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# The 'Crazy Clock' of York: Collapsing Time and Unstable Reality in James Montgomery Urban Topographic Poetry

Dr Adam James Smith

## York, a city 'sunk into time'

'York never loses its magic', wrote Dana Huntley wrote in 2009 whilst attempting to account for the public's enduring fascination with the city's history. A decade later, as no less than three stores dedicated to providing merchandise to legions of *Harry Potter* fans slowly colonize York's celebrated fourteenth-century Shambles (doubling as both functioning shops and interactive simulations of fictional boy wizard's own 'back to school' experiences), the city now faces an excess of magic. Why these shops have appeared in York is not immediately obvious. Fidelity critics might erroneously claim the Shambles as some form of proto-Diagon Alley, but a consideration of York's relationship in literature with the topographic imaginary reveals that the city has long been a site where the boundaries between the real and the imagined have proved unstable. Alongside the Dick Turpins stalking the corridors of York Dungeons and the hordes of Roman Soldiers commandeering the museum gardens once a year, it is no surprise that the cobbled streets of York should provide the breach through which the Wizarding World can extort real capital from real customers. This chapter argues that the reason York provides such a fruitful arena for these complex negotiations of fact and fiction is bound up in the city's history, or rather, the city's performance of this history. The following account of James Montgomery's depiction of York in 1795, and

the various ways in which he replicates and subverts stock characteristics of earlier examples of topographical poetry, will reveal that this is a performance that York has sustained since at least the eighteenth century.

The poet, printer and political prisoner James Montgomery proposed that York was a city where time was out of joint. Writing from a cell beneath York Castle Prison, Montgomery penned a knowing contribution to the genre of urban topographical poetry, decentering the form's typically London-bound focus to consider the surprising relationship between time and space in a city later described as a living 'microcosm of English history and architecture' (2009, 34). To this day, York refuses to permit the observer to experience its significant and varied history in anything resembling a linear fashion. Instead, this is a city where the local branch of the Ask Italian restaurant chain is housed within an eighteenth-century Assembly Rooms and the Starbucks down the road is a partially resorted Georgian Bank. At the same time, York's famous culture of retail tourism offers a Roman and Viking themed iteration of Jean Baudrillard's Disneyland, 'presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real' (1989, 29). As Richard Voase identifies, visitors to York today are myth-hunters: "There is a sense [that] anything [coded] for tourist consumption [is] staged. The "authentic" becomes inauthentic and a quest for the unmarked "authentic" begins, initiating a trajectory of interest and activity in pursuit of the real' (1999, 291).

As early as 1125, accounts of York are seen to prioritise discussions of the city's past over descriptions of its condition in the present. William of Malmesbury, often credited as one of the first English Historians, described York less as a city than a scar upon the landscape, signifying centuries of violent failure and cyclic trauma. In 1479, a Venetian diplomat wrote that York is one of the most important towns in the Kingdom because of its lost status 'in ancient times' (Palliser 1979, 7). For Joseph Taylor, visiting York in 1705, York is 'a very ancient city' populated with 'ruins' (Palliser 1979, 30). York is rarely understood as temporally present. This tendency persists long into the twentieth century, with G. J. Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge defining York primarily as a 'tourist-historic city' (Ashworth 1990, 151). They highlight the significance of the Jorvik Viking Centre, intended to be an 'icon attraction' when it was opened in the 1980s, suggesting that its arrival set the agenda for York tourism for the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond (Ashworth 1990, 151). This highly successful simulacrum of a Viking settlement prompted a boom in the city's tourism. Voase suggests that after its installation, tourist behaviours typically associated with designated attractions spread beyond the confines of the Jorvik Viking Centre, influencing surrounding businesses such as shops, restaurants, and more recently even civic events such as the Jorvik Viking Festival (1999, 290). The emergence of this lucrative 'retail tourism' prompts Ashworth and Tunbridge to observe that York city centre now operates in a manner strikingly reminiscent of a 'fantasy theme park' (Ashworth 1990, 151). Undoubtedly, this is a theme park

dedicated to a fantastical reimagining of York's history. Because of this the city's present remains elusive.

