OXFORD

BY ACCIDENT OR DESIGN

PAUL FYFE

Writing the Victorian Metropolis

By Accident or Design

Writing the Victorian Metropolis

PAUL FYFE

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First Edition published in 2015

Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014947943

ISBN 978–0–19–873233–4

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

ALSO PUBLISHED BY
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic
Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience
Lauren M. E. Goodlad

Reading Constellations
Urban Modernity in Victorian Fiction
Patricia McKee

Winner of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) First Book Award in Literatures in the English Language

The Novelty of Newspapers
Victorian Fiction After the Invention of the News
Matthew Rubery
ALSO AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK

ALSO PUBLISHED BY
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Starry Sky Within
Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature
Anna Henchman

The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel
Edited by Lisa Rodensky

Charles Dickens's Networks
Public Transport and the Novel
Jonathan H. Grossman

BY ACCIDENT OR DESIGN

Acknowledgements

As my friend David Kirby says, "Art is the deliberate transformed by the accidental." While I began this project deliberately, many such unexpected encounters with mentors, friends, and supportive environments along the way have transformed it into this book. The process has happily replayed the book's own arguments, set not in the Victorian metropolis but the institutions in which I have had the great pleasure to study and serve. They deserve more than the acknowledgements to follow. The project first took shape amid the remarkable community of nineteenth-century studies at the University of Virginia and the four faculty members who taught me most about how to read. (And then how to write about it.) To Chip Tucker, Karen Chase, Michael Levenson, and Jerry McGann, I owe the deepest thanks, by whose lights of acuity, imagination, and generosity I hope always to steer. Thanks also to the outstanding mentoring, teaching, and support of Stephen Arata, Jennifer Wicke, Andy Stauffer, Brad Pasanek, Cindy Wall, John O'Brien, Greg Colomb, Paul Cantor, Alison Booth, Jahan Ramazani, Clare Kinney, Vicky Olwell, Guinn Baker, Cheryl Lewis, and Randy Swift. My friends in UVa's graduate community pushed this book always to more ambitious and engaged terrain; thank you particularly Jim Cocola, Justin Neuman, Jill Rappoport, Heather Morton, John Murphy, Neil Hultgren, Michael Lewis, Pete Capuano, Lindsay Wright, Bethany Nowviskie, Brad Tuggle, Ashley Faulker, and Chris Ruotolo. This book would not have been possible without the unfailing support of the UVa English Department as well as a NINES Graduate Fellowship.

My colleagues in English and the History of Text Technologies program at Florida State University likewise significantly supported my research. As department chairs, Ralph Berry and Eric Walker provided clear-eyed professional guidance for the book's completion. I am grateful to the insights and encouragement of Meegan Kennedy, Anne Coldiron, Andrew Epstein, Paul Outka, Elaine Treharne, Cristobal Silva, Leigh Edwards, Barry Faulk, Gary Taylor, and Micah Vandegrift. I did not deserve the brilliance of Sarah Unruh, Cheryl Price, and John Handel, whose research assistance grounded the book's argument and expanded its reach. I also thank the Council on Research and Creativity for a First-Year Assistant Professor grant. The FSU Libraries provided special materials grants and unflagging helpfulness in all my pursuits. Tony Harrison and

colleagues in the English department at North Carolina State University have NCSU have provided financial and intellectual support for this project and those it has lead to.

The Victorian studies community has been welcoming since the first time my dissertation director insisted I go talk to strangers at a conference. We are no longer strangers. Thanks to the many people who have responded to the following materials at conferences, in reviews, and in print. For their help, thanks especially to Richard Menke, Dan Novak, Jill Galvan, Alexis Easley, Ellen Rosenman, Paul Dobraszczyk, and Jim Mussell. Significant research for the project was facilitated by the excellent staff at the UVa Library, FSU Libraries, the British Library, the London Metropolitan Archives, The National Archives at Kew, and the Library at the London Transport Museum. Thanks also to Patrick Leary, the VICTORIA listserv, and the evolving scholarly community on social media in which I find daily affirmation of this field.

I am grateful to Jacqueline Baker at OUP for taking an interest in this project and smartly guiding it through its reviews. Two anonymous reviewers offered extremely constructive feedback during the process. Rachel Platt and Lucy McClune ably shepherded the book's administration; its production was expertly handled by Gayathri Manoharan, Jack Howells, and Ann Broughton. Thanks to the journal editors and publishers who have allowed materials to be adapted from "Accidents of a Novel Trade: Industrial Catastrophe, Fire Insurance, and *Mary Barton*" which appeared in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 65, no. 3 (December 2010): 315–46; and from "The Random Selection of Victorian New Media" in *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 42, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 1–23.

