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# **Cities on the Margin; On the Margin of Cities. Representation of Urban Space in Contemporary Irish and British Fiction**

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ANNALES LITTÉRAIRES DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE FRANCHE-COMTÉ

Philippe Laplace & Éric Tabuteau (eds.)

**CITIES ON THE MARGIN  
ON THE MARGIN OF CITIES**

**Representations of Urban Space  
in Contemporary Irish and British Fiction**



*Presses Universitaires Franc-Comtoises*

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### Avant-propos

L'ouvrage que le lecteur a entre les mains est dû à l'initiative de deux universitaires franc-comtois (Philippe Laplace et Eric Tabuteau), qui ont voulu réunir les approches d'universitaires européens autour de la géographie littéraire de la ville dans le roman contemporain britannique. Cette confrontation à distance a été conçue dans le cadre des travaux de l'unité de recherche interdisciplinaire "Littérature et Histoire des pays de langues européennes (EA3224)", qui a toujours entretenu une collaboration étroite avec des collègues d'autres pays.

L'ouvrage regroupe douze contributions qui abordent la façon dont certains romanciers de langue anglaise de la seconde moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle témoignent des évolutions sociales récentes de la ville et de la façon dont celle-ci est vécue et rêvée par ses habitants de toujours ou par ceux qui viennent y trouver ce que ne leur a pas donné leur pays d'origine. Dus à des écrivains dont certains n'ont jusqu'ici que peu nourri la critique, ces récits de fiction ont pour cadre des métropoles bien réelles telles que Londres, Glasgow, Edimbourg, Belfast, Dublin, ou encore York. Les romanciers y témoignent des répercussions que peuvent avoir, sur leur vie concrète et leur imaginaire ou ceux de leurs contemporains faits personnages, les transformations spatiales et sociologiques en cours, les discriminations dont ils peuvent être victimes. Ils reflètent et confrontent les images passées et présentes de la ville ou de leur quartier.

Notre équipe a vocation à analyser les regards que la littérature porte sur l'histoire et à rendre compte de la façon dont la fiction peut témoigner de la perception du monde par les générations successives. C'est pourquoi, j'ai encouragé d'emblée le projet de Ph. Laplace et d'E. Tabuteau, à la fois pour sa cohérence et son originalité, en même temps que pour la variété des perspectives adoptées. Puissent ceux qui s'intéressent à la littérature britannique actuelle, et à la littérature tout court, y trouver matière à mieux la savourer.

*Gérard Brey  
Directeur de l'EA3224  
Littérature et Histoire des pays de langues européennes*



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**Cities on the Margin; On the Margin of Cities**

Philippe LAPLACE & Eric TABUTEAU  
(University of Franche-Comté, Besançon)

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When twelve researchers who specialize in various fields of British and Irish literature decide to contribute to a collective work dealing with the representation of urban space in contemporary British and Irish fiction, it cannot be reasonably expected that they will reach the same conclusions; first because the works they survey are bound to be extremely different; second because the theoretical background they use to analyse the selected novels is voluminous. Yet, the editors have decided to divide this collection of essays into two sections. In doing so, they want to prove that although various themes are developed in the twelve chapters, common strains are to be found. Above all, the multiplicity of voices and of opinions reflected here by all the contributors stresses the energy and the spirit of the "margin." The title of course implies the geographical periphery, but it also stands for people whose voices have for so long been dismissed in traditional urban discourse, those who have been left on the "margin of cities." This book is by no means a definitive account of contemporary novels in Great Britain and Ireland, but it aims at providing a starting point for debates and reflections on the unsettled postmodern cityscape and on the anxious and sometimes thunderous voices heard from the margin.

### A Tale of "post- Cities"

The first part of this collective work brings us to England's metropolises. Although some outer or distant cities like Dublin, New York or Kingston are alluded to, it is the major English cities that are the main centres of interest. The authors lay the emphasis on the literary representations of London, but also Sheffield, Birmingham, York and their outskirts. Yet, if the contributors have chosen narratives which present typical English conurbations, it does not imply that the novels under scrutiny propose a hackneyed picture of the cityscape. It would undoubtedly be possible and relevant to focus on classic descriptions of English cities, on works which consider them from a traditional angle. Even at the dawn of the third millennium, modernist visions of the city cannot be dismissed as inapt and outdated. After all, as Peter Hall has remarked in *Cities of Tomorrow*, "in the mid-1980s the problem of the urban underclass was still as stubbornly rooted in the world's cities, and in the consciousness of its more sensitive citizens, as in the mid-1880s, when it provided the vital stimulus to the birth of modern city planning."<sup>1</sup>

But the authors of this collection of essays are convinced that today cities are undergoing major and rapid changes which make it impossible to study them as before. They agree with Saskia Sassen for whom "Economic globalization, accompanied by the emergence of a global culture, has profoundly altered the social, economic, and political reality of nation-states, cross national regions, and [...] cities."<sup>2</sup> They see the city as a changeable, disparate whole with endlessly variable borders, and they are aware that contemporary literature endeavours to give an account of this phenomenon. Thus, although they deal with representations of English cities, the nerve centres of the empire on which the sun never sets, the authors of this first part essentially focus on novels which stress a postmodern or post-colonial perspective, because they are persuaded that it is the type of approach which really takes into account what is at stake in our contemporary urban societies.

The authors are also conscious of the importance of the theoretical background in their analyses; thus they have systematically based them on seminal works dealing with the urban

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* (1988; Blackwell: Oxford, 1996), 399.

<sup>2</sup> Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Pine Forge Press: Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994), xiii.

world or its representation in literature. For example, they focus on the theories of Charles Jencks, Italo Calvino or Rem Koolhaas to explain that the move from modernity to postmodernity lies in the changes that make it difficult to make clear-cut distinctions between city and country. They rely on the elaborated discourse of Edward Soja to show that the distinction between centre and periphery has blurred into insignificance and they underline the reflection of Marc Augé in order to define the concept of non-place. They also resort to the theoretical works of celebrated intellectuals such as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul or Henry Louis Gates to enhance the hybrid and post-colonial nature of the English capital. References to the writings of prominent thinkers such as Michel Butor, Gaston Bachelard, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault translate the authors' intention to propose a study that transcends a simple literary observation.

The first article of this initial part takes us to London. It shows that the changes which have taken place in the physical environment make it difficult to maintain the old mode of seeing, reading and writing the city as a recognisable entity outside of which lies the countryside. Richard Skeates explains that this postmodern, sprawling urban space which facilitates hyper-mobile living, what he calls a tundra of motorways and service stations, is an environment that has been forged by a constantly expanding car-based city. It corresponds to the urban background which can be found in J. G. Ballard's novels such as *Crash* and within which the British writer John King situates his novel *Human Punk*. The latter is an account of the lives of a group of young, white, working-class males, linked with under-achievement in a rather vague and hard-to-define space, often pejoratively described as non-place and frequently represented in British fiction as a negative example by which positive models of authentic city and country life can be measured. Richard Skeates argues that this text offers an account of the new urban condition, a new version of the city in which ways of living are emerging that do not make for comfortable reading. Indeed, King describes characters who have developed a new kind of relationship with both nature and mobility that bears little relation to older forms of seeing and experiencing the world. In his opinion, it is those who move constantly between those places and non-places, for example the speeding motorist, who can grasp the new urban moment.

In his essay, Peter Miles refers to several novels, movies and even television programmes which take place in cities as diverse as London, Manchester or Sheffield, to quote but a few. In his turn, he stresses the importance of movement in postmodern cities, noting that since the end of the nineteenth century, British texts depicting the working class and the poor have been built on dynamic images involving motion, vehicles and routes: walking, running, and riding by such modes as tram, train, bus, coach, truck, bicycle, motorbike and car. In this respect, he believes that it is no accident that H.G. Wells, writing in response to the new spatial and imaginative freedoms that the bicycle gave to the lower middle class, projected his *Time Machine* as a mechanism with bicycle-like features. In novels such as Barry Hines's *Looks and Smiles*, Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* or David Storey's *This Sporting Life*, Peter Miles observes that the complexities of mobility come about with industrialization and its products, the growth of cities and an urban working class. Beyond running and walking, mobility costs money. In texts dealing with the working class produced during historical phases of economic downturn, he notes that images of futile circular movement abound, primarily capturing more focused personal experiences of limitation, frustration and entrapment. In Hines's novel for instance, even the motorway, which could symbolise a possible escape, proves to be just an urban extension, a series of traces of motor accidents combined with symptoms of every social ill, rural as well as urban.

In the novels he has selected, Tim Woods also recognizes the importance of mobility and especially walking which is conceived of as a form of inscribing oneself into the domain of urban planning. In his opinion, this drifting, which refuses the organization of the capitalist environment by wandering randomly through the cityscape, is an attempt to redefine and reanimate the city. He asserts that in fictions as varied as Penelope Lively's *City of the Mind*, Iain Sinclair's *Dark Lanthorns: Rodinsky as a psychogeographer*, Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and others, there is a distinct attempt to make the city, and especially London, mysterious again, to re-enchant the city, to represent cities as spaces where strange and inexplicable events and actions occur. For Tim Woods, novelists have constantly sought to rewrite the political map of the city as a poetic one, to insist that this other, imaginative side of the metropolis is as significant to how we live the

city, walk its streets and constitute our selves, as are the political expectations we think the city embodies. Fictional representations have always reached into spaces that other representations cannot reach. He argues that fiction has become a site for constructing urban space, a space which organizes and formulates new metaphors and ways of seeing the city. To illustrate his explanation, he takes the example of Rushdie's fiction in which London is always depicted as a hybrid space embodying the idea that a city remains constantly unstable.

Eric Tabuteau's essay hinges on the fictions of Rushdie's protégée, Zadie Smith, and of her now deceased Caribbean fellow-writer, Sam Selvon. It endeavours to study their representations of multicultural London which, although they introduce a number of innovations, do not stand out from earlier writers' evocations of the British capital and recall some commonplaces of English literature. Yet, most critics have viewed their description of the capital as particularly innovative. According to Eric Tabuteau, this is above all due to a question of perspective. London as it is described in *The Lonely Londoners* and *White Teeth* has not undergone radical modifications, but the new coloured immigrants who describe it have different preoccupations which cause them to dwell on specific aspects which, for anyone else, would be pointless. Selvon's and Smith's novels do not introduce radical changes, but a new way of conceiving the town which challenges the received ideas about the British capital, showing that nothing can be taken for granted in today's cosmopolitan megalopolis. The city with which the immigrants are confronted is not different from the one where British people venture everyday. But because they live on the margin and have a passionate relationship with the city, the immigrants' remarks serve as a touchstone and test the vision that the other Londoners have of the city. London, which is at the same time exotic and familiar, becomes the birthplace of a painful multicultural society where they experience a never-ending culture shock.

*Romance*, the novel tackled by Corinne Duboin, is also set in London. It dramatises African-Caribbeans' experience of the city, their frustrations and setbacks as black immigrants who have moved to the metropolitan centre and yet remain on the fringe. The author, Jamaican-born Joan Riley, gives a voice to black West Indian women who have to face indifference and sheer individualism, characteristic

of modern city life, together with sexual prejudices. Riley also exposes the evils of racist British society and their pernicious effects on immigrant families. The novelist, who explores the intersecting themes of race, class, gender, and space, denounces black British women's plight as an indirect result of black men's victimisation. Corinne Duboin insists that Riley's picture of London is an indictment of British conservatism that makes minorities in general, and women from the black diaspora in particular, its scapegoats. Joan Riley deconstructs the British metropolis as an open place of multiple possibilities and decries its mythic allure of the promise of a better life. Riley's evocation of urban unrest in the eighties intends to denounce police brutality and institutionalised urban violence against ethnic minorities in the U.K. This apocalyptic vision exposes the fragmented cosmopolitan city as a battlefield rather than as an integrating melting pot. Yet, Riley's novel suggests that the African-Caribbean diaspora is not to be regarded as a displaced periphery within the centre. Since it contributes to urban diversity and richness, it has the option to appropriate the cosmopolitan city and make it its own.

Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* and Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*, the two novels studied by Ana María Sánchez-Arce, provide two different artistic approaches to invisibility. Cityscape develops in *Anita and Me* from an idyllic childhood space to a troubled reflection of multicultural Britain and its effect on the self. Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* takes the shape of a fable about belonging, suffering and creativity where urban space achieves mythic status. Okri's fable circles around a nameless character who sets out on a journey in search of visibility and historical relevance, but instead comes across an invisible city and finds himself endeavouring to become one of its invisible dwellers. The city belongs to those who have been forgotten or overlooked, probably slaves on ships crossing the Atlantic ocean, or oppressed peoples in Africa and America. Oppression is also present in *Anita and Me* which takes the reader to the fictional town of Tollington, on the outskirts of Wolverhampton, which is in itself a satellite of Birmingham, and relatively far from London. The invisibility of Indian migrants reflects the situation in England during the sixties, when ethnic minorities were not recognised or fairly represented in government or the media. But as the protagonist grows older, Tollington loses its clear-cut structure. As Ana María Sánchez-Arce explains, with Tollington's

incorporation into the thriving city, the village becomes indistinguishable from the suburban mass. The changing cityscape, with its roads and infinite possibilities, becomes the perfect environment for challenging the old values of both white and Indian communities.

The next essay offers an excellent transition to the second part of this book. The theme of Marianne Camus's contribution is still the representation of the city and the life of its inhabitants; however we move from the south-east of England and the Midlands to the north-east of England. Marianne Camus studies Kate Atkinson's much celebrated first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. Atkinson, born in Edinburgh, has set her novel in the historic city of York. However, York, a city which has always been praised for its beauty and the weight of its historical heritage, does not appear as an architectural gem, as a location deeply steeped in the history of England. Atkinson's text deliberately ignores the picturesque beauty of the city to go "behind the scenes," that is to say to examine the real but also the imaginary lives of the community. The superimposition of these images offers a criss-crossing which hovers between an imaginative and a realistic description of the city. The rich heritage of the urban setting, the history of the city, remain in the background in order to stress the humble and simple personal stories of York's citizens. Atkinson takes us behind the beautiful scenes perceived by tourists when visiting York and reestablishes the lives, loves, hopes and dreams of its inhabitants as the narrative motif which helps us to understand the complexity of the city. What we are presented with is a female gaze and a lower-middle class vision of a comely place where ordinary people live, love and die, their unpretentious existence taking place in the shadows of the overwhelming streets and buildings.