In 1724, Daniel Defoe lamented that York is a difficult city to experience precisely because it is mired in history, characterising it as a place 'sunk into time' (Defoe 1979, 33). The places he encounters during his tour of the city are symbolic of all they have been before, distorting any perception of what they might be today. According to Daniel Defoe contemporary York is at best glimpsed momentarily through the cloudy sea of time. In framing his account of York in such terms, Defoe contemplates a set of questions that are also central to the traditions of topographic poetry that Montgomery would later draw upon, namely those of time, perception and the signifying practices of the city. Topographical poetry, often said to have originated with John Denham's 1642 poem 'Cooper's Hill', is a genre traditionally consisting of descriptions or praise of particular places. Robert Aubin's history of the form provides the most often-cited definition: 'a subspecies of descriptive poetry' seeking to depict 'nature in general' but aiming chiefly to 'describe specifically named actual localities' (Aubin 1936, 1). Following the publication of Aubin's history, topographical poetry fell out of favour amongst literary historians, dismissed as a parochial form built on 'stock elements and dull morals' (Foster 1970, 395). The form enjoyed some rehabilitation throughout the twentieth century, stemming from acknowledgements of both its popularity during the eighteenth century and its identification as a site of

generic instability, mutation and amalgamation (Wasserman 1959, Durling 1964, Page and Preston 1993).

Contemplation of the passage and projection of time is one of five characteristics that John Wilson Foster argues remain central to this genre throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These include: the use of extensive description, the use of space as a patterning device, the use of extended metaphor, the development of a controlling moral vision and the use of 'time projections' (Foster 1970, 403). As Foster explains:

The topographic poet has a choice of four time-projections. He is looking and writing in the present, of course, but he can also reflect upon the past (the recent and the distant) and use the mythological past for purposes of comparison and explanation of origins (Foster 1970, 399).

In 'The Pleasures of Imprisonment', Montgomery incorporates each of the five traits later identified by Foster, self-consciously aligning himself with long-standing traditions of topographic poetry. His two-part epistle, 'The Pleasures of Imprisonment', sees Montgomery's captive poetic persona imagining a walk around York; a city that refuses to be located temporally in the present, only ever understood in terms of what it is not, or more often, what it no longer is. Exchanging the literal world of the typical topographic poet for the figurative world of his narrator's imagination, the poem sets about exploring and exposing the city's reliance on myth, both past and present. At the heart of this endeavour is an emphasis on time, outed

here as a subjective and malleable foundational myth upon which are built the systems and structures that led to Montgomery's imprisonment.

### **York, a Radical and Conservative City**

At the time of publication, Montgomery had a very particular relationship with York. Prior to his arrival in the city, Montgomery was a resident of Sheffield, where he was also editor of the *Sheffield Iris* newspaper. A sequel to the openly dissenting *Sheffield Register*, the *Iris* was well-known as a champion of political reform and a vocal critic of central government. In 1794, Montgomery was sentenced to a six-month imprisonment at York Castle for allegedly printing a poem deemed overtly critical of Britain's involvement in the French Revolution. Montgomery, who denied all knowledge of the poem, was charged for 'intending to stir up and excite sedition amongst his majesty's subjects' (Montgomery 1795, 2). He received a six-month sentence. Upon release, he was quickly charged again, this time for reporting an altercation between Sheffield protestors and government militia. He returned to York Castle for a further sentence of six-months.

