Introduction: engaging the eidometropolis

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Many of us students and scholars of the Romantic period in Britain have found our way to the age of "the great transformation" in pursuit of some question, perhaps the question of our own modernity, an interest in how a culture took shape. Romanticism certainly proved a decisive development for many features of the contemporary Anglo-American world: the modern notions of reform and revolution, the practices of political representation, the logics of historical periods and movements, the invention of "literature," the theory of the creative artist, the genre of the aesthetic epiphany, the hypothesis of organic form, and, of course, a host of assumptions about "nature," a matter ultimately crucial to most of the other items on the list. Romanticism contributed decisively to modern *culture*, it has become almost banal to observe, precisely by virtue of its commitments to nature and the natural world. Less obvious, however, is the way in which developments in the Romantic period – the Romantic period in the development of what was then the world's most "developed" nation – helped to shape the modern experience of the city and to establish the dimensions of what we have come to call metropolitanism, a sense of the urban site as at once capital to the provinces and point of contact with the wider world.

This volume attends to just such developments. It considers the "world city" as both condition and object for British Romanticism. Our definition of the subject is broadly cultural-historical, with an emphasis on the scenes and means of representation, on how the metropolis figures – and how it is figured – in one of the most productive literary eras in the history of British culture. The essays discuss poetry, fiction, drama, non-fiction, the visual arts, cultural sites, social spaces, and historical movements. While they represent a wide range of opinion, method, and critical background, they converge in their agreement about the need to relocate this time in a different sort of scene.

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The volume is not about London as such, but London looms as large in most of these essays as it did in the world they attend to. The late Roy Porter's recent boast that by the year 1800 London had become "the grandest city in the West and probably in the world" is not a vain one.[1] With nearly a million inhabitants, no European capital surpassed London's size, and in the wider world (according to best estimates) only Edo (Tokyo) and Peking were larger. London's longtime cultural rival, Paris, had a population only about half as large. And where London's population represented more than 10 percent of the population of England and Wales, to which it served as capital, the population of Paris represented less than 2 percent of the total population of France. (Even Edinburgh and Dublin, for all their rapid growth and cultural centrality in late eighteenth-century Scotland and Ireland, represented substantially smaller fractions of those respective populations.) Between 1800 and 1850, London's population had doubled, sustaining its growth in spite of the fact that its crude death rate exceeded its crude birth rate. It did so by attracting an enormous number of people born and raised elsewhere, something on the order of 8,000–10,000 per year over the period in question, though after 1800 its rise in population was actually slower than that of the new industrial centers. The growth of these smaller cities also increased rapidly between 1780 and 1850. In 1801 there were only fifteen towns with populations over 20,000; by 1851 there were sixty-three. London itself attracted people in ever increasing numbers. A remarkable 330,000 people relocated there in the 1840s alone.

This general sense of displacement from country to city, and especially to London, was magnified by practices of "enclosure" and "clearance" – legalized forms of privatization and depopulation in rural shires. Such displacement became a spur to much of the writing we identify with Romanticism in the world's first industrial nation.[2] Wordsworth acknowledged as much in the famous Preface that sketched the historical circumstances of his and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. There he explained that among the "multitude of causes, unknown to former times" which were "acting with a combined force" on the mind, one of the foremost was "the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies."[3] But it would be a mistake simply to take at face value Wordsworth's claim that the salutary habits of rural life saved him from the deleterious repetitions of city life. The relation between the "artificial"

uniformities of the city and the "natural" uniformities Wordsworth imputes to the rural scene of his childhood is by no means a clear one. Nor was it necessarily a one-way road, as it were, into town. At the very least, the repetitions of urban experience may be said to have occasioned the recognition of those cycles of recurrence he hearkened back to in "low and rustic life."

For another indication of the imagination's traffic between country and city, one might also consider Coleridge's 1818 *Fragment of an Essay on Beauty*, where he proposes that we conceive of "the region of unconscious thoughts" on an "ascending scale" that begins with "the most universal associations of motion with the functions of passions of life – as when on passing out of a crowded city into the fields on a day in June, we describe the grass and king-cups as nodding their heads and dancing in the breeze."[4] As a gloss on Wordsworth's poem on the daffodils, this comment suggests that central tropes of Romantic nature – nature as landscape, nature as what is "universal," and nature as what is "unconscious" – tend to reflect experience of the urban center. One of the motivating intuitions in this volume is that, in many representative productions of the Romantic period, the patterns of the city and those of the country begin to shape each other in a kind of mutual projection, one that depends on the "accumulation of men (and women) in cities" as an accepted frame of reference.

