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## 'After London': The Death of the Metropolis in the Fiction of Richard Jefferies

**Abstract:** In the late nineteenth century, urban spaces attracted increasing criticism. Against the backdrop of environmental pollution, the miserable housing conditions of the poor and fears of degeneration, the metropolis came under close examination. Late Victorian writers responded to this discussion in particular. The essay investigates the representation of urban disorders in the works of Richard Jefferies. As a critic of industrialized society, Jefferies powerfully articulated a possible future of London in some of his shorter prose fiction and in his novel *After London; or, Wild England* (1885). Whereas his short story "Snowed Up" (1876) and the fragment "The Great Snow" (1876) portray a temporary 'death' of the city resulting from tremendous snowstorms, *After London* presents a complete overthrow of urban structures. Jefferies's pessimistic outlook on the future of the city will be analysed and brought within the context of other fictional texts of the period, which also focus on the future of London.

The first years of the new millennium seem to offer little optimism about humanity's future. Over the last two years in particular, the world has witnessed the occurrence of natural disasters on a hitherto unprecedented scale. Tsunamis devastated coastal regions of South-East Asia, hurricanes raged in the Gulf of Mexico and flooded New Orleans, Pakistan and East Africa were shaken by earthquakes, and floods brought damage to parts of Europe. Apart from natural catastrophes, urbanity has also come under threat. The ferocious terrorist attacks on New York in 2001, bombings in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005 and recent uprisings of desperate French youth gangs across Parisian suburbs seriously undermine the stability of Western societies. On the other hand, countries like India or Brazil have to tackle mushrooming cities, urban 'Molochs' with their frail infrastructure teetering on the brink of collapse.

However unique the current situation may appear, the latter decades of the nineteenth century also witnessed a widespread debate on ecological affairs as well as the condition of urban living. As the most technologically advanced country in the world, late Victorian Britain was the first nation to face the grim effects of industrial production on the environment and on urban spaces. Apart from historians or sociologists, literary critics have also increasingly opened their eyes to the representation of urbanity and the perception of nature and society by including a focus on British literature. From the early 1990s onwards, eco-

logical approaches to literature have been gaining ground, and ecocriticism, the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, has stimulated a new way of looking at literary texts.<sup>1</sup> However, the main body of work within the field of ecocriticism has been more concerned with nature writing and pastoralism than with metropolitan locations.

In the 1870s and 1880s, Richard Jefferies (1848-1887) established himself as the outstanding essayist of rural England who wrote for national magazines, such as the *Standard*, the *New Quarterly* or *Fraser's Magazine*. As a sympathetic chronicler of life remote from the big metropolis, Jefferies met the taste of a predominantly urban readership, which delighted in descriptions of the alleged simplicities of rural experience. His first novel, *The Scarlet Shawl*, was published in 1874. Although Jefferies's gifts as an observer of rural life were admired by his contemporaries, most of his novels did not achieve the same acclaim. From the early 1880s onwards, the author was tormented by tuberculosis, which led to his death in 1887. Being mainly judged as a 'country writer,' Jefferies's explorations of the English landscape and rural lifestyles are nowadays referred to as valuable documents articulating the condition of late Victorian agriculture (cf. Neil 1993).

Unfortunately, Jefferies's fiction has not been given the attention it deserves by literary scholarship, which is largely due to the fact that the author's status has been predominantly that of a journalist but not of a novelist. Besides, from the perspective of trends in literary studies, Jefferies's books do not seem particularly appealing in the light of the fashionable issues in recent literary criticism, namely 'race,' 'gender' or 'class.' However, a number of his literary works offer illuminating insights into the late Victorian discourse on nature and civilization and it is here that the author emerges as a fascinating subject of scholarly research.