Prior to his conviction, Montgomery's work in the *Iris* reveals a paradoxical perception of York, as both a platform for elite political protest and a site of discipline and punishment for activists and radical non-conformists. The *Iris* celebrates, for instance, the activities of Christopher Wyvill: founder of the Yorkshire Association. Established in 1779, this Association sought to make constitutional information

available to Yorkshire land-owners and, in 1780, petitioned parliament for greater representation of Northern interests in Westminster (Smith 2017, 358). In 1793, Wyvill's sentiments regarding England's involvement in the French Revolution aligned with those expressed in both the *Register* and the *Iris*. This alignment provided a synergy that Montgomery capitalized on in his weekly editorials. Amidst the pages of the same paper, though, Montgomery also found himself reporting (with increasingly regularity) the imprisonment of fellow Reformists charged with treason. Weeks before he was charged himself, Montgomery dedicated a string of issues to the trial of Thomas Hardy, the founder of the London Corresponding Society who was charged with high treason as part of William Pitt's attempt to crush the British Radical Movement during the 1790s.

It is clear from Montgomery's private correspondence that after receiving his sentence, the city of York became a synecdoche for state-sanctioned punishment of the government's critics. Writing to Joseph Aston in the months preceding his captivity, Montgomery spoke of the extent to which the image of York Castle had taken up residence in his imagination: 'I have got York Castle wedged in my head, and, for the life of me, I cannot get it out again; indeed, my upper story is so full of it, that there is scarce any room for anything else to breathe' (Everett 1854, 198). Whilst in prison, Montgomery wrote twenty-six poems, the majority of which were posted to the *Iris* office and printed in the paper during his confinement. For the most part, these poems see a repentant Montgomery reflect on his apparent naivety in thinking he could

criticize his government in print without consequence. Montgomery's foray into topographical poetry in the two-part epistle 'The Pleasures of Imprisonment' differs from the rest of this collection in two important ways. This is the only poem to treat Montgomery's situation at the time of writing in literal, non-allegorical terms. It is also the only poem not to be published in the *Iris* during his confinement. Its first appearance in print was as part of *Prison Amusements*, an anthology of Montgomery's prison writing published in 1797, a year after his final release.

### **James Montgomery and Topographical Tradition**

Though Montgomery's phantasmal wanderer surveys the roads, gates and bars of this once Roman city, he also acknowledges that he does so from the confines of a cell in York Castle Prison. The poetic voice of this epistle is in two places at once: one physical, one imagined. Montgomery's York is no longer a signifier prompting imaginative action; it is a cypher conjured entirely within the imagination of both the poet and his narrator. This York is a hyper-real space divorced from its real-world referent, where there can no longer exist any meaningful distinction between the literal and figurative. Whilst relaying this imagined tour of a wholly conceptual York, Montgomery deliberately evokes earlier examples of urban topographical poetry. These pre-existing forms foreshadow Guy Debord's later assertion that the city is spectacle made available for visual consumption (Debord 1967). The poems tended to detail the observations of a typically anonymous wanderer, functionally reminiscent

of the 'loitering, idling, walking [...] flâneur' (Higgins 2018) first described by Baudelaire (1987) and later theorized by Walter Benjamin (1979). For instance, Jonathan Swift's 'A Description of the Morning' and 'A Description of a City Shower' (each appearing in the pages of Richard Steele's *The Tatler* in October 1710) both see a detached poetic voice observing the city during unflattering circumstances. These poems also contributed to the emergence of a pioneering satirical form later termed the Urban or Mock Georgic (Bullard 2013, 611). This poetry subverts the structure and diction of Virgil's *Georgics* (poems dedicated to lavishly representations of the lost pastoral paradises a mythic golden age) oxymoronically applying them to the moral and physical depravities of the city at the time of writing. These descriptions of the city focus on the unflinching recollection of detail, foregrounding and magnifying the grim realities of London life. In this manner, the city becomes a gateway to the cultural and the political. The moral degradation writ upon the street becomes, for Swift, a barometer for the state of the nation.

