

*Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward*, 1874, by (Samuel) Luke Fildes.

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‘It will be one of the enigmas designed to puzzle posterity, that England – which undertook to clothe, conquer and evangelise the world – would yet be baffled by its own paupers’. So wrote the Yorkshire socialist, James Hole, in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition. If the Victorians were ‘baffled’ by their paupers, it was certainly not for want of trying to gain knowledge about them. The nature and extent of pauperism was generally considered to be one of the great problems of the age, even at the very moment when the achievements of industrial civilisation were centre-stage. The ‘condition of England’ question which preoccupied the political and literary classes in the middle decades of the nineteenth century was essentially a question about inequality: the absence of wealth, the reality of destitution, in the midst of plenty. The spectre of social revolution and physical degeneration, revived in the panic years of the 1880s, was likewise essentially concerned with the conditions in which poverty had not only survived but was growing, like a cancer, within the social body. Victorians responded to such periodic crises in a variety of ways, amongst which two general tendencies can be highlighted: firstly, by embarking on social inquiries, to measure and map the problem of poverty, so it could be understood as a whole; and secondly, by representing the experience of poverty on a human scale, so that the poor could be better known as individuals.

Luke Fildes’ celebrated painting, entitled *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874, might be read at first as a definitive example of the second strategy. In this view, the problem of poverty is treated through the depiction of a cast of characters familiar to readers of Victorian narratives of urban poverty. The single mother, perhaps widowed, with two hungry infants, caught in the light above the door; the disabled serviceman, seeking support from the state; the drunken man in the top hat, slouching against the wall; the ragged children, tired and hungry; the gaunt figure, in conversation with the policeman, who has evidently seen better days. According to the artist, this scene was based on the sight of applicants for poor relief gathering outside a London casual (or vagrant) ward in the winter evenings. ‘I used, on these occasions, to study the types of the people and the different incidents and select those I wanted for my picture’, he tells us. And in return for another payment, one presumes, he persuaded several of them to come to his studio, where he could observe them in more detail. Like Charles Dickens (whose letters he quoted in the exhibition catalogue), Fildes sought to present a true knowledge of the poor as individuals. He also wanted his painting ‘to be looked at and thought over’: and the result, if we are to believe contemporary accounts of the effect of exhibiting the painting, was a sensation. Such was the interest, indeed, that the picture apparently had to be railed off and a policeman posted beside it to protect it from the gathering crowds of exhibition-goers. The depiction of ‘mere misery’, in the words of one reviewer, was calculated to attract attention: here a light is cast upon the streets of Darkest London.

But Fildes' painting is not simply an attempt to reduce the problem of poverty to the character of paupers, or to particular types of pauperism: it also reflects, quite accurately, some important changes in the ways Victorians approached the category of pauperism as a whole. The infamous 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which resulted in an unprecedented wave of workhouse building and transformed the administrative basis on which poor relief was given, also bequeathed to the Victorians a system of classifying the problem of pauperism, at first rudimentary, but increasingly complex. In 1834, the main focus had been upon the 'able-bodied labourer', especially the male agricultural worker, and beyond this relatively little was actually said about other kinds of pauperism – the widow, the elderly, the children, the sick, the insane, or the vagrant, for example. Increasingly, however, Poor Law reformers, administrators and pressure groups of all kinds sought to break down and categorise different kinds of pauperism - to classify the poor according to gender, age, health and type of poverty – and to seek to devise different means of treating each kind of pauperism distinctly. By the time that Fildes exhibited his painting, the new strategy of classification had resulted in a new wave of institutional building (especially from the mid-1860s) devoted to specialised facilities for the poor, including, most notably, sick wards, children's homes and vagrant wards, many of which were concentrated in large cities, and above all in the metropolis itself. In its discriminating vision of the vagrant class, *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* thus accurately reflects one of the key tendencies in social scientific thinking in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

These applicants are waiting, hunched up against the walls, gathered *en masse* in the urban gloom; but the artist has depicted them as distinct individuals or groups, the particularities of their moral characters made visible in their posture, demeanour and clothing. Here the viewers of Fildes' painting could well have read a reformist message, for the many Victorian critics of the Poor Law held one of its worst failings to be its failure to distinguish between different kinds of poverty. Writing in 1864, Frances Power Cobbe described the workhouse as 'a huge *omnium gatherum* of human want, vice, folly and disease', in which paupers were herded together, irrespective of their needs; and in this respect, many critics would have argued that metropolitan vagrant (or 'casual') wards were hardly any better. By the 1860s, the cry of the specialist professional and the reforming social scientist was for more classification of pauperism, for the breaking up of the problem into its constituent parts, and for the application of more discriminating knowledge of the lives of the poor themselves. In this view, to know the poor individually, or at least to know the types of pauperism individually, was a vital part of mapping and managing the problem of pauperism as a whole.

Seen in this light, Fildes' depiction of urban poverty does not seem quite so different from the strategies of contemporary social scientists. If this is an individualising vision of pauperism, it is also one based on a view of the urban scene as composed of a variety of different types of urban poverty, reflected in recognisable stereotypes of the urban poor. Is this a sort of snap-shot ethnography of the London poor, after the writings of a Mayhew or a Dickens? The thought would not have been so strange to a Victorian viewer of the painting. To address the problem of pauperism, according to the principles of Victorian social science, one had first to know it; and to know it, required discrimination. But this was not the same thing as empathy, and the

painting's 'social realism' – as it has been described by art historians – was every bit as artificial as that of a Dickens novel. It must also be admitted, as many a Victorian satirist would have delighted in noting, that it was rather more congenial for interested viewers to gaze on visions of urban distress in the comfort of a Royal Academy salon, than to wander the streets of London in search of similar scenes. The flaneur of street pauperism found a ready market for his work, especially where it affirmed the fantasies and prejudices of middle-class readers and viewers. Even where Victorian travellers in the land of the poor came close to the methods of the modern ethnographer – as for example, in the case of one workhouse inspector who took the trouble to copy down all the graffiti he could find on the walls of vagrant wards in his district – there remained a gulf of understanding between the worlds of pauperism and plenty. In this view, the casual poor were objects, not subjects: the material to which the Poor Law was applied, as much as applicants for relief.

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