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Coherence and Inclusion in the Life-Writing of Romantic-Period

London

Abstract

This article considers the ways in which London lives were written together during the Romantic period, considering representations across different genres and media including: poetry by William Wordsworth, Richard Horwood's house-by-house *Plan* of the city (1792-9), *Fores's New Guide for Foreigners* ([?1789]), the 1788 volume of *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies*, Richard Phillips' *Modern London* (1804) and Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1820-1). It pays particular attention to recovering evidence of marginalised individuals, whose lives were never written at book or article length, but of whom traces survive in glimpses and in aggregated forms such as plate series and directories. It also discusses the life-writing of communities through the representation of common knowledge and the use of statistics, contrasting the confident assertions of knowledge made in guides, mapping and topography with the more conflicted and fragmented modes common in poetry and novels. Through examining these issues, it contends that there are considerable benefits in thinking of life-writing as being intrinsic to a far wider range of discourses than the standard biographical and autobiographical modes, arguing that a broader conception is invaluable for recovering occluded existences, modelling collective experience and understanding the hierarchies implicit in the ways in which lives are culturally inscribed.

Keywords: London; Topography; Genre; Diversity.

Biographical Note

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<http://www.romanticlondon.org>.

Main Text

The title of this special issue and the conference from which it arose – ‘Writing Lives Together’ – can be read in several different ways. The most obvious reading denotes an interest in texts that place multiple lives alongside each other. However, it is also possible to read ‘writing’ as an active process that associates and connects different individuals’ experiences. Writing lives together in this formulation speaks both to the representational difficulties of accounting for separate human subjectivities and to the important roles played by narrative in expressing and instantiating collective values. The implied emphasis on the conscious imposition of coherence speaks to one of the main challenges of writing life-focused narratives. Any individual human life is vastly more complex and nuanced than can fully be represented in written records. This complexity vests partly in the manners in which a mind works and changes over the course of a lifetime and partly in the entangled natures of our social existences, with lives being shaped not only by the will of the person doing the living, but also by individuals’ associations, circumstances and influences within wider cultures. To account for lives in texts consequently requires the development of techniques either for dealing with or for working around such complexities. When writing the life of a single person, a biographer or autobiographer must make hard decisions about which of the modes and incidents available to them through their sources are most representative of the life that they are inscribing (or, alternatively, which manners and exclusions will allow infelicities to be hidden – life writing is a high-stakes game, and presenting an unvarnished truth is not always its central aim). A text that narrativises a single life, though, has a natural central focus that can be used to arbitrate questions of significance and meaning. As more existences are woven into a life-writer’s tapestry, questions about which sets of evidence to use – and which experiences to privilege – become more involved. The desire for necessary coherence often means that as additional lives are added into an account, increasingly stringent selection criteria become necessary for choosing which elements of those lives to include. Consequently, accounts that feature lives written together often become strongly inflected towards elements that unite the existences under consideration, underplaying connections and idiosyncrasies that fit less well with the particular types of togetherness around which their narratives are constructed.

While editorial concatenations that draw lives into constellations can be reductive in certain ways, they also have important sociological and ideological possibilities to recommend

them. Notably, the process of writing (and reading) lives together can temper the implicit (or explicit) claims for exceptionalism that the biographies and autobiographies of single individuals necessarily make. By downplaying problematic narratives of individual genius, lives written together can provide a fuller acknowledgement of the roles played by community and collaboration. Accumulating lives can also help to overcome some of the problems inherent in accounting for marginalised figures, who generally leave fewer textual traces than their more socially-privileged peers. By amalgamating such traces, some of the qualities of otherwise-occluded lives can be reclaimed and reconsidered.

The conception of life writing required to admit these testimonies necessarily has soft edges rather than hard limits. Away from its core modes, with their single biographical foci, life-writing blurs into other modes of historical, literary and non-fictional representation in which lives are written and encoded but within which they do not constitute dominant narratives. This article will principally dwell on these more diffuse kinds of life writing as it examines how a diverse range of Romantic-period authors and artists represented the burgeoning city of London through implicitly and explicitly evoking the lives lived within it.