Montgomery relocates the tropes and traits of Gay and Swift's Urban Georgic (which, on closer inspection, are revealed to be exclusively examples of 'London' Georgic) to eighteenth-century England's second city, York, questioning the metropolitan assumptions of his poetic predecessors. York's historic character, and the specific contexts in which Montgomery was embroiled, also permit the poet self-consciously to juxtapose real and imagined visions of the city in order to destabilize distinctions between the two. In drawing and stating explicit conclusions about the broader

implications of the state of the city, Montgomery also recalls William Blake's 'London', published four years before Montgomery's *Prison Amusements*. Blake's poem signalled a shift from denotation to connotation. Blake's city no longer signifies itself, but invites an indictment of the social ills of civil life. Blake confirms the social ills that Swift only ever inferred. The reader is not left to discern the horror in that which is described: the poem *tells us*, for instance, that the infant's cry is one of fear.

That 'The Pleasures of Imprisonment' shares discernible life-blood with both the early eighteenth-century Urban Georgic and Blake's 'London' is a trait consistent with Montgomery's literary career. Montgomery work resists the easy categorization which often accompanies literary periodization. On the one hand, Montgomery bears some striking Romantic credentials. Following the publication of his 1806 poem, 'The Wanderer of Switzerland' (a poem which quickly circulated around Europe and America), Montgomery found himself listed alongside the best-known poets of the time. Described by Helen Cross Knight as a 'patriotic plaint over down-trodden liberties [...] which directly appealed to the strongest affections and best instincts of the heart', 'The Wanderer of Switzerland' won the praise of both William Wordsworth and Robert Southey (Knight 1857, 118). Wordsworth wrote to Montgomery upon reading the poem, expressing a 'lively interest in [his] destiny as a poet', whilst the Southey asserted that it was 'worth a thousand *Lyrical Ballads*' (Cross 1857, 157). Elsewhere, *The Eclectic Review* reported that Montgomery 'displays a rich and romantic fancy, a tender heart, a copious and active imagery and language, and an

irresistible influence over the feelings' (Cross 1857, 118). At the same time, however, Montgomery's poetry owes a discernible debt to the Augustan poetry of the early eighteenth century, his protest poetry proving far more akin to the verse of Pope and Swift than Wordsworth and Coleridge. Rather than staging a Romantic invitation to imagine, Montgomery's earliest published poetry (which appeared amidst the pages of the *Register* and *Iris* newspapers) peddled overt and discrete positions relating to specific social and political situations. Caught between the Romantics and the Augustans, Montgomery ultimately fell through the seams of the literary canon. Indeed, Mary Cross Knight's posthumous biography reveals that whilst it is an Augustan commitment to explicit causes that distinguished Montgomery from his Romantic contemporaries, it was this same characteristic that rendered him inferior in the eyes of his posterity (1857, iii).

This difficulty in categorizing Montgomery's poetry, endured by both Montgomery's biographers and his editors, is symptomatic of a broader contradiction. Throughout his career his verse fluctuates between pragmatism and idealism. This is the true difference between his earlier poems and 'The Wanderer of Switzerland.' The earlier poems seek to further a specific, political cause, the latter uses a specific cause to stage an abstract appreciation of nature and the imagination. Montgomery's contribution to topographic poetry, as a broadly defined form, sits similarly between the Augustan and Romantic traditions. On the one hand, it is clearly informed by the Urban Georgics of Swift and Gay, deriving horror from painstakingly detailed descriptions

of the city, whilst also anticipating Blake, and the revelation that true terror lies not in what the city is, but rather what it represents. It also provides the keystone of a collection, *Prison Amusements*, that self-consciously foregrounds the tensions between Montgomery's interest in poetry as both a practical expression and as an abstract invitation to imagine.

