

More'd / Unmoored
Figures of the Débâcle: The Utopics of Whistler's *Wapping*
(*the river, canvas and the flesh*)

I have been wishing to write about this image by James Whistler for some years, and I have been drawn to visit the location, the Angel Pub, Rotherhithe, in fact the one surviving river frontage along this stretch of the Thames. It is in reality a somewhat bland destination, that seems to have been configured by its current proprietors to uncompromisingly affirm what one would suspect all along: the disappearance of this world that Whistler painted; empty Thames, now foregrounded by an unoccupied balcony of plastic tables; no precarity, no event, no intoxication, odourless

But I would like to take this opportunity to write into this image and to unravel it as a site within the Thames's history of speculation and desire (and many thanks to Paul for providing the context in which to do that). For today's purposes, it is also a site between Battersea and the outer estuary, the sites of Shaun and Matt's work respectively. As with Shaun's imagery this work organises a complex temporal and material layering, at once separated, floating, but also reconfiguring toward a new, projective body. Like Matt's work there are figural architectonics here, in the embodiment of psychic and physiological states, amplified / dramatized in their proximity to the Thames, and its dynamic conditions of flow and flood.

With such a well-known image and notorious artist there is of course an extensive history of the art of the Victorian period that any reading must sit alongside, and which I will refer to very selectively.

But I wish to begin by, in part, structuring the reading in relation to a much earlier image of the relationship of water and land and one which has its own, if somewhat abstracted, relationship to the Thames and to London: the frontispiece to the second edition of Thomas More's *Utopia* by Ambrosius and Hans Holbein, 1518. For, as we recall, Utopia has, as its consistent subtext, and object of utopic critique, Tudor England itself.

The Holbeins' image exhibits a complex machinery of framing, formed of figures and vegetation of the foreground, and garlands hanging down as if from the underside of the image. This framing is instructional, echoing that of text of the book itself, in its own complex positioning of the fictional object, referent, or non-referent (the u-topic, the no-place). In the foreground, the fictional narrator and voyager to Utopia Raphael Hythlodius is engaged in discussion with the author More: an anthropomorphic embodiment of the intertwining of fact and fiction within the utopian text. They do not look directly at Utopia but, as Louis Marin comments, 'make the marvellous island visible with words'. What the Holbeins illustrate for More's readers is how Utopia, as part of its formal structuring, or in its literary architectonics, contemplates the limits and conditions of its own act of representation. Marin writes, 'The festoons and medallions with the names of the places, the frontal mapping of the island, all these show that Utopia, the island, the map, is just a representation, an image of things made by words. But they also show that every representation conceals and harbours, through its frontiers, frames, borders, edges and limits, a utopia, that is, a utopian drive, a desire for an elsewhere that would nevertheless be realised here and now'. This principle of a self-reflexive framing of the desirous co-presence of real and fictional registers, is one that I wish to transfer into Whistler's image and *its* desirous urban spectacle of flotation, in its identification here as a utopic image.

Wapping follows the production of a series of etchings by Whistler (the so-called *Thames Set*) recording scenes from the London docklands and the then notorious slum area of the south bank at Rotherhithe. (The particular relevance of this image from the *Thames Set*, ‘The Lime-Burner’, will become evident later.) The etchings, as Kathleen Pyne recounts, continued techniques and pictorial preoccupations with decrepit, urban subject matter within, broadly speaking, the idiom of the picturesque and the earlier Dutch topographic tradition that Whistler had developed previously on tour in the Rheinland, Alsace and during his time in Paris. Whistler took up lodgings in the inns of Rotherhithe during the production of the etchings but he was, during this time and throughout his life in London, also resident in Chelsea at various addresses around Cheyne Walk and the north side of Battersea Bridge.