We realize that, even after Raymond Williams' problematizing of country–city history in Britain, it remains counter-intuitive to posit a "Romantic London," or to recognize a metropolitanism taking shape so early in European modernity. (Williams, as we shall see, did not explicitly call for such possibilities, though his account allows for them.) Curiously, though, while not many things in the period we call Romantic were associated with "romance" by writers of the day, the Great Metropolis was in fact one of them. This, too, can be established on the authority of Wordsworth in a curious passage from *The Prelude*. "There was a time," writes Wordsworth in the preamble to Book VII, echoing his own "Intimations Ode,"

> When whatsoe'er is feigned
> Of airy palaces, and gardens built
> By Genii of romance . . . fell short, far short,
> Of what my fond simplicity believed
> And thought of London – held me by a chain
> Less strong of wonder and obscure delight. (1850, VII:77–87)[5]

To illustrate the strength of this chain of wonder and delight – the power of the idea of London – he goes on to rehearse an anecdote about a boy from the Lake District, "a cripple from his birth, whom chance / Summoned from school to London." The boy is initially envied by those he leaves behind, but it is how he is viewed when he returns to them that concerns the adult poet in his retrospection:

> When the Boy returned,
> After short absence, curiously I scanned
> His mien and person, nor was free, in sooth,
> From disappointment, not to find some change
> In look and air, from that new region brought,
> As if from Fairy-land. Much I questioned him;
> And every word he uttered, on my ears
> Fell flatter than a cagèd parrot's note
> That answers unexpectedly awry
> And mocks the prompter's listening. (1850, VII:93–102)

In this fantasy, it is the city, not the country, that is imagined as the place of epiphanic transformation. But as is usual with Wordsworth, the expectation of novelty is first disappointed in fact and then deflected into figure.

This figure, that of the parrot, is particularly suggestive in connection with what Walter Benjamin calls the history of "the mimetic faculty" in its "ontogenetic sense," which is captured by Wordsworth's account (in the "Intimations Ode") of how a child throws himself into the mimicry of adult life "as if his whole vocation / Were endless imitation."[6] In comparing the words of the returning crippled boy to a caged parrot's note, Wordsworth not only echoes the famous vignette of the caged starling in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* but also sounds the notes that will echo through his own sentimental journeys in the great city. Moreover, the passage itself, in its figuration of the Boy's words as that of a parrot that answers unexpectedly awry, itself echoes or mimics an earlier passage in *The Prelude*. This one concerns another capitalized "Boy," the Boy of Winander, who calls to hoot owls across a quiet Cumberland lake and listens in uneasy silence for their mimic reply. But the mimicry associated with the metropolis in the figure of the caged parrot is not simply a matter of nature's imprint on the brain, not just an affair of nature and culture. It has to do with more complex forms of representation, forms that call to mind nothing so much as the involuted representational structure of the very epic of homely life, *The Prelude*, in which they appear. It has to do with the mimic repetition of the domestic owl in the figure of the exotic

parrot – and with the metropolis as the place where this relationship of native to exotic mimicry can itself become an object of poetic imitation. As we explain presently, this kind of mimesis is central to the notion of the "Eidometropolis," as it circulated in turn-of-the-century London.

So while it makes sense for Romanticists to revisit Williams' influential account of country and city in this period, it makes more sense for them – for us – to introduce a metropolitan inflection which appears belatedly in Williams' story. To undertake this latter task, we suggest, is to approach Williams by way of perhaps two of the most compelling accounts of metropolitanism to be found anywhere: those of two German theorists of modernity, Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel.