I could not have pursued literary scholarship without my parents Derek and Inger who unreservedly urged me and my siblings into open fields, to borrow a phrase from Gillian Beer. My dear children Camm and Anders were always with me, as was their mother—my friend, colleague, and most serendipitous encounter—Maggie Simon. This book is dedicated to my family.

Contents

List of Illustrations

Introduction: A Tremendous Chapter of Accidents

> God made the country, and man made the town.
>
> William Cowper, *The Task*, 1785

> On the banks of the Thames it is a tremendous chapter of accidents.
>
> Henry James, 'London', 1888

In the years between Cowper and James, London explodes. As do prevailing notions of how a metropolis even forms and develops. Sprawl, population, demographic diversity, economic muscle, skeletal poverty, global connectedness: the foundational metrics of urban studies are themselves a product of the nineteenth-century cities they attempted to measure. This book attends to other ways of understanding what seemed to many (then and now) like a unique phenomenon in the history of human settlement: the emergence of the modern metropolis.[1] In particular, it tracks a significant change in attitudes about metropolitan development or what might metaphorically be called the death of the urban planner.[2] When James describes London as 'a tremendous chapter of accidents', he is

[1] These terms have been the subject of extensive debate in urban and cultural studies. Rather than defining metropolitan modernity from the outset or claiming Victorian London as its exemplar, I am persuaded by Simon Parker's argument in *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2004) that Victorian London helped facilitate a broad self-consciousness about the urban condition. From a similar angle, Alexander Welsh argues that 'the discovery of the city as a problem... coincided with the rise of modern historicism'; see *The City of Dickens* (London: Clarendon, 1971), 31. If scholars have been debating metropolitan modernity ever since, they extend the inquiries, theorizing, and self-scrutiny of nineteenth-century urban observers, inhabitants, and artists. As such, this book begins with their keywords about the metropolis and its distinguishing problems.

[2] Urban experience ranks high in J. Hillis Miller's argument about the nineteenth-century disappearance of God: 'Life in the city is the way in which many men have experienced most directly what it means to live without God in the world'; see *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1963), 5. This book changes the terms of Miller's argument from disappearing God to a missing designer and attempts to offer more specific contexts for such a transformation.

commenting on its architecture, ruminating on the design of buildings and the aggregation of strangely mingled styles. But in effect, James also sums up a century's worth of questions about the increasingly uncertain origins of urban species. Cowper could echo Virgil to quip, 'God made the country, and man made the town'—though by the end of the eighteenth century this cultural geography is already old-fashioned with its moral, even Manichean contrasts. The famous quote also attempts to answer an implied question about design: who made what? Certainly by the early nineteenth century, no one was quite so sure, particularly concerning the unprecedented form of what Friedrich Engels called 'the great towns'. Divinely ordained? Definitely not. But man made? Was such a sprawling, labyrinthine Babylon really something man had wrought?

Babylon and the labyrinth were favourite metaphors for nineteenth-century London. So too were metaphors of city as organism, whether bodily system or rancorous tumour. In the 1820s, William Cobbett famously diagnosed the metropolis's unnatural growth with its nickname 'the Great Wen'.[3] Also circulating was the characterization of the city as a ceaseless living stream of traffic and strangers, each an atom unto themselves, swirling in a social maelstrom. In 1865, John Ruskin would say of the city that 'existence becomes mere transition, and every creature is only atom in a drift of human dust, and current of interchanging particles... for a city, or cities, such as this no architecture is possible—nay, no desire of it is possible to their inhabitants.'[4] For Ruskin, the built environment of the city is entirely lacking in design; the urban has no planner. London was the signature but not the exclusive example of this phenomenon. Visiting the greatest of the industrialized great towns in the 1840s, Engels argues, 'it is precisely Manchester that has been built less according to a plan and less within the limitations of official regulations—and indeed more through accident—than any other town.'[5] Writers on England's rapid urbanization were often stunned by its apparent randomness:

> The discontinuities and obscurities, the apparent absence of large, visibly related structures, the disorganizations and disarticulations, seem to compose

[3] William Cobbett, 'Sussex Journal', *Cobbett's Weekly Register*, 12 January 1822, 92.