Within the wider oeuvre of Whistler *Wapping* is located at something of a transition point between the earlier work of the urban picturesque – of an artist adroitly internalising and working through a received aesthetic and its techniques – and the assertion of a different painterly project, toward the then controversial pictorialism of Whistler’s later career. The later work was itself, of course, also responsive to the Thames as an aquatic body and, importantly, as hiatus within the urban environment, a zone of unstable atmospherics from which the city can be viewed; a spacing, a frame from which distant events of urban luminosity are recorded and surcharged /amplified through Whistler’s aestheticizing strategies.

That mauve-blue strike of rigging within *Wapping*, an armature of the foreground manufactured from the colour of the farthest, most distant forms – vessels of the horizon – signals future progression toward images of more ambiguous spatial construction, and the explicit registering of pictorial substance as surface.

Historian Melissa Berry discusses the mobility of artists of the European scene in this period, and employs the term translocalism in relation to Whistler’s *Wapping*. She refers to the inclusion of a portrait of Alphonse Legros as one of the three associates of the foreground. Legros is the bearded of the two male figures. Legros was a friend and colleague of Whistler whom Whistler had persuaded to relocate from Paris to London, and who took up residence with Whistler in Chelsea toward the conclusion of the painting. Translocalism also provides a useful term to describe Whistler’s own movements across London, and those of his associates, across zones of distinctly different economic fortune and social class: from Chelsea to Rotherhithe, Whistler’s well-known predilection for slumming it on the other side of town.

The female figure is based on Whistler’s lover Joanna Hiffernan. Famously, her portrait here was subject to extensive alteration. As accounts go, Whistler recoiled from completing a more explicitly provocative permutation of the image because of its possible censorship by the RA and because of the imminent arrival in London of Whistler’s puritanical mother, whom Whistler held in great regard.

I want to briefly expand upon the historical and biographical circumstances of the image through its description by historian Jonathan Ribner as a way to frame my further reading of it. Ribner’s focus is in fact on a broader survey of depictions of the Thames at the height of its pollution, the period of the so-called ‘Great Stink’, before the completion of the Metropolitan Board of Works sewerage system in 1875. Ribner compares Whistler’s painting to more conventional Victorian moralising, narrative images in which the polluted Thames becomes the backdrop to moral corruption. Ribner describes how this image by John

Stanhope figures, in the portrait of a prostitute (of a rather ideal Pre-Raphaelite appearance), the conflation of a desire for urban sanitary and moral reform; Ribner writes, 'Ineffectually raised to ventilate the prostitute's close quarters, the open window admits breezes as sullied as the woman's calling'. Whistler's image, Ribner observes, dispenses with the moralising tone, offering an 'amoral alternative'. He writes, 'Their dark clothes set off against the murky Thames and its forest of mast and rigging a bearded man and a young sailor are engaged in a conversation with a woman. Originally painted with cleavage bared the woman [...] was intended to be salaciously taunting the sailor'.

Ribner's account usefully situates Whistler's painting within the context of debates around environmental crisis and the river's toxicity. However, I would wish to insist on two fundamental revisions to that viewing of the painting: firstly, that there would seem to be, in the instant of the scene depicted, *no* conversation between the woman and the two men; that they have become, in that turn from the 'salacious' to the 'amoral', in a certain sense, dissociated. And that, secondly, the description 'murky' does not match with Whistler's Thames, but rather that it is opaque and distinctly luminous. To become more precise about the disposition of these two urban bodies, the female figure and the river, and the structuring of their connection is the purpose of the reading to follow.

There is also biographical information to account for the air of dissociation between figures, notably, an increasingly acrimonious relationship between Legros and Hiffernan that Whistler may have to sought to reflect within the evolution of the image. But, I would suggest, it is more pertinent to understand this dissociation at the level of the act of painting itself, in Whistler's response to the constraints and possibilities of the media, transgression or compliance to the generic conventions of the social realism of the time, and to account for it as the influence upon the construction of the image and its work of figuration, of another set of forces and desires.