As one of the late Victorian authors who wrote about urbanity in crisis, Richard Jefferies powerfully articulated the alarming prospects of London. In his writings on the breakdown of modern life, Jefferies responded to the anxieties of his time, most prominently in his novel *After London; or, Wild England* (1885). The aim of this essay is to explore the representation of urban disorders in the fiction of Richard Jefferies and to investigate the way the author deconstructs urban spaces by drawing on the conflict between nature and civilization. The first part of the essay aims at giving a survey of the critical debate on environmental pollution in London during the 1870s and 1880s which will serve as a backdrop to Jefferies's fictional explorations of the city's future whereas the second part of the essay will focus on the collapse of the metropolis in the author's short story "Snowed Up" (1876), his fragment "The Great Snow" (1876) and his best-known novel *After London; or, Wild England*. Finally, Jefferies's scenarios

<sup>1</sup> An interesting survey on the spread of ecocriticism and its various sub-branches is provided in Glotfelty / Fromm 1996. Rosendale 2002 also focuses on various key concepts of ecocriticism.

of metropolitan disintegration will be brought within the context of other fictional texts of the period which also delineate the future of London.

### 1. Urbanity in Crisis: The Debate on the State of the Metropolis 1870-1890

In the shadows of economic stagnation, high levels of unemployment, the decline of rural life and uncertainties about Britain's role in the world, the critical examination of British society and the ways of modern living amounted to an unprecedented public discourse between 1870 and 1900. By the 1880s, London itself had become the main focus of concern and criticism. The metropolis was frequently targeted by writers and commentators as a 'Moloch,' a conurbation of squalor, dirt and waste, and a shameful illustration of the evils of the age (cf. Olsen 1979, 54). The bewildering growth of the city and the steady devouring of its hinterland both amazed and appalled Victorian intellectuals. It testified to the seemingly uncontrollable nature of urban expansion, but it also stimulated resistance to save at least some areas from the onslaught of brick and mortar. For example, the 1870s and 1880s saw a heated controversy on the preservation of Epping Forest, which was intended to be reduced to a smaller size and turned into a landscape garden (cf. Buxton 1885, 15).

Life in the metropolis increasingly came under attack after 1870. Earlier in the century, the most prominent critic of urban existence in Victorian Britain, John Ruskin, had defined three characteristics of city life: the "hot fermentation and unwholesome secrecy," the "mere trampling pressure and electric friction" and the "monotony of life in the streets" (in Wheeler 1995, 49). According to Ruskin, these features of urban experience led to mental and physical distress and an unnatural craving for excitement. The effects of the metropolitan environment on the human constitution were also vividly outlined. In *Degeneration amongst Londoners* (1885), J. Cantlie declared that due to the enormous lack of ozone, the population of the city was exposed to severe health risks and degenerative developments. The author even promulgated the emergence of a novel disease called "urbomorbus" with its symptoms of weak bone structures, permanent fatigue and premature senescence (cf. Cantlie 1885, 24). Ten years later, Max Nordau's far more influential book *Degeneration* (1895) stirred society with its condemnation of modern city life. By the end of the nineteenth century, the link between urbanization and supposedly 'urban' diseases such as alcoholism, insanity, suicide and sexual perversion was firmly established in the public mind.<sup>2</sup>

In 1884, Ruskin's lectures, published the same year under the title *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, delineated a scenario of ecological apocalypse. Judging himself an apprehensive observer, Ruskin associated the perceived increase in clouded skies and storms with the deteriorating physical environment as well as with the moral bleakness of Victorian society. Caused by industrial pol-

<sup>2</sup> The debate on 'urban' diseases in late nineteenth-century Britain is explored, for example, in Chamberlin / Gilman 1985, 67-9. See also Greenslade 1994, 41-6.

lution, the author's semi-metaphorical clouds and 'plague winds' were outward symptoms of a decaying civilization. As Ruskin stated, in an industrialized society the beauty of nature was corrupted, which destroyed the harmony of human existence and opened dark prospects for the modern world:

That harmony is now broken, and broken the world around: fragments indeed of what existed still exist, and hours of what is past still return; but month by month the darkness gains upon the day, and the ashes of the antipodes glare through the night. (Ruskin 1908, 137)

Although his lectures on observations of the sky seriously injured Ruskin's reputation by shedding light on his mental depressions, his theories were part of a wide discussion on meteorological phenomena. The association of dark skies and stormy weather with a society in crisis was even articulated by experts who were "willing to enter the word 'gloom' in their diaries with increasing frequency" (Brimblecombe 1987, 117). A study published in 1892 claimed a growing presence of heavy fogs within the metropolis between 1871 and 1890 (Brimblecombe 1987, 111). After the average mortality rate had risen by 700 deaths in a week of especially severe fogs in 1873, debates on the apocalyptic consequences of air pollution attained a new pitch and scrutinized the excess of coal consumption within the conurbation as signs of a pernicious lifestyle and a destructive economic system.