### **No Mean Cities?**

The second part of this collection of essays is devoted to novelists hailing from the so-called "Celtic Fringe" who have chosen major cities from their countries — Dublin, Belfast, Glasgow, Edinburgh — as the location of their narrations. These peripheral nations were long associated with peaceful and pastoral settings in popular culture, until James Joyce's short stories and novels in

Ireland<sup>3</sup> and the Scottish Renaissance in Scotland broke with the traditional rural pattern and instituted a modernist perspective which meant an extensive reconsideration of the urban environment and of the city / country dichotomy.<sup>4</sup> The idyllic green pastures celebrated by the Celtic Twilighters as the repository of ancient myths and legends or of timeless traditions, and the peaceful and serene communities of the Kailyarders then gave way to bleaker and more realistic representations of the dreariness of post-industrial revolution cityscapes. It is however significant to note that a series of urban sentimental clichés were nonetheless re-established to describe Scottish cities — Glasgow being chosen as the paradigm of a Scottish city — after the Second World War: the representation of the city then became known as the "Urban Kailyard."<sup>5</sup> Contemporary novelists therefore had to get rid of two conceptions of the city in order to affirm their own.

Contemporary novelists have however opened new perspectives by using the vast gamut of narrative techniques offered by the postmodern mode.<sup>6</sup> The city has transformed itself into a place of raging entropy, of violent activities and of uncaring commercialism. It has lost its national specificity in order to become a place where a new global / international culture flourishes, but also a hotbed of semiotic intricacy, of misunderstandings, of disrupted and chaotic lives; everything which escapes the control and dominion of society. Contemporary novelists have thus redefined the periphery and marginality through their descriptions of cities: far from the idyllic rural landscapes and their homely inhabitants, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast and Dublin have become unpredictable and volatile locations. Cities are now considered as a maze of symbols, stories and histories which one needs to decode in

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<sup>3</sup> See: Jackson I. Cope, *Joyce's Cities; Archeologies of the Soul* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981) and Peter I. Barta, *Bely, Joyce, and Döblin: Peripatetics in the City Novel* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Grey Granite* (1934; Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990). One should also mention two forerunner novels where the stability of the community is ripped apart by the new economic considerations imported from the city: George Douglas Brown, *The House With the Green Shutters* (1901; London: Penguin Books, 1985) and J. MacDougall Hay, *Gillespie* (1914; Edinburgh: Canongate, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> For the Urban Kailyard, see: Moira Burgess, *Imagine a City: Glasgow in Fiction* (Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 1998), 68-93.

<sup>6</sup> For definitions of the very elusive term "Postmodernism," see: Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (1989; London: Routledge, 2002), 1-28.

order to understand their inhabitants' lives and motives. The city's narrative, and the way it has been narrated by contemporary novelists, is the main theme explored in the "Celtic" section of *Cities on the Margin*.

In her article "Under a Beautiful Light," Sara Marinelli adopts a feminist outlook when considering Glasgow and the way it has been narrated. Glasgow is a cityscape which has often been described or "imagined" in masculine and virile ways and which even literature has provided with all the attributes of a chauvinist stronghold where women were somehow left on the margin or excluded. It is however a more complex city which shares a certain kind of schizophrenia with Scotland: a city on the periphery which has also long been one of the main commercial ports of Great Britain, therefore fully participating in the construction of the Empire. Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* is Sara Marinelli's starting point. It is indeed impossible to avoid the seminal influence of Gray's novel in the description and representation of Scottish cities, and particularly Glasgow. Sara Marinelli's article then departs from Gray's *Lanark* to focus on the female vision(s) — the female gaze — and the female voice(s) which aim at challenging the traditional patriarchal conceptions of the city. Recent research tend to rehabilitate women's roles and functions in the mythical creation and development of the city of Glasgow. Women writers have also greatly contributed to the reassessment of women's location in the city. Sara Marinelli shows us how three female novelists have depicted and narrated the city. Novels by A. L. Kennedy, Janice Galloway, and Jackie Kay provide us with the basis for a reevaluation of the representation of the city along new gender lines. Female voices are now heard, presenting the city under "different lights," according to the colour of their skin, their sexual orientations or their perceptions. The city has become a place of negotiation and (re)location of women through the (re)appropriation of myths but also the assumption of a narrative stance. The city — Glasgow for instance — is a transitional space where women define their own identity through narrative.

After having studied the (re)definition of the city by female novelists we examine narrative(s) of the city in Philippe Laplace's contribution. We stay in Scotland, although moving eastwards from Glasgow to Edinburgh, with Irvine Welsh's controversial *Filth* and we cross the Irish Sea with Robert McLiam Wilson's celebrated

*Eureka Street* and his depiction of Belfast. In these two peripheral cities we discover how the novelists imply the imposition of what theoreticians of the postmodern have called a "Grand Narrative," or a "metanarrative." The city, through its laws or its unwritten codes of conduct, controls or forbids actions deemed to threaten its stability: city planners have imposed behavioural patterns or restricted social liberty and freedom of movement according to the citizens' creeds, the colour of their skin or their social status. The city (in this case Edinburgh or Belfast) should be considered as a repository of personal stories whose narration has been hampered by its metanarrative. The imposition of (pre)conceptions according to people's location in the city, their clothes, their gender or the way they speak is a source of misunderstanding. The semiotic environment is often misread in order to comply with the existing prejudices. The protagonist of each novel presents us with two different attitudes: one consists in opposing the metanarrative in order to rediscover people's personal narratives — including his own — and the other one consists in wittingly participating in the imposition of the metanarrative in order to take advantage of it and to reap the fruits of domination. The imagery of the body will then be examined in both novels. Both novelists indeed make use of Bakhtin's Grotesque Realism when depicting their characters and their bodies or bodily actions: by exaggerating some organs or bodily functions, they call for or herald a change of society, a metamorphosis of the city's code.

We stay in Northern Ireland and examine another aspect of the codification of the city with Shane Murphy's contribution. We move from personal narratives and the imposition of a metanarrative to the representation of a place on city maps. Maps are provisional texts in themselves, open to rewriting and misreading, and are therefore far from the objective representation they are supposed to be. Shane Murphy studies the cartographic (re)presentation of Belfast in Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man* and Glenn Patterson's *Burning Your Own*, that is to say how people (de)construct or narrate their urban location. Although the main focus of his article is provided by McNamee's and Patterson's novels, Shane Murphy broadens the scope of his research by taking into account a wide range of novels, essays and films. Sectarian geography has delimited territories of the cityscape in people's minds and on their maps. Like the city's metanarrative studied before, these cartographic

delimitations seem to vindicate violence by establishing prejudices and differences. Politics, cartography and geography are then intimately linked. However, what Shane Murphy wants to show through his choice of texts is that these delimitations are mostly a construction which is not fixed and unchangeable, contrary to what classic literary and social criticism has advocated. Even if maps are still regarded in their original aims and motivations, alternative maps and map-readings emerge. Shane Murphy's article shows us how Patterson and McNamee undermine the logic of sectarian geography. Their protagonists' relationships to location are not fixed and established once and for all, as cartographers would have us believe, but they evolve as do their political, cultural or sexual lives and interests. Belfast is seen as a changing place, a location on the move where the lines demarcating networks and ideologies keep crisscrossing and altering.

The following essay takes us from Belfast to Dublin. Joe Brooker examines the Irish urban experience portrayed by the prolific Irish novelist Roddy Doyle. The "Barrytown Trilogy" (*The Commitments; The Snapper; The Van*) serves as a background text; however other novels by fellow Irish writers or Roddy Doyle's film adaptations are also alluded to. In order to present the Irish urban experience, Joe Brooker first returns to the Anglo-Irish literary revival and its need to reappropriate spaces of the past — mainly located in rural Ireland — in order to vindicate its claims to Irishness or to a specific Irish identity. However Roddy Doyle (amongst many other Irish writers) has always refused to treat the obvious associations between Ireland and the land or between Irishness and the idealization of a mythical past. In each of Roddy Doyle's novels, the city, its streets and its housing estates, have become the celebration of a contemporary Irish experience. In this postmodern age, with the means of communication and the wealth of information at our disposal, it is necessary to have a much broader scope in order to define Irishness and the Irish urban identity. Dublin housing estates are not the reflection of a pristine or authentic Irish working-class any more: they are now more fragmented and open to a global culture broadcast thanks to television, which is symbolized by the proliferation of satellite dishes on Dublin's roofs. The feeling of belonging to a class, a society or a nation must now take these influences into account. The "Barrytown trilogy" shows how city and the nation should also now be "imagined" by taking into account

these new devices and the anxiety and instability of the postmodern cityscape.

Edinburgh and Irvine Welsh are once more at the centre of our attention with the much celebrated *Trainspotting* which brings an apt conclusion to our section on the "Celtic fringe" and the postmodern representation of these "cities on the Margin." Ruth Helyer examines the representation of Edinburgh in *Trainspotting* and the way in which Irvine Welsh elevates the city into a symbol and a symptom of our postmodern society. She shows that the cityscape, its transport system, parks, buildings and activities become the reflection of Welsh's characters and of their identities. The geography of the city — the city fathers' model of the city — is therefore closely tied with personal identification, with the feelings of belonging or alienation felt by the citizens. However, citizens, through their vernacular — a specific feature of Welsh's *Trainspotting* — their codes of behaviour and their idiosyncrasies, participate in the configuration and definition of their city. Cities and citizens are closely tied in a give-and-take relationship. Ruth Helyer also considers the marketing and the commercial aspects of the city in Welsh's novel: how the city — Edinburgh — advertises itself or is sold to tourists. Citizens obviously partake in this consumption of the city, as do characters of *Trainspotting*. The city has become a ready-made myth which our image-craving postmodern society is eager to sell or buy. Irvine Welsh therefore juxtaposes, in an interesting way, the power of consumer capitalism against the supposed subculture of drug addicts in Edinburgh. Ruth Helyer insists on Welsh's commitment to denouncing capitalist oppression and the subjection to a certain form of high culture. The traditional view of the city has changed dramatically throughout the ages. The Modernist vision of the city — exemplified by TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* — has become the postmodernist city, with its self-conscious and paradoxical (self-) representations.

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## **"Those vast new wildernesses of glass and brick:"<sup>1</sup> Representing the Contemporary Urban Condition**

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*Woo ah, mercy mercy me  
Ah things ain't what they used to be...<sup>2</sup>*

The tendency to nostalgia, to looking backward in the hope, expectancy and almost sure knowledge (for what could be true if not this?) that what went before was somehow better, more secure, more real even, than what is experienced as the present confusion has perhaps never been more prevalent than it is today. Or so the story goes ...

And perhaps it is true that we are now experiencing a period of change that is unprecedented, an age in which the onward rush of technological change — and not to forget political, social and economic change — leaves us with nowhere but the past to nostalgically shelter and comfort ourselves, in which to rebuild our ravaged urbanised landscapes in the timeless and changeless model that history and nature, and moreover literature, appear to offer us and of which the future seems to want to deprive us. That model is "the city" which, along with its necessary other "the country," seems to exert an almost unbreakable hold on the imagination. While

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, "England Your England," in: George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1957), 89.

<sup>2</sup> Marvin Gaye, "Mercy Mercy (The Ecology)," Jobete Music Co., Inc. 1971.

Britain's heritage tendencies seem to grow exponentially, positively thriving on every fresh piece of evidence that the countryside has become a tundra of motorways, service stations, retail "parks" and "garden villages," what J. G. Ballard has called "the terrain of business parks, marinas and executive housing that constitutes New Britain,"<sup>3</sup> the city continues to be reinvented by its backers more and more spectacularly, seemingly becoming more "vibrant" by the minute. For it seems that both "the country" and "the city" have to be shown to still be properly in existence: the city as a geographically bounded, recognisable entity, outside of which lies the countryside. This is where representations of all kinds, in the majority of cases, continue to do their job: to bolster up, to reassure, and above all mystify the real facts of our highly urbanised existence.

Although a number of theoretical analyses, in a variety of disciplines, have explored this sort of terrain in the context of the blurring of the social, cultural, and physical boundaries of modernity and the creation of hybrids, including the new urban landscapes, British fiction has on the whole been reluctant to engage with the same territory. On the contrary, there seems to be a deep-rooted desire to not only keep alive the old modes of seeing, reading and writing the city and the country, but to reinforce them, either through simply ignoring the reality of our contemporary urban condition, or through representations of the urban periphery which reveal deep-seated anxieties. If it is the case that there is a prevalence of nostalgic longings for the supposed simplicities of the past, then it often seems to take the form of a fundamental dualism in which the past provides the location for natural and "real" cities and by extension the location for properly authentic human citizens, and the future belongs to unnatural, less real and less properly human settlements – that "wilderness of glass and brick" observed 60 years ago by George Orwell in his essay *England Your England* — inhabited by degraded human subjects, ambivalently referred to by one writer as a "mutant urban herd."<sup>4</sup> There does seem to be a connection here between anxieties about the disappearance of both the traditionally figured and imagined city of modernity, and the type of human beings who inhabited those cities. In much the same way that

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<sup>3</sup> J. G. Ballard, *New Statesman*, 20.12.99, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Rem Koolhaas & Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL: Office for Metropolitan Architecture*. Edited by Jennifer Sigler; photography by Hans Werlemann (1995; Köln: Taschen, 1997), 202. References cited hereafter in text as (SMLXL).

postmodern theory suggests that the figuration of the modern human subject has entered a moment of crisis in which its foundational qualities of autonomy and integrity are breaking down and fragmenting, I want to suggest that this formulation can be applied to the city itself, that paradigmatic environment in which the heroic (male) subject of modernity moved. For some theorists of the postmodern, notably the urban geographer David Harvey,<sup>5</sup> one of the key markers of the move from modernity to postmodernity lies in precisely a recognition of the changes that have taken place in the physical environment, changes that make it increasingly difficult to refer any longer with confidence to older spatial categories which attempted to make clear-cut distinctions between city and country. This analysis instead posits the existence of an all-encompassing urbanised space in which the distinction between centre and periphery, if it could ever be said to have existed in reality, is perceived to have collapsed, leaving a boundaryless, formless totality: an infinitely extended city.

