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Victorian Fictions and Victorian Nightmares

In the last episode of the three-part BBC adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* (BBC, 2002), there is a scene in which the heroine, Nan Astley, cast out by her enraged mistress and lover, society widow Diana Lethaby, stumbles through the streets of London. Exhausted and with nowhere to go, Nan experiences the street life of the city in a near-delirious state, detached, yet hyper-aware of her surroundings. The camerawork throughout the scene is disorientating, odd angles, sudden cuts and fragmented images chasing each other in a series of dreamlike and surreal impressions which seem to draw Nan, but also the viewer, into an abyss, into a vision of insanity and paranoia (Figure 2.1). The image of Victorian London conveyed in the scene is haunting, repulsive, yet also oddly fascinating; the energy and physicality of the fragmented images of the market, of people, stalls, wares and filth, is monstrous, yet compelling, a freak show, a human circus, bizarre and frightening, even as it draws the eye.

Another example: the 1999 BBC adaptation of *Wives and Daughters* features a scene very early on in the adaptation, when the heroine, Molly, as a child, examines a beetle on a leaf in a large park. The scene’s dreamlike quality, which renders the sounds and voices of the garden party going on in the background faraway and detached, also creates a peculiar closeness to the little girl and her perception of the world. Later on, Molly is asleep underneath an old oak tree when she is found by two women, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, who will later become her stepmother, and Lady Harriet Cumnor. The perspective of this shot, already foreshadowed by the large tree which dwarfs Molly, and later repeated in shots of Molly in the large country house to which the park belongs, reverses the perspective of the shot of Molly looking at the beetle, instead making her the small object, under observation in a much larger
world. The scene evokes a distorted perspective and carries a strong sense of exposure and isolation. It is, shortly after, followed by another scene, which forms a counterpoint to this perspective. Here, the now grown Molly and her father are framed together as they sit in comfortable silence, toasting bread and cheese over the open fire. The scene is relaxed, informal and homely, as well as private.

The two scenes in *Wives and Daughters* are used as a shortcut to establish Molly, her relationship with her father, and her part in (and attitude to) the wider social circles in which she moves. Nevertheless, what is achieved is more than that; the intensely personal vision of the country house, seen from Molly’s childhood perspective, also gives a subjective and powerful sense of the past as experienced through a child’s eyes. What we see is an alternative and subjective view of the period and what it feels like from an outsider’s perspective, as a personal but also alienating experience.

The scene in *Tipping the Velvet*, despite its very different tone and subject matter, achieves a similar goal. Scenes of Victorian urban life readily bring to mind cinematic and televisual representations of Dickens’s London as well as more Gothic associations of Victorian urban settings with crime and murder (in particular associated with Jack the Ripper and Sherlock Holmes). Nevertheless, the portrayal of London as a grotesque cesspit of humanity, much as it owes to this darker strand of period imagination, is unusual when outside its specific