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► To cite this version:

Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada. From rags to draperies : depictions of London paupers in the Victorian visual art. Florence Fix et A.-F. Gillard-Estrada. Pauvretés esthétiques au XIXe siècle. Regards croisés franco-britanniques, EUD-Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2022. halshs-03709794

HAL Id: halshs-03709794

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03709794>

Submitted on 1 Jul 2022

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From rags to draperies: depictions of London paupers in the Victorian visual arts

Résumé

Du chiffon au drapé : la représentation des pauvres londoniens dans les arts visuels victoriens

Si les romans victoriens décrivent dans les rues de Londres des gueux en haillons, traités comme des matières informes, animalisées, objectifiées par le regard empli d'effroi d'un narrateur ou d'un personnage, le sujet est plus délicat à traiter dans les arts visuels. Des peintres tels que Hubert von Herkomer, Frank Holl et Luke Fildes tirent renommée et succès d'une représentation stylisée et empathique de la misère, qui s'inspire parfois de leurs illustrations de presse, moins contraintes par les codes de la peinture académique. Aussi les peintures, photographies et illustrations de miséreux si affligés qu'ils en semblent morts, effondrés contre les murs de villes hostiles à leur présence, se tiennent constamment entre esthétisation et documentation, entre hommage au genre pictural et obédience au réalisme social. F.G. Watts travaille la matière des chiffons et loques qui couvrent les pauvresses à la façon d'un marbre, Frank Holl emprunte la structuration de ses tableaux à celle des représentations de vierges à l'enfant de la Renaissance italienne, les photographes John Thomson et Adolphe Smith, documentant les rues de Londres, relayés par la peinture de genre de Augustus Edwin Mulready, concentrent le regard sur des mères isolées ou des enfants mendiants, Gustave Doré dispose les mendiants en frise : la délicatesse de ces dispositifs sert autant la dénonciation de l'abjecte misère que l'embellissement, la revalorisation des pauvres. Le gueux solitaire est magnifié, notamment par le biais du vêtement, quand la masse de mendiants hagards rassemblés, à l'exemple de ceux de Dudley Hardy et de Charles Paul Renouard, apparaît dangereuse. Un regard moderne porté sur l'altérité s'élabore ici, non sans hommage appuyé aux maîtres anciens.

In "Night Walks", a chronicle of his nocturnal perambulations in the streets of London, Charles Dickens records how his persona, the insomniac Uncommercial Traveller, nearly trips over a vagrant lying down on the ground:

Suddenly, a thing that in a moment more I should have trodden upon without seeing, rose up at my feet with a cry of loneliness and houselessness, struck out of it by the bell, the like of which I never heard. We then stood face to face looking at one another, frightened by one another. The creature was like a beetle-browed hair-lipped youth of twenty, and it had a loose bundle of rags on, which it held together with one of its hands. It shivered from head to foot, and its teeth chattered, and as it stared at me – persecutor, devil, ghost, whatever it thought me – it made with its whining mouth as if it were snapping at me, like a worried dog. Intending to give this ugly object money, I put out my hand to stay it – for it recoiled as it whined and snapped – and laid my hand upon its shoulder. Instantly, it twisted out of its garment, like the young man in the New Testament, and left me standing alone with its rags in my hands¹.

The gaze the narrator and the pauper exchange emphasizes their reciprocal fright. The narrator's subsequent humane attempt to touch and assist the miserable man is counterbalanced by this reification and animalization: he is described as "a thing", an "ugly object" who utters

¹ Charles DICKENS, "Night Walks", in Charles DICKENS, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Daniel TYLER (éd.), Oxford, OUP, 2015, p. 126-134, here p. 131-132 (first published in Dickens' journal *All the Year Round* in July 1861).

harrowing noises. Notable is his “loose bundle of rags”, which recalls the tattered clothes street labourers scavenged to make a living. The narrator is left with a ragged piece of clothing in his hands, which he compares to the garment Christ’s young disciple leaves in the guards’ hands as he flees naked from the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:51-52). The experience of urban misery is recounted by way of a comparison with a Biblical episode. The wretch identified by his abject rags is thus ennobled by this allusion.