It is not only theory that has been mapping this blurred urban terrain. Representations, in particular in film, but also in certain forms of fiction, can be found of a city that appears to be fragmenting, mutating and generally evading old definitional categories. If it is the case, as I have suggested above, that there is a connection to be made between the breaking down and fragmentation in the way that both human subjectivity and the city is conceived, then one might suppose that these sorts of representations are a simple manifestation of this breakdown, an enthusiastic embracement of new subject positions as represented by new attitudes to and images of the city. However, it seems more likely to me that these representations are themselves symptomatic of the deep anxieties that western modernity is exhibiting in the face of challenges to the hegemony of both the autonomous individual subject, and its environment, the modern city.

In a world that is moving rapidly away from the older conceptions of place and locality within which we usually locate the term "city," it is worth asking exactly what it is that we mean when we refer to "the city," for it is not a stable signifier the meaning of which can be taken for granted. As both a place and a signifier, the city has historically succeeded in constantly mutating and taking on

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<sup>5</sup> See for example: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); David Harvey, "Cities or Urbanisation?" *City 1/2*, January 1996, 38-62.

new shapes and new meanings. Charles Jencks, for example, in *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* describes the city, as "slime-mould," an opportunistic organism that grows where it can, adapting to local conditions and endlessly reproducing itself, hovering between order and chaos, planned change and chaotic flux. The analogy of chess has also been used to invoke the changing morphology of an entity that, while perhaps the paradigmatic human construction, seems paradoxically to be beyond human control and understanding, an oxymoronic "man-made wilderness."<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on both the physical city and its literary and symbolic meaning in *Invisible Cities*,<sup>8</sup> Italo Calvino writes:

*Contemplating their essential landscapes, Kublai reflected on the invisible order that sustains cities, on the rules that decreed how they rise, take shape and prosper, adapting themselves to the seasons, and then how they sadden and fall in ruins. At times he thought he was on the verge of discovering a coherent, harmonious system underlying the infinite deformities and discords...to consider each successive state of the board as one of the countless forms that the system assembles and destroys. (IC, 122)*

In *S,M,L,XL*, Rem Koolhaas, criticising urban planners and their pretensions to be able to somehow solve the perennial problems of cities through the application of rational methodologies, also compares the city to an infinite game of chess for which no rules are available. He considers that:

*The professionals of the city are like chess players who lose to computers. A perverse automatic pilot constantly outwits all attempts at capturing the city, exhausts all ambitions of its definition, ridicules the most passionate assertions of its present failure and future impossibility, steers it implacably further on its flight forward. (SMLXL, 963)*

Jencks, Calvino and Koolhaas are recognising the essential difficulties, impossibilities perhaps, involved in conceptualising or writing about the city in any general terms. They warn against

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Jencks, *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* (Academy Ed. , London, 1997), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Jencks, "The city that never sleeps," *New Statesman*. 28.6.96, 26-8.

<sup>8</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*. Trans: H.B. Jovanovitch (1974; London: Vintage, 1997). References hereafter cited in text as (IC).

reliance on systems, categorisations and models that inevitably reduce complexity and replace it with the simplicities and certainties of a set of binary oppositions such as that of "country" and "city" which effectively deny the lived realities of a contemporary urban condition which resembles much more what Calvino, again in *Invisible Cities*, calls the "continuous city:" a vastly spread-out, never-ending urban environment. Marco Polo describes the city of Penthesilea to Kublai Khan:

*You, no doubt, imagine seeing a girdle of walls rising from the dusty plane as you slowly approach the gate...Until you have reached it you are outside it; you pass beneath an archway and you find yourself within a city...If this is what you believe, you are wrong...You advance for hours and it is not clear to you whether you are already in the city's midst or outside it. Like a lake with low shores lost in the plain, so Penthesilea spreads for miles around, a soupy city diluted in the plain...The question that now begins to gnaw at your mind is more anguished: outside Penthesilea does an outside exist? Or, no matter how far you go from the city, will you only pass from one limbo to another, never managing to leave it. (IC, 156)*

Calvino is describing a physical environment which bears little resemblance to that older figuration or image of the city which drew on an entity that, however big and bloated, was still recognisable as a limited and bounded structure which occupied a specific space. However, and perhaps more importantly, Calvino is also referring to an epistemological and ontological condition, a way of being in and understanding the world that David Harvey has described as "the urbanisation of consciousness."<sup>9</sup> That punctual, centred consciousness that the ideologues of modernity from Descartes onwards wanted to establish as the authentic version of the human being flows out into the extended urban landscapes of postmodernity. Not only do we know and understand the world as an increasingly urbanised place, encircled — hemmed in one might say — by global networks of transport and communications, but in many ways we are coming to know ourselves as products of this urbanised environment that effectively has no opposite, no outside by which it can be measured.

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<sup>9</sup> David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 229.

This is the urban environment within which the British writer John King situates his novel *Human Punk*,<sup>10</sup> an account of the lives of a group of young men as they grow up in and around Slough and the western outskirts of London between the years of 1977 and 1999. These are unfashionable characters living in a deeply unfashionable area. Young, white, working-class males, linked almost synonymously with under-achievement, violence and antisocial behaviour. "Slough," by-word for all that is scorned by both metropolitan liberal elites and provincial reactionary sensibilities. Simultaneously perceived as a degraded, and by implication degrading, experiment in an outmoded and redundant form of Corbusian-style modern living, and as a problematically postmodern site of sprawling suburbia. An area that can almost be read as a metaphor for the move from modernist optimism towards the transformation of the old nineteenth-century industrial city into the gleaming high-rise, mobile twentieth-century city, to postmodernist pessimism and turning away from those utopian visions. However, King's text, while acknowledging that this environment is frequently represented as a dystopian hell by metrocentric writers, provides positive images of a liberating lifestyle which in a strange way owes a debt to those early modernist visions of a motorway city. This postmodern, sprawling urban environment that facilitates hyper-mobile living with all its connotations of consumerism, shopping malls and motorways is in some ways a successful version of the modernist vision. As J. G. Ballard<sup>11</sup> asks, suggesting that artists and writers need to locate themselves in a more "challenging and real world" than that of the simulacrum that he claims that the city — London in this instance — has become:

*Where are those places that the "visionary" Le Corbusier thought would be cities of the future, i.e. cities built for speed and movement, for the car. They are here and now, surrounding the great dying city centre dinosaurs. Is it suburbia? No. A suburb of where?<sup>12</sup>*

No, it is not suburbia as it is traditionally conceived. It is an environment that has been forged by a constantly expanding car-

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<sup>10</sup> John King, *Human Punk* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000). References cited hereafter in text as (HP).

<sup>11</sup> J. G. Ballard, "Welcome to the Virtual City," *tate*, 3, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> J. G. Ballard, "Welcome to the Virtual City," 33.

based city that has in some instances forcibly ejected, and in others facilitated or propelled, successive generations of inner Londoners out onto the forbidding — for some — plains of outer London and the M25. It is a new habitat, a new definition of what London is and of its parameters. "Outside the M25" has become a convenient way of describing that which is not London, though even this term is rapidly dating as calls are made for yet another ring-road, even further from the centre. The latest description of London's boundaries encompasses the hundred odd miles from Reading in the west to Chelmsford in the east — a "hundred mile city." This is a form of urban space, increasingly the dominant form, which is and has been infrequently represented in British fiction in any form other than as a negative example by which positive models of authentic city and country life can be measured. It is that rather vague, amorphous, and hard-to-define space (though it is important to ask exactly why it is that it should be difficult to summon up images of it), often pejoratively described by terms such as non-place, that does not fit comfortably into any of the conventional categories — city, country, suburb — by which space is defined and represented in the British context. King's text maps neither city nor country but instead inhabits a space that can best be described as urban sprawl, specifically in this case London's outer margins as defined by the M25. Its description echoes Calvino's:

*...the Thames Valley a solid block of houses and trading estates, new housing estates fed by service-station mini-markets and warehouse superstores, a spread of car parks and shopping malls, multiplex cinemas and fast-food strips. In the old days there were city walls around the rulers' towers, and now there's the M25. (HP, 257)*

The text offers an account of the new urban condition, a new version of the city in which ways of living are emerging that do not make for comfortable reading either from a traditional metropolitan or provincial perspective. King's characters operate from within that total urban environment that Calvino draws attention to and as a result neither measure nor define their world according to the sort of external referents such as "nature" or "countryside" that traditional perspectives claim to be able to provide. Instead "nature" appears as a degraded and polluted presence, an industrialised landscape that survives as a pastiche backdrop to the hyper-mobile lives that his characters lead, constantly navigating the abundant space that

modern communications technologies have made available to them, roads in particular, but also the global urban spaces that air travel and mobile telecommunications bring into existence. What is uncomfortable about this version of the contemporary city for the traditional metropolitan or provincial perspective is that King depicts characters who have developed a new kind of relationship with both nature and mobility that bears little relation to that which grows out of a rigid adherence to the older forms of both seeing and experiencing the world. Although there is a clear sense of nostalgia and harking-back to traditional images, there is also, and very importantly, a constant recognition and reminder that these images reside in myth — "city walls around the rulers' towers" — and that moreover these are myths that explicitly preserve and perpetuate the socio-economic structures that are part and parcel of a world divided neatly into dualisms such as city and country, metropolitan and provincial, centre and periphery.

The term periphery is an important one in this context and has been for many theorists of the "postmodern condition." Again, it is worth dwelling on precisely what is meant by the term for it contains a variety of historically and ideologically situated meanings that make its usage far from neutral. As Michel Foucault famously pointed out in his essay *The Eye of Power*:

*A whole history remains to be written of spaces — which would at the same time be the history of powers (both these terms in the plural) — from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat...Space used to be either dismissed as belonging to 'nature' — that is, the given, the basic conditions, 'physical geography', in other words a sort of 'prehistoric' stratum; or else it was conceived as the residential site or field of expansion of peoples, of a culture, a language or a State.<sup>13</sup>*

The word and associated concept "periphery" illustrates very clearly what Foucault means. Buried within the notion of the periphery is a whole history of assumptions and theoretical positions. In strictly spatial terms, the periphery is the edge, that which is not centre, however in the light of a constantly expanding city, the periphery becomes historically contingent: that which was on the periphery may not remain so. Some theorists, Edward Soja for

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<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power," in: Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Translated and Edited by Colin Gordon (London: Harvester, 1980), 149.

example in his analysis of Los Angeles in *Postmodern Geographies*,<sup>14</sup> prefer to see the distinction between centre and periphery as having blurred into insignificance. To an extent this is undoubtedly true, however, by most measures of analysis, the central city has remained dominant, and its associated hinterland has become the commuter city, the edge city, sprawl, call it what you will. The affluent are able to leap over this belt, living in old towns and villages beyond it and in doing so extending the range of the city even further, while the poor are trapped in what in Britain and America is often described as an "inner-city ghetto," which more often than not is to be found, not in the gentrified inner-city, but in its bleak, poverty-stricken municipal housing estates, so-called "sink estates," on the blurred edge of the city. "Inner-city" then becomes a euphemism, a mystificatory term which disguises the gentrified nature of the inner-city, while "the periphery" meanwhile becomes an ambivalent term used to describe that which is not-city, *i.e.* — a degraded and extended form of suburbia, but also, "problem" areas. Most representations of the periphery seem to take as their point of departure the extent to which a differentiation can be made from a mythic ideal of the city. As John Foot points out in his discussion of Milan in a paper entitled "The urban periphery: myth and reality:" "The periphery has been seen in manifold ways by different writers, planners, architects and historians. Most of these representations take their cue from an ideal-city form against which the periphery is contrasted."<sup>15</sup>

The periphery becomes the non-city or the anti-city. It is the failed city in as much as it does not exhibit the mythological primary characteristics of the old bounded, perhaps even walled, communal city of the golden age. This old, authentic, version of the city being associated with "order," and the periphery being concomitantly associated with "disorder." The architect Richard Rogers, for example, advocating stricter controls on urban expansion and the return to what he considers to be a purer and more "natural" city archetype ("an urban renaissance"), complains about the disorderly nature of British cities in *Cities for a Small Planet*:

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> John Foot, "The urban periphery: myth and reality Milan, 1950-1990," *City*, 4, 2000, 13.