Writing about a populous metropolis might initially seem to be the opposite of writing a single-subject biography, with plenitude necessarily replacing specificity. However, in practice, many of the same tools are used. Cities are commonly characterised through the ascription of human traits and through the construction of narratives of growth and progress. As Peter Ackroyd puts it in *London: The Biography*: ‘Whether we consider London as a young man refreshed and risen from sleep [...] or whether we lament its condition as a deformed giant, we must regard it as a human shape with its own laws of life and growth’ (2). Ackroyd does not claim that London’s life is easy to grasp, asserting that the city ‘cannot be conceived in its entirety but can be experienced only as a wilderness of alleys and passages, courts and thoroughfares, in which even the most experienced citizen may lose the way’ (2). However, the patterns that he traces ultimately seek to bring together strands of the city, and they do so to a large extent through biographical testimonies drawn from a wide range of sources, including histories, court records and anecdotes, but focusing particularly on literary writings. By finding cognate relations among these accounts, Ackroyd celebrates the complexity of the city within a framework that characterises it through writing together (in both the senses that I discussed in my initial paragraph) particular modes of lived experience.

While Ackroyd's approach is a very engaging one, its historical veracity is occasionally undermined by his tendency to argue that while characteristic aspects of London have morphed over time, they were in a sense always already there. This approach has a lot in common with conventional biography, which tends to project an essential unity of character onto its subjects. The most typical twentieth-century manifestation of this is the post-Freudian reading of childhood events onto later life, in which early experiences become definitive explanations for later actions. Such holistic approaches can be questioned in any kind of biographical writing, but when considering a city over the course of millennia, they sometimes serve obstructively to occlude the particular ways in which the city was conceived of in different periods. Ackroyd's work is grounded in an idiosyncratic kind of magical thinking about London, the specific formulation of which is his own but which is influenced by a powerful tradition that has assimilated alienated Romantic discourses of the city produced by writers such as William Blake and Thomas De Quincey; Modernist techniques of fragmentation and bricolage; Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and Guy Debord's situationalist drifting; and psychogeographical writings by authors like Iain Sinclair and Michael Moorcock. The techniques developed through this tradition have created means both for suggesting that London is an infinite canvas and for valorising this image; as Ackroyd puts it at the end of his book, 'London goes beyond any boundary or convention. It contains every wish or word ever spoken, every action or gesture every made, every harsh or noble statement ever expressed. It is illimitable' (778-9). This is a typically postmodern depiction of the metropolitan sublime, but one that is very different from the ways in which the city was characterised in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when its unparalleled scale was seen by many authors as being rather more problematic.

By 1800, London had reached a population of well over a million. It was the largest city in Europe, nearly twice the size of Paris, its nearest competitor, and twelve times the size of its nearest British rivals. This unprecedented size meant that new modes of recording urban lives and experiences had to be created to encompass its complexities. However, for a considerable period of time, the types of works that we would now class as literature shied away from the challenge of formulating such modes, placing London in what Marilyn Butler has termed 'an imaginative void' (188). Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary works commonly seem either to recoil from London – as is the case with many novels that dip into the city but begin and end in more comprehensible communities at a distance from it – or to censure

the metropolis, imagining it as an oppressor or a trap, as William Blake does in 'London' and Samuel Taylor Coleridge does in several of his conversation poems.

