It is tempting to select from the multitude of available Victorian visions of London to show that Modernism was a Victorian invention, or, even more seductive, that the city of the imagination took over from empirical experience in the nineteenth-century creative mind, so that the postmodern city becomes thereby a dream product of the nineteenth century. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s notebook provides an example in the entry for 6 December 1857, which plays with the paradox that fog was able ‘almost to spiritualise the materialism’ of the city, and ‘make the scene resemble the other world of worldly people, gross even in ghostliness’.¹ To put this alongside a postmodern account of the imagined or desired city (as usefully summarised by Bruna Mancini, for example) is to enjoy a feeling of pseudo-recognition which short-circuits the distance between the two:

Giandomenico Amendola writes that nowadays the boundary between reality and image is weak, labile, ephemeral: the lived city, the desired city and the imagined city tend to merge .... The urban/architectonic space becomes a linguistic/poetical space, the space of imagination. Through imagination and memory, the narrated/imagined cities cause the real world to be absorbed by an imaginary one, acquiring a powerful symbolic value.²

The present essay, on the other hand, looks for insights in writers who seem to have ‘kept their heads’, as their contemporaries might have said, when viewing the urban scene, and investigates the point of breakdown of the recording eye and consciousness.

In this spirit, I begin with Tennyson’s patriotic account of London’s ‘central roar’ as a reference point for the examination of examples of writing about the crowded city scene, culminating in cases, separated by eighty years, in which the complex scene induces hypnagogic visions in its beholder. In the process, it will renew the case for the importance of the London writings of Richard Jefferies. The final picture will suggest that by the 1880s a more-or-less twentieth-century view arose, in which city life of the mass was seen as a transcendent purposeful force, and individual human life insignificant in the futility of its daily round. This encourages construction of a somewhat modified overarching narrative.

The central roar

The much quoted image of London’s ‘central roar’ occurs in Tennyson’s patriotic celebration of the workaday London crowd in the financial and institutional centre of the metropolis, in his *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington* of 1852. This is not a politically active crowd, nor a crowd of the dispossessed, but contains those who contributed to the maintenance of London as the financial capital of the world and the centre of an empire, and contained an ever-increasing number of what we now call commuters, and those innumerable messengers, carriers and agents whose hundreds of thousands of communications are now carried electronically, and who swelled the numbers in the streets at all hours of the day.

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3 I am grateful to Vaughan Bell of the School of Psychology at Cardiff University for pointing me to sources on hypnagogia. He is not of course responsible for the interpretation I have placed upon them. For a general treatment of hypnagogia, see Andreas Mavromatis, *Hypnagogia: The Unique State of Consciousness between Wakefulness and Sleep*, London: Routledge, 1987; and Gary Lachman, ‘Waking Sleep’, http://www.forteantimes.com/articles/163_hypnagogia.shtml
4 Wordsworth uses the word ‘roar’ for the noise of the crowd in Book Seven of the *Prelude*, e.g. lines 178, 273 of the 1850 text.