

Alice Meynell and the Politics of an Image: “The Climate of Smoke”

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Alice Meynell’s *London Impressions* (1898),¹ a series of ten short, almost laconic essays on London, belongs to a surge of green and ecological criticism by women in the late nineteenth century.² An aspect of this environmental project is Meynell’s very exact use of the word “impression” in the sense of an imprint on the mind or object, for it conveys the meaning of being acted on from outside, as climate acts on the self. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the derivation of “impression” from Latin *impremere*, to press, and all its several senses whether of a mold or an influence, convey the meaning of pressure from outside, being stamped with something. Neither Meynell’s language nor Hyde’s photogravure images are impressionistic: they owe nothing to impressionism; rather, Meynell uses language with the sharpness and clarity of an imprint, almost like an indentation. The technique of photogravure, used for the spectacularly beautiful monochrome images by William Hyde, works in parallel with Meynell’s prose. Photogravure depended literally on impression, the multiple imprinting of a photographic negative on light-sensitive materials. Hyde’s characteristic black-on-black chiaroscuro of the urban scene—his capacity to create paradoxically solid shadows in which the play of opacity and outline, indistinctness and lineation, muffled forms and sudden clarity, to create the special somatic derealization of city experience—depended on an intaglio technology that could summon the physical intensity of London. Streetlamps, the mesh of telegraph wires (the “nerves of London” in one illustration [6]), the sudden lit window, are scored onto the lineaments of darkness. The substantiveness of his images mattered because they registered the irreducible materiality of London and its pollution.

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Figure 1. William Hyde, “Utilitarian London,” photogravure, 9.5 x 5 in., in *London Impressions: Etchings and Pictures in Photogravure by William Hyde and Essays by Alice Meynell*, K.T.C. 41.b.22, © British Library Board.

Hyde’s work is described as “Etchings and Pictures in Photogravure” (often etchings on a photographic negative). Printed by the Swan Electric Engraving Co., his panoramic images, often taken from above, are germane to Meynell’s prose. “Utilitarian London” (fig. 1), the illustration to the essay “The Climate of Smoke,” is particularly important because it challenges impressionism in its technique and theme. And not only this movement, but one of Meynell’s contemporaries, Turner. The image, an intransigent industrial scene of gasworks, signature telegraph wires, railway line with oncoming engine clouded in smoke, and roofscape with smoking chimneys, would have gone through five imprinting processes to become an intaglio figure on a copper plate.³ There can be huge variations in light and shade even in the final printing process, remarked Herbert Denison, the authoritative scholar of photogravure in the 1890s.⁴ Thus Hyde’s unique sequences of blur and incision (it seems that he drew on his negatives to achieve this—the three plumes of smoke at center seem to have been incised onto the negative) were achieved with calculated assessments of ink type and roller pressure.⁵

“The Climate of Smoke” essay (9–11) comes between “The Effect of London” (6–8), which looks at a townscape that has “no likeness to anything in nature” (7), and “The Trees” (12–15), which explores the uncanny derealization of trees constantly exposed to the artificial light

of London streetlamps. Both essays recognize a “charm” (in one case) and in the other a perverse beauty in the arboreal townscape (7). Even when they are exploring a new kind of techno-ecology created in London and brutalizing the city, they find some elements at least of the intriguing. But the essay on smoke offers no redeeming features.

Meynell sees the “artificial climate” of smoke not simply as pollution but as the limit case of humanly made dead matter (9). Its inertia may create a “handsome grime” (9), but because it is not living it is capable of no inner movement. Shapeless, lifeless, it can have no form. The sun gives it an artificial vitality and form, but this is illusory. With no coherence, no direction, “The smoke is helpless” (9). Subject to the force of gravitation, its movement, after the initial upsurge from chimneys, is always downward. No wind makes it buoyant: it drops, with a downward inertia, and drifts until it is resolved into the blight of soot, “the last black atom, on the face of the town” (10). Smoke might mimic the living action of cloud and thunderstorm and even deceive people into believing that a storm is imminent, but it lacks the volition of real weather: its powerlessness and decay, “the refuse of chimneys,” holds it in “mechanical suspension”—“there is no life in his storm” (10). It is *not* cloud but an imitation of it. This artificial climate at least exposes itself as such. But “It makes the sunshine ugly” (10), a “smirch” on the purity of the day; this “uncleanness of smoke” exposes us to the unrelieved blazing sun upon miles of blue slate roofs (10). Its scene-shifting formlessness at least shows up real form, such as the form of St Paul’s dome, but it is itself a deception. Smoke is incapable of self-movement. In Meynell’s theology, smoke, incapable of transubstantiation, is implicitly satanic. It is death.

Toward the end of the essay Meynell uses language drawn from art and painting, but this language is negatively inflected. Smoke has painted the surface of the town in variants of black. It is a form of *aquarelle*, watercolor, without depth. She compares it to the decay of time—time, in an elision of color and temporality, is “brown,” has depth (11). And surprisingly, the essay terminates like this: “But too much of the surface of London is the work of that dashing impressionist, the climate” (11).

Here impressionism is seen negatively, aligned with the incoherence of smoke and its formlessness. Implicitly, there is a contrast between the clarity of an impression and the formlessness of impressionism. To explore this further I return to the photogravure illustration “Utilitarian London” with a little more precision. Taken from above, it is a view of a raised railway line and oncoming train to the right,

dominated by a gasworks. Roofs and chimneys sweep round to the left, oppressively crowding the scene. The smoking chimneys are uniform—smoke blows from left to right. To the left of center a canal sweeps round to the right, parallel with the railway but below it, choked with bordering houses. The arches of a viaduct are faintly shown in the distance. The city stretches to the horizon. It is the epitome of blackness and fixity despite the moving train. Things seem to be set in blackness. The dark tones dominate. The immobility of grime manifests in the houses, the gasworks.