### **Inner Space: The Pleasures of Imprisonment, Part 1**

At the center of *Prison Amusements* sits the two-part epistle, 'The Pleasures of Imprisonment' (Montgomery 1797, 42). From the outset of the first epistle, Montgomery foreshadows the poetic tour deferred until the second, stressing to his addressee that though he finds himself physically confined behind 'bolts, bars' and 'gates of iron', his mind remains 'as free as you.' This defiant declaration sets the agenda for the first epistle, which stages an overt meditation on the function of reading and writing. Indulging in a protracted description of literary appreciation, tracing the gradual conversion from inspiration, to imagination and then ultimately to composition, the poem explicitly showcases the poet's shared interests in poetic imagination and functional journalism.

At the heart of the poem sits an emphasis on food, fame, air and the imagination; Montgomery's implication being that all are necessary for his survival. However, he stops short of drawing an equivalence, making the case instead that of these four vital necessities, the fourth is most essential. First, he debunks 'fame', a significant act given

his life-long, self-confessed commitment to this end. He admits that for poets 'air and fame [...] are both the same', and each less important than food, for 'who ever fattened on a name? Or made a Pidgeon pie of fame?'. Food, he confirms, is needed to sustain the body. But, he continues, more important still is food for the imagination: 'For books, my friend, are charming brooms/ To sweep the dust of upper rooms!' Imagining 'the chamber of the brain' as a physical space, he explains that 'Strange creeping things, called thoughts, are bred, / Among the lumber of the head.' Thoughts can feast, as a pestilence, upon the uncultivated mind, ravaging the brain like 'the frogs of Egypt land.' Likewise, if the mind is fed on a well-balanced diet, thoughts can enhance an individual, and 'genius, wisdom, and wit abound.' Montgomery's topographical tour of the spaces within his mind again foreshadows the tour waiting in the second epistle, in which the streets of York are replicated within this inner-space.

Though Montgomery claims that during his solitude he has learned that 'reading, writing, eating, drinking' are the most reliable supplements for healthy 'thinking', he warns that he has also learned that not all books are cures. Some are full of nothing but the 'wit of being dull.' Such books, he writes, can contain 'ten thousand words and ne'er a thought.' News and letters provide the most substantial sustenance for thoughts, forging a temporary connection to an external social reality for which Montgomery theatrically pines. His poetic voice stresses the salvation he feels upon receiving the 'paper messengers of friends.' These letters are described as though they

are 'manna' – food from God – gifting Montgomery with the jubilant inspiration he will need to transcend his corporeal form and walk the streets of York in the second half of the poem. Crucially, however, it is neither the books nor the letters that themselves generate these transcendental thoughts. Rather, it is the act of reading.

When Montgomery engages with these texts he perceives that:

Art and nature both combine,  
And live, and breath, in every line;  
The reader glows along the page,  
With all the author's native rage!

'Rage' is used in this sense to mean 'a vehement desire or passion' (*OED*).

Participation in the act of interpretation allows Montgomery to share the passion instilled in the text by its author, and this in turn fuels his figurative escape from confinement:

When high the tide of fancy flows,  
The muse takes me by the nose:  
With brains on fire, I boldly then  
Bestride my Pegasean pen;  
Bourne on an honest gander's quill,  
I fly triumphant where I will;  
Beneath my feet York Castle falls,  
With all its bolts, and bars and walls.

The poem's focal perspective splinters as Montgomery's body frantically writes the ensuing scenes whilst his imagination, quite literally, takes flight. Free from the confines of 'my senses and myself', Montgomery is free to journey anywhere, unbound by time, space, logic or reason. As the narrative strikes off 'to fairy land', Montgomery maintains the poem's split perspective, switching back and forth

between the reality perceived by his imagination and that experienced by his physical self, juxtaposing within the poem's very couplets the tension between Augustan pragmatism and Romantic imagination that characterized his life's work. For better or worse, Montgomery transforms his surroundings, escaping his immediate situation by imagining an alternate present where he is instead subject to the law of 'a generous soul [who] knows how to rule, and how to please.' He reads and then re-writes his world. When this trip is brought to an abrupt conclusion by his growing hunger, the epistle itself provides the only evidence of its occurrence, a tangible residue of this temporary transformation: 'Nothing remains of all this vapour, / Save – what I send you – ink and paper.'