Describing ragged and slouching paupers such as the one Dickens portrays here in his literary sketches raised other difficulties when it came to the visual arts². Urban poverty was increasingly represented on canvas during the century and social reportage was emerging as a new epistemological field. Yet, it was still considered an unfit subject for art. Painters especially were constrained by artistic conventions, but also by ideological considerations³. The Victorian tendency to idealize or sentimentalize the depictions of modern subjects in painting is to be found in many pictorial representations of misery. The critical reception was generally averse to realistic depictions of poverty. Exhibiting them on the walls of galleries or hanging them in middle-class homes was therefore challenging⁴. Still, committed patrons did acquire the “social realist” pictures that Hubert von Herkomer, Frank Holl and Luke Fildes produced in the 1870s. Fildes’ row of paupers wearing grimy rags in *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* of 1874⁵ (figure 3) created a sensation when exhibited at the Royal Academy. But the reception of their representations of social issues was not always positive and Fildes, Holl and Herkomer later turned to the more lucrative genre of portraiture. They had all been successful press illustrators for *The Graphic*, but it was easier to depict physical and psychological destitution in press illustrations than in painting, which was constrained by codes and conventions⁶. An ever-increasing production of textual reportages in book or periodical form evoked the topic of the vast multitudes of poor labourers and mendicants who roamed the streets of London and these reports were often illustrated with engravings and photographs⁷. These too are nonetheless characterized by a tension between documentation and aestheticization. Indeed, the depiction of misery in the visual arts particularly problematizes the issue of the gaze of the artist as well as that of the beholder. The artists who wished to raise awareness about social ills had to conciliate this intention with social expectations and artistic conventions as well as with their own aesthetic principles.

This chapter focuses on a particular motif in the visual arts: the representation, in a corpus of paintings, illustrations and photographs, of paupers who have collapsed on the ground or are

² See Linda NOCHLIN, *Misère: The Visual Representation of Misery in the 19th Century*, New York, Thames & Hudson, 2018; Alistair ROBINSON, *Vagrancy in the Victorian Age. Representing the Wandering Poor in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, Cambridge, CUP, 2021.

³ Urban modern scenes in which diverse social classes intersect but hardly interact were current in Victorian painting. The figures are generally placed on precise zones of the street according to their social stations so as to organise, hierarchize, order or separate the different classes. The pictorial construct reflects the ideological point of view of the middle-class artist and public, as shows the example of one of the most popular painters of modern scenes, W.P. Frith. See Simon KNOWLES, “Pavement, Gutter, Carriageway: Social Order and Urban Spaces in the Work of W.P. Frith”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 2011, Vol. 39, n° 2, 2011, p. 349-365.

⁴ Julian TREUHERZ, *Hard Times: Social Realism in Victorian Art*, Londres, Lund Humphries Publishers, 1987, p. 9-13.

⁵ Samuel Luke FILDES, *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward*, 1874, oil on canvas, 57 x 94 cm, Royal Holloway, University of London.

⁶ On the cross-influences between the arts and the illustrated press, see Caroline ARSCOTT, “From Graphic to Academic”, in Rafael CARDOSO DENIS and Colin TRODD (dir.), *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, Manchester, MUP, 2000, p. 102-116; Andrea KORDA, *Printing and Painting the News in Victorian London, The Graphic and Social Realism, 1869-1891*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015.

⁷ See for example Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London poor* (1851-1861), William Jerrold Blanchard and Gustave Doré’s *London, a Pilgrimage* (1872), Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1889) and William Booth’s *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890).

slouching or sitting against walls or on bridges. These figures are sometimes so destitute or apathetic that they seem to be dead. Their averted or closed eyes deprive them of the gaze they might have returned to the spectator. Their bodily postures and their tattered garments are clear visual signs of their utter social degradation. The artists, however, were motivated by artistic considerations and had to keep within the bounds of the visually acceptable and so the figures are often handled artistically. They are generally based on previous iconographical models and their rags are depicted like fluid folds that sometimes evoke draperies. Exactly as Dickens ennobles the pauper's rags by means of a comparison, the garments are transfigured by the treatment of the figures' clothes. In so doing, the indigents are somewhat divested of their working-class identity and removed from their socio-economic context.

The “human refuse”: G.F. Watts's draped pauper

Around 1849-1850, the painter F.G. Watts painted four social subjects which stand apart from his neoclassical and symbolist production. He was in search of a new language that would allow him to address high-minded topical subjects. *The Song of the Shirt* depicts a desperate seamstress. Like numerous contemporary paintings on the theme, it was drawn from a poem published by Thomas Hood (1799-1845) in 1843. *Irish Famine* is a frontal presentation of a starving Irish family. *Found Drowned* represents a woman washed ashore under a bridge, presumably a suicide. *Under a Dry Arch* shows a forlorn female pauper. Watts had read Carlyle's denunciations of social inequality in *Past and Present* (1843) and he was eager to broach social issues⁸. Yet he never adopted the visual style of realism. Incidentally, Watts did not exhibit these canvases before 1881. He lent them to annual exhibitions of the Whitechapel Art Gallery as part of the collective venture led by thinkers and artists to educate the working class and improve their lives⁹. During his career, Watts often denounced the scourges of his society, such as child prostitution, women's exploitation or animal cruelty. His mode to do so was often that of allegory or symbolism. He thus modelled the human figure on classical and Michaelangelesque sculptural prototypes (mostly the nude or classically draped figures) as these, to him, were immediately legible and could best express his idea. The human figures in his four social subjects thus personify ideas and emblematises the universal condition of man.