[4] John Ruskin, 'The Study of Architecture in Our Schools', in *On the Old Road. Volume 1—Art* (Sunnyside, Kent: George Allen, 1885), 378.

[5] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, ed. Victor Kiernan (Harmondsworth, Middlesex; New York: Penguin, 1987), 86. Henderson and Chaloner translate the sentence differently: 'Yet Manchester is the very town in which building has taken place in a haphazard manner with little or no planning or interference from the authorities.' See *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 56.

> the structure of a chaos, a landscape whose human, social, and natural parts may be related simply by accidents, a random agglomeration of mere appearances.[6]

Accidentally composed, such an urban landscape becomes illegible, argues Steven Marcus. What all of these characterizations share—and what their diversity also suggests—is a deep uncertainty about how the metropolis comes into being, about its il/logical, un/motivated, or chaotic processes which certainly seem beyond human making or control.

The persistent accidentalness within Victorian writing about the metropolis tells another story: not about incoherence or illegibility but about change. This book challenges the geographical and disciplinary scope of the nineteenth-century's transforming ideas about change—and especially the role of chance within it. The conventional genealogies of such transformations cluster into three domains: the development of statistics and mathematical theories of probability, the arrival of an aesthetic modernity of contingency and shock, and evolutionary biology's emphasis on random mutations and the chances of survival. Each of these critical narratives makes claims about the new enfranchisement of chance over the course of the nineteenth century. But, as this book argues, the metropolis ought to rank among the primary arenas for this intellectual history. It was ground zero for some of the most important interdisciplinary thinking about causation in the nineteenth century. *By Accident or Design* offers a different vocabulary for the century's shifts towards probabilistic or relativistic paradigms by grounding them in the material contexts of the Victorian metropolis and, in particular, the increasingly conspicuous accidents that marked its characteristic dynamics of order and dispersion.

By Accident or Design looks to moments after the town was no longer evidently man-made but before it was reconceived as systemically independent, emergent, or globally interconnected. Examining representations of metropolitan life in text and image from 1830–70, this book locates in the Victorians' eroding certainty about the built environment a productive play between concepts of design and chance. Those decades mark several major changes in metropolitan infrastructure—including the arrival of the omnibus, the railway, massive urban improvement projects, and significant industrial development—which not only shaped a generic category of the modern city, but underscored its troubling instabilities in often spectacular ways. The accidents they generated became a focus of writing about the metropolis as well as a backdrop for thinking about the

[6] Steven Marcus, 'Reading the Illegible', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), I, 257.

contingencies of human design, whether expressed in cities or in forms of printed representation.

Attending to omnibus collisions, pedestrian mishaps, fires, industrial catastrophe, and railway crashes, this book investigates a representative set of urban accidents not merely to characterize the changing experience of metropolitan life but to explain why these phenomena captured Victorian attentions, to show their prevalence and particular uses in discourse, and to propose their close relations to some of the signature genres and circulatory patterns of metropolitan writing. Through its series of case studies, this book pursues two interdependent goals: to establish the mid-century metropolis as an important domain of probability thinking and to demonstrate alternate, even accidental literary histories for the most conspicuous forms of its representation, from the newspaper to the realist novel. This study of accidents offers an alternative critical vocabulary for the cultural contingencies, generic development, and complex circulation of some of the major forms of Victorian print culture. Those textual forms describe and index how Victorians came to perceive not just the emergent metropolis but perhaps modernity itself.

ARGUMENTS FROM DESIGN TO ACCIDENT

From his later perspective, Henry James can suggest that 'the most general appeal of the great city remains exactly what it is, the largest chapter of human accidents. I have no idea of what the future evolution of the strangely mingled monster may be.'[7] To Cobbett's metaphor of a monstrous organism, to Ruskin's apprehension of random atomic collisions, James contributes the ascendant language of Darwinism, wherein chance mutations generate the enormity and strange mingling of the city whose future course is neither teleological nor predictable. Darwin's development theory presents one of several important contexts for the paradigmatic transitions this book hopes to complicate. Then as now, Darwin earns a lot of attention for his role in turning Victorian attitudes towards an understanding of systemic contingency. *The Origin of Species* inspired reactions in precisely these terms, as anxious contemporaries seized upon how 'Darwin seemed to risk turning the world into an accident'.[8] For example, as William Denton sniped in *Is Darwin Right?* (1881), 'this is no hap-hazard world, nor is man a mere come-by-chance. We are not the

[7] James, 'London', 232.