The profusion of lives within the city was often highlighted as an epistemological problem by the canonical Romantic poets. As William Wordsworth puts it in the 1805 version of his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*,

one feeling was there which belong'd
To this great City by exclusive right:
How often in the overflowing Streets
Have I gone forwards with the Crowd, and said
Unto myself, the face of every one
That passes by me is a mystery. (208; ll. 593-8)

For Wordsworth, London overwhelms because it contains too many lives lived in parallel. It is only through retreating and setting the city in its natural contexts, as he does in the 1802 sonnet 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge', that he can definitively characterise it, and this characterisation vests in an uncharacteristic stillness, 'a calm so deep' that 'the very houses seem asleep' (147; ll. 11, 13). London is an awkward location for Wordsworth's modes of life-writing because its profusion of potential signifiers overwhelms the clusters of meaning through which he tries to define his own self-worth. While he is not wholly negative about the city, he ultimately delineates his own existence in large part through the rejection of metropolitan experiences. In the seventh book of *The Prelude*, he is keen to assert the impact made on him by the 'written paper' that explains the life of the 'blind Beggar', but he fails to transcribe this story into his own life-writing (208; ll. 614, 612). While Neil Hertz reads the encounter as 'triangulat[ing] the poet's self in relation to his double, who is represented, for a moment, as an emblem of minimal difference in relation to itself', this is only a fleeting instant of equivalency that Wordsworth's life story transcends but which that of the beggar does not (60). Hertz characterises the text on the beggar's chest as 'minimally informative'; however, from the poem we have no way of knowing this, or of knowing the beggar as a man rather than as an affective instance in Wordsworth's personal narrative (59).

While literary accounts like Wordsworth's asserted the difficulty of comprehensively representing London, other kinds of textual and visual accounts took up the task of ordering and encompassing the industrialising city with relish, albeit in modes that were often very different

from Ackroydian transcendentalism. One of the period's most impressive accounts is the immense *PLAN of the Cities of LONDON and WESTMINSTER the Borough of SOUTHWARK, and PARTS adjoining Shewing every HOUSE* produced with considerable pains by the surveyor Richard Horwood between 1790 and 1799. Horwood's *Plan* might not appear at first to be an instance of life-writing, but when examined more closely, it serves to demonstrate some of the manners in which London lives operated alongside each other and to show how lives lingered and were privileged within the city. Its level of detail – unprecedented since 1676 and unrepeated until the Ordinance Survey covered the city later in the nineteenth century – establishes the scale of London: the sizes of residences and the distances between them, the boundaries of the parishes, the spaces in and around the city, and – in the coloured version preserved in the British Library's Crace Collection – the greenness of the parks (Maps.Crace.V). Many streets are named for gates, rivers and landmarks, both present and erased, but personal names and titles also jostle across the map's thirty-two sheets. The churches with their saints' names encode both religious and personal histories. The vast number of landmarks named for monarchs and the monarchy bespeak London's enduring role as the centre of the state. The names of major aristocratic landowners are also written into the fabric of city, featuring particularly prominently in the squares and avenues developed during the eighteenth century: Bedford Square, Portland Place, Grosvenor Square and so on. Horwood's *Plan* thus records the spatial contexts within which London lives were lived and encodes the extent to which London was infused with the memories of lives, or at least their signifiers. Horwood's city was a city of names, and while the lingering of these names along adjacent streets was a less ordered and definitive form of life writing than those found in biographical accounts, it was nevertheless potent.

The *Plan* also serves as one of the main biographical sources for its creator, Richard Horwood, whose life is otherwise largely obscure. The year of his birth is not entirely clear, although he is recorded as having been baptised in Aylesbury on the 26th of March 1758 (Baigent). In his twenties he surveyed Trentham Hall in Staffordshire for his older brother, Thomas, but apart from this, little evidence has been uncovered regarding his career before he began working on the *Plan*. Scholars have speculated that he may have worked for the Phoenix Fire Office in London, an institution that later provided him with a loan to support his mapping work, but there is no firm proof of this (Darlington and Howegogo 31). It is also possible that he was the same Richard Horwood who operated as a dealer in 'CHINA, Glass, Enamelled, Blue-edged and Queen's Ware' from 431 Strand in the 1780s. A notice of an auction of his

stock in *The World* for the 26th of November 1790 describes this Horwood as a ‘Wholesale and Retail Dealer’; it also states that he is ‘Quitting that Trade, having engaged in a work of great public utility, under the patronage of persons of the first rank and consequence’ ([4]). This date lines up very neatly with the first records of Horwood’s seeking subscribers for his *Plan*, which might well be the ‘work of great public utility’ that the notice describes. Surviving newspaper reports detail the dissolution in the late 1780s of the partnerships in which the china dealer Richard Horwood was involved and note a series of bankruptcy proceedings against him in the years immediately after the auction. If the surveyor and the merchant are the same man, this bankruptcy would provide an explanation congruent with other sources that indicate that Horwood’s circumstances while he was creating the *Plan* were often straitened.