Not only did the weather come under close observation in late Victorian evaluations of a deteriorating environment. More attention was given to the worrying state of the Thames. In 1858, the level of air pollution, termed the 'Great Stink' by the contemporary press, already caused widespread apprehensions, not the least since the death of Prince Albert from typhoid fever was associated with nauseous gases emanating from the river (cf. Wilson 1993, xi). Despite the 'Rivers Pollution Prevention Act' of 1876, the contamination of the Thames seemed to be impossible to stop by the late 1880s. A flood of reports and pamphlets attempted to raise awareness of the river's condition. For example, in *The Future of the Port of London* (1890), P.T. Volprignano gave a detailed description of "thick layers of black slimy filth" and a "nauseous chemical decomposition" on the shores of the river which contained an infinite number of dangerous micro-organisms (1890, 5). The author blamed the pollution of the Thames for the spread of diseases within the conurbation: "Hence all those deaths from more or less contagious diseases recorded weekly among the inhabitants of London and suburbs" (5). Another report even evoked the scenery of omnipresent death in the metropolis resulting from the staggering levels of dirt and waste in the Thames (cf. Buckland 1878, 18).

The ills of modern life were also encapsulated in the appalling state of urban housing. In "Ugly London" (1889), William Morris, one of the most eminent critics of social squalor in late Victorian Britain, condemned London as a desert of brick and mortar. Andrew Mearns's anonymously published *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883) exposed the misery of proletarian living conditions and helped to convey the deplorable situation of the impoverished part of the popula-

tion to the more prosperous classes. Mearns's description of the poor's housing areas as "pestilential human rookeries [...] reeking with poisonous and malodorous gases" or "dark and filthy passages swarming with vermin" sparked a lively controversy on the state of the metropolis and fostered an outpouring of articles and pamphlets (Wohl 1970, 58). In his response to *The Bitter Cry*, Edmond J. Long considered the lack of space in pauperized dwellings as a major trigger of moral degeneration: "Huddled together in the most promiscuous manner [...], their habits are akin to those of the brute creation, and their tastes and instincts are but little better" (Long 1884, 22). Undoubtedly, the circumstances of housing in the eastern parts of the capital helped to create the image of the city as an epitome of disorder.

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the spectacular growth of the metropolis was also associated with the breakdown of the Roman empire. J.A. Froude drew parallels between the fall of Rome and the future of the city:

The tendency of people in later stages of civilization to gather into towns is an old story. Horace had seen in Rome what we are now witnessing in England – the fields deserted, the people crowding into cities. He noted growing degeneracy. He foretold the inevitable consequences. (in Briggs 1971, 59)

As has been shown, a variety of debates accentuated the disadvantages of urban existence in late nineteenth-century society, ranging from ecological problems to aspects of urban housing, uncontrolled expansion or meteorological phenomena. Challenging the belief in technological progress and the blessings of an industrialized economy, this discourse on the dangers of environmental pollution and squalid homes in Britain's capital was assimilated and deployed by British writers, and it stimulated a rich response in late Victorian literature.

## 2. The Death of London in the Fiction of Richard Jefferies

Between 1875 and 1885, Jefferies wrote a number of texts, which share one common quality, namely the destruction of London. Probably written even before 1875, his fragment "The Great Snow," was first published together with a re-issue of the author's utopian novel *After London; or, Wild England* (1980). Jefferies's short story "Snowed Up: A Mistletoe Story" was first edited in 1996 whereas *After London* was already available to Victorian readers, appearing in 1885. In the following, all three works will be considered with a focus on their representation of urban disorder.

"Snowed Up" recounts a few days in the life of the young woman Edie, who, due to a tremendous snowstorm, is confined to her house in London together with her father, members of an impoverished family of the gentry, and three potential future husbands. All events are portrayed solely through the diary entries of the female protagonist. The relationship between nature and civilization is touched upon already in the first sentence when Edie receives a set of furs and muses about the price: "I do believe they must have cost three hundred pounds" (Jefferies 1996, 19). The juxtaposition of the human value system, which is repre-

sented by monetary means and the animal skins as a symbol of the exploitation of nature encapsulates a dominant theme in the story, the questioning of society's values in the face of natural disaster. Furthermore, the opposition between an intact human environment and barren nature is highlighted. This relationship will be reversed in the course of the story.