*...our urban landscape is full of unplanned ruptures and broken street patterns...Cities have lost the connected, dense style that characterised them in the past. People long for nostalgic images of 'community'...Yet a compact sense of place and order is still the hallmark of popular inner-city neighbourhoods...Multi-purpose, mixed and closely knit neighbourhoods ordered around streets and squares are the archetypal human settlement...<sup>16</sup>*

Rogers argues that our cities have lost coherence, that there is no sense of order to be found in their jumbled and chaotic, "ruptured" and "broken" structures. Moreover, he claims that it is precisely this lack of order and coherence, this inability to satisfactorily "read" the city that is somehow the cause of the ongoing migration of populations from inner-city areas to the peripheries, the ever-expanding city outskirts. He writes that: "When order breaks down people try to escape."<sup>17</sup> Once that "order" has gone, the city begins to fragment, its population begins to disperse and communities disappear. Rogers sees his task, and the task of city planners and architects in general, as that of hindering the erosion of the public spaces and city cores associated with the classically conceived city, which will accordingly call a halt to the "unsightly developments and left-over spaces"<sup>18</sup> of the periphery, a halt to the expansion of those "wildernesses of glass and brick." Rogers is writing in a long tradition of opposition to anything which disturbs the "order" supposedly inherent in a purified earlier version of the city; a city that is centred and central, unified and coherent, rational and organised as a reflection of the mythic characteristics of its designers and — *sotto voce* — rulers. I have mentioned Descartes earlier in the context of the construction of a particular version of human consciousness that modernity has been keen to perceive as primary, and it is interesting that at an early stage in the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes finds the metaphor of city building a useful one to reinforce the new scientific and epistemological method which he proposes to construct. Descartes writes:

*So it is that these old cities which, originally only villages, have become, through the passage of time, great towns, are usually so badly proportioned in comparison with those orderly towns which an engineer*

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Country* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 57.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Country*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Country*, 62.

*designs at will on some plain that, although the buildings, taken separately, often display as much art as those of the planned towns or even more, nevertheless, seeing how they are placed, with a big one here, a small one there, and how they cause the streets to bend and to be at different levels, one has the impression that they are more the product of chance than that of a human will operating according to reason.<sup>19</sup>*

This passage expresses some very familiar and highly contemporary fears and desires and in so doing seems to collapse the historical specificity of our present moment into a spectrum of concern that has spanned several centuries: that cities have outgrown some sort of original template; that they would be far better places if they were subject to the rational will of what we would now call an architect or town planner; that there has at some stage in history been a bare "plain" or state of nature in which to lay out the fundamental expression of the individual architect's will. Descartes seems to be suggesting that cities, like the bodies that inhabit them, need to be contained, disciplined and rationally organised. That which does not conform to these characteristics becomes associated with the peripheral, the fragmented and the incoherent. However, just as the body that Descartes attempted to repress and banish at the start of modernity is now often represented as returning in the form of a technologised monster, a computer enhanced nightmare to haunt his dreams as he sits in front of his infamous stove, the city also re-emerges in profoundly dystopic terminology, as a sprawling artificial monstrosity that needs to be somehow returned to its primordial condition of pure cityness.

The periphery consequently takes on negative characteristics when contrasted with the positive myths surrounding the centre which, identified with history and power becomes an easily imaged and imagined place, an authentic *place*, while the periphery with its modernity, its lack of history and power, and its geographical diffuseness becomes or remains an inauthentic, hard to imagine *non-place*. However, rather than pejoratively labelling the new urban spaces as peripheral both when measured against the city on the one hand and the country on the other, John Foot proposes that these new landscapes are hybrids which can be assessed and described in their own right. He suggests that:

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<sup>19</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*. Trans: F. E. Sutcliffe (1637; Penguin Books, 1968), 35.

*The contemporary city is not a degeneration of the historic city, it is something completely different, rich of new potentiality, to understand and use. In the new contemporary city new lifestyles are asserting themselves, linked to a different relationship with nature and to new forms of mobility across territory.*<sup>20</sup>

According to this view, a much more nuanced and complex scenario is needed to describe the periphery or 'peri-urban' areas and their relationship with the centre or the historic city core. It is not that one site — periphery or sprawl — deserves the label "non-place" and another site — centre or "the city" — can be defined by its placeness. The term non-place is associated primarily with the work of the anthropologist Marc Augé for whom non-places are a primary constituent of a redefined modernity, a so-called "supermodernity," which is recognised by a massive urban expansion with accelerated means of transport, large movements of population "and the multiplication of what we call non-places."<sup>21</sup> Non-places are produced in the vacuum that arises when historical reference is no longer possible, when relational difference between locations blurs, and when identity can no longer be tied up with "place." Although Augé is primarily interested in areas such as shopping centres, motorway service areas, airports etc. the term non-place itself has escaped these narrow confines and entered the broader landscape including the domestic realm of residential areas. As John Foot points out, what then becomes important is the issue of "home" and its role in the establishment and creation of identity. The logic of centre and periphery would appear to claim that it is only the authentic old established city that can provide sufficient historic and geographical specificity to establish identity, and that the converse is true for the amorphous peripheral sprawl. However, in the context of city centres that are more and more given over to business, tourism and consumption of all kinds, the simple equation of city centre with place is clearly inadequate, while the association of non-place with so-called peripheral areas where people actually live is equally deficient. "Thus we cannot simply classify *places* and *non-places* but only sort out a series of complicated and ever-changing

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<sup>20</sup> John Foot, "The urban periphery: myth and reality Milan, 1950-1990," 18.

<sup>21</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 34.

relationships between places, non-places, workers and users of these areas which create and recreate meaning and identity."<sup>2</sup>

This is where John King's representation succeeds in capturing the complexities of the new urban condition, for he pays attention, albeit in a highly critical manner, to both the role of the city, nearby but not *central* to the lives of his characters, and the sprawling areas that they actually inhabit and that are their centres, even though not central in the ways that we have traditionally understood the concept. How can it be possible for a traditional literary or theoretical approach to come to terms with those vastly expanded new spaces that Augé refers to as constituting a "supermodernity"? For no longer is it to be the strolling flâneur who can best understand, interpret, and make sense of his modern city. In the vastly expanded spaces of King's postmodern urban sprawl, it is more often the speeding motorist and the airborne international traveller who, moving constantly between non-places and places, can grasp the new urban moment.

This is the landscape with which J. G. Ballard, in novels such as *Crash*,<sup>3</sup> has both familiarised us as a site which literature might take seriously, but simultaneously defamiliarised and made an uncanny, haunted, "overlit" (to use Ballard's own term in the introduction to the 1995 edition) place that is infused with anxiety. However, for King, writing within precisely the same geographical context as Ballard, it is something different; it is a place wherein a new urban paradigm is developing, with its own fragile and always contingent historical and geographical roots. It is a place, not a non-place or a degraded version of the historic city, where children are born, go to school, grow up, become adults, travel from and return to; where lives are lived that are not quite as marginalised as most literary accounts would have us believe. In other words it is an environment in which human beings find themselves and to which they respond in a multitude of ways. As King puts it, life is still able to 'bloom' in this environment:

*...extending the highways...spreading out, more and more people flushed out of London by the rich...from Margate to Milton Keynes, Southend to Reading. Life is being stripped down to the bone, another sort of factory farming, but wherever there's people life blooms. (HP, 258)*

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<sup>2</sup> John Foot, "The urban periphery: myth and reality Milan, 1950-1990," 14.

<sup>3</sup> J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (1973; London: Vintage, 1995). References cited hereafter in text as (C).

Whereas most versions of this environment, in a way that is similar to late nineteenth-century accounts of, for example, the East End of London, readily produce the required shudder and frisson of horror in the literate reader when confronted by the disturbing, marginalised and profoundly unhomely images associated with sprawl, King refuses to pander to these sensibilities and instead offers us an account which recognises the urban facts of his character's existences without the implied criticism, pity or even contempt that is so often the case. The sort of life that King represents, the life that has "bloomed," is indeed disturbing in as much as the lives of his male characters are dominated and characterised by violence and drugs, racism and homophobia, but equally disturbing is the fact that the text itself offers no moral position or voice with which the reader can readily identify. However, perhaps even more disturbing, and somewhat paradoxically, it is precisely the lack of suggestions of unhomeliness or uncanniness lurking in the city margins that contributes to its difficulty for readers who have become used to enjoying the comfortable shiver of distaste at representations of the marginalised 'other' stranded between city and country. The worrying reality for these readers is that that new urban paradigm does provide a sense of domestic security for the vast numbers — perhaps increasingly the majority of the population — who live there, enjoying the opportunities that are on offer, or in other words enjoying the very modernity that earlier generations of writers had been keen to document. The lifestyles that dominate in *Human Punk* are the very antithesis of those which are increasingly marketed as being desirable in a city context. They have nothing in common with the almost pastoralised notion of city life that is represented by films such as "Notting Hill" or the "bobo" or "bourgeois bohemian" lifestyle that is supposed to be available in what Iain Sinclair derisively labels *Hoxtonia* ("...the more garret-like and terrible the better...bare as a Spitalfield weavers' loft, at £800 p.w.").<sup>24</sup> They do not recognise or aspire to the description of London as: "the most vibrant, the hippest, the coolest of the great global cities: the city as a cosmopolitan state."<sup>25</sup> Their city is not about to be designated European City of Culture. Ironically it is an earlier version of the city that is being offered by

<sup>24</sup> Iain Sinclair, "If I Turn and Run," *London Review of Books*, 1.6.2000, 17-20.

<sup>25</sup> *Granta* 65, *London and the lives of the City* (London: Granta, Spring 1999), Back cover.

the city boosters and their marketing fantasies: a pastiched and sanitised simulacrum of the modern city, a cosy version that leaves out all the downsides of that city that in many ways the population of the new sprawl have either been keen to escape or have been forced to leave. The new version of the traditional city that is being hyped, not only in the advertising copy of estate agents and by "directors of urban regeneration" but in literary representations, is in many ways not a real city at all but a kind of urban theme park, a shell-city around which edge-city, suburban-city, the infinite city, continues to grow. Everywhere, that is, except in our imagination where "the city" continues to exercise its domination. Simultaneously that other city — "the contemporary urban condition" — that I have been discussing is noticeably either under-imagined or figured as a nightmarish neo-gothic terrain.

It is precisely that periphery which is not a periphery, those marginalised areas which are not so marginal and which Richard Rogers and many others throughout the past century at least have found so distasteful and so provocative, that, like it or not, in many ways actually represent both the present reality and the future of our cities. Amongst the glossy and celebratory pages of *tate* magazine's issue promoting the enormous "Century City" exhibition, J. G. Ballard sounds a different note to most of the other articles that are to be found boosting the twentieth-century city. For Ballard, the traditional conception of a city, as a specific object or location which has succeeded in provoking myriad aesthetic responses during the last two hundred years of its expansion, is dying. However, unlike Richard Rogers, Ballard does not suggest that it is either possible or even desirable to revive or reinvent that classical version of the city. He notes with no apparent remorse that these cities are becoming dinosaurs, slow moving, strange and incomprehensible. They are "in long term decline," centres either nostalgically recreating a heritagised version of the past for tourists, or for a super-rich metropolitan elite whose enormous wealth and spending power has "distorted social life in London and New York...validating the notion that the dreams that money can buy are a perfectly fit topic for a young painter, novelist and film maker. It's not their ambition that corrupts today's artists, but the subject matter facing them."<sup>5</sup>

Ballard's concerns here are to do with art. His question strikes at the heart of any honest discourse on the nature of city life

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<sup>5</sup> J. G. Ballard, "Welcome to the Virtual City," 33.

at the start of the twenty-first century. What sort of art, and in particular, fiction, can be produced as a response to the declining place that is the postmodern city? Where, Ballard asks, is the new Rimbaud, or for that matter the Dickens, Balzac, Kafka...or the many other great writers and documentors of modernity and the city of modernity? And he is not alone in asking this question. Rem Koolhaas, for example, claims that: "Since it is out of control, the urban is about to become a major vector of the imagination...We were making sand castles. Now we swim in the sea that swept them away." (*SMLXL*, 969)

Koolhaas is pointing out that something significant has changed, that there has been a shift, a break with the past that means that we can no longer use the term "city" in the way that it has been used to describe a geographically and historically specific space. No, it is not "the city," it is "the urban" that is "out of control" and it is the new phenomenon of an all-pervasive and ever-present urbanisation to which the imagination is being forced to turn its attention. For Ballard this "faceless deadland of inter-urban sprawl" is, paradoxically, an "exciting space of the imagination."<sup>27</sup> Those very qualities which are producing fear and anxiety at the prospect of the disappearance of both the cherished city and its heroic citizens, replete with "civic identity, tradition...human values"<sup>28</sup> should also induce a fascination and attraction for the modern artist when confronted by the dysfunctional and profoundly unheroic subjects of the new urban spaces. John Foot too suggests that: "It seems essential to try and formulate some new ways of imagining the urban periphery."<sup>29</sup>

Yes, it does seem to be essential to find some new ways of imagining the urban periphery which do not endlessly recycle images that are replete with horror at its illegitimacy and inauthenticity. It is inevitable that the future does belong to that diffuse "peri-urban" area and that our present failure to successfully imagine it in any positive form will contribute to the continued marginalisation of its population. These are questions which are neither often nor successfully dealt with by urban theory with its emphasis on the physical rather than the social landscape of the city. It is perhaps up to fiction to provide some representations of the

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<sup>27</sup> J. G. Ballard, "Welcome to the Virtual City," 33.

<sup>28</sup> J. G. Ballard, "Welcome to the Virtual City," 33.

<sup>29</sup> John Foot, "The urban periphery: myth and reality Milan, 1950-1990," 17.

contemporary urban condition which might enable a social vision which goes beyond the narrow, historically and ideologically restricted, basis which currently informs most attempts to deal with the new urban "seas" in which we all swim. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* concludes with the following passage in which Marco Polo responds to the Great Khan's pessimism and despondency as to the fate of the city that he considers is drawing towards the sort of nightmarish, "infernal" state that so many commentators, over such a long period of time, have deemed inevitable:

*The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who or what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (IC, 165)*

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## Road Rage: Urban Trajectories and the Working Class

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*A city is a sum of trajectories whose laws are different for drivers and pedestrians. There are detours, shortcuts, obstacles, traffic densities varying according to hours or days [...] Onto this space traversed by the individuals themselves, a space which the invention, improvement, diffusion and organization of new means of transportation will revolutionize, is superimposed the space of representations, a space which the transformations of the means of information will affect profoundly.*<sup>1</sup>

*We should find countless intermediaries between reality and symbols if we gave things all the movements they suggest. George Sand, dreaming beside a path of yellow sand, saw life flowing by. 'What is more beautiful than a road?' she wrote. 'It is the symbol and the image of an active, varied life.' Each one of us then, should speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches.*<sup>2</sup>

*My first published manuscript was the first manuscript I wrote for publication [...] It appeared in a cycling magazine, well known at the time, called, I think, Cycling.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Butor, "The Space of the Novel," in: Richard Howard (ed.), *Inventory: Essays by Michel Butor* (London: Cape, 1970), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958; Boston: Beacon, 1994), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Morrison, in a letter to Walter J. Roberts. Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (1896; London: Dent, 1996), 216-17.