*Under a Dry Arch*¹⁰ (figure 1) depicts a poor woman who has found shelter under a bridge, perhaps to die there. The broad handling of paint and the drab colours convey her dire situation. She is alone in a blurry and austere setting and there are no clues as to her situation. Watts' painting is a discomfiting image of the ravages of the economic and social context and their impact on women. Yet his pictorial treatment of the woman's clothes aestheticizes his subject. Her garment is an artistic flowing mass of folds that hardly suggests realistic rags. Watts thus addresses this social subject in his usual vein – that is, with a classicizing language and in an allegorical mode.

In his work on avant-garde photography, George Didi-Huberman compares the Parisian *serpillières* and *chiffons* to survivals of Antiquity: their shapes somehow retain something of the classical drapery, and the piece of clothing acquires an independent life just as it falls on the pavement¹¹. The classical motif thus becomes a base object. Yet the visual reminiscence of

⁸ See David A. STEWART, “Reality, Artifice, and the Politics of Evolution: Watts and Carlyle in the Earnest Age”, *Victorian Poetry*, Autumn-Winter, 1995, vol. 33, n° 3/4, Word and Image, p. 476-498; Lindsay ERRINGTON, *Social and Religious Themes in English Art 1840-1860*, New York, Garland, 1984.

⁹ In the early 1880s Watts became involved in the teaching work which social reformers and committed artists conducted in the destitute area of Whitechapel. See Mrs. Russell Barrington, *F.G. Watts. Reminiscences*, London, George Allen, 1905, p. 90-92; Mrs BARNETT, *Canon Barnett, His Life, Work and Friends*, London, John Murray, 1918, vol. I, p. 161 and II, p. 67-68.

¹⁰ G.F. WATTS, *Under a Dry Arch*, c. 1848-1850, oil on canvas, 137 x 101.5 cm, Watts Gallery, Crompton.

¹¹ Georges DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Nimpha moderna. Essai sur le drapé tombé*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002, coll. « Art et Artistes », p. 13.

the antique allows for a displacement of the gaze: what seems at first an informal heap of folds, a miserable and impure piece of refuse, is elevated to a beautiful and noble motif. The *chiffon*, or rag, is a leitmotif in photography and this points to its centrality in the imaginary of modernity.

Watts's image too allows for a displacement of the gaze. In a comment on the painting, he associated his figure with debris: "my old woman under the archway I hope, arouses pity for human refuse¹²". Her posture, gaunt face and crouching position equate her to a heap of rags and drapery, and this creates a "visual paradox¹³". The garment is indeed a reminiscence of the Parthenon marbles that Watts copied in the British Museum as show the intricate, diagonal and rectilinear folds of the orange-tinged cloak on the upper part of her body and the fluid, flowing folds of the green gown which covers her legs. The antique formula ennobles the figure of the pauper and realism here meets allegory. Even at the moment of her probable death – the rippling garment is like life flowing away from her –, the pathetic woman remains artistic. The woman's ugliness reflects the physical effects of poverty on her body and face. Watts nonetheless aestheticizes this realist subject thanks to visual echoes drawn from religious iconography. Her bodily posture, the attitude of her head, the play on the light and her pallor call to mind paintings of the Virgin swooning at the sight of her son crucified on the Cross¹⁴. This fits the tendency in much Victorian art to represent working-class figures as allegories of redemption. Here, though, salvation is not to be found in the Church: she turns her back on St Paul's Cathedral, which looms out of the blurred darkness of the cityscape. This institution is reduced to a distant shadow because it disregards the fate of the poor and this, for Mark Bills, exemplifies Watts's interest in "Dickensian social realism¹⁵". The grey-brown hues evoke the filth and pollution of a foul urban world which corrupts its inhabitants, in particular women. The bridge is a motif that symbolises the contrast between the frailty of humanity and the immutability of solid buildings; it also functions as a liminal threshold between life and death and imprisons the figure in a tomb-like space.

Watts refrained from exhibiting his "social subjects" until quite late. He may have found it problematic to produce an image of suffering which, to follow T. Ghosh's analysis, could be "inextricably enmeshed with liberal guilt and pleasurable consumption¹⁶". Misery elicited an uneasy tension between the ethical and the aesthetic and the potentiality that the work should occasion the scopophilic gaze may have left the artist in a quandary. On the other hand, the aestheticization of the subject and its inscription within iconographical models enabled Watts to tackle the issue of destitution in the medium of painting.

A mass of crumpled folds: Frank Holl's impoverished mother and child

Frank Holl was particularly interested in the reality of the labouring and destitute classes, whom he represented in a style that reflected his academic training and his emulation of the Old Masters. He felt sincere empathy for the harsh conditions of his fellow men but, like many other artists, he looked to previous iconographical models when drawing the human figure. Many

¹² F.G WATTS and H. BARNETT, *What Should a Picture Say?*, London, Penny and Hull, p. 4. Also quoted in Paul BARLOW, "The Pointless Meaningfulness of Watts's Work", in *Representations of G.F. Watts: Art Making in Victorian Culture*, Colin TRODD and Stephanie BROWN (dir.), Burlington, Ashgate, 2004, p. 29-47, here p. 39. See also Nicholas TROMANS, *The Art of G.F. Watts*, London, Paul Holberton Publishing, 2017.