The death of the city in "Snowed Up" is brought about by a gradual meteorological change, which increasingly destabilizes the organization of the metropolis. A hint at the upcoming catastrophe occurs in Edie's second diary entry where she relates her way home from the theatre and contemplates the scenery of quiet streets, "almost like death itself" (20), and the falling snow. The snow already alludes to a distorted urban environment apparent from the unusual emptiness and silence of the streets. The absence of noise is further underpinned by the quiet movements of the carriage. Thus, the breakdown of the city commences with a loss of its audible characteristics.

The first effect of the snowfall on social life within London is apparent from the absence of one of Edie's three admirers, Lord Bilberton, who is unable to attend dinner because of a cold induced by the snow. As the weather progresses on its sinister course, the mobility of the protagonist becomes increasingly limited since she cannot move outdoors any longer. The complications of a restricted mobility later affect the whole city when news of obstructions reach Edie's home: "He says Piccadilly is quite impassable with the snow and Curzon St blocked up, and his carriage could not get through it" (22). The metropolis faces ongoing isolation as trains stop running and communication is impeded by snapped wires resulting from rough winds.

After disruptions in the infrastructure of the city, more basic needs of the urban dwellers come under threat. Starvation looms over Edie's household, which turns the formerly rather unpleasant meteorological situation into outright disaster. The intention of one of Edie's guests to leave the house and organize food ends in a desperate struggle: "he got out of the first floor window and dropped onto the heap of snow. To my horror he sank up to his shoulders, and could not move" (24). This description of the man captured within masses of snow becomes a powerful image of the hopeless fight of man against the forces of nature. Finally, after 18 days of permanent snowfall the icy grip on the city is loosened by a thaw, which saves the protagonist from threatening starvation. Edie's diary entries end with a critical examination of urban society which has resumed its course of material accumulation: "There's such a noise in the streets now – people are running about once more almost as if nothing had happened. If the sky was to fall they would forget it in ten minutes on the Stock Exchange" (29). Thus, although the population of London only narrowly escaped from the catastrophe of destruction, it will not change its attitudes and convictions. Mankind, after all, has not learnt the lesson that there is a world separated from human influence, which can, nevertheless, wipe humanity out of existence and render its material value system worthless.

The disorder of the city in "Snowed Up" is given emphasis by picturing the desolate state of major locations within the metropolis: Trafalgar Square is buried in 18 feet of snow and further reference is made to a similar situation at Knightsbridge and the Houses of Parliament (28). Naturally, the scenario of London's breakdown in Jefferies's story gains force by continually confronting the reader with places which he or she knows from his or her own experience.

Within the general criticism on Victorian society's behaviour towards nature, Jefferies throws light on a concrete deficiency of urban organization in his short story by acknowledging the city's complete dependence on the countryside for the provision of food. One of the characters in "Snowed Up" explains that "all the provisions people eat in London are brought in daily" (23). The city is thus pictured as a greedily devouring 'Moloch' that sucks the energy out of its rural surroundings without storing up supplies for any eventualities. The snowstorm exposes the fragile system on which the conurbation is based. What is focused on here is the thoughtless attitude towards the natural environment, a given-for-granted belief that society rests on unshakable foundations.

The catastrophe of the heavy snowstorm is also brought into connection with the North Pole by Edie's father who, as she remarks: "says it serves us right for attempting to reach the North Pole" (23). Interpreting the breakdown of London as the revenge of the sentient agency of nature adds another symbolic meaning to the snow, which now serves as a tool employed to curb humanity's appalling arrogance. Edie's father is the only person within the story who arrives at this viewpoint whereas his daughter and her three admirers consider the snow a mere nuisance. The notion of nature intent on revenge and punishing mankind is later brilliantly depicted in Matthew P. Shiel's novel *The Purple Cloud* (1901) in which the victory over the North Pole triggers the extinction of humanity by a poisonous cloud circulating the globe. Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "When the World Screamed" (1912) also delineates nature as a living organism, which uses volcanic eruptions and storms to defy man's dominance.