However, the most absorbing evidence for Horwood’s London existence in the 1790s is the *Plan* itself, which encodes his successes and his frustrations. The interior of the Tower of London is not shown; Horwood provides an explanatory note stating that ‘The Internal Parts not distinguished being refused permission to take the Survey’. He also includes an ‘EXPLANATION’ in some convenient fields in the south-eastern part of the *Plan* that reveals that he was unable to carry out his scheme to the standards that he had originally hoped to reach. ‘The Public’, he writes, ‘will observe that there are many Streets &c where the Numbers are omitted, such are either without Numbers, or are so very irregular and frequently changed that they could not with propriety be inserted.’ While Horwood was not able to gather every detail that he had sought to include, the *Plan* as it stands is a testament to his success at accruing information and at finding ingenious ways of accommodating it. The material object contains direct and tacit evidence of Horwood’s walking London’s many streets, taking careful notes and surveys; his consulting people of all ranks and stations and gathering written sources in order to confirm names and numbers; his negotiations with printers, engravers and subscribers; his buying the specially-watermarked paper on which the *Plan* was printed; and his working painstakingly by sun and candlelight with pencil, compasses and rule in hand to recreate the metropolis in miniature. The *Plan* is not a conventional piece of life-writing, but nevertheless it acts both as a compelling memorial of Horwood’s London life and as a means by which other lives can be traced through the city.

While examining Horwood’s *Plan* suggests some of the ways in which life signs can linger, other structured accounts write lives more directly into their systems. For example, lives play interesting roles in *Fores’s New Guide for Foreigners, containing the most complete and*

accurate description of the Cities of LONDON and WESTMINSTER, and their Environs, That has yet been offered to the Public. This dual-language French and English guide was published around 1789 by Samuel William Fores, one of the major London printsellers, whose shop at No. 3 Piccadilly was opposite the office for the Paris Diligence and therefore convenient for marketing to those fleeing the French Revolution. The account of London in *Fores's Guide* is principally composed of brief descriptions of major landmarks, but many of these are defined and connected biographically. A good example is its depiction of the equestrian statue of Charles the First at Charing Cross, a monument situated just up the road from the location of its subject's beheading:

This statue is placed at the top of Charing-Cross; it is of bronze, and bears a strong resemblance of its original. In the heat of rebellion it was put up for sale, and was bought by a cutler, who advertised his design of making it into knives; the demand was great, and all the partisans of the king were purchasers of them. At the restoration of Charles II, the cutler who had buried the statue, made a present of it to the king, who ordered it to be re-placed. (5-6)

Sadly, the guide fails to include the name of the prudent and ingenious metalsmith who bought the statue: John Rivet. However, it does suggest some of the ways in which knowing the city was a biographical as well as a topographical prospect. The anecdote about Rivet is at once a curious and a particular story: an account suggestive of a more general London character that takes in canniness and resourcefulness and a piece of specific symbolic currency that the guide provides to ease its readers into London society. In the rest of the guide, certain names recur, chief among them Christopher Wren, whose churches pinned the fact of his existence into the fabric of the city. *Fore's Guide* models a network of metropolitan knowledge within which lives are integral, biographical elements being woven together with history, contemporary observation and other discourses to render the city graspable and attractive.

