

Gregory Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. 253. £55. ISBN 9781107024922.

Romanticists are familiar with the Cockney School attacks on the Leigh Hunt circle mounted by J. G. Lockhart in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* beginning in 1817. Gregory Dart offers a fine-grained analysis of deployments of the term 'Cockney' after the attacks, and in so doing manages to cover a remarkable swathe of London's cultural landscape. The book is a study of Cockneyism and its transformation from origins as a synonym for *cit* (a term meaning 'buffoonish city-dweller'), to a politicized invective against a new lower middle class pretending to the customs of its betters, and an affectionate term that invokes the Bob Cratchits and John Wemmicks of Dickens's novels. Dart offers this study as the 'crucial missing link between [the metropolitan writers] Keats and Dickens,' showing the late Romantic Cockney, with his rhythmic weekday commutes to the city centre and his absurdly pastoral weekend dreams on Hempstead Heath, to be something completely new (25). The introduction turns on Hunt's time at Horesemonger Lane Gaol, which for Dart represents Hunt's boundedness. Hunt transformed his prison cell into a cozy wallpapered retreat that replicated the homey firesides of a suburban home or the intimate bowers of an Islington pleasure garden. *Blackwood's* transformed Cockney tendencies toward littleness of space and enormity of fancy into an invective that registered a particular constellation of class anxieties. Hunt's grandiose treatment of snug private spaces made him an easy target. The Cockney, that pretentious citified fool who cannot see over the walls of his own suburban garden or past his own self-importance, laid neatly over an emerging class of low-paid professionals who occupied the interstices between the old London bourgeoisie and the laboring classes.

Behind grandiose egotistical performances, Dart finds in Cockneyism so much littleness—from the closeness of Hazlitt's rooming house in *Liber Amoris* (1823) to the tiny figures in John Martin's overblown treatment of *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821). The problem with the Cockneys, according to conservative critics, was that despite their ordinary lives, they were always thinking further than the cold, small streets that trapped them. Nothing could be more ridiculous than pretending to the pastoral, or to the grand, while really merely inhabiting the stale outskirts. The term gained traction from the moment *Blackwood's* ridiculed an apprentice-apothecary's august pretensions to Hellenism, although in Dart's narrative its deployment drifts away from the sharply political as non-Tory critics began to use it. In addition, some works that Dart considers Cockney escaped unharmed. Neither Charles Lamb nor Pierce Egan were scathed by the designation 'Cockney'. Dart finds a 'structural hypocrisy' in Egan's *Life in London* that allows for its sustained popularity (117). While *Life in London* was marked by trappings of Cockney dandyism, its flash style, Dart argues, placed it ambiguously into the ranks of society. Its regency blend of old cant and new slang made for a mish-mosh of language so thick that it became unidentifiable with the newly risen metropolitan upstarts. Evidently, its tension between content and formal qualities, coupled with Egan's association with the popular, Tory-leaning sport of boxing, was protection enough.

In a neat bit of structural symmetry, the book imprisons both the origins and ends of Romantic Cockneyism. Hunt's incarceration for treason is exchanged for Haydon's time done for debt; the essayist is exchanged for the painter, the whole-hog Cockney untroubled by notions of false consciousness for the reluctant friend of both Hunt and Lockhart. Haydon's *The Mock Election* (1828) exposes a performativity that makes Cockney persons indistinguishable from Cockney works—the lot of Cockneys are themselves *pieces of work* imprisoned in a space of endless deferral and betweenness. Haydon paints debtors prison as a theatrical space, a self-reflexive spectacle in which those incarcerated performed for their

fellow prisoners.

In his turn toward Dickens, Dart makes a claim for the Cockneys as ‘true barometers of modern life,’ (221) but this comes at great cost. The Cockney’s unstable position—and with it his potential for upward mobility—has been contained into a ‘dynamic stasis,’ an energy that always returns to the suburbs to rest, lulled to inaction by the same dull round of weekend entertainments (239). For Dart, Cockneyism is fundamentally modern. Its territory lies ambiguously between the country and the city, between the enormous and the little, between the flagrantly fake and the desperately authentic. Dart offers incidences with and without invective, wielded across liberal and conservative periodicals, in reviews that take up literature, art, urban planning and architecture. If there is one problem with this incisive book, it is that it becomes difficult to think of anything that *isn’t* Cockney; in fact, one might almost exchange the word *modernity* for Cockney—and, as Dart would have it, ‘nowadays we are all Cockneys’ (53).

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