented by the growing professional middle class. In *The Soul of London*, Ford's authoritative presentation of the differing angles from which 'Englishness' can be understood, offers a more inchoate perception of national identity, which thereby also becomes more pervasive.

The superlative 'Englishness' that emerges from all three authors' texts might be explained by their actual 'foreignness' or, rather, their 'un-Englishness'. Ford, half-German, describes himself as a 'man of no race with few ties',¹ Bram Stoker was Irish, Conan Doyle, Scottish (with Irish antecedents) – none of them from central London and not obviously or comfortably 'English'. All are, in some way, both strangers to and intimate with the 'Englishness' that they depict. It is this outsider position, in part, that contributes to the creation of an 'insider' perspective.

Definitions of Englishness are produced, then, through the writers' 'attempted' totalisation of the city through its textual rendition. In other words, a project of narrative 'assimilation' is undertaken in which the constituents of London are explained which mirrors the apparent assimilation of an increasingly varied population.

Yet the homogeneity achieved by one aspect of this totalisation is superficial. London as an imagined 'whole' is, in fact, represented in fragments, whether obviously, as in *The Soul of London* or through the 'seriality' of short detective stories or through the glimpses we get, almost as though through train windows, of London in *Dracula*, in between the Transylvanian travelogue.² The fragmented, fragmenting representations of the metropolis whose energy and power are both exhilarating and alarming, in each case either generate plot, or indicate the possibility of plot. That is, the city creates criminals for Sherlock Holmes to catch as surely as 'London' is the ultimate destination of the voracious Count Dracula. In Ford, we witness, also often literally through train windows, tantalizing glimpses of lives that would lead to a fully blown story if that were the narrator's intention. Yet in Ford the 'fragmented' approach is far more schematized and deliberate, and takes on many more forms than simply the witnessed snatches of possible dramas.

Assimilation: the Consumption and Digestion of the Monstrous?

In the author's preface to the American edition of *England and the English* (1907), Ford recounts his investigation aboard a transatlantic liner as to the statistics of the foreign population in New York. People give him various replies:

One told me [. . .] three and a half million Jews. Another said that there were two million Germans [. . .] every Londoner is aware that he lives amongst an immense body of foreigners [. . .] I suppose we, as Londoners, exaggerate in these matters more than do most New Yorkers [. . .] I know whole districts of London where all the signs in the shop windows are incomprehensible to me.³

Yet for all this marked difference, the effect of habitation, as he goes on to describe it in the first chapter of *The Soul of London*, through a metaphoric process of digestion, renders these aliens into natives. Their eventual conversion into the London product occurs through a process of assimilation in which the foreigner is transformed by 'the most potent of all juices' (SL 12) and slowly but surely digested 'into the singular and inevitable product that is the Londoner' (SL 12). When in Dickens's novels, London is variously personified, it is almost always a London of parts. The 'unifying' power of London that Ford creates through this metaphor instead recalls Balzac and his depictions of Paris, notably in *The History of the Thirteen* when desire and gold whip up the entire population of Paris into a frenzy of

appetite in which the city is characterized as a feeding monster. Ford's European literary influences may well account for the quasi-organic power he attributes to London, describing it as 'anaesthetically' (SL 12) able to convert its inhabitants into one type of legible product and as destroying 'all race characteristics' (SL 12). The foreigner becomes more or less fully, or at least well 'translated', not into 'English' but into 'London'. For example:

You may watch, say, a Berlin Junker, arrogant, provincial, unlicked, unbearable to any other German, execrable to anyone not a German, turning after a year or two into a presentable and only just not typical Londoner; subdued, quiet in matters of collars, ties, coat, voice and backbone, and naturally extracting a 'sir' from a policeman. London will do all this imperceptibly. And, in externals, that is the high-water mark of achievement of the Modern Spirit. (SL 13)

The intervention of the law in this extract, in which the city is seen as a site of operation and transformation, relates to themes of identity, of invasion, and in a sense of masquerade, that we find in *Dracula*.

What is 'monstrous' in *Dracula* is less the vampiric, assimilative identity of the Count, but his desire to pass unnoticed in London, a prerequisite to his conquest of that city. Although, of course, it is the conjunction of the two that render him so sinister.