Jefferies's fragment "The Great Snow" takes the confrontation between nature and civilization to another level. As the title suggests, the text also relates the ramifications of meteorological disruptions on the metropolis. However, there are major narrative differences. Unlike the author's short story, "The Great Snow" has no individual protagonists but narrates the breakdown of urban life from a broader perspective. The events are described by an unknown narrator and do not include any personal references, which gives the text the documentary character found in journalism.

Probably due to its fragmentary construction, the course of events in "The Great Snow" commences when the first disturbances of the weather have already occurred. After trains have ceased to arrive in London as a result of 33 inches of snowfall, business within the City is suspended (cf. Jefferies 1980b, 243). The frozen Thames obstructs all navigation and, as the river is often styled metaphori-

cally as London's 'artery' or 'lifeblood' in contemporary literature, the motionless surface of the Thames becomes a compelling symbol of the city's death.<sup>3</sup>

More than once the transformation of London into a seemingly non-civilized space is emphasized. For example, people start to erect tents within their rooms to fight the cold, thus imitating housing habits of supposedly 'primitive' peoples. A direct reference to native inhabitants of the Arctic zones is made by the narrator who compares the dome of St. Paul's to the "roof of a huge Esquimoux [sic!] hut" (244). The polar conditions of the metropolis are also manifested in the presence of large icebergs and the appearance of "two white bears" (245). After the noise of London traffic has been silenced, urban space reverberates with the sounds of huge ice blocks crashing into each other. Against the backdrop of Victorian exploration, this development of the urban environment into a polar landscape in Jefferies's text carries a special significance. No other territory held more fascination for the Victorian public. The Arctic and the North Pole in particular were perceived as uncharted territories full of mystery and awe-inspiring otherness since their remoteness and hostility turned them into the ultimate spatial antagonist of the industrialized and civilized space in Britain. After the interior of Southern Africa had been mapped in the 1870s by the travels of David Livingstone, Henry M. Stanley and Verney L. Cameron, the polar region remained the last blank space on the globe, and its conquest held the final chance of national triumph, the "culmination of centuries of exertion in exploration" (Riffenburgh 1993, 1). The Victorian encounter with the Arctic was primarily shaped by the disastrous expedition of John Franklin which departed from London in 1845 and perished in the empty wastelands of the far north. Later reports of cannibalism among the 129 participants and the detection of stiffened corpses, disseminated to the eager readership by an unprecedented press coverage, advanced the notion of the Arctic as a place of danger and death.<sup>4</sup>

In Jefferies's "The Great Snow," the bleak polar landscape is brought to the British Isles, and its terror has gripped London, the most glorious symbol of civilization. Even the dreadful fact of cannibalism, one of the most horrid details about Franklin's expedition, is practised among the starving population of the metropolis where "roasted bodies were eaten by the miserable creatures around" (248). The anti-human, hostile environment of the Arctic and the space of the city become interchangeable, and display the terrible fate of Franklin's undertaking written at large. The urban environment has turned against the city dwellers and robbed them of their safety. Therefore, it can be argued that the extension of the Arctic climate, its fauna and the housing habits of its people to Britain presents an effective process of conquest, which re-establishes the reign of nature. In

<sup>3</sup> In her article "Rivers, Journeys, and the Construction of Place in Nineteenth-Century English Literature," Alison Byerly provides an overview on symbolic meanings of the Thames in British literature and culture (in Rosendale 2002, 89-93).

<sup>4</sup> In his study *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism and Geographical Discovery*, Beau Riffenburgh argues convincingly that the evaluation of the Franklin expedition in the public was decisively directed and shaped by sensational press coverage (1993, 24-8).

"The Great Snow," London is overthrown by what was commonly thought to be the harshest and most inscrutable embodiment of nature. There is a further parallel to Matthew P. Shiel's later novel *The Purple Cloud*, which also shows the transition of the cultivated British landscape into wild, storm-ridden and Arctic scenery (cf. Shiel 1929, 112).