¹³ « *Le paradoxe visuel proposé par ce tas de voiles ou de haillons* », Georges DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Nimpha moderna. Essai sur le drapé tombé*, op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁴ Echoes of religious iconography are present in his other social subjects: the Holy Family in *Irish Famine*, the Mater Dolorosa in *The Seamstress* and Christ on the Cross in *Found Drowned*.

¹⁵ Mark BILLS, "Dickens and the Painting of Modern Life", in *Dickens and the Artists*, Mark BILLS (dir.), New Haven/London, Yale UP, 2012, p. 147.

¹⁶ See Tanushree GHOSH, "Gifting Pain: the Pleasures of Liberal Guilt in *London, a Pilgrimage* and *Street Life in London*", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 2013, 41, p. 91-123, here p. 117.

contemporary paintings of female paupers and their children are visual reminders of religious iconography. Besides, mothers are often represented as maternal and devoted, which corresponds to middle-class constructions of woman in a culture that sanctified the family¹⁷. In a drawing published in *The Graphic* in 1888¹⁸, Holl represents a mother carrying a child who has settled on a doorstep. The bundle against her bosom almost hides her face and seems to contain another baby. The shape of a cross on the door suggests that this is a church. According to his daughter, Holl was inspired by a scene he had actually witnessed¹⁹. The group is organised in an academic triangular composition. The mother is like a secular version of the Madonna with Jesus and the Infant John the Baptist placed on a crumpled and sketchy layer of cloth. What predominates is the mass of clothing. The painter used thin hatchings and thick strokes to render the materiality of the gown and the movement of the folds. White dabs of gouache suggest the uncomfortable presence of snow. Parts of the figures' bodies are lit and stand out against the dark heap of fabric. The mother's face is half-shown and merely suggested by swift lines. Her neatly combed hair, on the other hand, is delineated with thin, flowing lines. Although the woman is de-individuated, her attitude and the treatment of her hands express pathos and the preservation of maternal instinct. The visual reminders of religious iconography and the handling of the garment ennoble the pauper woman. Holl's treatment of working-class figures was always elevated and the way he depicted the folds of their rags attests to the legacy of the antique.

Holl made a version of this work in a painting²⁰ but a comparison of the two shows that the medium of illustration enabled him to tackle this dire subject in a freer and bolder way. The mother is sitting erect: she has not collapsed on the floor. She turns to the child comfortingly and her eyes are open. This individualizes her and the image is less discomfiting than the drawing. A basket laden with flowers points to her occupation and the urban setting contains the comforting presence of a church in the background. The *dispositif*, thus, orientates the spectator's gaze: in a context in which paintings were exhibited in venues mostly frequented by the middle class, this sentimentalized depiction of a poor mother and her child who are situated socially could elicit the beholders' empathy without upsetting their sensibilities or offending their opinions²¹. The drawing, on the contrary, leaves the beholder with no clues as to the situation and social class of the woman, who is thus universalized. Holl concentrates on the pathetic plight of a desperate mother and children who have reached utter degradation by falling to the ground like a heap of clothes. Both works point to different strategies that are conditioned by the medium used, but in both cases the artistic treatment makes these paupers a legitimate subject in art.

The swathed object “crawler”

¹⁷ Even a realist painting like Fildes' *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (figure 4) shows a woman and children or huddled kinfolk that correspond to coded representations of the family.

¹⁸ *The Graphic*, August 11, 1888, p. 4. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/search/results/1888-08-11?NewspaperTitle=The%2BGraphic&IssueId=BL%2F9000057%2F18880811%2F&County=London%2C%20England> (last accessed 18 February 2022). See also: <https://www.gettyimages.fr/detail/illustration/homeless-mother-and-child-on-streets-of-illustration-libre-de-droits/1300206453> (last accessed 18 February 2022).

¹⁹ See Mark BILLS, *Frank Holl: Emerging from the Shadows*, London, Philip Wilson Publishers, 2013, note 12, p. 36.

²⁰ Date and location unknown. A photograph of the painting appears in Philip Daniel McEvansoneya's thesis of 1992, University of Leicester, “‘Dismal art’ or ‘strong, realistic pictures’? Luke Fildes, Frank Holl and ‘social realism’”, online: <https://hdl.handle.net/2381/35697> (last accessed 18 February 2022).

²¹ On the issue of the gaze, see Susan P. CASTERAS, “Seeing the Unseen. Pictorial Problematics and Victorian Images of Class, Poverty, and Urban Life”, in Carol T. CHRIST and John O. JORDAN (dir.), *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, p. 264-286. On the role of vision in Victorian culture, see Kate FLINT, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, Cambridge, CUP, 2000.