The Count wishes to improve his English conversation with Jonathon Harker because

a stranger in a strange land, he is no one; men know him not – and to know not is to care not for. I am content if I am like the rest, so that no man stops if he sees me, or pause in his speaking if he hear my words, to say 'Ha, ha! a stranger!'⁴

Jonathon Harker's horrified reaction to this is compounded by the fact that not only is Dracula studying English conversation and intonation, but he is also learning the English Bradshaw's Guide by heart, studying various maps of London and atlases of England. That Count Dracula might elicit a 'Sir' from a policeman is a really rather disagreeable prospect and one Harker makes no bones about:

Then I stopped and looked at the Count. There was a mocking smile on the bloated face which seemed to drive me mad. This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps for centuries to come, he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless. The very thought drove me mad. A terrible desire came upon me to rid the world of such a monster. (51)

Dracula is terrifying because he threatens the English social fabric through territorial acquisition which takes the form of his desire both to be assimilated and to assimilate. By the same token, he threatens English manhood. Harker nearly faints when he sees him in Piccadilly Circus: not simply because of his presence, which is bad enough, but also because he is ogling pretty girls; a day-time activity which serves as the disturbing reminder of his night-time proclivities. Yet Count Dracula only desires what Ford articulates as desirable, not so much for the foreigner in question, but for the native population – and indeed for what Ford calls for to serve the interests of the future of the city, at the end of *The Soul of London*:

If a fitted race can be bred, a race will survive, multiply and carry on vast cities. If no such race arrive the city must die. For, sooner or later, the drain upon the counties must cease: there will be no fresh blood to infuse. (SL 104)

It is interesting that in a climate of anxiety with regard to foreign invasion and suspicion of the ‘foreign population’ (including those arriving from the colonies), Ford celebrates, however optimistically, the increasing diversity of the native population. Although perhaps the danger of this, as perceived by other journalists and writers at this time, is contained by the consequences of assimilation as Ford describes them. But the safety net of strangers becoming ‘Londoners’ is rendered less secure by a narrative that presents the city as a plotless ‘text’ to be variously explored, whose signs (including its population) can be interpreted differently depending on where you are looking from, or who you are, with parts that even the author finds ‘incomprehensible’. The fear of foreign sexual potency, implicit in Dracula’s take-over of London, remains only marginal to Ford’s call for a ‘fitted race’, although I suppose that implicit in obtaining a policeman’s polite acknowledgement must be the assumption of docile sexual mores.

Ford recognizes that:

One may sail easily round England, or circumnavigate the globe. But not the most enthusiastic geographer [. . .] ever memorised a map of London. Certainly no one ever walks round it. For England is a small island, the world is infinitesimal amongst the planets. But London is illimitable. (SL 15)

Yet Dracula’s attempted conquest of London, in contrast, takes the form of the possibility of complete knowledge. He attempts the ‘memorisation’ of London. He evidently does not succeed – the

foreigner's knowledge of 'maps' is never then as good as the native inhabitants' experience – yet his uncanny power to infiltrate the city, find his way round, and buy property in its wealthiest parts, is alarming. He nearly makes London 'limitable' but in fact, through his supernatural powers, ultimately represents something of its illimitability and 'vastness'. His defeat at the end of the novel thus also serves to control something of the sense of alarm generated by the 'out-of-controlness' of a city growing so rapidly – it would seem – with the help of foreign agencies.

Conan Doyle's criminally populated London might also ultimately be seen as assimilable, and limitable. The London that Sherlock Holmes deciphers for us is an eminently chartered London. Under his keen eye, every by-pass, every underground exit in the sprawling metropolis – from aristocrat's secret boudoir to criminal window-ledge – is recorded, and leaves the reader with a very specific map of London. As Colin Watson points out,

The London of Holmes commends itself at once and unconditionally [. . .] It is a city where every crime is soluble and whose vices are sealed within narrow and defined areas. It is a cosy place. It is, for as long as a hawkeyed man broods in Baker Street, a safe place. It does not exist. It never did. But Doyle managed to build it in the minds of his readers.⁵

If Ford writes of the 'sepia tinge' that makes the spirit of the age unfathomable, reflecting the illimitability of London, then in Conan Doyle's narratives that sepia tinge signifies the opposite: the nostalgic colouring of something indescribably familiar, safe and circumscribed. Sherlock Holmes as perspicacious detective does 'fathom' the city: the detective really 'notices' and therefore he alone, in a sense, creates this London, enabling others to 'see'. The 'sepia tinge' of the Sherlock Holmes stories defines and delimits a sense of London and of Englishness that is fixed, whereas the 'sepia in water' (*SL* 12) of Ford's colouring represents the swirl and flux of a still-wet aquarelle. Conan Doyle's London is an imaginary place, which, as Watson states, never existed; yet it continues to be solidly associated with 'Edwardian' London to most readers.