Another way in which *Fores's Guide* attempts to account for London lives is through the use of statistics. It records that each year citizens got through '1,113,500 Barrels of strong beer; 789,700 Ditto of small beer; 32,500 Tons of wine' and '11,146,700 Gallons of rum, brandy, Geneva, &c.' (vi). Putting these numbers into conversation with the figure of 1.2 million inhabitants that the guide provides indicates that the average Londoner got through roughly 145 litres of strong beer, 103 litres of small beer, 28 litres of wine and 42 litres of spirits each year. This roughly converts into 2900 units, or a weekly average of 56 units, with spirits comprising a

little over half of this. The National Health Service website currently states that ‘men and women are advised not to regularly drink more than 14 units a week’. If the figures here are accurate, they suggest that our accounts of London lives at the turn of the nineteenth century should account for a considerably greater degree of drunkenness than is generally acknowledged. Statistics like this are in some respects the antithesis of biographical specificity, but nevertheless they represent an extreme form of writing lives together, suggesting norms with implications for more focused kinds of life writing. In *Fores’s Guide* large quantities are not delirious, as they are for Wordsworth; instead, they are accounted for in a series of neat tables and lists that prove capable of performing the kinds of reductions that the poet’s differing priorities cause him to shy away from.

The characters of importance that *Fores’s Guide* weaves into the city are almost exclusively eminent men. Similarly, Horwood’s *Plan* principally records the names of the male aristocrats who owned the land on which streets and squares were built, rather than the names of those who lived in them. The lives of the privileged thus occlude the lives of less fortunate groups, such as the estimated 50,000 women in late eighteenth-century London who were compelled by economic and social pressures to work as prostitutes (Colquhoun 340). The lives of these women were only very rarely written up in full. However, among the less-exalted textual remains of the eighteenth century, compilations survive that purport to reflect their lives, albeit in twisted and generic forms. One of these is *Harris’s List of Covent-Garden Ladies*, a directory published between 1759 and 1795. The extent to which *Harris’s List* was fictionalised is unclear and its nature as a book written (presumably) by men for male use means that its accounts of prostitution fail to provide much space for the voices of the women upon whom it gazes. At times it is genuinely witty, at times uncomfortably so at the expense of its unfortunate subjects, at times it becomes tedious or horrific, and at times, as its accounts pile up, it becomes deeply disheartening. It is a text that encourages its readers to skate along surfaces, but as its entries process the implications of their numbers and formulae become increasingly apparent. The *List* set out to be a sparkling record, describing itself in its 1788 version as a publication ‘able to suit every constitution, and every pocket, every whim and fancy that the most extravagant sensualist can desire’ (14). In fact, though, it encodes the systematic physical and commercial exploitation of a significant proportion of the city’s female inhabitants by their socially and economically privileged male peers. It is deeply disturbing that the *List* is the only surviving biographical source for many of the women in its parades of ‘Castalian spring[s]’ (24), ‘Venetian mount[s]’ (28) and ‘Cyprian grove[s]’ (40). Nevertheless, its existence tells some

dark truths about the lives of individual women and about the ways in which urban lives could be destroyed. Many laudatory accounts of London state that vice formed part of its rich tapestry. *Harris's List*, for all its inadequacies as biography and as prose, is a powerful corrective to such visions. Its version of writing lives together as a form of objectification and commodification is a potent testament to the partial truth of William Blake's vision of London as a city where establishment privilege blasted and blighted the lives of those less able to represent themselves.

Many of the entries in *Harris's List* dwell principally on the physical attributes of their subjects, but most also consider qualities of character. In addition, a few entries provide records that tantalise through biographical glimpses rather than through florid pornographising. In its account of Eliza Webster, for example, the 1788 *List* models some familiar kinds of story-shape:

Mrs. W—bst—r is the daughter of a gentleman, deceased, has received a good education, which she improves by an excellent natural understanding; her age is twenty-one, her figure tall, and every limb elegantly proportioned; she possesses an agreeable face, but we will not flatter her by calling it a pretty one, being too thinly formed to constitute beauty, and too much pitted with the small pox to be stiled handsome; still she commands a beautiful pair of dark eyes, which give a most pleasing, amorous expression to her whole countenance, and makes her, tho' not a pretty, still a very desirable girl; she possesses a lively and entertaining manner, with an affable disposition, and refined, delicate sentiments, which has lately been much abused by the brutality of her late keeper, Mr. K—d, well known at Garraway's coffee house, for the lowness of his birth, and still greater meanness of his sentiments. He was some time since a corn-factor, but has now relinquished that, and now all his business, delight, and employment, seems to be that of persecuting Mrs. W——. In the course of last summer he arrested her for the paltry sum of twenty-five pounds, which, from the natural consequences of not paying immediately, amounted to sixty pounds, and upwards. Indeed, could the whole conduct of this old r—l be summed up, it would be impossible to describe his cruelty to Mrs. W. which proceeds merely from his [her?] resolution not to live with a wretch, whose cruelty, and her own disposition, obliges her to despise. It is from such kind of usage as this that has taught Mrs. W. prudence and discretion in all her engagements with the men, nor will she ever admit a visitor to take any liberties, without first knowing the value he fits on her company; and from the appearance which her present keeper enables her to make, she expects to be something considerable. (119-21)

This passage is shaped both like a piece of life writing and like a strand from a novel, with a narrative that describes a formative process of education, an unfortunate connection, tribulations and the development of new knowledge. However, its particular kind of non-fictionality eschews the repentant death-ending that a moralistic fiction might apply to such circumstances in favour of asserting that while a life has been changed by adverse circumstances, it has not been concluded by them. Whether the novelistic echoes flow from art to life or the other way round is difficult to ascertain, as is the extent to which Mrs Webster's story was moulded by the author of the *List*. Nevertheless, the passage throws light on mediations of attractiveness; the importance placed on sensibility and accomplishment; the fact that obsessive stalking was alive and well in the eighteenth-century city; and the potentially malicious uses that could be made of debt laws. It may not be a full or a trustworthy life, but it nevertheless implies a lot about the difficulties that the women of London faced due to the attitudes and systems emplaced by their male counterparts. This, too, was life in London.

While both *Fores's Guide* and *Harris's List* were relatively cheap publications, many works that sought to give accounts of the city's life were pitched towards more select audiences. In 1804, Richard Phillips published a three-guinea volume entitled *Modern London*, in which he hoped to 'exhibit the very soul of the Metropolis in a way which has never before been attempted' (vi). To help to achieve this purpose, he included a supplement consisting of thirty-one plates of itinerant traders by the artist William Marshall Craig, a new instalment in a tradition of depicting London's criers that stretched back to the series published by Paul Sandby in 1760. These captioned hand-coloured images strike some telling contrasts, memorialising the voices of some of London's poorest salespersons by placing them in some of its most exclusive squares. The explanatory texts for the plates celebrate the ways in which London's traders acted as indispensable and colourful parts of the city's commercial ecosystem, but they also encode anxieties about the fairness and equability of these arrangements. While the Foundling Hospital is commended, the details given of the circumstances of the poor chimney sweep who stands in front of it make it clear that charitable systems were by no means entirely effective in alleviating the struggles of London's poor. *Modern London* presents a positive image of the metropolis, but is honest enough to reveal its tensions.

Most of the tradesmen depicted in the *Modern London* plates are not fully personalised in the descriptions, but a few images are linked with specific people:



Figure 1: William Marshall Craig, ‘Slippers’, from *Modern London* (1804).

THE Turk in the annexed Plate is a portrait. Habited in the costume of his nation, he has sold Morocco Slippers in the Strand, Cheapside, and Cornhill (during the hours of Exchange), a great number of years. To these principal streets he generally confines his walks. There are other sellers of Slippers, particularly about the Royal Exchange, who are Jews, and are very importunate for custom, while the venerable Turk uses no solicitation beyond showing his Slippers. They are sold at one shilling and sixpence and two shillings per pair, and are of all colours and all sizes. (Description to Plate 28)

Like the accounts in *Harris’s List*, this is a paltry kind of biography, but nevertheless it records a life that might have slipped out of view entirely were it not for the systemising efforts of Phillips

and his collaborators. In attempting to give ‘correct ideas of London’ ([Phillips] iii), topographical works caught up in their schemas individuals whose nationalities, classes and roles meant that they could never produce the kinds of documentary traces necessary to allow their lives to be written up in full. It is often only in large-scale attempts to account for the city that the lives of these individuals can fleetingly be glimpsed.