This photogravure also recalls another antithetical “impressionist” image. It is Turner’s *Rain, Steam, and Speed. The Great Western Railway* of 1844 (fig. 2), painted half a century before. In the dynamic haze and indistinctness of Turner’s image, the artificial product, steam, is given the same standing as “real” rain, and the categories of material phenomena are elided with the abstract quality of speed as if all three together are transformative, even transcendent. Turner’s title deliberately poses the question, How is it possible to render in the matter of paint the abstraction of speed? The surging volumes of paint mimic the visual experience of travel at speed, where attributes merge. The paint takes on swirling movement as if it is alive. It celebrates dissolve and dematerialization rather like the dissolving views of popular visual culture. Turner’s train also sweeps into view from the right. It is traveling over Brunel’s Maidenstone Bridge spanning the Thames, a virtuosic piece of technology. A viaduct is faintly to be seen crossing the water; a mark nearly at center faintly represents a boat on the river below the train. It is the work of a “dashing impressionist” indeed (though it is impressionism *avant la lettre*).

Hyde’s solid, static image is a parody of Turner’s painting. It is about irreducible matter. Hyde and Meynell are refusing the technologically achieved *sensory* dissolve, implicitly a pseudo-sublime that simply makes matter fade out of optical existence. Turner doesn’t respect either the category of matter, mass in contradistinction to mind, or the man-made industrial squalor that both generates and is generated by smoke. Thus there are metaphysical and social issues at stake. The alchemy of rain, steam, and speed is deconstructed in the presence of Hyde’s gasworks, the source of pollution. The irreducible smudge of smoke is an answer to the rhapsodic blur of Turner’s paint. This is in fact an image of the Great Western Railway too. And the oncoming train is positioned exactly as Turner’s is positioned. The railway line is the main line to Paddington. It ran parallel to the Grand Union Canal until it diverged at the site of



Figure 2. J. M. W. Turner, *Rain, Steam, and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844), oil on canvas, 91 x 121.8 cm, © The National Gallery, London.

the Western Gasworks (established 1845, a year after Turner's painting). The Grand Union Canal stands in for Turner's romanticized Thames. Hyde has even shown us a craft at the point in the picture where Turner's faint boat is sketched. The viaduct of his image, where a train runs, matches Turner's ghostly viaduct. The documentary actuality of this landscape round Paddington and Ladbroke Grove is important to establish because Meynell and Hyde clearly wished to deromanticize Turner's painting and to show the social and ecological reality of smoke in the crowded houses and their chimneys. (It was a landscape that lasted until the 1970s: the gasworks was demolished in 1970 to make way for new housing. The canal and railway still exist.)

I don't think this replication can be an accident. How Hyde and Meynell managed to find such an extraordinary mimicry of Turner's image in a London slum is a mystery. (No correspondence exists.) Much later in *London Impressions*, as if to give us a retrospective clue, a small image illustrating "The Smouldering City" is titled "Rain, Smoke, and Traffic" (30). Turner is on Meynell's mind.

Meynell's political reading of London is Blakean, in that it is driven by a visionary passion as well as by deep outrage that human life can be so abused by social forces. In Meynell's theology, the possibility of transformation in the world of matter was a given. (In Catholic theology, the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist was an axiom.) In her most pessimistic essays, transformative experience never happens, but it was essential to preserve the opposition between matter and spirit that Turner elides, for the antithesis creates the possibility of transformation. In the final essay, "The Smouldering City," London is an inferno of "hidden furnaces" and "imprisoned flames," which, though hidden, "spends mines and forests to keep the mobile creature close within his gates" (30, 29). Fire, "the secret of the Thames itself" (30), chokes roads and passages with its residues of cold ashes and grime. And creates ecological disaster. It intimates "immeasurable destruction" (31). Fire is the repressed, unseen presence of London, but it is imaged as Ariel captured and distorted by the industrial Prospero, "gross and dead"—but an Ariel struggling to be free (31). There is no such struggle in "The Climate of Smoke." Paradoxically, only someone who loved London could delineate its ecological disasters with such poetic force.

NOTES

I thank MA students of the Bread Loaf School of English (2022) for discussions of Meynell's essay.

1. The full title of the book, with the authors built into the title, is *London Impressions: Etchings and Pictures in Photogravure, by William Hyde, and Essays by Alice Meynell* (London, Westminster: Archibald Constable, 2 Whitehall Gardens, 1898). All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. For women's ecological writing, see Ana Parejo Vadillo, "The Green 1890's."
3. A photographic negative would have been fused with light-sensitive gelatine (treated with bichromate of potassium). This, essentially becoming a transparency made of gelatine, would be fused with a copper plate also treated with gelatine, that would therefore be able to accept the differential light and shade of the image, through the variations of thickness of the gelatine, onto its surface. When successively washed with a mordant or corrosive fluid, the transparency would be

etched by the action of the fluid onto the copper surface ready to be inked and printed. See Denison, *A Treatise on Photogravure*. For a succinct account of the five stages of production, see also Wilkinson, *Photogravure*, 10–11.

4. Denison, *A Treatise on Photogravure*, 91–96.
5. Guildford Museum and Art Gallery holds a number of William Hyde's mezzotints that suggest why Meynell commissioned him. Paradoxically, his mezzotints seem anxious to learn from the darks and noir shading of photography. See particularly "The Storm Cloud," "Moonlight on Rye Marsh," "Moon Shining through Dead Tree," "Moon Shining on Dead Tree."

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