Yet 'seeing' through the city, in Sherlock Holmes's case, serves to cover up a different kind of blindness, for frequently (although certainly not always) the foreigner is suspect: the King of Bohemia is morally despicable, Mormons are fatally vindictive, and Englishmen who have been abroad too long begin to poison their daughters with

exotic snakes. If not wholly 'criminal', the stranger represents danger, is certainly not agreeably 'assimilated' and rather than eliciting 'Sir' from policemen, is better-off arrested by them. Although many Englishmen and women also turn out to be guilty, when they are appraised at the end of the story, they are found to have betrayed their country, either literally because they were spies, or figuratively, because somehow they have behaved in way considered 'unEnglish'. In *The Bruce-Partington Plans* (1908) for example, Sir Walter Valentine is arrested and imprisoned:

'Everything is known, Colonel Walter,' said Holmes. 'How an English gentleman could behave in such a manner is beyond my comprehension. But your whole correspondence and relations with Oberstein are within our knowledge.'⁶

Walter Valentine betrays his class as well as his country, a double outrage then, and one which serves to reinforce the underlying chivalric order that determines Sherlock Holmes's judgments, which frequently remain separate from the law. As David Trotter notes, quoting Sir Charles Dilke in 1868:

Love of race, among the English [. . .] rests upon a firmer base than either love of mankind or love of Britain, for it reposes upon a subsoil of things known: the ascertained virtues and powers of the English people.⁷

Chivalric values have their place in both Bram Stoker and in Ford. Yet the onset of modernity, specifically of technological advances in locomotion and elevation, provide a link here with the second half of this discussion. From the 'subsoil of things known' we shall leap to the literal and figurative abstractions that occur in all three writers, with regard, in the first place, to physical perception.

Modernity Through Fragmentation/Systematization

Michel de Certeau in 'Walking in the City' writes of New York as viewed from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center and of the desire that artists have always had to picture the whole, if possible, from above:

Medieval or Renaissance painters represented the city as seen in a perspective that no eye had yet enjoyed [. . .] To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of 'seeing the whole' of looking down on, totalising the most immoderate of human texts?⁸

De Certeau's approach seems to be an apt one when considering Ford for although he uses 'height' as part of the totalising perspective and Ford uses distance, both share the *fantasy* of an attempted totalisation. The 'pleasure' that this project inevitably provokes is very much in evidence in Ford's account although his text consists of an attempted totalisation made up of fragments. London, he writes, is a place of 'innumerable class districts' (SL 10). In his visits to and accounts of these little 'districts', and the various forms of travel with which he experiments, Ford creates both complete and incomplete cameos.

What you see is a function of where you are positioned, and Ford places himself in various modes of transport, reporting alternatively from inside a motor car, on top of a bicycle, an electric tram, or, closer, with the 'eye of a bird that is close to the ground' (SL 16), noting the difference in impressions at different speeds. This 'kaleidoscopic' imagery contributes to 'the modern spirit'. Ford's dizzying or acrobatic accounts, punctuated by moments of tranquility, contemplation and repose are echoed in how the detective patrols the modern city (nose down to the ground or watching from a window), and in how the team of vampire chasers sets about catching Dracula.

We receive, thereby, a composite photograph of the whole. Instead of creating one 'text' Ford creates a series of short stories, or impressions of potential short stories. 'London is a thing of these "bits"...' (SL 22). Upon seeing a couple from a train window – a man with red hair brandishing a stick following a woman wearing a white apron – he comments, 'I have not the least idea whether he were going to thrash her, or whether together they were going to beat a carpet' (SL 40). He does give the story a footnote, and thus a sense of possible ending, by adding that 'the evening papers reported no murder in Southwark.'

The incomplete, he writes,

gives to looking out of train windows a touch of pathos and of dissatisfaction. It is akin to the sentiment ingrained in humanity of liking a story to have an end. And it is the 'note' of all roads into London. (SL 41)

In the Sherlock Holmes stories we are given completed stories where plot is paramount and endings always in evidence. The crime that might be, in the story of the carpet-beating couple, is precisely what Sherlock Holmes would track down and resolve, although it wouldn't necessarily be the obvious one of murder – no doubt such a story would end in the discovery of a narrowly averted international

conspiracy, complete with German barbers. The 'fragmented' in Sherlock Holmes remains, on the whole, relegated to structure (the short story or, within this, the incidental) and the 'modern spirit' is obvious mostly in the treatment of systems, technology and science. Although the detective and his vision – the way he and only he sees patterns in apparently disconnected events – creates an interesting parallel to Ford's notion of the 'visible world'.

In Ford, the visible is in a sense framed by the invisible, thereby ensuring a form of suspense or at least of the lack of (re-)solution: London provokes and evokes a background both to the mysterious and the incidental. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, it does so with the addition of a *dénouement*.

Yet there is a more disturbing element which is never fully articulated in these 'family' stories. The crimes are, in fact, often more grotesque and alarming than their solutions would suggest, and although the stories lock away bad foreigners and celebrate the English powers not only of detection but of justice, they acknowledge the romance of the criminal story, the strangers' mesmerizing story-telling powers, and the city's endless absorbing capacity to receive, generate and accommodate the exotic. That is, in other words, Sherlock Holmes's London though represented ultimately as cosy, contained, knowable and safe, partakes – through the grotesque and sinister elements that are never fully developed or acknowledged – of some of unknowable 'illimitability', the vastness, danger and mystery of Ford's London.