No doubt the very notion of a metropolitan aesthetic owes a great debt to the work of Benjamin, and the Anglophone engagement with his writing on this subject should only intensify with the recent translation of his unfinished magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*. First published in 1982 under the title *Passagen-Werk* as the fifth volume of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, it has also been available in piecemeal translation for decades, and so many of its arguments and assumptions have long been known to the English-speaking world. Students of Benjamin have long been aware, for example, that in a separately published synopsis of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin singled out not London but Paris as "the Capital of the Nineteenth Century."[7]

Certainly Paris, of all cities, sustains associations at once Romantic – what could be more romantic than Paris? – *and* metropolitan. It was Victor Hugo, one of its great laureates, who is supposed to have said that all that can be found anywhere can be found in Paris, and such a measure of the metropolis is common enough. In Benjamin's more exacting account of the matter, salient features of Parisian metropolitan life are captured in a certain character type, one defined at once by desire and nostalgia. This is the figure of the flâneur, the city-dweller who gazes on shop windows that rouse his appetites and walks streets that "conduct [him] into a vanished time."[8] With this figure as the criterion, London does not even rank as Paris' chief rival for Benjamin. That role was reserved for Rome. And the reason Rome was not the capital of the nineteenth century, not "the promised land of the flâneur," was that the city was insufficiently modern, too full of history to be taken "*tout entiére* – every shop sign, every step, and every gateway – into the passerby's dream" (p. 417). It was Paris, Benjamin insisted, that offered the technology that enabled the passerby to process the past into reverie,

to mix memory and modernity. Such a technology is what he sees embedded, for example, in the arcades – those covered alleyways for shopping and browsing that can still be found in parts of Paris, in European cities as remote as St. Petersburg, and indeed the world over. And so it is that Benjamin's "nineteenth century" is inaugurated at its very turn with, precisely, the construction of the Parisian arcade.

While the first arcades date to around 1800, Benjamin's real emphasis in *The Arcades Project* tends to fall on the second half of the century, the Paris of the mature Baudelaire and after, even that of the young Marcel Proust. It is indeed to the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past* to which Benjamin turns for a key formulation of "the principle of flânerie": "Then, quite apart from all those literary preoccupations and without definite attachment to anything, suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone, the smell of a road would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing beneath what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to approach and take from them, but which despite all my efforts I never managed to discover" (p. 420). Benjamin cites Proust here to show how, for the first time since Baudelaire, "the old Romantic sentiment for landscape dissolves and a new Romantic conception of landscape emerges – of landscape that seems, rather, to be a cityscape" (p. 420). For, by way of the figure of the flâneur, this chiastic formulation of the relation of Romantic landscape and Romantic cityscape, the one dissolving as the other emerges, enables Benjamin to link the figure of the flâneur to the emergence in Paris of a new form of representation: the panorama.

The panorama developed as a distinctive technique of landscape, or more typically cityscape, in which the viewer is placed in the center of a large 360-degree painting in "correct" perspective. Benjamin in fact directly links the panoramic mode with the Arcades themselves, claiming that the high point in the diffusion of the former coincides with the introduction of the latter. And he sees the panoramas as nothing less than the "expression of a new attitude to life," one in which the city dweller "attempts to bring the countryside into town." Thus, in the distinctly urban phenomenon of the panorama, "the city opens out to landscape – as it will do later for the flâneur" (p. 420). Benjamin's conceptual link between the panorama and the Romantic "cityscape," through flânerie, has crucially come to define metropolitan sensibility. More problematic, though, is his twofold claim for Paris as the paradigmatic center in the new metropolitan scheme of things – as the place in which the new

panoramic mode of representation emerged and as the site where Roman-
tic cityscape displaces modern cityscape. Both parts of this claim are
questionable from London's point of view.

In raising such questions, we do not mean to challenge Benjamin's
assertions about the great vogue for panoramas in nineteenth-century
Paris. Philippoteaux's *Panorama of the Champs-Elysées* (1872) is a good
example of the Parisian type (figure 1).[9] One of the earliest of the
nineteenth-century Parisian arcades – *Passage des Panoramas* – is actually
named for the new exhibition spaces that stood on either side of its
entrance. And through the career of Daguerre, in particular, Benjamin
traces a genealogy of modern media, for Daguerre studied panoramas
with Pierre Prévost (who owned one of the two sites in the *Passage des
Panoramas*) before developing the diorama in 1822, and the year in which
the diorama burnt down, 1839, was the year in which he invented the
Daguerrotype, forerunner of modern photography. But even accepting
the panorama as the "signature" form of the nineteenth century, as it has
been called, we want to resist Benjamin's single-mindedness in making
the Paris of Baudelaire and the young Proust the capital of the nineteenth
century.