Representing wretched paupers in an artistic mode was also a concern of early photographers, even when they aimed at documenting their society. In 1877 John Thomson and Adolphe Smith published a photo-reportage entitled *Street Life in London* which concentrates on the lives of workers and beggars. In particular, they describe “the Crawlers of Saint Giles’s”, old women who had become so wretched that they had to crawl in order to beg. These “wrecks of humanity” are plunged in “a lethargic condition which can scarcely be preferable to death itself”: they are “constantly dozing, and yet are never asleep²²”. Their physical attitudes reflect that state: “Some of them are unable to lie down for days. They sit on the hard stones step of the workhouse, their heads reclining on the door²³”. Their immobility is only interrupted when they crawl like animals, occasionally exchanging gazes with the passer-by when, “with one eye open”, they “look up languidly”.

The chapter is illustrated with a photograph of a “crawler” evoked in the text – an old woman characterized by “abject misery”. She lives on the street with her young son who is “covered in rags” but does not appear in the image. He has placed his own son in her care so that she may “redeem herself” – a highly religious term – and earn her meagre subsistence of tea and bread. The photograph shows her with the baby, who is only protected by “the dirty and worn shawl which covers the poor woman’s shoulder”. Yet although she exemplifies the category of the crawlers, she is not represented as an utmost figure of abjection. The treatment of her clothes, on the contrary, is quite artistic and she is ennobled by the visual allusion to the Madonna and child. The setting is reduced to a minimum. The reality of urban filth is reflected in the work on the grain of the photograph, with traces, grooves or stains on the wall and a rather blurred though geometrical background. The figure is placed close to the spectator and at the centre of the photograph. The “crawler” seems like a variation on the picturesque old beggar. The position of her head evokes the crawlers’ characteristic lethargy mentioned in the text, but it also recalls the iconography of martyrology. Most of all, her striped cloak is a graceful swathe that espouses her arms and envelops the infant. As for her gown, it is rendered with clearly delineated folds and creases that differ from the rags evoked in the text. The treatment of the garment is therefore quite artistic.

In their preface, Thomson and Smith stated that their objective was to reflect a reality. Ghosh, however, points to the ambivalence of such publications, which were devised as works of social investigation but were also advertised as commodified artistic books²⁴. This to Ghosh generates “an interplay of [...] disparate spectatorial motivations²⁵”. Such images indeed conflate curiosity for the Other, a more or less authentic desire for social justice and the impulse to aestheticize the abject so as to make it fit for artistic production and consumption.

The picturesque attire of the child-beggar

Contemporary photography of misery is thus often poised between the documentary and the aesthetic. This was especially the case with images of street “urchins”. *Poor Jo, Homeless*²⁶ by Oscar Rejlander (1813-1875) is a case in point. Originally entitled *Night in Town* and conceived as a pendant to another beggar boy, *Day in Town*. Thus renamed, the work alludes to the street-sweeper of Dickens’s novel *Bleak House* (1852-1853) It thus moves the representation away from reality and inscribes it within the fictional. *Poor Jo, Homeless* represents a ragamuffin

²² John THOMSON and Adolphe SMITH, *Street Life in London*, London, Sampson Low, Searle & Rivington, 1877, p. 81-82.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 82. All subsequent quotations are from this page.

²⁴ Tanushree GHOSH, “Gifting Pain: the Pleasures of Liberal Guilt in *London, a pilgrimage* and *Street Life in London*”, art. cit.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p 92.

²⁶ Oscar REJLANDER, *Poor Jo, Homeless*, c. 1860, photograph, carbon print, 20.3 x 15.7 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum. URL: <https://victorianweb.org/photos/rejlander/6.html> (last accessed 18 February 2022).

wearing rags and sitting on a doorstep. His body is curled up and his face buried in his crossed arms. His posture evokes prostration and lethargy, but it is also considerably closer to the artistic poses of *académies* than to real-life situations. The artist had a young model pose in a minimalized and stylized décor, his body covered with artistically arranged rags. His shirt is depicted with graceful folds as it sophisticatedly falls off his shoulder. The figure fits into the tradition of the picturesque child beggars initiated by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682²⁷). All in all, the photograph stands as an aestheticized image of infantile destitution.

Such beggar-child imagery was a favourite subject with the genre painter Augustus Edwin Mulready (1844-1905). Like Thomas Kennington (figure 5), Mulready produced innumerable sentimentalized depictions of children begging, working, resting or sleeping on the streets of London. In particular, he relished in images of children who are sleeping but seem almost dead, perhaps. Representing children enabled the artist to make his paintings of poverty more acceptable, and possibly more saleable. The artist probably intended to make the public aware of the plight of such children. However, his images do not contain signs that he aimed at denouncing an iniquitous social system. On the contrary, the sentimentalized treatment alleviates the topic of poverty.