A powerful image of nature reasserting its dominance in "The Great Snow" is further revealed in the behaviour of the population of London. Driven by hunger, people raid houses and intimidate witnesses by their animal-like features, with "teeth showed like dogs about to bite, the lips being drawn back [...]" (246). The rioters are also portrayed as "wolves in human shape," which contains an allusion to the abolition of societal norms by evoking Thomas Hobbes's famous comparison of mankind with wolves. Mirroring the philosopher's description of the original state of humanity with its "perpetuall warre of every man against his neighbour" (Hobbes 1991, 145), the people of London are subjected to a process of retrogression, which culminates in the reintroduction of the Hobbesian state of nature: "The possession of a single potato was sufficient incitement for murder" (247). In "The Great Snow," human nature returns to atavistic impulses and thereby completes the onslaught of the snowstorm.

The fragment finally presents an eschatological scenario, with the conurbation, due to heavy fogs, lying in absolute darkness and mankind reverting to madness: "The mob set fire to houses and burnt streets down to the level of the snow, not so much for warmth as for light. Many went raving mad, and ran about naked until they dropped and died. Fanatics preached unheeded to the crowds" (248). The narrator's account in "The Great Snow" ends with the description of frenzied, dying city dwellers, who can only resort to burning fires and addressing supernatural powers, thereby finalizing the 'burial' of the modern nineteenth century. Although, by quoting subsequently published journals, the narrator implies that parts of the population of London survived, the closing lines of the text display an unresolved state of destruction and havoc which also contributes to the more sinister quality of "The Great Snow" in comparison to "Snowed Up."

The snow in "The Great Snow" conveys a sense of agency. Its quality becomes apparent in some of the reports by witnesses who "describe the snow as cutting the skin of their faces in a painful manner" (243). The impression of the snow as an active opponent is further highlighted by a comparison between frozen grains of snow and "pellets from a gun" (243). In opposition to "Snowed Up," where the effects of the snow on human bodies are exclusively restricted to aspects of temperature, the weather in Jefferies's fragment divulges a gloomier facet as an agent inflicting physical harm with the ferocity of a weapon. This even military characteristic evokes a state of warfare and urbanity under siege.

The death of the city in "The Great Snow" can also be grasped in terms of class. After hunger has reduced the people to despair, the West End becomes the target of the poorer classes: "The East rose and threw itself *en masse* upon the West. The fashionable quarters were invaded by an army of ravening wretches"

(246). Clearly, Jefferies here accentuated one of the most dreaded scenarios of Victorian thought, the rebellious multitudes of the East End swarming into the richer parts of the metropolis and terrorizing their prosperous neighbours. By including this aspect of social confrontation within the city into his fragment, the author intensified the horrors of the catastrophe since the snow not only leads to the breakdown of public life, but it also advances the overthrow of the social order and thereby draws on deeply rooted Victorian anxieties. Civilization succumbs to a double force uniting the return of nature in the shape of an Arctic climate and the impoverished masses of the East End. It has been pointed out already that the miserable living conditions of the London poor were a matter of serious concern during the 1870s and 1880s.

Jefferies's depiction of the snow as the trigger of odious class conflict allows another reading of the text. Late nineteenth-century commentators, William Morris among them, warned that the inequalities of the economic system would eventually see society teetering on the brink of disintegration and open riot. In "The Great Snow," however, this collapse results not from the increasing squalor of an inhuman economy but from meteorological phenomena. Thus, the snow can also be interpreted as an accelerator of industrial development, for it continually broadens the sections of the destitute poor and leads to society's final dissolution. In other words, the snow speeds up a process which would alternatively have occurred at a later stage in history.

Whereas "Snowed Up" and "The Great Snow" portray London in the grip of Arctic storms, Jefferies's novel *After London; or, Wild England* introduces an altogether different projection of urban disorder. As the title suggests, the metropolis in *After London* has literally come to an end. The novel presents the south of England in the distant future where a tremendous catastrophe has eradicated modern civilization and even altered topographical features. The exact nature of the disaster, which led to this post-apocalyptic age is not expounded. Furthermore, the population has decreased enormously and society is shaped by an almost medieval lifestyle. The male protagonist of the novel, Felix Aquila, is the son of a baron who embarks on a journey across the southern part of England in his quest for adventure and opportunities. Jefferies's portrayal of a changing environment in *After London* has been acclaimed by literary critics. John Fowles judged the author to be a "master at physical sensation and feel of place" (Jefferies 1980a, xvi), and Brian Aldiss evaluated the meticulously constructed setting as the major achievement of the whole novel (cf. Aldiss 1986, 114).