As the first half of the epistle ends, the opening position of Montgomery's narrator has shifted. At the outset, the poem asserted that of air, fame, food and imagination, the latter two were equally vital, providing sustenance for the body and the mind respectively. Regardless of the detail and sophistication of the fantastical worlds Montgomery has been able to build 'within the darkness of [his] head', it will always 'vanish in a thrice' when his body succumbs to hunger: '[Not] even in gaol can folk forget, / To eat, to drink, and run in debt!' Montgomery reveals the true horror of enforced captivity, foregrounding what Michel Foucault would centuries later term 'biopower': the means by which subjects are controlled through the external management of their biological reality (Foucault 2008, 21). There is, Montgomery abruptly discovers, no equivalence between mental and bodily succor. The physical

and the perceived, the real and the imagined, are not synonymous. The second half of the epistle explores this revelation to damning effect with general reference to the imagined city and specific reference to the city of York.

### **“Walking” the Streets of York: The Pleasures of Imprisonment, Part 2**

Montgomery’s reluctant endorsement of the physical over the perceived has considerable consequences on the genre of the epistle’s second half, which deliberately apes the structure of the early eighteenth-century Urban Georgic. As seen previously in Swift’s contribution to this form, the city is always less important than that which it represents. Analogue becomes allegory, as detailed descriptions of London become metaphorical critiques of social and political behaviors. John Gay’s 1716 poem, published in three books and titled *Trivia, or The Art of Walking the Streets of London*, is a particularly striking intertext for Montgomery’s poem. Gay’s topographical poem delivers documentary satire, powered by the revelation of gruesome detail. Favouring the literal over the figurative, these London poems side-step simile, metaphor and analogy to denote to the reader a vivid picture of the streets outside. The implication that modern life has fallen short of classical standards resides in appreciation of their form, but in terms of content we have ‘straightforward description [...] devoid of any meaning beyond its capacity to function efficiently’ (Barnett 1981, 93). Gay’s urban wanderer physically walks the streets of the city and contemplates what it might represent. In an ironic inversion of this dynamic,

Montgomery's wanderer embarks on a fanciful tour of an entirely imagined York and contemplates what it might be like in reality.

*Trivia* opens with a second-person address to the reader, offering to 'steer your course alright' as the narrator teaches *you* 'how to walk clean by day, and safe by night' (Gay 2009, 170). Gay's narrative voice acknowledges that the reader will not literally be present for the forthcoming walk around London, but insists that they will share in and learn from his experience:

By thee transported, I securely stray  
Where winding alleys lead the doubtful way,  
The silent court and op'ning square explore,  
And long perplexing lanes, untrod before (170).

The second half of Montgomery's epistle adopts a strikingly reminiscent pose, inviting the read to join the narrator on a walk around York:

Now let us ramble o'er the green,  
To see and hear, be heard and seen;  
To breathe the air, enjoy the light,  
And hail yon sun, who shines as bright [...]

Unlike Gay's narrator, Montgomery's readers are not required to imagine him walking around the city and translating what he observes into moral or political advice. We are already aware that Montgomery resides in York Castle, where we can assume he is imagining this tour of York just as he imagined his previous adventure in 'Fairly Land.' This second flight of fancy, however, proves an inversion of the first. Where before, the couplets saw Montgomery's imagination translating his lived surroundings into a more desirable alternative, this second installment begins with

the imagined alternative and marks its gradual regression back to reality. Rather than describing the projection of exterior locations on the interior of the prison, Montgomery imagines the intrusive appearance of prison apparatus on the external world of York. Though an effort is made to describe life outside, the couplets bring Montgomery back to his physical location. Even as he describes the sun, he cannot help but concede that if it shines bright on 'York Minster' it must also shine on 'the dungeons and the gallows.' When he next pauses to survey the scene, he finds his gaze fall once more on the city's 'solitary cells':

And let us the scene review:  
That's the old castle, this the new;  
Yonder the felons walk, and there  
The lady-prisoners take the air.