For Benjamin fails to note that the panoramic form was in fact
pioneered in Britain and that it achieved its great celebrity in London's
Leicester Square before being exported to the wider world (starting with
Paris, to be sure). The acknowledged inventor of the new panorama was
in fact Robert Barker, who patented his technique in 1787, after being
inspired by a view of Edinburgh from Calton Hill (a metropolitan site
discussed in Ian Duncan's lead-off essay below). A year later he exhibited
the Edinburgh panorama in London. Five years later, he created what
would become an international sensation with a 137-square-meter view of
London from the Roof of Albion's Mills. Barker reinvested his profits in his
own enterprise, and throughout the 1790s and beyond, he and his son
mounted a series of successful new panoramas, and many of them toured
the great capitals of Europe and America. It was only when it became
evident that Barker was unable to satisfy the sensational appetites he had
aroused abroad that artists in other cities began to undertake panoramas
of their own. Thus, Robert Fulton, inventor of the steamboat, launched
exhibitions in America, and thus, Pierre Prevost, Daguerre's mentor,
mounted his *View of Paris from the Tuileries* in 1799. Even the very term,
panorama – taken up by Prévost and used to name the early Parisian
arcade where his exhibition stood – was coined for Barker's London
exhibition in 1791.

The point here, however, is not merely that the signature apparatus of the modern metropolis was exported to Paris from London. It is also that the London panorama and the discourse around it anticipated many key themes of the new metropolitanism, especially the complex relation of landscape and cityscape. By the turn of the century, indeed, the stage was set in Britain for a most intriguing moment of self-consciousness in the story of metropolitan mimesis: Thomas Girtin's exhibition of his *Eidometropolis* – meaning "image" or "representation" of the metropolis. This resonant title registers how intimately the story of this great painting is involved with the London entertainments developed by Barker and others before him.

The story can be briefly told. Barker's exclusive license for the panorama expired in 1801, and in the following year the vogue for the panorama attracted the talents of Girtin, one of the country's most promising young artists. Girtin was a precocious British water-colorist who died at the age of twenty-seven in 1802. In his brief but intensely promising career to this point – he was regarded by contemporaries as a worthy rival to the young J. M. W. Turner – he had painted mainly landscapes, bringing a talent for Romantic atmospheric effects to a medium he is now said to have helped liberate from its dependency on the practice of tinted drawing.[10] Intended (and received) at once as a kind of breakthrough and as a summing up of the new world of spectacular urban representation, the *Eidometropolis* was a great panoramic painting of London exhibited in the rooms at Spring Gardens in 1802. It was still on display when he died in November of that year. At 108 × 18 feet, Girtin's Great London Panorama (as it was also called) offered its many spectators a 360-degree view of London at the turn of the century from an imagined point of vantage atop the British Plate Glass Manufactory at the south end of Blackfriars Bridge. The review in the *Monthly Magazine* for October 1802 called it the "connoisseur's panorama" and praised its fidelity to nature:

Mr. Girtin's *Eidometropolis* at Spring Garden is very well attended, and . . . may fairly be placed in the very first class among the productions in this new and extraordinary appropriation of perspective to painting. The artist . . . has generally paid particular attention to representing the objects of the hue with which they appear in nature, and, by that means, greatly heightened the illusion.[11]

The "new . . . appropriation of perspective to painting" refers to Barker's recently patented technique of dramatic foreshortening on a circularly arranged canvas, and we should note that Girtin is being credited here for the outstanding naturalism of his work in a mode already noted

for its naturalism. It must have been a wonder to behold, but since it has not survived intact, we have to imagine it on the basis of extant pen and ink sketches, which indeed bear out the high praise of Girtin's contemporaries.[12]