Dracula, of course, is wildly exotic and as a narrative we can speak of its 'fragmented' quality primarily in terms of structure. The story is told, to borrow from Ford, as a series of 'little bits' – that is, one moment a diary, the next a newspaper cutting, the next a rendering of scientific observations into a phonograph. The fearful tale is not only recounted from various vantage points, but it covers so much (literal) ground, that it has been referred to as a travel narrative:⁹ its sweeping breadth from sheer mountain tops in the Carpathians to the reading rooms in the British Museum give it a breathlessness and even a kaleidoscopic quality akin to the movement and changing vistas present in Ford's journeys in and around London. Ford, in fact, also circulates metaphorically much farther afield than simply the English countryside. He mentions, at one point, those 'ruined temples' that become 'little pieces of London' (SL 24) and describes the sense of an extended 'Englishness' present through the perusal of the latest

English books and journals: 'the stores and the circulating library make London extend to Jubbulpore...' (SL 24).

Ford writes 'we talk of the Londoner [...] but there is none' (SL 89-90): as quickly as he creates London subjects he then erases them. This, in a sense, creates a kind of 'vanishing point' narrative: 'close-ups' swiftly merging into the distance. Yet within this there is also a sense of contained journey that perhaps best defines the Englishness of this period, one which both Bram Stoker and Conan Doyle in their various ways helped to construct or celebrate, albeit as a fondly imagined quality that none, in a sense, really themselves 'owned'. The following quotation refers to passengers in a railway carriage, and 'trains', perhaps as much as London, are common to all three authors' works. In Ford's words, taken from *The Spirit of the People*, then:

It is not – the whole of Anglo-Saxondom – a matter of race but one, quite simply of place – of place and of spirit, the spirit being born of the environment. We are not Teutons; we are not Latins; we are not Celts or Anglo-Saxons in the sense of being descendants of Jutes or Angles. We are all passengers together, carving or not carving our initials on the doors of our carriage, and we all vaguely hope as a nation to jolly well get somewhere [...].] But, in a dim way too, we do hope that we shall jolly well get somewhere where they sell ginger-beer. (SP 255-6)

The sense of journey here, the anticipation of passage, rather than of arrival, recalls Huysmans' *Against the Grain*, but is also thoroughly post-modern. The inscription of the individual through the 'carving of initials' yet the assumption of unity implicit in a common taste or desire goes beyond Empire and war. Dracula's longevity as a 'vampire' continues to exist in heterotopic relation to the urban, though not necessarily to London in particular. Sherlock Holmes is imbued with the spirit of a non-existent address in Baker Street, but Ford's paragraph on 'getting somewhere where they sell ginger beer' could apply to a description of the package-holiday brigade waiting in the Gatwick departure lounge. Perhaps it is less 'London' that is a thing of these 'bits', than England. 'Close-up from a distance' as aptly describes the lot of third and more generation immigrants in London, the 'trouble' with having shop signs in a 'foreign' language, or the problem of 'assimilation' which has hit the world almost more brutally since the collapse of the twin towers from which de Certeau imagines the Renaissance artists' ideal perspective.

Yet rather more comfortably than the towering perspective of a world-view that exists only retrospectively, Ford's London is still a

London we can recognize. In contrast, Conan Doyle's and Bram Stoker's London, no less familiar, is firmly fixed in the past. It is a London of bygone times, fired and cast, one might say, with a particular sense of urgency: Mina and Jonathon Harker, and Sherlock Holmes, defend the city from the immediate perils of the crook and the opportunist. Ford's London, projected more speculatively, results in a qualitatively different kind of defense: a 'protection' of the *nature* of London that endures due to the way his evocations both anticipated and encompassed the passage of time.

NOTES

- 1 Ford Madox Ford, *England and the English*, ed. Sara Haslam, Manchester: Carcanet, 2003, p. 325. Hereafter separate volumes cited in quotations refer to this edition: *The Soul of London* (SL), *The Heart of the Country* (HC) and *The Spirit of the People* (SP).
- 2 In my final section I discuss this idea in more detail.
- 3 This Author's Note is reprinted in *England and the English*, Haslam ed., pp. 327-36; pp. 328-9.
- 4 Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 20.
- 5 Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime stories and their Audience*, London: Methuen, 1987, p. 24.
- 6 Conan Doyle, 'The Bruce-Partington Plans', *The Complete Short Stories*, London: John Murray, 1928, p. 997.
- 7 David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1896-1920*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 154.
- 8 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley & L.A: University of California Press, 1984, p. 92.
- 9 Stephen D. Arata, 'The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonisation', *Dracula: New Casebooks*, ed. Glennis Byron, New York: St Martin's Press, 1999, p. 129.