It is telling that when the fictional and periodical writings of the 1820s turned their attention towards documenting London, marginal lives of the kinds that had been caught up in systemising accounts came to play increasingly important roles. An essay like Charles Lamb’s ‘A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis’ operates in a richer and less straightforward manner than the plate descriptions in *Modern London*, but places a similar emphasis on the ways in which the diversity of city lives has effects across different strata of residents. In elegising the passing-away of older patterns of metropolitan existence, Lamb writes that ‘[t]he Mendicants of this great city were so many of her sights, her lions,’ adding in direct reference to the sorts of memorialising that *Modern London* attempts, ‘I can no more spare them than I could the Cries of London’ (533). As with many of Lamb’s essays, there is an element of teasing but mournful autobiography in play, which is only half-masked by his assumed guise, Elia. When Lamb writes the lives of London together, he both shapes perceptions of his own life and contributes to the normalisation of new modes of apprehending the city that saw the lives within it as being intrinsically kaleidoscopic and entangled.

Whether these entanglements were problematic or a cause for celebration depended a great deal on a writer’s perspective. One of the most positive accounts of 1820s London mobility was Pierce Egan’s catchily-titled *Life in London; or, the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. and his elegant friends Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis*. Egan’s work – an inspired mishmash of guide, novel, topographical account and compilation – was published in a series of monthly numbers commencing in 1820 before being issued as a single volume in 1821. This was a method that was commonly used for novels later in the century, but which was borrowed by Egan and his collaborators from topographical works like Rudolph Ackermann’s lavish *Microcosm of London* (1808-10). *Life in London* also resembled such publications in its being constructed around plates, with the brothers George and Robert Cruikshank working to depict the progress of Egan’s protagonists through London’s high society and shadier corners.

Life writing is one of many genres and registers that Egan's text freely combines in its collaborative evocation of the metropolis. Its texts and plates included real London figures, such as the black one-legged fiddler Billy Waters, who may have played himself in the theatrical productions that *Life in London* spawned and who was commemorated as a result of its success as a figure in Derby porcelain (Worrall 62-3). The book also includes thinly-veiled autobiographical elements. As Gregory Dart notes, 'To those *in the know* (such as Moncrieff, the theatrical impresario) it was no secret that the characters of Tom, Jerry and Logic were actually based on George Cruikshank, Robert Cruikshank and Pierce Egan himself, since the trio had been hard-drinking companions in and around the metropolis for some years. Egan was even to take the part of Bob Logic in Moncrieff's stage version of the story' (120). While Egan's book employed characters, his readers were invited to replace these figures imaginatively with known contemporaries and – due to the book's roots in non-fictional guides – with themselves.

Heterogeneous mixing is the touchstone of *Life in London*, employed both in its narrative and as a formal strategy. Tom and Jerry rub shoulders with the rich at Carlton House and Almack's and with the poor in East End boozers and debtors' prisons. Similarly, scandalous songs by Thomas Moore sit alongside substantial sections from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* and Peter Pindar's verse jostles against Charles Dibdin's songs, lines from Shakespeare and chunks of Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*. In his opening chapter, Egan bends the knee to Laurence Sterne first, followed by Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett (5). As this grouping indicates, the rumbustious mid-eighteenth-century novel was certainly a major influence on *Life in London*, but so was the latest flash cant and gossip, and so were other discourses. In his opening chapter Egan thanks London publishers including Rudolph Ackermann and Byron's publisher John Murray, as well as the professors of the Royal Academy, the radical satirist William Hone and one of the archetypal men-about-town, the politician, playwright and theatre owner Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Egan did not see such heterogeneity and profusion as being fundamentally confusing. For him, the mixing of London lives made the city creative in ways that those with fixed notions of taste generally overlooked:

It should seem, then, that TASTE is every thing in "this *here* LIFE!" but it is also observed to be of so meretricious a nature to its admirers, that it is as perplexing to fix a decisive hold upon "good taste," as to take into custody the "will-o'-the-wisp" that plays such whimsical tricks with the benighted traveller: and, perhaps, after all our researches and anxiety to obtain this desideratum of character, it matters but little to the mass of society

in London, whether the *relish* for this chameleon sort of article is obtained over a quarter of *three outs* of Hodges's *full proof*, to complete a bargain of "lively soals" at Billingsgate before peep of day by *Poll Fry*, so that happiness is the result; or, whether it is realized with all qualities of a barometer by Mr. HAZLITT, in the evening lolling at his ease upon one of *Ben Medley's* elegant couches, enjoying the reviving comforts of a good *tinney*, smacking his *chaffer* over a glass of old hock, and topping his *glim* to a *classic* nicety, in order to throw a *new light* upon the elegant leaves of Roscoe's *Life of Lorenzo de' Medici*, as a *composition* for a NEW LECTURE at the Surrey Institution. This is also LIFE IN LONDON. (31-2)

For Egan, attempts to define what London life ought to be like often missed its potential for being a whole range of different things (at least for those with the social, financial and cultural capital to traverse its different loci and levels). His paying attention to the dialects of the street as well as to Hazlitt's erudite considerations gives Egan's account of *Life in London* a vibrancy and an openness that often elude more censorious arbiters. While his London is occasionally hackneyed and absurd, this is in keeping with the nature of the city itself, a place with far too many stakeholders and poseurs to sit comfortably in depictions that seek to be wholly original or ultimately conclusive.

Egan was generally seen by his contemporaries as a relatively tasteless author. However, his pioneering desire to capture the different faces and voices of the city reflected and helped to fuel a burgeoning interest that had considerable ongoing implications. We might think of the review of Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* in the *Athenaeum*, which described it as consisting of 'two pounds of Smollett, three ounces of Sterne, a handful of [Theodore] Hook [and] a dash of grammatical Pierce Egan' (841). While Egan is censured and belittled here, the criticism acknowledges that the multifaceted London he assembled from an unprecedentedly broad range of components itself became a component in later collages seeking to shape and capture the metropolis. The influence of Egan's ranging across classes and discourses is traceable in the novels of Dickens, in works like Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* and in later traditions of non-fictional writing about London, including Ackroyd's biography. In admitting diverse materials and juxtaposing them with relish, Egan developed ways of writing London lives together that would prove enduringly useful both for making sense and for modelling (albeit not uncomplicatedly) a textual city of inclusion.

In 1802, Richard Phillips published a small guidebook called *The Picture of London*, written by the obscure antiquarian writer John Feltham. While the book was addressed principally to tourists, it also advertised itself as being of use to native citizens:

The inhabitants of London are, in general, so completely involved in the vortex of their own particular circle or business, that they remain in a state of total ignorance of all the surrounding and inviting objects; it is, therefore, probable that this work will, in some degree, be a means of rousing their dormant curiosity, of occasionally directing their thrifty and sensual pursuits to more worthy and liberal employment, and of exhibiting to their notice, charities, and other useful institutions, which sometimes languish for want of publicity and patronage. (3-4)

One of the potential issues with conventional biographies, even those that write lives together, is their focus on ‘their own particular circle of business’. In this article, I have suggested that accounts of lives – conceived of both individually and collectively – underpin a huge range of representations of London beyond those that might be seen as traditionally biographical. The recording of lives is not something that happens only in biographies, diaries, letters and autobiographies, but is rather a crucial aspect of myriad different textual and cultural forms. Recognising these texts as life writing can help fully to contextualise the detailed lives at the centre of the biographical tradition and to suggest how we might work to include in our recollections the experiences of individuals, communities and institutions that fall outside the existing networks of biographical ‘publicity and patronage’.

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Figures

Figure 1: William Marshall Craig, 'Slippers', from *Modern London* (1804).