A popular British television programme recently assembled contributors to address the subject of childhood poverty. One speaker, raised in the Moss Side area of Manchester, recalled the toys available to her and to her brothers and sisters. "There were seven of us," she declared, "and we had nothing." After a thoughtful pause, she added "We *did* have a bicycle with no wheels . . ." (audience laughter). "We took it up to the bedroom and fought for turns on it. You could put your hands on the handlebars and pedal furiously. Pedalling to nowhere" (audience silent).<sup>4</sup>

This reminiscence offers itself as an icon of what has been termed "the rediscovery of poverty" in Britain's cities during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>5</sup> The image warrants this status on the grounds of how readily and empathically it was understood by others, suggesting that the speaker had tapped into an existing cultural iconography. In literary-critical terms one might object that the image skirts pitfalls of cliché, sentimentality and, depending on one's view of bicycles, bathos. Certainly the speaker might, with greater accuracy, have referred to "a bicycle frame." Yet her oxymoron of "a bicycle with no wheels" (amusing in itself and blackly humorous in being posed as a qualification of "having nothing") potently crystallised an experience of wasted and frustrated movement. "Pedalling to nowhere" evokes a Sisyphian circularity and futility that extends to the speaker's whole historical moment and social and economic background. Admittedly, some pastoral reassurance is available in the anecdote in terms of what it has to say about the resilience of children under circumstances of deprivation, but this is outweighed by pathos and the stimulus to indignation in the irony of children fighting for no more than the opportunity to pedal to nowhere. However, to the extent that "nowhere" is transposable into "Erewhon" and also links to the "no place" of Sir Thomas More's "utopia," one is encouraged to see those children as fighting for the chance to experience even the *denial* of some heterotopic experience otherwise promised by mobility and such as might, in Sally

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<sup>4</sup> "Kilroy," BBC1, 27/04/2001.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Pacione, "Introduction," in: Pacione (ed.), *Britain's Cities: Geographies of Division in Urban Britain* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1-6.

MacNamee's words in an allied context, "enable children to resist and escape control."<sup>6</sup>

Since at least the time of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (and partly stemming from those very social changes recorded in Thomas Hardy's novel concerning relationships between town and country and the modern modification of community by the widespread necessity of mobility), British texts depicting the working class and the poor have been built on dynamic images involving (or depicting confrontation with, or significant exclusion from) motion, vehicles and routes. Walking, running, and riding by such modes as tram, train, bus, coach, truck, bicycle, motorbike and car are primary components of that dynamic, producing a complex calculus of situation, entrapment, escape and defeat. The apparent necessity and even banality of such largely everyday motion — most often involving movement as means rather than end — has doubtless worked to impede appreciation of the literal, structural, figurative and ideological significances of such movement. One may be very aware that it is significant whether Tess Durbeyfield walks, drives Prince, rides in Alec's trap or on his horse or confronts a steam-engine, but familiarity means that invisibility tends to cloak the exponents of mobility in our own time. Nevertheless, as in the case of the bicycle with no wheels, one may in fact detect in such representations the crucial metonymic function of the exponents of mobility and its frustrations — their status, in Bachelard's words, as "intermediaries between reality and symbols." More particularly, if the working class is defined as a social group that has nothing to sell but its labour, there remains — especially in the absence of employment (as "The Full Monty" understood in comic mode, and "Brassed Off" and "Billy Elliot" in sentimental and aesthetic terms) — the mobility and trajectories of working-class bodies through space.<sup>7</sup> Working-class prostitution, as in nineteenth-century London (and dramatized in Arthur Morrison's "Lizerunt"), fundamentally exemplifies that condition of the class.<sup>8</sup> In consequence, if we are impelled to wonder why, in *The Commitments*, Joey Fagan's arrival

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<sup>6</sup> Sally MacNamee, "Foucault's Heterotopia and Children's Everyday Lives," *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research*, 7.4 (2000), <<http://www.sagepub.co.uk/frame.html>>; <<http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journals/Details/jc0077.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> "The Full Monty" (1997), dir. Peter Cattaneo; "Brassed Off" (1996), dir. Mark Herman; "Billy Elliot" (2000), dir. Stephen Daldry.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Morrison, "Lizerunt," in his *Tales of Mean Streets* (London: Methuen, 1894), 31-62.

on a "fuckin' Suzuki" has such a claim on our attention or why the band's Dublinicised version of "Night Train" epitomizes their performances — or why "Destination Anywhere" forms part of the film's soundtrack; why the final novel of the Barrytown trilogy is *The Van*; why the film of *Trainspotting* begins with the principal characters running towards camera along a city pavement and Renton colliding confrontationally with the bonnet of a car; why (apart from the legacy of "Easy Rider") the motorcycle and its burning occupy such a strong symbolic position in the film "House of America;" why the film "Twin Town" begins with the twins' high-speed joy-riding down quiet Swansea back-streets, moves through their background (in a mobile home), their skid-pan vandalism of the local rugby pitch and ends with their (presumably doomed) power-boat voyage to Morocco — then a framework of understanding is forcefully presented by the topic of mobility, its modes, meanings and heterotopic elements.<sup>9</sup>

Heterotopia — the other place, or the place of otherness — involves the concept of a liberating space in which, in Foucault's terms, there is potential for an altered "ordering of things." The idea of such places most often involves literal spaces and sites within society, examples ranging from libraries and theatres to counter-cultural festivals; however, they may equally be places of the mind — in literary terms the disorientations and multiplicities of meanings of, perhaps, a *Gulliver's Travels* or a *Tristram Shandy* — but psychologically they may be understood as the goal of quests for some place defined by its potential for difference and its capacity to offer inversions and subversions of, and more radical challenges to, that ideology which would otherwise define identity and social role.<sup>10</sup> There is room, in other words, for heterotopic space to be aspirational and virtual, if, in Bachelard's words, "we gave things all the movements they suggest." Katrien Jacobs, in arguing for the heterotopic value of avant-garde internet pornography (and to some extent "pure smut"), observes that "heterotopia was first defined by Foucault as 'a disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter;'" moreover, she bases her particular argument

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<sup>9</sup> Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments* (1987; London: Heinemann, 1988); "The Commitments" (1991), dir. Alan Parker; Roddy Doyle, *The Van* (London: Secker, 1991); "Trainspotting" (1996), dir. Danny Boyle; "House of America" (1997), dir. Marc Evans; "Twin Town" (1997), dir. Kevin Allen.

<sup>10</sup> See Graham St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia: ConFest as Australia's Marginal Centre" <<http://www.angelfire.com/pq/edgecentral/>>.

on the fact that in cyberspace "inhabitants are involved in an active *search* for other spaces" (my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> Arthur Morrison (if with the axe to grind of the upwardly mobile) most forcefully established an image of working-class environments as at root static and monotonous in the introduction to his *Tales of Mean Streets*, which he quite simply entitled "A Street:"

*Of this street there are about one hundred and fifty yards — on the same pattern all. It is not pretty to look at. A dingy little brick house twenty feet high, with three square holes to carry the windows, and an oblong hole to carry the door, is not a pleasing object; and each side of this street is formed by two or three score of such houses in a row, with one front wall in common. And the effect is of stables. [...]*

*Where in the East End lies this street? Everywhere. The hundred-and-fifty yards is only a link in a long and a mightily tangled chain — is only a turn in a tortuous maze. This street of the square holes is hundreds of miles long. That it is planned in short lengths is true, but there is no other way in the world that can more properly be called a single street, because of its dismal lack of accent, its sordid uniformity, its utter remoteness from delight.* ("A Street," 9; 25)

Part of what makes television's "The Royle Family" so sadly funny is the characters' acceptance (and enjoyment) of stasis and monotony. It is against such a backdrop that "pedalling to nowhere" takes on meaning. Indeed, writing of British youth cinema in the 1990s, Karen Lury observes "a frequent tension between staying and going."<sup>12</sup>

In texts dealing with the working class produced during historical phases of economic downturn, images of futile *circular* movement (like "pedalling to nowhere") abound — perhaps representing an intuitive modelling of the concept of Kondratieff cycles, though primarily capturing more focused personal experiences of limitation, frustration and entrapment. *Love on the Dole*, Walter Greenwood's novel of the Great Depression, used such movement as structural principle and persistent motif: most memorably, the last section of the final chapter is a variation on the opening of the second; meanwhile, time passing takes the form of

<sup>11</sup> Katrien Jacobs, "Pornography in Small Places and Other Spaces" <[http://pages.emerson.edu/faculty/Katrien\\_Jacobs/articles/pornplaces/pornplaces.html](http://pages.emerson.edu/faculty/Katrien_Jacobs/articles/pornplaces/pornplaces.html)>.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Lury, "Here and Then: Space, Place and Nostalgia in British Youth Cinema of the 1990s" in: Robert Murphy (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s* (London: BFI, 2000), 101.

"twelve months each treading on the other's heel in a never-ending suffocating circle, monotonous, constrained, like prisoners exercising mechanically in the confines of the prison yard."<sup>13</sup> This pattern of a circular movement within the confinement of a further boundary (chapter-structure; prison yard) produces a compounded image of frustration. In the case of Greenwood's prison imagery, the effect is even more compounded when one connects it with Foucault's identification of the prison not as the site of a potentially liberating heterotopia but as a "heterotopia of deviation" instituted in the interests of extant social power and its current definitions of deviancy. The same pattern of circular movement within the confinement of a further boundary is enacted in the Moss Side woman's image in the surreal incongruity of the non-bicycle's location in the children's bedroom. Here is a place connoting imagination and dream, a portal to heterotopia: yet within the enclosure of the room the possibility of literal, let alone cognitive, movement via this bicycle with no wheels is further frustrated. In this perspective, it is no accident that H. G. Wells, writing in response to the new spatial and imaginative freedoms that the bicycle positively conferred on the lower middle class at the end of the nineteenth century, projected his Time Machine as a mechanism with bicycle-like features (a "saddle," "bars" and "levers"); moreover, it proves wholly unconstrained by the walls of the laboratory in which it sits.<sup>14</sup> (Hetherington specifically finds an analogy for heterotopic sites in laboratories — think of Drs Frankenstein and Jekyll — places "in which new ways of experimenting with ordering society are tried out.")<sup>15</sup> The dimensional slippage between space and time in Wells' story certainly projects an emphatic liberation into a heterotopia where, for one thing, social truths concerning class relationships (Eloi and Morlocks) are revealed to the Time Traveller with the clarity of a diagram. But in Moss Side things are different: the wheels have come off the mechanism and even in merely spatial terms the bicycle moves its rider nowhere. In "Yosser's Story" (from Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff*), the unemployed Yosser's estranged wife Maureen organises a clandestine raid to strip the furniture and fittings from the family house; the children (in a telling

<sup>13</sup> Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole: A Tale of the Two Cities* (London: Cape, 1933), 99.

<sup>14</sup> H.G. Wells, "The Time-Machine," in: H. G. Wells, *Selected Short Stories* (1895; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 14.

<sup>15</sup> K. Hetherington, cit. Graham St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia" <<http://www.angelfire.com/pq/edgcentral/oneach.html>>.

inversion of "inside" and "outside" that figures the exposure and vulnerability of Yosser's family) are subsequently seen playing football in the lounge, empty but for debris. One of the few other items remaining in the house is a yellow child's bicycle left stranded in the hallway; significantly, this is pushed aside as social workers walk in to start the ultimately violent process of taking Yosser's family into care. In corollary, when Yosser's young daughter is forcibly carried into the social workers' *transit van* (her resistance apparently smothered, control over her location and direction forcibly imposed), she sweetly smiles in order to draw the most well intending social worker into range and then wordlessly — and quite formidably — administers a Yosser-style head-butt.<sup>66</sup> In *Looks and Smiles* (dealing with unemployment in 1970s Sheffield), Barry Hines has his young hero Mick Walsh careering on a stolen motorbike about a "circuit" constructed around his council estate (another circular movement within a confining boundary). It is a route that includes his riding through a half-demolished terrace of houses (again figuring an inversion of "inside" and "outside"):

*The dirt track round the wasteland passed between piles of house bricks and rubble, swooped down craters and climbed mounds of compressed earth which had been made by diggers and bulldozers. Somebody had knocked the boards out of the front and back doors of one of the derelict houses. [...]*

*Mick leaned over as he swung the bike round the chassis of an abandoned car; he seemed to have dipped too low as the back wheel skidded and spun uselessly and the bike slid away from underneath him. But he dug his boot in, rode the drift, then accelerated away leaving the dust to settle on the car shell and on two little girls who were engrossed in a comic on a discarded settee. He stood up to absorb the impact of landing as he took off from a hump of soil, then slowed down as he approached the derelict house and bumped over the kitchen doorstep. The engine roared louder in the enclosed space and the sound was still reverberating inside, when he rode out through the front door.<sup>67</sup>*

The domestic dereliction, the stolen motorbike, the abandoned car-shell, the girls sitting outside on the discarded settee and the riding of the bike inside the kitchen and out the front door, all contribute to this particular "wasteland" (a term, incidentally, that one senses Hines is actively appropriating from T. S. Eliot and

<sup>66</sup> Alan Bleasdale, "Yosser's Story," from "The Boys from the Blackstuff," BBC, 1982.