[8] George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 93.

accidental result of a million accidents, each fortunately, yet accidentally, contributing to the grand result'.[9] Though Darwin said no such thing, he has been entangled ever since in arguments about causation and design, in which Darwinism seems to invoke 'the law of higgledy-piggledy' governing an accidental world.[10]

By contrast, in *The Origin of Species*, Darwin addresses the role of chance within the laws of variation quite directly:

> I have hitherto sometimes spoken as if the variations—so common and multiform with organic beings under domestication, and in a lesser degree with those under nature—were due to chance. This, of course is a wholly incorrect expression, but it serves to acknowledge plainly our ignorance of the cause of each particular variation.[11]

From this perspective, 'chance is the name we give to as yet unknown laws', as Gillian Beer has explained.[12] Darwin gently suggests that natural selection is less as a matter of chance than human ignorance about causation. As in the *Origin*'s famous final sentence, Darwin went further to press the compatibility of natural selection with divine creation, translating our ignorance of causes into a sense of faith and wonder.[13] Of course, this in no way attributes those causes to a divine agent, and Darwinian biology was instantly perceived as challenging traditions of natural theology which credit a divine creator for the world's design.[14] Natural selection not only removed agency and knowable causation, it seemed to invite operations beyond human prediction or discernment, in keeping as much with randomness as with faith. Thus, George Levine argues that 'Darwin abjured chance but required it for his argument' which ultimately presents 'a very strange combination of the random and the orderly'.[15] So too does chance spur the 'Darwinian imagination'

[9] William Denton, *Is Darwin Right? or, The Origin of Man* (Wellesley, MA: Mrs E. M. F. Denton, 1881), 109, <http://books.google.com/books?id=_d04AAAAMAAJ>.

[10] Charles Darwin, 'Darwin, C. R. to Lyell, Charles', 10 December 1859, Letter 2575, Darwin Correspondence Project, <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/entry-2575>.

[11] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 108. For a good survey of the issue of chance in Darwin and in evolutionary theory more broadly, see Roberta Lynn Millstein, 'The Chances of Evolution: An Analysis of the Roles of Chance in Microevolution and Macroevolution' (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1997), <https://webspace.utexas.edu/deverj/personal/test/chance.pdf>.

[12] *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 79.

[13] Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 396. Gillian Beer notes how this sentence was revised in different editions; see *Darwin's Plots*, 48.

[14] Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, viii.

[15] Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, 19, 93.

that Levine finds operating in a variety of cultural, generic, and narratological spheres, structured by a 'contest between design and chance'.[16]

Darwin's complex wrangling with questions of design, chance, and change has at times overshadowed other domains and earlier contexts in which similar cultural work was being done. As Levine reminds us, '[t]here were many evolutionisms before Darwin and there have been many since.'[17] In analogous ways that predate Darwin, observers of the Victorian metropolis were fascinated by the accidents that seemed to characterize its haphazard speciation and which gradually suggested other kinds of organizing principles at work: the aleatory, meaning dependent on uncertain contingencies, like throwing dice; and the stochastic, meaning patterned or structured by these aleatory processes. Even Darwin's route to the Galapagos went through the metropolis, in part because it linked the English to global or imperial expansion, and in part because 'metropolis' had a working definition in nineteenth-century biology as the most concentrated location for a given species which could be anywhere: country, city, wilderness, archipelago. The metropolitan concept travelled, radiating its questions about 'the difficult relations between design and causation, futurity and chance'.[18]

In this sense, the metropolis does not just shadow the century's better-known debates about design between evolutionism and deistic religion: it shares a lexicon and conceptual framework with which to confront such questions. Throughout the nineteenth century, theologians and religious defenders deployed 'the argument from design' as a fundamental principle of interpreting the complexity and contingency of the natural world. Inspired by Bishop (Joseph) Butler's 1736 work *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, natural theology claimed—as would its contemporary offspring, intelligent design theory—that the improbably perfect structures of the natural world could only prove the existence of God as divine craftsman. William Paley in *Natural Theology* (1802) points to natural structures like the eye and biological systems like the circulation of the blood to underscore their thoughtful mechanisms, an intentionality of design which natural theology converts into religious faith. At certain points, Paley relies on mechanical and industrial analogies to underscore the purposeful design of human invention and infrastructure. As we would never expect the random appearance of watches, factory equipment, or city water systems

[16] Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, 13, 62.
[17] Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, 3.
[18] Gillian Beer, *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 276.