This element is prominent in his painting *A Recess on a London Bridge*²⁸ (figure 6). Mulready chooses the symbolic motif of the bridge on which a ragged child is sleeping. The treatment of his clothes enhances the artistic dimension of the image: the shirt's folds are carefully delineated, with marked brushstrokes that indicate the fluidity of the garments. The setting is reduced to the geometrical structure of the parapet and bench. The subject and the theatrical treatment of light and shade emulate Murillo's beggar children and his dramatic baroque tenebrism²⁹. The boy's face is illuminated by dramatic effects of light while his body is partly in the shade. The starry, inky blue sky, which occupies a third of the picture, also evokes a stage backdrop. The painting does not depict an individual story of destitution; rather, it is related to the artistic and the fictional.

The work is therefore ambivalent. It depicts a social reality – the death of street infants – while flaunting the artistic means to do so. The stylish ribbon that adorns the urchin is a traditional iconographic motif that recalls the unrealistic drapes Murillo placed on his beggars³⁰. But its blood-red colour also connotes death. A shadow seems to gradually invade the boy's body, as if suggesting his inexorable demise. His head is slightly tilted backwards so that the beholder may focus on his delicate beauty. Mulready departs from the figure of the picturesque Southern beggar: his model corresponds to current stereotypes of English beauty: the doll-like face, unspoiled skin, delicate closed eyes and regular fair hair emphasize the impression of purity. Moreover, he turns his face to the sky, perhaps an allusion to the theme of the comfort found in the afterlife. Death – and the bridge is highly symbolic here – is perhaps more promising than life on earth. However, the article “a” in the title indicates that this is just any bridge. The topographic, economic and social context is thus not made explicit. Representing a beggar child enabled the artist to appeal to sentiment yet it certainly prevented him from indicting the system. This canvas stands rather as an allegory of misery.

Mulready's repeated representations of exhausted young beggars on bridges, which are variations on his prolific production of children working or sleeping on the streets, attest to the contemporary commodification of images of misery. The sentimentalizing trend of many

²⁷ Tijana Žakula studies the genealogy of beggars from Spanish to Dutch or Flemish and then to English painting in “The Indecorous Appeal of Beggar Boys: Murillo, de Lairesse and Gainsborough”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 2011, vol. 35, n° 3/4, p. 165-173.

²⁸ Augustus Edwin MULREADY, *A Recess on a London Bridge*, 1879, oil on canvas, 43.6 x 53.5 cm, Laing Art Gallery.

²⁹ One thinks of *The Young Beggar* of 1645-1650 (Musée du Louvre).

³⁰ See for example *Young Boys playing dice* (1675, Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

Victorian images of infantile poverty points to the artistic and ideological norms that restricted British artists in a way that differed from practices in France. One comparison between Mulready's and Kennington's maudlin portrayals of children with the starker and more realistic depictions of urban urchins produced by Fernand Pelez (1848-1913³¹) shows their different approaches: in presenting artistic beggars, the artists ran the risk of anesthetizing the desire to awaken consciences.

Gustave Doré's friezes of tattered paupers

In 1872, Gustave Doré and William Blanchard Jerrold (1826-1884), a writer and journalist, published *London, a Pilgrimage*³², an illustrated travelogue that provides numerous scenes of urban destitution. The book reflects the contemporary interest in social investigation. It was also designed as a gift-book and it sold well, despite its lukewarm critical reception. Images of poverty thus acquire the status of "leisure-time commodities³³". Doré's depictions of the city are imaginative visions rather than documentary pictures. They recall his illustrations for tales, fairy tales or Dante's works. *London* holds several illustrations that represent ragged sitting or slouching vagrants: they are either resting or sleeping on or under bridges³⁴. Most are organised in frieze-like compositions. The reality of their dire poverty is aestheticized, among other means by the treatment of the figures' ragged clothes and battered hats. The visual language is based on pre-existing iconographical compositions and motifs.

The first of these engravings, *Resting on the Bridge* (p. XII), shows six figures on a bench organised around two groups of three paupers, each arranged in a pyramidal structure – one with a woman who holds a baby on her lap and rests her head against a child's, and the other with a girl holding two infants. Doré plays on the contrasting effects produced by the lines and the masses: the flowing folds of the paupers' clothes and cloak relieve the geometrical structure and straight lines of the pavement, parapet and sky. The figures are focused upon by the vertical format and constricted space. Despite the vacant plane in the foreground, the beholder is directly confronted to the figures. However, more than a depiction of London's misery, the illustration evokes the iconography of the Holy family resting during the Flight into Egypt, with the veiled woman functioning as a profane Madonna. Doré handles the rags as rippling draperies heightened with white strokes, which attests to his emulation of the Old Masters.

Such artistic treatment of beggars resting or sleeping on bridges is found in many other illustrations. *Asleep under the Stars* (figure 7), which illustrates a chapter entitled "London Charity" (ch. XXI, p. 179), depicts a row of beggars of all ages who are similarly placed in a frieze-like composition. The choice of the symmetrical stacks and central recess – enhanced by the horizontal format – allows Doré to play again on the contrast between the geometrical structure of the bridge and the disorderly figures of ragged sleepers. The text below the illustration reads: "The aged, the orphan, the halt, the blind³⁵, of London, would fill an ordinary city. When the struggle for life is so severe as it is in England in the happiest times, the wounded and disabled and invalided must be in considerable numbers" (p. 179). There is some variety in the figures: older and younger men and women alternate with children. The seated figures are more or less slumping on the bench; their poses are contrived and yet artistic. What stands out

³¹ See Fernand Pelez, *1848-1913: la parade des humbles*, Isabelle COLLET (dir.), Paris Musées, 2009.