<sup>67</sup> Barry Hines, *Looks and Smiles* (1981; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 10.

redefining, more materially, for his own class, much as Greenwood redefined the class-related meanings of Romantic and Shakespearean allusions).<sup>18</sup> In point of fact, Mick does possess his own motorcycle, but without an income he too is effectively another child on a bike with no wheels, pedalling to nowhere:

*It had been stripped down to the frame and the parts arranged neatly on the floor around it. The pistons were worn out and it needed a re-bore and a new gasket, but Mick could not afford to have it mended, so he spent his time taking it to pieces and cleaning it, then putting it back together again. [...] He [...] straddled the bike and stood there holding the hand grips and gently squeezing the brakes. He went through the motions of revving up and changing gears, substituting the sounds of the engine with growls and whines, like a little boy on a tricycle pretending to ride a motor-bike. (L&S, 24)*

It should come as no surprise that Hines presents Mick's favourite rooms as his bedroom on the one hand, and this garage on the other.

The best-known bicycle in working-class literature is undoubtedly Arthur Seaton's in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. In Sillitoe's novel it symbolises the condition of the industrial worker in a class-structured society (the Arthur who is "cooped up [...] all week" in a fictional version of the Raleigh bicycle factory): "Latest sports models gleamed faintly behind the window of a bicycle shop, with the shadowy cardboard form of Sir Walter Raleigh bowing nobly from their midst."<sup>19</sup> At the same time, echoing a memory of his cousin Dave deserting from the army in wartime "on a stolen bicycle," Arthur's machine — in the relative working-class affluence of 1950s Britain — also participates in the heterotopic quest figured in his fishing trips at the weekend:

*He straightened his back, his fingers freeing nylon line from a speedily revolving reel. Around him lay knapsack and jacket, an empty catch-net, his bicycle, and two tins of worms dug from the plot of the garden at home before setting out. [...] Another solitary man was fishing further along the canal, but Arthur knew that they would leave each other in peace, would not even call out*

<sup>18</sup> Peter Miles & Malcolm Smith, *Cinema, Literature and Society: Elite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 148-49.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (London: W.H. Allen, 1958), 198; *ibid.*, 79.

*greetings. No one bothered you: you were a hunter, a dreamer, your own boss, away from it all for a few hours on any day that the weather did not throw down its rain. Like the corporal in the army who said it was marvellous the things you thought about as you sat on the lavatory. Even better than that, it was marvellous the things that came to you in the tranquillity of fishing. (SN&SM, 210)*

The bicycle's functions, however, in part entrapping and in part liberating, *are* paradoxical, and in that respect mirror Arthur's fishing metaphor for the pattern of his life in general: "Whenever you caught a fish, the fish caught you, in a way of speaking, and it was the same with anything else you caught, like the measles or a woman" (SN&SM, 211). To have Saturday and Sunday, you have to have the "terror" of Monday morning. With this in mind, it is not surprising that images of circularity also abound in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, reiterating a familiar undertone of entrapment. However, what is also distinctively evident is that images of circularity in this novel tend to have less to do with prison-yards and much more with fairground and carnival (some of Foucault's most positively identified heterotopia). To an extent these even speak of a long-suffering working class (Arthur Seaton through time) at last embracing the full employment of the 1950s and in part prepared to override the unchanged real foundations of its class and industrial situation in return for the short-term benefits of "good" pay and such degrees of freedom as had simply not been available to Arthur Seaton's parents in the depressed 1930s. Weekends are thus seen as events punctuating the "slow-turning Big Wheel of the year" (SN&SM, 7). More spectacularly, Nottingham's Goose Fair presents itself as a place of carnival disguise (with hats reading *Kiss me quick* and *You've had it*) and, further, as a whirlpool of circles which in many ways are just as mechanical and industrial in their circularity as the castan lathe at which Arthur works, but which are here mechanisms devoted to enjoyment and even exhilaration:

*They heard the thumping pistons of red-painted engines that gave power to Caterpillars and Noah's Arks, and distant screams came down at them from the tower of Helter Skelter and the topmost arc of the Big Wheel, noise and lights a magnetised swamp sucking people into it for miles around. [...]*

*Music was sweet from the Bobby Horses, a circular up-and-down movement shaking along to captivating organ music. [...] 'An old-age pensioner's roundabout,' Arthur shouted. 'Wait till we're on the rocket.'*

*When the horses rose they saw over the heads of the crowd, a mixing ground of grown-ups and children. (SN&SM, 156)*

On the circling Ghost Train, Arthur battles with a cloth banner depicting a skeleton and emerges wrapped up in it, shouting "I've won [...] I beat that bloody skeleton" (SN&SM, 159); on top of the corkscrew of the Helter Skelter he temporarily feels "like a king up there with so much power spreading on all sides below him" (SN&SM, 161). The fact, however, that the Helter Skelter ride ends with a brush with the soldiers (state force) who will badly beat Arthur and deflect him into a more conformist role, provides limits to the clarity of these existential moments of affirmation and to the ultimate productiveness of his heterotopic drive, instead reasserting the inevitable place within Arthur's life, alongside his defiance, of paradox, ambiguity and compromise.

The bicycle thus provides one telling example of the exponents of mobility in action, but literary and cinematic representations of the working class typically mobilise the whole social history of movement and transport as a hierarchy defined by period and relative affluence. At the same time such representations also inevitably make use of a deeply ingrained literary and iconographic tradition which figures journeys along roads with their settings out, their turnings, frustrations, revelations and sense of closure in arrival or completion, as a model of human life and the human condition. As these two ways of understanding human movement ghost over or collide with one another in representations of the working class, the quality of life — and even the human condition — is presented as deeply structured by economics.

In this context, David Storey's *This Sporting Life* is a text that touches on the private history of almost every British family to the extent that those histories tend to record the first acquisition of such consumerist totems as television set, washing machine, refrigerator and — especially — car. These are typical of the items which become available to Storey's Arthur Machin through his "success" and which he innocently imposes on his landlady and lover Mrs Hammond as part of his attempt to engage her emotions. The growth of post-war consumerism and its consequences for mobility, and the extent to which these did or did not represent a genuine change in the condition of the working class, does not so much provide the background to the rise and fall of Storey's hero as professional Rugby League player, as constitute the entire meaning of it. The

novel's presentation of professional sport stresses its appropriation by middle-class interests (represented by the businessmen Weaver and Slomer) and the consequent irony of Machin's escape from the factory bench into Rugby League in fact constituting merely a change in the terms of his continuing employment by the same bosses. Arthur himself simply revels in the role of sporting working-class hero and in his own eyes gains immensely in money and goods. As such, however, he is the working class itself in affluent Butskellite Britain, wooed by consumerism into accepting the status quo in underlying class relationships — while his landlady Mrs Hammond, deeply in touch with past sufferings (personal, but also representative of the history of her class) shows greater depth in her perennial bitterness, distrust, resentment and resistance. For Arthur, the jewel in the crown of his success is his motorcar, the Jaguar that his signing-on fee enables him to run. Getting Mrs Hammond to climb inside it at one point appears to be a statement of both the irresistible advance of consumerism and of the development of Machin's relationship with her. Yet there is no comparison to be made between Machin's car and Weaver's. Machin receives more than £500 as a fee for signing as a player; but Weaver's car is described as £3,000 worth of Bentley, and this is only one indication of the bosses' unreachable lifestyle. Machin's Jaguar is bought on special terms manufactured for him by the Club; he knows he will never again acquire a car at the same price. Towards the end of the novel the Jaguar — like Machin himself — is wearing out and he must confront the idea of not having a car again. One very significant moment involving his car — and one in which Storey may well have been influenced by Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*<sup>20</sup> — occurs when Machin is reading a novel in a doss-house. Hoggart had homed in on the dissemination of a kind of American pulp fiction in Britain which he described as tending to end with the hero washing his hands of events, getting into his car and driving on to the next town; in Hoggart's case, that action implied a deplorable abandonment of responsibility which was relatable to, and which only reinforced, a perceived malaise of uncommittedness among 1950s youth. Machin's novel, about a hard-boiled detective named Stulton, uncannily follows the pattern Hoggart had sketched, though Storey's emphasis falls on the limitations of the mobility that Machin thinks he has achieved through his car:

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).

*And he falls for the crook's girl friend, and she falls for him. But she's in it so thick with the crooks that it's not unforeseen she gets bumped off. Stulton, driven crazy by this, turns on the crooks and finishes them off in no time. Then he looks round him and realises there's nothing left. The girl's dead. He just doesn't want to go on living any more. At the end he's in his car, driving out of town. He gets on the turnpike and steps on the gas. In no time he's left the place, the people, his memories far behind. The road's clear and open. The car's booming along. He begins to feel better, and he starts thinking about the next town, and the next sample it probably holds.*

*That touched me. I thought if only I could break things up like this Stulton, and get on to the next place and leave all these wrecks behind. I even tried driving out of town fast. But the roads were crammed. They twisted and ducked about. And I'd only go a couple of miles, hardly leaving town behind, before I was in the next bloody place. One town started where the other left off. There was no place to feel free. I was on a chain, and wherever I went, I had to come back the same way.<sup>21</sup>*

Mobility as merely an aspect of consumerism here changes nothing. The longing for a different place and the differences it might present is certainly evident, but the north of England is presented as an environment dashing dreams by providing no Route 66. The car, as instrument of mobility and heterotopic possibility, here in fact contributes to an assessment of the post-war position of the working class far grimmer than Sillitoe's in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

Mick Walsh's motorcycle lying around in pieces is only one of many manifestations of economics creating transport difficulties for the Walsh family in *Looks and Smiles*, and of those transport difficulties in turn compounding their financial difficulties. Writing in the early years of Thatcherism's attack on public services, Hines presents Mick as usually having to walk (because bus-fares have increased) and when Mick does catch a bus he has to deal with the impediments of reduced services and staffing (*L&S*, 12). His father has sold the family car on account of rising petrol costs and now travels to work by bus, but this has only led to a Catch-22 situation whereby his costs are now about the same as before, he has two hours' extra travelling and, despite himself, he is left considering whether to buy another car (*L&S*, 23). The novel is peppered with such examples. However, Hines gives the screw the heaviest turn

<sup>21</sup> David Storey, *This Sporting Life* (1960; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 191.

when, following a successful bet, Mick is able to put his bike together, break out of Sheffield and take his girlfriend Karen to Bristol on his motorbike to visit the absent father she idealizes. At the father's address, however, Mick and Karen only find another "wasteland" of demolition and realise that in a way they have simply come full circle: "It's like Byron Street at home where we ride our bikes" (L&S, 172). Meanwhile the motorway ride has not so much constituted an escape along a road to another place, as a compounded image of an inescapable, divided, compassionless society and an eroded quality of life — principally figured in wrecks and a calculus of vehicles and their associated social values:

*This is what they passed:*

*Squashed birds. A smoking van on the hard shoulder. Police cars lurking in lay-bys. A derelict coal-mine. Slag heaps. A deserted village. Dead elm trees. Tractors grubbing up hedgerows. Broiler houses. Strips of lorry tyres like cast-off snake-skins. JESUS LIVES scrawled on a bridge. New housing estates in the wilds. Long vehicles. A coachload of senior citizens on a mystery tour. A vintage car. Company cars. Cars with leopard-skin covers. Cars with dogs nodding and hands waving in their windows. A motel. A two-mile tail-back going the other way. A GET-IN-LANE-NOW sign. Major roadworks for mile after mile. A crash surrounded by police cars and ambulances with flashing blue lights. An abandoned dog running fearfully and exhausted along the central reservation. A rusty mudguard. A buckled crash-barrier. A burnt out car down an embankment. Broken windscreen glass. Blood on the road. A kestrel hovering over a scorched bank. A slimy canal. New trading estates with FACTORY UNITS TO LET signs. Silent factories. Empty council houses. Overgrown allotments. A stinking river. Acres of new, unsold cars. A busy golf-course. Polythene flapping on a barbed wire fence. Litter: in fields, in woods, in streets. A convoy of army trucks. (L&S, 169)*

As in the case of Storey, though now more apocalyptically, Hines presents the scale of opposition to aspiration through mobility. Motorbike at last mobilised (though simply through luck rather than any real change of circumstances — just as Harry Hardcastle's bet in *Love on the Dole* enables him to take Helen for a week's holiday at the coast), the motorway proves to be just an urban extension, a Godard-like procession of evidence of motor accidents combined with symptoms of every social ill, rural as well as urban (from industrial decay and factory-farming through hedgerow-loss to Dutch elm disease) and a lurking authoritarian threat figured in police vehicles and the final anti-Thatcher image of "a convoy of

army trucks." The novel in fact begins with a recruitment talk for the army at Mick's school (including a film about tanks) and ends with the likelihood of Mick, with no other alternatives, joining up and heading for Northern Ireland. The whole novel, in that sense, comes full circle and shrinks to a record of the interval before Mick's bowing to the Thatcherite inevitable.

In the long view, bicycle, motorbike and car are exponents of mobility that superimpose themselves on the image of Tess Durbeyfield crossing the farmland of Wessex on foot. Walking, of course, is not a working-class prerogative. However, recent work on pedestrianism in the Romantic period has highlighted how middle-class literary tourists took to walking tours as an assertion of ideological autonomy, confronting what Robert Jarvis terms the "deeply-sedimented history of associating walking with indigence, necessity and fate, and in later centuries with the illicit freedom of the road and the deterrent force of the still-active vagrancy laws."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, for the poor in any century walking has been a condition of existence — and a form of mobility seldom celebrated by them. Romanticized by Georgian poets, its acknowledgement as a condition of working life — and its distortion by sentimentalists — was probably best recorded by the tramping Irish navvy-poet Patrick MacGill in books such as *Children of the Dead End* and *Moleskin Joe*, as also in his verse:

*You speak of the road in your verses, you picture the joy of it still,  
You of the specs and the collars, you who are geese of the quill,  
You pad it along with wine-flask and your pockets crammed with dough,  
Eat and drink at your pleasure, and write how the flowers grow –  
If your stomach was empty as pity, your hobnails were down at the heels,  
And a nor-easter biting your nose off, then you would know how it feels,  
A nail in the sole of your bluchers jaggng your feet like a pin,  
And every step in your journey was driving it further in,  
Then out on the great long roadway, you'd find when you went abroad,  
The nearer you go to Nature, the further you go from God.<sup>23</sup>*

<sup>22</sup> Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 23-4.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick MacGill, "Padding It" in his *Songs of a Navvy* (Windsor: The Author, 1912). Patrick MacGill, *Children of the Dead End* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1914). Patrick MacGill, *Moleskin Joe* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1923). See also Peter Miles, "The Squalor and the Glory: Patrick MacGill, Navigator of Authorship and Working-Class Identity" in: Janis Londraville (ed.), *Selected Irish Writers from the Library of John Quinn* (West Cornwall CT: Locust Hill Press, 2001), 201-27.