The first part of *After London* gives a historian's account of the "relapse into barbarism" and also reveals the gloomy future of Victorian cities. With the breakdown of civilization, it is the urban population, the "immense crowds collected in the cities," which are most affected by the cataclysmic changes (Jefferies 1980a, 16). The destruction of urban space in the course of the catastrophe discloses the pollution of the industrialized city by an outpouring of its subterranean and hidden elements: "Almost worse than the mice were the rats, which came out of the old cities in such vast numbers that the people who survived and saw them are re-

lated to have fled in fear" (6). The rat, a permanent and detested companion to man's habitation and traditionally considered a harbinger of plague and death, testifies the rottenness of urban spaces.

Particularly the vivid description of London's annihilation ranks among the outstanding passages of Jefferies's novel. A huge flood, caused by the obstruction of the Thames, drowned the mightiest city of the world. The lower parts of London were swamped, whereas other areas were covered by opulent vegetation, which signifies the return of untamed nature. In actual fact, *After London* does not show the post-apocalyptic space of the metropolis as an intact habitat free of all the evils of industrial society. Instead, the core of what was once the most powerful conurbation on earth is still branded as a toxic territory: "It is a vast stagnant swamp which no man dare enter, since death would be his inevitable fate" (37). The narrator explains the poisonous quality of the area by referring to the decomposing organic material: "For all the rottenness of a thousand years and of many hundred millions of human beings is there festering under the stagnant water, which has sunk down into and penetrated the earth, and floated up to the surface the contents of the buried cloacæ" (37). The future of London is depicted as a huge stinking and contaminated waste dump where life cannot exist. Interestingly, the representation of the swamped metropolis shows some parallels to urban scenarios of late Victorian London. For example, the presence of a crippled vegetation near the swamp, apparent from the plants that "had reached but half their natural height" (198), is also a feature of urban environment. Furthermore, the swamp oozes a "thick vapour" (199), which can be related to the heavy fogs haunting the city in the late nineteenth century. The surface of the swamp "bears a greenish-brown floating scum" and when the protagonist enters the site of ancient London on his journey, he is surprised at the "horrid blackness of the water" (200). Clearly, the description of the water mirrors complaints about the condition of the Thames in the 1880s. The author himself contemplated the lamentable state of the river in 1884 and prophesied that the "putrid black water" provided a seedbed of "disease and pestilence" (Jefferies 1980a, xvii). Thus, although the city has vanished entirely in *After London*, its characteristic as a space hostile to nature and natural beauty has remained. The similarity of pollution in Victorian London and the swamped city reminds the reader that some of these horrid scenes projected in the novel are already present in his or her own environment.

During his voyage across the swamp, the protagonist Felix Aquila discovers some relics of London by entering a barren, blackened island. On the ground, he detects the traces of some skeletons, "mouldered away leaving nothing but their outline," and he stumbles over a "diamond bracelet" and a "heap of money" (203). Finally, Felix encounters strange white walls with a crystal-like surface:

He touched it, when the wall fell immediately with a crushing sound as if pulverised, and disappeared in a vast cavern at his feet. [...] He carefully avoided touching them, for they seemed as brittle as glass, and merely a white powder having no consistency at all. (204)

The brittle walls are the last remnants of Victorian buildings, fragile ruins of an extinct world which, in contrast to the presence of antique Greek, Roman or Egyptian buildings in the nineteenth century, have left no such impressive fragments. It is this portrayal of the walls as "merely a white powder" which emphasizes London's total eradication from the face of the earth. Skeletons, coins and frail ruins are, apart from the environmental pollution, all that is left from the metropolis: in *After London*, the death of the city has reached its final stage. In opposition to the human skeletons and the walls, money and jewellery are the only lasting, intact objects transferred to the future period, powerful symbols of a society which had no other values or permanent achievements to pass on. Actually, to modern readers of the novel, the description of the area with its lethal gases and impenetrable clouds, its ruins, a scorched earth and its anti-organic quality bears some resemblance to a post-nuclear setting, a city destroyed by the most disastrous effects of warfare.