³² William Jerrold BLANCHARD and Gustave DORÉ, *London, a Pilgrimage*, London, Grant & Co., 1872. See online: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k10470488.image> (last accessed 18 February 2022). All subsequent references are to this edition.

³³ Tanushree GHOSH, "Gifting Pain: the Pleasures of Liberal Guilt in *London, a Pilgrimage* and *Street Life in London*", art. cit., p. 92.

³⁴ Another of Doré's favoured modes of composition is the positioning of beggars against a wall or a door: they appear as heaps of rags arranged in a more or less pyramidal disposition.

³⁵ This is an echo of Luke 14:21: "The poor, the maimed, the halt, and the blind" ("halt" meaning "lame, handicapped").

again are the masses of their rags. The fluid and elaborate garments depicted in dark tones contrast with the light grid against which they are placed – an effect which is amplified by the undulating line of the heads. The upper half of the picture shows a murky starry sky that conjures up the impression of cosmic calm. The scene is placed at some distance from the viewer thanks to the inclusion of a portion of the cobbled street in the foreground. All this gives the impression that the illustration does not describe real homeless people but models posing on a stage.

This theatrical dimension is present in another engraving entitled *The Penny Gaff Frequenters* (p. 165). Except for the vertical format, this illustration adopts the same composition, with a bridge under a night sky. This time, Saint Paul's cathedral is visible in the background; there are also fewer figures: an elderly couple and a child wearing hats are slumped on a bench. This looks like another example of homeless people sleeping rough in the urban environment. However, the image appears in a chapter devoted to “play” and to the theatre. The text actually blurs the distinction between reality and the theatre. Among the popular forms of entertainment described, such as penny gaffs, that is, cheap theatrical productions, is a play entitled the “Starving Poor of Whitechapel” at the “Garrick Theatre”, attended by an empathetic audience: indeed, it is explained that the public “understood only too well what hard life in Whitechapel meant; and had spent nights with the stars, upon the stones of London” (p. 164). What becomes unclear, consequently, is whether the illustration refers to the actors performing on the stage or to the real scenes that inspired the spectacle. The conflation between the social realm and the world of the theatre further underlines the artistic dimension of Doré's illustrations.

The chapter on “play” contains another night-scene on a bridge that highlights the artistic and non-realist dimension of Doré's depictions of paupers. *A Cold Resting Place* (figure 8) (p. 177) is a new variation on the figure of the young girl with infants on her laps. An elaborate cloak envelops her, and her rags are treated like artistic drapery. The image is a step away from the documentary: the figure appears as a universal emblem of *misère* – a modern-day, juvenile and destitute adaptation of the traditional iconographical subjects of Roman Charity or of the Madonna and child. The privileged motif of the sleeping paupers in drape-like tatters thus fits a pictorial strategy that allows Doré to tackle a topical reality while achieving artistic effects above all.

Ragtag multitudes: the disruptive collective

Such aestheticized and allegorized sleeping or slumping beggars garbed in artistic rags allowed for a safe mode of contemplation. The artistic treatment could somewhat annul their political and social charge. A few visual works, though, represent flocks of destitute paupers lying down on the ground. The effect here is more unsettling. *Sans Asile* (1889) by Dudley Hardy (1867-1922) depicts an almost indistinct mass of rough sleepers lying against each other in Trafalgar Square³⁶. They seem like heaps of bodies in shabby clothes and are all crammed and tangled. Only a few figures stand out. The scene is inspired by a real event that took place in 1887 and which William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army, describes in *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890): “The existence of these unfortunates was somewhat rudely forced upon the attention of Society in 1887, when Trafalgar Square became the camping

³⁶ The painting's precise references have not been found. There is an engraving in the *Art Journal*, London, J.S. Virtue, 1890, p. 174: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31822042026989&view=1up&seq=199&skin=2021> (last accessed 18 February 2022) and a photograph in Alfred Edwin Johnson, *Dudley Hardy, R.I., R.M.S.: containing 56 examples of the artist's work in brush, pen, and pencil*, London, Adam & Charles Black, 1909, p. 20. It is also reproduced in J.A. KESTNER, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting*, Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1995, p. 182.

ground of the Homeless Outcasts of London³⁷”. Booth then describes similar night-scenes in order to raise awareness about the situation of the mass of Londoners who were deprived of decent housing and clothing. He focuses on the postures of the vagrants lying in huddled groups as well as on their ungainly rags, which provide scant comfort against the elements. His descriptions of such social situations are often recorded in dramatic scenes that emphasize the visual.