For the journalist Mrs Cecil Chesterton, the sheer physical effort of extended periods of walking along London streets was the unexpected body blow that she experienced in taking on the disguise of a working-class woman down on her luck. The first chapter of her 1926 exposé *In Darkest London* significantly carries as its epigraph the words "I walked with other souls in pain."<sup>24</sup> In Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol" this line refers to prison exercise and the mental torment of other prisoners ("souls-in-pain"), but for Mrs Chesterton, traversing London in search of a hostel for women, the meaning she found in the line related as much to the body as to the soul — as if Wilde had written "I walked in pain (with other souls)":

*It was my first experience of destitution, and it sank deep into my consciousness. It is one thing to walk through London with the knowledge of a comfortable fireside awaiting you — it is another to drag the weary length of interminable streets not knowing what lies at the end of the journey. [...] It is a road that, to this day, I think has no ending. To me it goes on and on into infinity. [...] I had not had a meal for some hours, and I was growing more and more infuriated with a system of society that makes a woman walk for miles to get a bed.*

*I suddenly stopped dead. I was new to the form of endurance necessary to walk on a hopeless quest for hours, and felt I could not carry on. (IDL, 17)*

This too had been Jack London's experience of "carrying the banner," of walking the London streets all night:

*Well fed and well clad, I have travelled all day with the spirit thermometer down to seventy-four degrees below zero — one hundred and six degrees of frost; and though I suffered, it was a mere nothing compared with carrying the banner for a night, ill fed, ill clad, and soaking wet.<sup>25</sup>*

Like Mrs Chesterton, Jack London is compelled to walk, to "move on," by a system that will not allow the poor to rest. The only escape is a bed, and Jack London, who had himself arrived in the East End in a cab, was alert to the ironies of how this might be obtained:

*The rain was falling heavily when the theatres let out, and the brilliant throng which poured from the places of amusement was hard put to find*

<sup>24</sup> Cecil Chesterton, *In Darkest London* (London: Stanley Paul, 1926), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (1903; London: Journeyman, 1977), 51.

*cabs. The streets were so many wild rivers of cabs, most of which were engaged, however; and here I saw the desperate attempts of ragged men and boys to get a shelter from the night by procuring cabs for the cabless ladies and gentlemen. (TPOTA, 51)*

George Orwell, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, also experienced a revelation of the place of walking in working-class experience, this time in the coal mine; indeed, much of chapter two is given over to the experience of "travelling," of the miner's hour or two of unpaid difficult walking each way between the cage and the coal-face itself. Through his account of this process, Orwell wove analogies with another journey — that of the City businessman and his environment on his way to work. In snippets, these intermittently resurface, providing a counterpoint to the miner's life. The cage itself is thus "about as wide as a telephone box;" the illusion created by the speed of the dropping of the cage is that "you hardly feel yourself deeper down than you would at the bottom of the Piccadilly Tube;" the miner must "creep through passages as long as from London Bridge to Oxford Circus" and the electric drills are "like a rather smaller version of the drills used in street-mending."<sup>26</sup> "But what I want to emphasize is this. Here is this frightful business of crawling to and fro, which to any normal person is a hard day's work in itself; and it is not part of the miner's work at all, it is merely an extra, like the City man's daily ride in the Tube" (*TRTWP*, 29).

Robert Tressell, in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, took special pains to contrast his workmen walking with the pedestrianism of other social groups:

*The superior classes — those who do nothing — regarded them as a sort of lower animals. A letter appeared in the Obscurer one week from one of these well-dressed loafers, complaining of the annoyance caused to the better-class visitors by workmen walking on the pavement as they passed along the Grand Parade in the evening on their way home from work, and suggesting that they should walk in the roadway. When they heard of the letter a lot of the workmen adopted the suggestion and walked in the road so as to avoid contaminating the idlers.<sup>27</sup>*

<sup>26</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Left Book Club, 1937), 25; *ibid.*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914; London: Granada, 1965), 387.

Running, however, is a very different matter to walking, as the opening of the film of "Trainspotting" testifies. In *A Child of the Jago* Arthur Morrison wrote of "the first lesson learnt by every child of the Jago, to avoid, as far as may be, suspicious flight in open streets" (ACOTJ, 24). Running was most notably used as a class-specific motif by Alan Sillitoe in his short story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, tracing the personal politics of a Borstal Boy: "running had always been made much of in our family, especially running away from the police."<sup>28</sup> Smith, the hero — despite his special privileges — deliberately loses a race against a rival institution set up by the governor of his own. Running, as the governor fails to appreciate, is intimately woven (like Arthur Seaton's fishing) into Smith's understanding of, and possession of, his own life — and the last thing he will allow is for it to be appropriated in the interests of the vanity of the governor of this "heterotopia of deviation:"

*So I thought: they aren't going to get me on this racing lark, this running and trying to win, this jogtrotting for a bit of blue ribbon, because it's not the way to go on at all, though they swear blind that it is. You should think about nobody and go your own way, not on a course marked out for you by holding mugs of water and bottles of iodine in case you fall and cut yourself so that they can pick you up — even if you want to stay where you are — and get you moving again. (TLOTDR, 39)*

Although the evidence of hiring fairs and quarterly employment belies any simplistic view of past peasant or working-class communities entirely free of the need for, or unhampered by the restrictions on, movement, the complexities of mobility primarily come about with industrialization and its products, the growth of cities and an urban working class. Beyond running and walking (the latter the weary last resort), mobility (whether to find and keep work or to dream of ways of escaping the environment and social structure it has constructed) costs money. Even just to "get on your bike" (in Norman Tebbit's phrase) sounds like "let them eat cake" when the bike has no wheels.<sup>29</sup> This is a truth of working-class

<sup>28</sup> Alan Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959; London: Pan, 1961), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Serendipity in surfing produced this verse by John J. Butler from a 1995 poem entitled "The Homeless and Unemployed: Dedicated to the Work of the Swansea Cyrenians:" " 'Get on our bikes,' were Tebbit's words. / But all that cost money, seeking work / In towns or cities who have nothing to give. / Walking the streets, no

experience perhaps only now prone to be understood by middle-class Britain as it waits frustratedly on a thousand platforms for trains to the City of London and which George Orwell assumed could do nothing but run smoothly. Meanwhile, the point is still worth making and James Kelman's Sammy in *How Late It Was, How Late* is an expressionistically extreme representation of mobility as Kelman's persistent hero struggles to cope without money (and without even his own shoes), but even more with the blindness that descends on him after a beating by the police, and with the problem of being simply thrown out of the police station to find his way home. He rubs his head against a wall until he feels the pain: "The thing is he was going naywhere, naywhere."<sup>30</sup> In the politics of mobility and class, the blind working-class pedestrian constitutes an image one step beyond even those of Patrick MacGill. Yet in the canon of images of mobility and its frustrations, the most resonant may still remain the death of Doddoe in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*:

*Doddoe had been killed three years ago, when his powerful side-carred motor bike burst like a bullet into a draper's shop at the bottom of a hill, with grinning and goggled Doddoe gripping the handlebars and knowing, when it was too late, that he should have taken the turn sooner, spouting like buckshot all the bad language he had ever known in the second before crashing. That's the way to do it, Arthur thought, sitting stupefied by the fire's heat and the fever from his cold. Doddoe knew what he was doing when he forgot that turning. (SN&SM, 63-4)*

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## Re-Enchanting the City: Sites and Non-Sites in Urban Fiction

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In 1985, the Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas entitled *Faith in the City* focused upon the problems of marginalization in British inner cities. It was not just an examination of the role of the Christian faith in the contemporary city, but exhorted the Thatcher government to place new faith in inner cities, rather than allowing degeneration which created "separate territories" outside the mainstream of our social and economic life. In its search for "a new vocabulary and a new mission to express renewed faith in the city," the Commission concluded that "Chapter after chapter of our Report tells the same story: that a growing number of people are excluded by poverty or powerlessness from sharing in the common life of our nation. A substantial minority — perhaps as many as one person in every four or five across the nation, and a much higher proportion in the UPAs (Urban Priority Areas) are forced to live on the margins of poverty or below the threshold of an acceptable standard of living."<sup>1</sup> This narrative of marginalization is just one from a series of social and political responses to what was perceived as a widespread problem of inner city degeneration and social marginalization in Britain in the mid-1980s. In the wake of the city riots in 1981 (Toxteth, Brixton, Moss Side) and 1985, a whole raft of Conservative Parliamentary

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<sup>1</sup> *Faith in the City*. The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), 5; *ibid.* , 359.

Acts and White Papers sought to address the problem of urban development and regeneration, with mixed success.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this was not a new problem. The riots and disorder in the cities in the 1980s were preceded by a debate which began in the early 1970s, which brought together a number of matters concerning the increasing social marginalization in cities — urban deprivation, racial disadvantage, unemployment and industrial decline, the efforts of planning and dispersal policies, and the role of newly-formed local government. In July 1977, the government "Inner City White Paper" entitled *Policy for the Inner Cities*, made a stark acknowledgement of the increasing problems:

*Many of the inner areas surrounding the centres of our cities suffer [...] from economic decline, physical decay and adverse social conditions [...] The inner parts of our cities ought not to be left to decay. It would be mean leaving large numbers of people to face a future of declining job opportunities, a squalid environment, deteriorating housing and declining public services.<sup>3</sup>*

Time and again during the last thirty years, politicians and theoreticians have focused upon the problems of marginal or "other" spaces in cities. In attempting to understand and tackle these problems of urban degeneration and marginalization, the last three decades have seen a challenge to the long held philosophical hierarchy of the discourse of time over space. This has partly been the result of debates within postmodernism, and partly a result of new Marxist cultural and social research into the production of space by people like the Situationist International, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and David Harvey. Lefebvre has done much to combat common illusions about the naturalness and transparency of space by erecting a typology of spatial productions. He conceives of the city as "a space of differences," a set of possibilities and prohibitions experienced by people in their everyday lives, and in particular, he considers how spatial organization affects the body in its negotiation of social space. Building upon these and others' ideas, Harvey has produced a continually influential Marxist urban theory that has

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<sup>2</sup> See Brian D. Jacobs, *Fractured Cities: Capitalism, Community and Empowerment in Britain and America* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Great Britain. Dept. of the Environment, *Policy for the Inner Cities*, presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Environment, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Wales (London: HMSO, 1977).

set out to map the politico-economic, socio-cultural and ethical effects of post-Fordist urban developments. Edward Soja, a significant figure in the so-called "Los Angeles School" of urban theory, has been particularly interested in "postmodern geography" and urbanism. His most recent book, *Postmetropolis*, is a taxonomy of city discourses, laying out six subject areas that are textually constructed within urban studies. These six discourses of the "postmetropolis," which are discourses that have sought to make sense of the *new urbanization processes* affecting the world in the late twentieth century, variously represent the city as: 1) a flexibly specialist Post-Fordist industrial Metropolis; 2) a globalized city-region or Cosmopolis; 3) a posturban Exopolis or megacity; 4) a Fractal City of intensified inequalities and social polarization; 5) a Carceral Archipelago of fortified cities; and 6) a collection of hyperreal Simcities, where daily life is increasingly played out as if it were a computer game.<sup>4</sup> Yet such efforts at understanding are not merely the preserve of social analysis, urban theory and legislative discourse. The city tugs at the imagination just as the imagination pulls at the city. Novelists have constantly sought to rewrite the political map of the city as a poetic one, to insist that this other, imaginative side of the metropolis is as significant to how we live the city, walk its streets and constitute our selves, as are the political expectancies we think the city embodies.

