Mapping Gothic London: Urban Waste, Class Rage and Mixophobia in Dan Simmons’s *Drood*

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Abstract:
This chapter investigates the Gothic London topography which characterises Dan Simmons’s *Drood* (2009), a novel pivoting on images of urban pollution, crime, segregation and threatening ethnoscapes. In reinventing Victorian London from a postmodern, postcolonial and poststructuralist point of vantage, Simmons turns it into a site of dialogic confrontation across ages, cultures and ways of ‘writing the city’. Especially noteworthy is the novel’s re-mapping of lower urban strata, such as the slums, the sewer channels, the burial grounds and the subterranean hideouts of the dispossessed. The political, socio-cultural and philosophical meanings attached to these frightful spaces are analysed in the light of twentieth-century theories developed by Baudrillard, Bauman, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and Said, whose ideas give insights into Simmons’s neo-Victorian re-imagining of the first modern metropolis.

Keywords: burial grounds, Gothic, heterotopia, London, metropolis, mixophobia, neo-Victorian, rage, underground, waste.

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The first modern metropolis, the capital of the British Empire and the literary city *par excellence*, London has been a model of urbanisation and urban culture over the centuries. Its identification with modernity and progress is, however, inseparable from communal and individual anxieties it has come to embody in history. Conceptualised as a site of conflicting values and aspirations in different ages, the British capital is nowadays increasingly perceived as a palimpsestic space in which effaced and fresh images, old and new meanings, incongruously coexist. As recent studies have demonstrated, London is “unavailable to any generalisation” (Wolfreys 2004: 4). An open signifier encapsulating manifold identifications, it “exists as multiple
constructs, serving different purposes of representation connected with identity”, one “imagined simultaneously as expansive over a particular space, whether of nation, city, neighbourhood or globe, and through historical time” (Gilbert 2002b: 2). As such, the British megacity acquires special relevance for today’s redefinition of identity politics both in the West and on a global scale.

A crucial moment in the on-going process of reinventing and re-imagining London can be located in the mid-Victorian age, when the metropolis was celebrated as the centre of capitalist economy, technological innovation and imperialism. However, the mythopoeia of progress it incarnated was challenged by urban images of corruption which, increasingly in the course of the century, bore witness to the persistence of social inequalities and tensions. As Roberth Mighall suggests, around the mid-century journalists and writers like Henry Mayhew, G. W. M. Reynolds and Charles Dickens located “terrors and mysteries in the heart of the modern metropolis” (Mighall 1999: xxii). Their transposition of exotic Gothic imagery into specific metropolitan areas charted a new Gothic terrain, an urban landscape in which fantasies merged with the mimetic, and horrors were shown to be physically present in the cityscape.

Two recurrent tropes of the mid-Victorian mapping of London were the labyrinth and the underworld. Both used as psycho-social metaphors, they gave spatial visibility to the fears and disorientation felt by the middle classes in facing the ‘dark’ recesses of their dichotomous civilisation. If the maze was insistently evoked in descriptions of the London slums and their horrors (poverty, crime, immigration, prostitution), the underground network of sewers, tunnels and catacombs was troped as the destination of katabatic journeys of self-understanding in coeval fiction and journalism. The hellish imagery associated with the city’s underbelly highlighted the dangerous proximity of a hidden space of abjection, a counter-world of violence and barbarity disquietingly embedded within the urban ‘body’ and constantly threatening to disrupt the order of the civilised surface.

By bringing this Gothic counter-world to light, mid-Victorian intellectuals challenged the dominant discourses of their age, whose progressive ideals pivoted around the image of an imperial capital of