The title Girtin gave to his urban panorama prompts reflection about his particular claims to naturalism, for, in calling it *Eidometropolis*, Girtin was also signaling a connection with what was perhaps the other greatest spectacular innovation of the age, also (as it happens) initially launched in London: P. J. De Loutherbourg's *Eidophusikon*, which had appeared in the Great Rooms at Spring Garden only a few years earlier. Loutherbourg (a key figure in Iain McCalman's account of Cagliostro's metropolitanism in this volume) had already established himself as a talented innovator in the painting of theatrical scenes for the London stage when, in 1781, right at the start of the period defining the historical scope of this volume, he produced a new kind of exhibition for the habitués of Leicester square. Since the *Eidophusikon* supplies Girtin with a frame of reference for his *Eidometropolis*, and since we wish to suggest that the notion of an "eidometropolis" forms a key part of the legacy of British Romanticism to Baudelairean modernity, it is worth dwelling a bit on Loutherbourg's invention.

The *Eidophusikon* (or "Representation of Nature," as it was subtitled) was an apparatus that promised the most life-like possible representation of the world by means of an array of technical devices working together in a proscenium frame that was roughly 6 feet high, 10 feet wide, and 8 feet deep. The illusion of depth, as contemporaries noted, was an effect crucial to the overall experience. To achieve this effect, Loutherbourg created layers of display, some transparent and some not, some two-dimensional and some three-dimensional. There was a flat back to the stage, and a light source behind layers of linen that were painted with clouds and, during a performance, shifted from side to side. There were also moving three-dimensional objects – ships, say, or carriages, at various depths. For sea scenes, there were simulated waves on rollers that could be rotated from the side of the stage. In addition to the light source shining through the clouds at the rear, typically representing the sun or moon, there were light sources shining from the front from under the proscenium arch: lamps able to concentrate candle power through glass stained to project a variety of colors. Thus, anticipating Daguerre's diorama of 1822, Loutherbourg's medium involved lamps positioned both to refract through transparencies from behind and to reflect off objects before them.[13] There was also a wide assortment of sound effects.

As the surviving handbills indicate, the *Eidophusikon* was advertised as an apparatus of mimetic realism, a "representation of nature," an exact "image of nature," "various imitations of Natural Phenomena, Represented by Moving Pictures." Loutherbourg had the reputation of a painter who, so William Henry Pyne recalled in 1823, "had studied midst the romantic regions of the Pyrenees, the Alps, and his own native mountains in Alsace," and who had also lavished praise on the English countryside: "no English landscape painter needs foreign travel to collect grand prototypes for his study."[14] The emphasis on "nature" in both the advertisements and in Pyne's comments can be misleading, however, since the *Eidophusikon* was itself a metropolitan phenomenon in two important senses. It was not only a creature of the dense London entertainment environment, but also often represented it. Consider what Pyne himself recollected of the night when he himself first attended Loutherbourg's famous spectacle:

The opening subject of the Eidophusikon represented the view from the summit of One-tree Hill, in Greenwich Park, looking up the Thames to the Metropolis; on one side, conspicuous upon its picturesque eminence, stood Flamstead House; and below on the right, the grand mass of building, Greenwich Hospital, with its imposing cupolas, cut out of pasteboard, and painted with architectural correctness. The large group of trees formed another division, behind which were the towns of Greenwich and Deptford, with the shore on each side stretching to the metropolis, which was seen in its vast extent, from Chelsea to Poplar. (pp. 283–85)

Natural and urban layers seem to alternate and interconnect in this taking in of the great metropolis. Secondly, the *Eidophusikon* offered representation of the wider world with which the great metropolis communicated, its ports and other points of contact – this too is clear from the evidence of the advertisements (figure 2). Further, the *Eidophusikon* is thought to have influenced other distinctively metropolitan theatrical spectacles, such as the celebrated production of *Omai* in 1786. It appeared and reappeared in London, with revivals in 1793 and again in 1799. Historians of stage and spectacle are agreed that its impression on the imagination of Londoners was deep and lasting. It is safe to say that there was, and is, no mistaking the allusion in Girtin's archaic-sounding title. But beyond this, we may also say that the allusion of *Eidometropolis* to *Eidophusikon* does more than casual work in Girtin's title.

Though it was not itself, like the *Eidophusikon*, a technology of superimposition, Girtin's way of naming it seems to establish such a structure in the allusion itself. It is as if Girtin were registering how his own