We might return here to the writings of Gilles Deleuze on the work of the painter Francis Bacon, where Deleuze describes the essential separation of the figure from narrative – the suggestion of a story between figures – in order for Bacon's work of the figure to become manifest. The escape from the figure as the correlate of narrative in painting can either take the form of a movement toward abstraction or toward, as Deleuze puts it, the 'purely figural'. Deleuze continues, 'Isolation is [...] the simplest means, necessary though not sufficient, to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick to the fact'.

Whistler affects something similar here, though not, of course, in order to express visceral, corporeal, radical 'matters of fact' in the manner of Bacon, but neither, I would suggest, simply in order to neutralise a specific narrative construct of the 'salacious' figure or transaction. In turning from *that*, something else happens. We might consider how the female figure separates, dissociates from figurative, narrative engagement in general terms, or perhaps more accurately, shifts, floats from one order of figurative construction to another. In that shift, the figure acquires a project of a figural nature, to become, at very centre of the foreground, the site at which figural drives concentrate and at which Whistler's realism and utopianism intersect.

Utopias, utopic representation, require by definition a point of disconnection within their narrative structure, in order for the 'marvellous island', the utopian figure to be manifest in the text. The utopian narrative, in image or textual form, must perform the simultaneous

connection and disconnection between this ‘reality’ and its utopic twin, the *other* of any place. Thus, within the utopian genre the devices of travel narrative are frequently employed, its hazards of storm and shipwreck; or, the rather less catastrophic violence of the sneeze and cough that concealed the coordinates of Utopia in the conversation between More and Raphael in the preface pages of More’s book.

One has a sense that, for the figure of Hiffernan, the conversation between the male figures has become inaudible, interrupted, superseded by other concerns and a more general ambient immersion. A salacious transaction may well still be implied within the right-hand, regions of the canvas, and one might also say that the transaction has simply been transferred to become more forthrightly one proffered by Whistler toward *our* desirous gaze. But if so, the prompting of our desire is now definitely at the conjunction of figure and the riverine city. Hiffernan leans back in a curiously stiffened pose – the successive reworking bringing a corpse-like rigidity to the figure – and, with right arm paradoxically both braced and theatrically nonchalant, connects with the guard rail and thus also with the totality of the armature of the image, the apparatus of the river’s traffic and its volition.

The nonchalance of the right arm belies the figure’s more forceful or even violent connection to that riverine traffic, for immediately behind, the figure is subject to the control and constrictions of the strut and chain of the jibboom and bowsprit of the nearest ship.

Hiffernan, in her ‘disconnection’ from the two male figures, yet pinned and chained to wider urban scene, centred within its unfolding processes, becomes the symbolic figure at the conclusion – that is, the ‘real’ destination point – of Whistler’s trans-local journey across London. The journey of Whistler and his party is, we recall, from the proprieties of Chelsea to the encounter with squalor and the ‘hard picturesque’, to borrow a term from architectural historian John MacArthur, on the south-side of the stinking Pool of London. The city beyond becomes the utopian counterpart to that ‘real’ geographic journey; a utopic urban portrait that, beyond the frame of the balcony, becomes itself a kind of exploded framework of a city floating free from geographic constraint.

Hiffernan as a centralised figure of the frame, in her ambiguous corporeal disposition, figures the transitional shift. She is a form of ‘delegate’, to borrow a term from Marin, who announces, at a deep figural level, the image’s utopic intentions, or, in a more properly meta-textual sense, its utopian impulse. Hiffernan is the frame-figure, figure of the balcony as a transitional space between ‘reality’, ‘history’ and its utopic twin. The balcony as an architecture of projection is the transitional edge between the one and the other; an ‘interval structure’, as Marin might call it, the inhabited thickness of an edge between two conditions.

The figure of Hiffernan, in the action of gripping the guard rail, would seem to casually alert us to how the architecture we view from has been cast adrift, left its anchorage, whatever spurious condition of river-frontage foundation, and is now subject to the hazards of a grand debacle. For, *Wapping* is not so much an image of the city and its river, but of city *as* river; as flow; all move in concert – boats, balcony, piers, spires, warfs, our cluster of associates, their table cloth, Whistler’s signature – as vessels under sail and under steam; we share in the movement of the vision of an itinerant city.