In response to the prison's disruptive intrusions into his carefully conjured vision of York, Montgomery's narrator capitalizes on the lessons learned during the first epistle. Reading, he has argued previously, orders the mind. It facilitates the application and rejuvenation of imagination, combating against those 'parasitic' thoughts that might otherwise reduce the mind to 'a fog of dullness.' To regain control over this York he has imagined, Montgomery's begins to read the city; an act prompting the revelation that York is a city that cannot be read productively. As we shall now see, whenever this poem attempts to scrutinize what it is that the city truly signifies, it is met instead with a catastrophic disintegration of meaning.

The first harbinger of this reality's impending collapse arises from the surreal revelation that time has become untraceable. The passage of time, Montgomery comments, should be a dependable constant. Yet here, time has become subjective, 'each day a month, each month a year'. As the nexus of the real and the imagined becomes increasingly tangled, Montgomery concedes that time, the most transcendental of signifiers, is now anchored no longer to the passage of the sun but to the arbitrary workings of his own mind:

How proudly shines the crazy clock!  
A clock, whose wheels eccentric run,  
More like my head than like the sun!

This tour of York is one of dream logic rather than topographical reality. And bound as it is to the state of Montgomery's mind, this joyous dream becomes a wretched nightmare as the narrator comes upon the courts of justice.

The court, a writhing nest of paradoxes and contradictions, resists Montgomery's attempts to read and interpret its place in his dream world. Its description is seeped in bathos:

Across the green, behold the court,  
Where jargon reigns and wigs resort;  
Where bloody tongues fight bloodless battles,  
For life and death, for straws and rattles.

Nothing here is as it should be. 'Bloody tongues' are put to violent yet 'bloodless' ends and 'life and death' are treated the same as 'straws and rattles.' The function of the court is to preserve and promote justice, yet in Montgomery's dream it signifies the

exact opposite. As Montgomery refers to a 'well known song in York' which observed that 'On the outside stands justice, who never once walks in', he further disrupts the already fragile boundaries between the dream and its real-world referent. The song exists, which means that the Montgomery's most fantastical conjuring – a court of justice dedicated to the perpetuation of injustice – is not a product of his imagination. This revelation instigates the breakdown of Montgomery's imagined tour, triggering the collapse of the poem itself: "Odd? Did I say? – I'm wrong this time; / But I was hampered for a rhyme."

His thoughts contaminated, Montgomery finds himself back in his cell. The tour is over. The poem, however, continues, building to a final reflection on the role of the city in cultural imagination. His attention turns to an 'unhappy buck', upon whom he projects his own situation. Since both have learned through unhappy experience that 'innocence availeth naught', Montgomery asserts that the 'feeble, lean, consumptive elf [is] the very picture of myself.' Both have known freedom, and both have lost it. The deer is accompanied by a 'dappled doe', figured as the 'victim's wife.' Montgomery envies this creature, 'all fire and life' and 'happier than a queen.' He concludes that the doe was 'born in a gaol, a prisoner bred' and is thus a stranger to 'all the woes of liberty.' With no conception of the freedom she is denied she can live happily. As the poem ends, Montgomery invites speculation on a possible kinship between this calf and the supposedly free citizens who have not experienced 'the joys that reign in prison.' They assume that they are free, but the poem wonders how they

can be sure that they too were not 'born in a gaol.' Here, Montgomery further distorts the real and imagined visions of York blended throughout the epistle, irreversibly compromising each with the revelation that both are imaginary. There is honesty in captivity, he concludes. He is presented daily with a palpable set of anchors to lived experience. His only real choice is to eat or starve, a choice grounded in physical effect. The poem's final paradox is that his release will rob him of the liberation he finds in knowing what is real:

Yet still this prospect, o'er the rest,  
Makes every blessing doubly blest;  
That soon these pleasures will be vanished,  
And I, from all these comforts, banished.