### 3. Conclusion

The three texts discussed reveal a gradual progression of urban disorder. In "Snowed Up," the dissolution of urban infrastructure is only a temporary state and the starving population is finally relieved by a sudden thaw. Furthermore, the protagonist's naïve diary entries and her focus on a future husband convey a less severe impression of the snowstorm. In comparison to the short story, Jefferies's fragment "The Great Snow" narrates the breakdown of the metropolis with thousands of victims and presents the transformation of London into a hostile Arctic region with all its associations of terror, which the Victorian reader was familiar with through popular accounts of polar expeditions. The city dwellers are portrayed as a frenzied mass whose animal-like features and rapacious behaviour imply atavistic throwbacks. Apart from that, "The Great Snow" also evokes the situation of social conflict by depicting the ravaging poor. Even the snow is described as an agent of a virtually military force. Both human retrogression and the physical change of the urban environment annihilate modern civilization. Finally, *After London* encapsulates the climax of urban disintegration, the literal death of the city. London's destruction has long been accomplished and the conurbation is only recognisable to the protagonist and the reader as a huge putrefied graveyard, which still contaminates the environment of the future.

All three texts clearly articulate the author's belief in the superior force of nature and mankind's failure to recognize the defects of an inhuman economic system and a ruthless exploitation of nature. By focusing on the breakdown of London as the result of nature's powers, Jefferies also denounced the feverish imagination of late Victorian science with its belief that nature could be domesticated and dominated. This was, for instance, proclaimed by Winwood Reade in his widely read *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872) which declared that, after the conquest of nature, "man will then be perfect; he will be a creator; he will therefore be what the vulgar worship as God" (Reade 1968, 413). As has been demon-

strated, Jefferies's answer to such hubristic concepts is that nature will never be subject to human calculation and that humanity still finds itself in the grip of natural forces, which determine the future of mankind and can ultimately bring about the extinction of modern existence.

Although many writers responded to the debate on the problems of urbanity in late Victorian Britain, Jefferies's *After London* reveals a much darker vision of London's future than most of his contemporaries. In William D. Hay's utopian novel *Three Hundred Years Hence* (1881), the city is relocated on an artificially constructed island near Madeira, and with its healthy air, the removal of industrial production and huge garden structures, this new 'Londinova' has abolished all the misery and grim scenery of the Victorian metropolis. The future of London in William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890) also displays a departure from the spatial characteristics of blighted industrial capitalism. Instead, the city appears as a rural paradise with orchards, neat little houses and rose gardens, set in a Mediterranean climate and enjoying eternal summer.

Like Jefferies, other writers also portrayed the end of London. In Kenneth Folingsby's novel *Meda - A Tale of the Future* (1891), all British cities are wiped from the earth whereas their ruins serve as a constant reminder of the follies of the ancients. To the future civilization in W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1906), even the concept of the 'city' is incomprehensible since all urban structures have been deleted long ago in favour of little self-governing communities. However, in both works the end of the city, in stark contrast to *After London*, appears to be the result of a voluntary decision to create healthier habitats for the human species.

Finally, a number of stories and novels also depict a cataclysmic destruction of the metropolis. In William D. Hay's story "The Doom of the Great City" (1880), the entire population of London is killed by a fog. Scenes of universal suffocation are also described in Robert Barr's "The Doom of London" (1894) whereas in H.G. Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Martians devastate the conurbation. But unlike *After London*, the urban structures in the texts of Hay, Barr and Wells remain largely intact and the city survives the aggressive agency of natural or extraterrestrial forces.

To conclude, although late Victorian science fiction abounds in alternatives to the industrialized city as well as with scenarios of urban destruction, Jefferies's novel *After London* certainly represents the bleakest prediction and a thorough shattering of the Victorian beliefs in progress and technology. His novel as well as his shorter prose fiction stands out as a chilling testimony to mankind's dependence on nature and society's careless attitude towards the natural environment. Even in the twenty-first century, Jefferies's warning has lost nothing of its relevance and immediacy. With shocking forecasts of global warming, a new ice age dawning, the depletion of the ozone layer, and daily reports of natural catastrophes, the author's pessimistic outlook on the future of industrialized civilization appears far from being relegated to the archives of literary history.

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