Note, how the painting constructs a quite different Thames City to that depicted in the earlier *Thames Set* etchings. The river fills *Wapping* in a different way. In the painting, the pre-embankment waterfront properties – central subject-matter in the etchings – have been largely pushed out, or, if depicted, are at the outer margins and smoothed of their picturesque credentials. They no longer bear witness to the marks of material processes, weathering, decay, neglect. Whistler ceases to *be* an artist in the Picturesque tradition here; he no longer complies to that pictorial philosophy of material culture and that form of city portrait.

We are all but directionless in this scene. We know Whistler paints the view east from the Angel pub, but in terms of pictorial ‘fact’ (the utopic fact, the truth of its fiction, before us on the canvas, on the screen now) – in what we are literally presented with as image – we are simply pointed in the direction of flow of that molten, burnished medium of travel.

The river moves more as a viscous medium than a fully fluid one; and one in which actions / trajectories / speeds of passage churn and leave an after-print in a malleable surface of uncertain density. The river is figured as if literally thickened with lime. (Lime, as the earlier *Thames Set* etching, ‘The Lime-Burner’ implies, was an essential part of the economy and toxic ecology of the river at the time; great quantities were applied to suppress the stink.) The luminous river is something more like *wey* / a toxic butter milk; an oiled, turped, limed-thickened milk. In places, it is a more of a metallic medium and invokes the etched metal plates of the *Thames-Set*, the burnished river surface of a reworked copper plate: scraped and acid-bitten river.

Rigging clutters the upper edges of the frame; much of the apparatus of sail is beyond the upper limits of the frame: an airy, baroque scene burgeons beyond our vision. Rigging, iron, rope, wire; brown canvas that appears like baroque folds of wood; and cream canvas like limpid peelings of the river’s surface; a river skin flayed-off by the action of wires across it, slicing into that surface like cheese wires held taught in transversal cuts, as boats catch each other’s rigging and describe vicious incisions at their myriad intersections.

– For all that painterly labour to render the apparatus of sail, to demonstrate virtuosity, Whistler seems to figure fragments of a dying body: limpid trophies draped heavily, in knots, in impossible tangles, terminal coagulation, an entropic tangle; languid organs of sail now, with their connecting tendons strained under bloated bags; heavy flaps of skin; the loose skin of an aged body, in fact. And at the epicentre of movement, that single dirty little plume, emitted by the distant red pole: an arrogant erection, simply strutted-up on either side; no finesse, no complexity. The steam-boat tug that sits centrally and traverses this portion of the Thames city would seem to pull downriver, whilst travelling across. Perhaps its motion in the centre there is in fact a spin, the rapid spin of a rotary engine. The old sail and row-boats glide like Venetian funereal gondolas about it; powered by its vortex (white water of the vortex encrusted at its base). Perhaps this is just one turbine station of many on this long arm of the fantasy of Whistler’s Thames city.

That flotilla in mid-river, moored yet mobile, anchored yet processional; and the boats and ships of the foreground become the strut system which connects land structures to riverine ones. The rigging is also the complex architecture that connects our balcony to the processional flow, and which ties Hiffennan into an immersive connection with the flows and toxicities of the Victorian world system; to the plastic movement of all. Witness that black, diagonal strut of the upper right-hand side terminating in a little detail of rope coil, how it appears like some specialised apparatus of mullion to rigging connection –

ambiguous technology of the fanciful city presented here, by which buildings can become mobile vessels, and the 'trans-local' journey of Whistler across London transitions toward the utopic, urban portrait; a floating 'desire for an elsewhere realised here-and-now' in the image.

In this reading, Hiffernan becomes something like a proto-*futurist* (a Pre-Raphaelite-Futurist and Mother-Lover hybrid). In the next evolution of this paper I will seek to map further the utopic contradictions and anticipatory capacity of that figure.