

Haewon Hwang. *London's Underground Spaces*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780748676071. Price: US\$120.00/£70.00.

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Underground spaces, both actual and imagined, have attracted significant levels of scholarly interest over the years. Rosalind Williams's *Notes on the Underground* (1990) and David L. Pike's *Subterranean Cities* (2005) are two fairly well-known general studies, though there are many more specialist volumes. This is not to be wondered at, given that many of the dominant tropes of our social maps and reading practices deploy surface and depth, from Marxist ideas of base and superstructure, to Freudian ideas of repression and the unconscious mind, and their afterlife in trauma theory, to Deleuzian rhizomes. Hwang is well aware of this self-reflexive aspect of her chosen topic, and of the fact that she is not the first to delve into the literary and historical depths of London. To distinguish her work from what has gone before, she focuses on the underground of London (with some side-glances at Paris) between 1840 and 1915, and she brings a variety of theoretical materials to the table, citing Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994) as an important theoretical reference point, alongside the work of Alain Corbin, Mary Douglas, and others. She reads Derrida as allowing her to discuss not just the explicit representation of underground space, but the way in which literary texts are haunted by underground space, even when it is not directly evoked.

Her study aims to illuminate some well-known actual underground spaces—the Victorian sewer, the underground railway, the cemetery—but also to connect

these up to a metaphorical underground, the radical political movements of the *fin de siècle*, e.g. the Irish Republican Brotherhood, or “Fenians.” Each of these spaces gets a chapter, and Hwang gives concise historical accounts of the development of each kind of underground, as well as more detailed readings of their literary refractions. The opening chapter summarizes the history of London’s Victorian sewers, and the engineering work of Joseph Bazalgette, before turning to what the sewers might have meant in the urban imaginary. As Hwang notes, the sewers do not, in fact, feature anything like as prominently in Victorian fiction as they do in Victorian journalism, in contrast to France, where Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862) is set partly in the sewers, and where tours of the Parisian sewers were available to the public. However, she argues, the “ghostly traces” of the sewer are to be found everywhere in Victorian literature, in the representation of prostitution, of the working class, and of dirt of all kinds, from dust heaps to the polluted river Thames. Such novels as Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) do not feature actual sewers, then, but they return obsessively to the idea of the city as a social body, a circulatory system from which the impurities must be purged and blockages cleared. Likewise, the underground railway is not nearly as prominent in the Victorian novel as it is in the Victorian newspaper, and indeed on the Victorian stage, but Hwang argues in Chapter 2 that it nonetheless leaves traces, and its cameo appearances in the fiction of Anthony Trollope, George Gissing, and Arthur Conan Doyle are explored alongside the Tube’s more explicit role in the Futurist-inspired arts of the turn of the century. Chapter 3 details the history of Victorian burial-practices—increasingly dependent on the railways to place the dead far from the inner city—before looking to the fictional treatment of bodies that will not stay buried in the work of Dickens, Wilkie Collins, M.E. Braddon, Bram Stoker, and others. Chapter 4 sketches the history of underground political

movements at the *fin de siècle* and tracks the way in which literary texts chose to represent their shadowy personnel, often eschewing political analysis for a more inward-looking perspective; the fiction of Henry James (*The Princess Casamassima* [1886]) and Joseph Conrad (*The Secret Agent* [1907]), among others) are cited as exemplary instances in this respect.

There is much to admire in this study, which engages with Victorian social, architectural, political, and cultural history. The historical summaries are concise and well-tailored to the readings they buttress, and Hwang is to be commended for casting her net wide for literary material, treating texts canonical and those long forgotten. Thus many readers will be familiar with the way in which the underground railway features in Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), but I for one have never read Baroness Orczy's "The Mysterious Death on the Underground Railway" (1901). And I am guessing very few will have come across the music-hall song "They're Moving Grandpa's Grave to Build a Sewer"—one would like to have heard more of this spirited ditty, which suggests an attitude to underground space that is irreverent rather than troubled.

There are, however also a few problems with *London's Underground Spaces*. In such a wide-ranging study it is perhaps, inevitable, that errors will creep in. (These could have been corrected in the production process, but even the university presses increasingly lack the resources for fact-checking of this sort.) Walter Hartright goes to Central America in *The Woman in White*, not Africa, as Chapter 3 suggests (144); the melodramatic "sensation scene" of Dion Boucicault's *After Dark* was not a railway death but a railway rescue (103); the Contagious Diseases Acts had been repealed in 1886, so using them to interpret an advertisement of 1888 requires some special pleading (42). This study's very capaciousness at times also threatens to weaken the

argumentation. Thus Chapter 2's account of the underground railway becomes an exploration of the literary resonances of the Victorian railway as such, ground that has been well covered by others. In the same way the chapter on the cemetery drifts into an account of death more generally in Victorian England rather than staying with its original, perfectly sensible, focus. Such blurring of focus means that at times it is not clear exactly what is being claimed for the underground specifically.

There is a great deal of useful material in this book, and anyone interested in Victorian London and its literature will learn from it. If I was not always convinced, that has, perhaps, more to do with my more general feeling about the way we read now, especially the way we read popular texts, including Gothic and Sensation fiction. Hwang, to her credit, is aware that it is somewhat tautological to use surface/depth techniques of interpretation to read a literary thematics of surface/depth. But like most of us she is still frequently drawn to read London's underground spaces as the repressed that returns to haunt the more official narratives of the city, and as the marker of some species of psychic fragmentation. Perhaps we need some new ways of reading that do not depend so much on ideas of the seeping up of repressed anxieties into the literary text, and that focus more on what writers are self-consciously doing; or that explain how it is that readers find pleasure in even the darkest and apparently most haunted texts. Hwang herself points to one possible new direction here. In Chapter 4, for example, she shows that a number of proto-modernist late-Victorian authors used the idea of urban terrorism to work through very different anxieties, in novels that were in the end more about modern selfhood per se, or even about the embattled position of the solitary modern writer in a changing literary market. Perhaps we might find that their mid-Victorian predecessors were no less self-

conscious in their approach to their material, and not always in thrall to repressed anxiety.

Biographical Notice:

Nicholas Daly is Professor of Modern English and American Literature at University College Dublin. His books include *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin de Siècle* (1999) and *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s* (2009). His new book *The Demographic Imagination: Paris, London, New York* is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press, and he is currently working on a collaborative project on Ruritanian fiction and film, from *The Prisoner of Zenda* to *The Princess Diaries*.