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William Dow

**Down and Out
in London and Orwell**

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William Dow

Down and Out in London and Orwell

Unlike much literature of the nineteenth-century, that seeks a safe centre in which the artist and the audience can be comfortably together, the work of Jack London and George Orwell specialises in a tendency to extremes, a tendency to seek the social peripheries of experience, to dwell in regions of discomfort and confrontation, and, perhaps most fundamentally, to language the body into existence. London's *People of the Abyss* (1903) and Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) transpose personal experience, notably involving their own bodies and "tramp" identities, while disclosing the body as an image of both depth and surface, of deep mysterious interiors and often codified exteriors. In effect, London and Orwell further the early twentieth-century project of bringing the body and its senses more overtly into the ethical and social realm, what such critics as I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot called "cultural health." Both writers try to imagine and render such health in the form of the body's boundaries—alternately, as permeable, shifting, and open to fusion with the environment, and as rigid, closed, and resistant to social appropriation.

What is unique about the expression of the body in *Abyss* and *Down* is that it offers not only a particular way of experiencing the world, but, in its provisionality and duality, a fundamentally different mode of knowing. Such is the idea suggested by the description of the protagonist, Freddie Drummond, in London's "South of the Slot" (1909):

His hands were soft. His extraordinary politeness was ominous. His first idea of the role he would play was that of a free and independent American