Hardy chose to place the figures of homeless people on the right-hand side of his canvas, under one of the monumental lions. The statue is cropped – perhaps an ironical comment on the grandeur of Britain. The solid sculpture and the blurred architecture of London in the background contrast with the randomly placed bodies of the vagrants, who adopt different positions: some are sleeping while others are awake and stare in opposite directions. A few figures are standing, but most are reclining or sitting, propped one against the other or against the pedestal. A man moves away from the group. Unlike Doré’s rows of beggars, there is no orderly alignment. The various positions and gazes produce a sense of confusion. The accidental bodily poses of the sleeping figures make them look like dead people. A bandaged ex-soldier conjures up the image of a battlefield strewn with corpses. The treatment of the garments makes it even more difficult to distinguish the bodies and this is emphasized by the random groupings of entire or fragmented figures whose rags are amalgamated. Yet the fact that some of the figures are erect and awake, with tense or desperate expressions on their faces, gives an unusually social and political potential to the painting. The figures are packed, many of them reduced to heaps of clothing, and yet some of them are individualized. The composition is bold: the space between the group and the spectator on the left creates a sense of distance but the figures on the right extend towards the picture plane. The urban *flâneur* thus seems to have stumbled by chance upon this spectacle of social destitution and is directly confronted to it. This scene of utter bodily degradation turns into a blatant exposition of contemporary economic hardships.

The French artist Charles Paul Renouard (1845-1924) founded his effects on a similar mode when he illustrated another real event for *The Graphic*. “Our Homeless London Poor, St James’s Park at Mid-day”³⁸ (figure 9) shows a group of homeless women and men lying down in a corner of the park. The title and the recognizable buildings on the horizon clearly place the scene at the heart of London. The cropped composition shows the influence of photography. The figures are scattered in various positions on the field and the beholder is given both a panoramic view and a close perspective. The bodies are layered from top to bottom on the image and the effect created is that the foreground slips down from the picture plane towards the viewer. Another field on the left, separated from the central one by a lane, is strewn with bodies. This reinforces the sense of a multitude of passive, de-individualized men and women who literally invade the viewer’s space. A few of the figures are sitting and chatting, but most of them are asleep. They wear distinctive garments but most look like inert bundles. The artist plays on crosshatchings and on contrasting light and dark tones to suggest the heavy material, the fluid folds and the deep creases. Very few faces are discernible. Their immobility connotes idleness and unemployment, as the title indicates (they sleep in the middle of the day). Most adopt the relaxed attitudes of rest and apathy, but the random placing of the bodies makes them look like corpses. A woman on the right is entirely muffled in a white cloak that looks like a pall. Above her, a dog sniffs at its immobile master.

One figure stands out in this general arrangement. At the exact centre of the image, a man quietly rests on his elbow, looking at the beholders as if to interpellate them. As M.E. Allen

³⁷ William BOOTH, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, New York, London, Funk & Wagnalls, 1890, Chapter 3, “The Homeless”, p. 25.

³⁸ Charles Paul Renouard, “Our Homeless London Poor, St James’s Park at Mid-day”, *The Graphic*, 17 September 1887.

notes, he “stares ahead with an easy assurance, as if daring the viewer to displace him³⁹”. The figure is a variation on the iconographical subject of the leisured idler basking in the sun who, here, embodies the issue of working-class unemployment. Allen notes that political activists as well as socialist, religious and charity groups staged meetings and marches to mobilize the crowds assembled in the Park. The government authorities then tried to expel both the homeless and the militants. The issue of the politicization of the suffering poor was a much-debated topic, and the quotation from Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Act III, sc. 2) – “Sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow’s eye” – rings like an ironical comment on the central figure’s gaze. Renouard provides a trenchant commentary on a social ill. The garments, hats and shoes are carefully delineated but the numerous figures are nonetheless treated as random heaps of clothing and rags. The figures are deprived of their gazes, which de-individuates them, except for the central figure, who engages in a direct ocular confrontation with the beholder and brings in a disruptive dimension.

All in all, the images studied here point to an ambivalent form of scopophilia – contemplating the artistic image of a destitute human being whose poverty makes him an “Other” to the wealthier observer walking around the gallery – or perhaps also walking around London. Such images came in the context of the advent of the spectatorial and the spectacular. Still, as this chapter has tentatively shown, artistic depictions of misery were constrained by artistic conventions which are reflected by the artistic treatment of bodies and garments. Many artists tried to conciliate the wish to reach effective visual effects and the desire to focus on the human dimension. While this tendency somewhat lessened the issue of misery, it nevertheless contributed to open the public’s eye to human suffering. Significantly, a number of avant-garde artists, mostly Van Gogh (1853-1890) and Picasso (1881-1973), were fascinated with and inspired by some of these images of poverty. Such works, therefore, fit into the genealogy of modernity.

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³⁹ Michelle Elizabeth ALLEN, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London*, Athens, Ohio UP, p. 135.