### **Poisonous Dreams of the City**

It is well documented that Montgomery's journalistic attitudes shifted considerably upon his release. The man once imprisoned for reporting 'inconvenient truth' later wrote the following to John Pye Smith, the acting editor of the *Sheffield Iris*: 'Be on your guard not to tell all the truth you know: there are some truths, which, like ancient coins, must not be circulated among the swine' (Wigley 1973, 177). J Wigley paints Montgomery's stay in York as a peculiar time in his life:

He had indulged in agonizing speculation on the nature of sin, death, and salvation as early as 1792 and by 1797 seemed, perhaps helped by two imprisonments [in York] to have fallen into a state of mental and spiritual despair (1973, 179).

Wigley reads Montgomery's subsequent withdrawal from journalism and public life as a fear of further imprisonment, which was doubtless a significant factor. However, careful reading of *Prison Amusements* sees Montgomery's poetic persona courting a more existential angst: a loss of faith in reality itself culminating in the revelation that York itself? is a mirage.

This revelation pre-empted Virginia Woolf's lampooning of the very same poems that Montgomery seeks to subvert, the Urban Georgic poetry of Swift and Gay. When tasked with describing Swift's London in her 1928 novel, *Orlando*, Woolf announced that such a thing would be impossible:

To give a truthful account of London society at that or indeed any other time, is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of truth, and no respect for it – the poets and the novelists – can be trusted to do it, for this is one of those cases where truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma – a mirage (Woolf 2008, 184).

A city cannot be truthfully described, Woolf explains. The best one can hope for is to convey its essence through description of some analogous experience. This would, of course, be a highly subjective exercise, and can only therefore be trusted to the 'poets and novelists.' The city cannot be objectively described because the city does not exist: 'the whole thing is a miasma – a mirage.' A miasma is a 'cloud of vapour' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2018). It has no substance. It is transparent and illusive. It lacks weight. As a phenomenon, a mirage is 'a deceptive image of a distant object formed by light that is refracted as it passes through air of varying temperature.' It also offers a linguistic short-hand for illusive fantasy: 'something that appears real or possible

but is not in fact so.' Woolf needles at conceptions of London, and of the city more broadly. It is worth noting that a miasma is also noxious, arising from putrescent organic matter (*OED*). At the time that Woolf employed this term it was believed to carry malaria. The city that Woolf sees conjured here is gaseous, non-corporeal, and poisonous.

Montgomery finds the concept of the city to be similarly harmful, offering a vision of freedom that cannot be confirmed. It is a poisonous dream, a miasma. That Montgomery performs this revelation in the city of York is highly significant. As Defoe observed in 1720, York is a city never recognized for what it literally is. Travel writers before and after Defoe, like Francis Bacon and John Baskerville, only ever scour it for evidence of times past. Whilst such figures are seen wandering the city imagining it as it *was*, Montgomery writes his poem in prison, imagining a tour of the city as it *is*. Though Montgomery's York is wholly imagined, by foregrounding the city not as a site of signification but a canvas for interpretation, his poem reveals the extent to which a city's character is always conjured by the wanderer walking its streets. The city must be read, Montgomery implores, but at the same time, reading a city as ensnared in its own mythology as York can present both considerable epistemological challenges and severe existential angst. By embarking on an imaginary tour of an already-imaginary city, Montgomery short-circuits his topographical poem and reveals the unspoken conceit of the city as a signifying construct and social concept. Even today, twenty-first century York is a city fueled by an industry dedicated to creatively (re)imagining its own past. In writing and in culture, the character of the

city is always imagined. It is a pleasant irony, then, that the stage from which Montgomery embarked upon this fantastical journey, York Castle Prison, is now not only a museum but one of the city's most lucrative tourist attractions.

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