Hence, while the locus of much of this discussion about the spatialization of contemporary relations has been cultural geography and urban theory, fiction has always been a significant source of epistemological understanding of our environment, and in particular of the urban environment. Fictional representations have always reached into those spaces that other representations cannot reach.<sup>5</sup> Not only is urban space a persistent theme of postwar fiction, but that fiction has itself become a site for constructing urban space, a space that organizes and formulates new metaphors and ways of seeing the city. Consequently, through a juxtaposition of spatial discourses — fiction about cities, urban theory and site-specific art — this chapter will sketch out some of the key concerns of urban spatial construction in contemporary fiction and how these interact with

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary British poetry also "thinks with the city," and for an excellent discussion of poetry and its relation to urban space, see: Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

one another. Although the text and the city have long been associated in our social imaginary, through such places as Babylon, Troy, the New Jerusalem or the "City of God," the lack of a unified city-space has led to a variety of other terms to conceptualize this fractured urban space — with heterotopology, periphractic space, "between" space, and satellite cities just some of the more prominent terms. Fictional representations demonstrate how our "imaginary" constructions are more pliable than the "real" spaces of the city; that there is a dynamic and symbiotic relationship between mapping urban spaces and mapping modern subjectivities; that people are actively engaged in shaping their urban environment by creating their own images and metaphors; and in this activity, urban living is partly aesthetic. That is, experiencing the spatial construction of the city is a form of "play," where fictional discourses of the city are potentially as significant as sociological discourses. As the urban sociologist James Donald acknowledges, "the city constitutes an *imagined environment*. What is involved in that imagining — the discourses, symbols, metaphors and fantasies through which we ascribe meaning to the modern experience of urban living — is as important a topic for the social sciences as the material determinants of the physical environment."<sup>6</sup>

One of the most significant characteristics of this "imagined environment" in recent fiction is the attempt to re-enchant the city, representing cities as spaces where strange and inexplicable events and actions occur. Michael Moorcock's novel *Mother London* (1988), continually allows the voices of ordinary Londoners to force their way into the narratives through snippets of conversations "overheard" by the three main protagonists who each have, to a greater or lesser extent, the gift of telepathy. This hint of magic is underplayed throughout so that the work never succumbs to the straitjacket of magical realism itself: the conceit is used very successfully to take the characters out of themselves, and to allow London, and the voices that constitute its being, into the novel as a character itself. Angela Carter's novels such as *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and *The Passion of New Eve*, depict cities as spaces where reason and imagination are constantly battling for supremacy. *The Passion of New Eve* commences with its

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<sup>6</sup> James Donald, "Metropolis: The City as Text," in: R. Boccock & K. Thompson (eds), *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 427.

protagonist Evelyn arriving in New York, and facing the shock of the city:

*Nothing in my experience had prepared me for the city. [...] I imagined a clean, hard, bright city where towers reared to the sky in a paradigm of technological aspiration and all would be peopled by loquacious cab-drivers, black but beaming chambermaids and a special kind of crisp-edged girl with apple-crunching incisors and long, gleaming legs like lascivious scissors — the shadowless inhabitants of a finite and succinct city where the ghosts who haunt the cities of Europe could have found no cobweb corners to roost in. But in New York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colours, a lurid, Gothic darkness that closed over my head entirely and became my world.<sup>7</sup>*

Apart from his racial and sexual fantasies, Evelyn also harbours the old fantasy about the "new world" with New York as a centre of Cartesian clarity, unlike the spectral cities of Europe. However, this illusion is punctured by the Gothic obscurity of the city:

*It was, then, an alchemical city. It was chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night. Built on a grid like the harmonious cities of the Chinese Empire, planned, like those cities, in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine of reason, the streets had been given numbers and not names out of a respect for pure function, had been designed in clean, abstract lines, discrete blocks, geometric intersections, to avoid just those vile repositories of the past, sewers of history, that poison the lives of European cities. A city of visible reason — that had been the intention. And this city, built to a specification that precluded the notion of Old Adam, had hence become uniquely vulnerable to that which the streamlined spires conspired to ignore, for the darkness had lain, unacknowledged, within the builders. (PNE, 16)*

The city as an architecture of "visible reason" is an attempt to eradicate the past and to hold at bay any notion of irrationality. Yet like Peter Ackroyd's representation of London in *Hawksmoor* (1985), all traces of unreason and unacknowledged passion cannot be excised and they return like the Freudian repressed.

It is precisely such "vile repositories of the past, the sewers of history," to which Iain Sinclair's writing has also been constantly attracted, focused as it has been upon London's overlooked byways and secret recesses. Books such as *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*

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<sup>7</sup> Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (London: Virago, 1982), 10. References cited hereafter in text as (PNE).

(1995), *Downriver* (1995), *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (1997), *Dark Lanthorns: Rodinsky as Psychogeographer* (1999), and *Liquid City* (1999), are accounts of the hidden histories, marginal spaces, forgotten people, and ghostly presences and absences in London. *Liquid City*, for example, is an eccentric collaboration with the photographer Marc Atkins, which explores London's hidden streets, cemeteries, parks and canals. As Sinclair and Atkins take their peregrination in the eastern and south eastern parts of London, *Liquid City* records and maps the condition of the city onto the text itself, so that the text assumes in a variety of ways the shape, the contours, the architecture and the "ebbs and flows" of the city. The title seeks to evoke the Thames, flowing silently through the narrative, to suggest the changes that London has constantly undergone and to which it is still subject. The variety of the urban text is therefore a response to a projection coming from some other place, imposing the question of what is real. *Dark Lanthorns* is a small chapbook which retraces three walks inscribed in red ink on his copy of *A Geographer's A-Z Map of London and Suburbs*, by the talismanic and enigmatic David Rodinsky, whose life is researched and recorded in Rachel Lichtenstein's *Rodinsky's Room* (1999). In *Dark Lanthorns*, Sinclair retraces the steps of Rodinsky, seeking the missing clues to the dead man's life. What seems to fascinate Sinclair is the way in which Rodinsky inscribed his life into the marginal spaces of London:

*Rodinsky was an artist in the tradition of Tom Phillips or the Surrealists, a re-maker of found objects. He bent the maps to fit his notion of how London should be — if he was describing it for the first time. Maps were prompts rather than definitive statements. If a particular page took his fancy, Rodinsky would attack its margins with a red biro. Other districts — Enfield, Stanmore, Willesden, Chingford, Hendon, Crystal Palace, Surbiton, Tooting Bec, Wimbledon, Richmond, Eltham, Peckham Rye — were of no interest to him and they were ignored. He was a taxonomist, breaking down the overwhelming mass of information into categories that excited his attention: prisons, asylums, burial grounds, children's homes, hospitals. These markings become a projected autobiography, a Dickensian fable of abandonment, destitution, and incarceration. That is how Rodinsky reads the world: a wilderness of unknowing, punctuated by dark places. Reservoirs of pain that solicit the heat of his red nib. His system of classification was shaped around privileged buildings that operated as*

*colonies of the damned, institutions with strictly enforced rules of conduct, gulags of the disappeared.*<sup>5</sup>

Rodinsky's appeal lies in his interest in non-places, spectral sites that are on the margins of urban consciousness and that harbour the dispossessed or outcasts of society. Elsewhere, the opening line of Iain Sinclair's *Lights Out for the Territory* states "The notion was to cut a crude V into the sprawl of the city, to vandalize dormant energies by an act of ambulant signmaking."<sup>6</sup> This book is a record of long journeys on foot, from Hackney to Chingford and down to the Thames river, around the City in its "ring of steel," and through the heart of Westminster, Lambeth and Millbank. Sinclair writes about the graffiti and guerrilla politics of Dalston, about the cult of feral dogs, about burying Ron Kray and meeting Lord Archer, while dragging in his wake some of the artists, writers and film-makers who represent, for him, an interesting alternative aesthetic of London at the end of the century. Central to the book is walking. Walking is conceived of as a form of inscribing oneself into the rigid domain of urban planning.

*Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks, in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself. To the no-bullshit materialist this sounds suspiciously like fin-de-siècle decadence, a poetic of entropy — but the born-again flâneur is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, eavesdropping on philosophical conversation pieces, than in noticing everything. [...] Walking, moving across a retreating townscape, stitches it all together: the illicit cocktail of exhaustion and a raging carbon monoxide high. (LOT, 4)*

Sinclair later writes that "Truths about a city divided against itself can only be uncovered, so [Patrick] Keiller believes, through a series of arcane pilgrimages, days spent crawling around the rim of things" (LOT, 306).

The key words here are "drifting" and "crawling," concepts finding deliberate echoes in the work of the French Situationist International and their concept of the "dérive." As with so much of

<sup>5</sup> Iain Sinclair, *Dark Lanthorns: Rodinsky as Psychogeographer* (Uppingham: Goldmark, 1999), 10-1.

<sup>6</sup> Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (London: Granta, 1997), 1. References cited hereafter in text as (LOT).

Sinclair's book, the lexicon in this passage — wandering, chance, drift, labyrinth — evokes the French philosophical ideas about language, representation, and cultural critique in the 1960s; and in this particular case, the critique of "the society of the spectacle" and urban incandescence by the Situationists. Reacting against the attempts of the new urbanism to rationalize, harmonize and commercialize the socio-economic diversity of Paris in the 1950s, the Situationist International sought to contest the interpretation of the city in order to resist its congealment in the dominant language of modernization, rationalism and "the spectacle." The broad arcs of the rationalist imagination, which had aspired to mould the city with Cartesian precision, looked like slaughter. The Situationist International sought ways of representing and addressing the social ecology of the city, declaring an empathy with the city's marginalized and deprived. As a critique of the commodification of experience and the boredom induced by contemporary city life (in that we know how to decipher the everyday signs of city life), Ivan Chtcheglov in his "Formulary for a New Urbanism" laments the collapse of imagination and narrative in urban existence, that cuts us off from the ghosts of history that lurk around every corner in the city: "Everyone wavers between the emotionally still-alive past and the already dead future."<sup>10</sup> The capacity to *engage* with the city rather than passively consume it is what is lacking, and in echoes of Carter's and Sinclair's fiction, he writes: "Certain *shifting angles*, certain *receding* perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors."<sup>11</sup> In order to combat the "mental disease [which] has swept the planet: banalization" and the safe security into which passive subjects in "the society of the spectacle" settle, Chtcheglov calls for a "new vision of time and space" and a "continuous *dérive*."<sup>12</sup>

The "*dérive*" (literally "drift") is the Situationists' notion of a constantly changing landscape that perpetually disorients the subject and thereby, forces social and experiential engagement with one's geography and spatial environment. This drifting, which

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<sup>10</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," (October, 1953) in: I. Blazwick (ed.), *An endless adventure ... an endless passion ... and endless banquet: A Situationist Scrapbook* (London: ICA & Verso, 1989), 24-5.

<sup>11</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," 24-5.

refuses the organization of the capitalist environment by wandering randomly through the urban landscape, is an attempt to redefine and reanimate the city. The drift or "dérive" is a delinquency because it endorses the route over the inventory. Drifting is a transgression of the alienated world and a therapeutic technique. As Simon Sadler has argued in his excellent book, "City planners from antiquity to modernism have tried to make the city into a mnemonic (memory aid), mapping into it chains of monuments or sites that would act as a sort of text, reminding the pedestrian of official history and knowledge. [...] The narrative of the drift, however, remained open, contingent, and shifting."<sup>13</sup> The city and its influence on the mood of its inhabitants was to be explored through "dérive," or systematic strolling, and psychogeographical games such as wandering through a town while following the directions of a map of another town. Hence, the "dérive" can be construed as a mode of "critical walking," in which subjectivity is constantly being scrutinised as a construction of the urban environment, and through which game-element there is a corresponding expansion of a subject's "dream life" and "imagination." The first issue of *The Situationist International* in June 1958 defined "dérive" as "a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. Also used to designate a specific period of continuous dérivage."<sup>14</sup> Guy Debord, the principal theorist of this group, gives "Two Accounts of the Dérive," in which he describes two long walks "structured" by chance encounters and events, that constitute a mode of exploring "the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individual," which the Situationists called "psychogeography."<sup>15</sup> Debord argued in "Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950s," that "unitary urbanism" "opposes the passive spectacle, the principle of our culture ... UU envisages the urban environment as the terrain of a game in which one participates."<sup>16</sup> He continues: "Unitary urbanism is opposed to the temporal fixation of cities. It leads to the advocacy of a permanent transformation, an

<sup>13</sup> Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1998), 98-9.

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," 22.

<sup>15</sup> Guy Debord, "Two Accounts of the Dérive," in: Elizabeth Sussman (ed.), *On the Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: The Situationist International, 1957-1972* (Cambridge, MA & London: M.I.T. Press, 1989), 135-39.

<sup>16</sup> Guy Debord, "Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950s," in: Elizabeth Sussman (ed.), *On the Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time*, 143-47.

accelerated movement of the abandonment and reconstruction of the city in temporal and at times spatial terms.<sup>17</sup> Psychogeography set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. Psychogeographic maps expressing complete insubordination to habitual influences were invoked. Indeed, there was something of an obsession with maps amongst the Situationists, as they produced alternative maps which defied the ordering rigour of grids, such as "The Naked City" [Figure 1, p. 78]. Sadler suggests that "rather than float above the city as some sort of omnipotent, instantaneous, disembodied, all-possessing eye, Situationist cartography admitted that its overview of the city was reconstructed in the imagination, piecing together an experience of space that was actually terrestrial, fragmented, subjective, temporal, and cultural."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the Situationists also stressed the subversive power of a sort of Bakhtinian carnivalization, which became an opportunity for unofficial and popular elements to playfully invert social and cultural conventions by raising the everyday and displacing the élite. What became known as "détournement" — the rearrangement of what already exists, like Rodinsky's re-making of found objects — is the free appropriation and adaptation of others' creations, a displacement of contexts that attacks the importance of attribution, originality and intellectual property, consequently allowing anyone to construct a raid on official culture. Together, the "dérive" and "détournement" are the key components for the Situationists' vision of a new city.

There are quite specific conjunctions between the Situationists and Site-specific art, which lie in the tie between performance and place and the development of strategies that work against the stabilities of site and location. If the Situationists were concerned with the placing of performance, then Site-specific art is equally concerned with a performance of place. Specific sites that emerged in the wake of land art, earth art, and conceptual art, frequently reflected upon and revised the impulses of earlier environmental art, happening performance and Fluxus presentations, among others, to test the limits and discourses of the work of art by directing attention toward conventionally "non-art" occurrences, locations, and acts. Robert Smithson's definitions of Site

<sup>17</sup> Guy Debord, "Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950s," 144.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 82.

and Non-Site relations are specifically concerned with the interpenetration of spaces. Site-specificity for Smithson was linked to the incursion of "surrounding" space, "literal" space, or "real" space into the viewer's experience of the artwork. Questions posed about the location or "place" of the object, force an engagement with the different orders of space in which works are situated and defined, undermining conventional oppositions between the virtual space of the artwork and the "real spaces" of its contexts. Robert Smithson's Non-Sites confront one with the absence of the Site, a relationship that is analogous to the architects Bernard Tschumi's and Peter Eisenman's interrogations of traditional geometries and architectural processes. Observing that "absence is either the trace of a previous presence, it contains memory; or the trace of a possible presence, it contains *immanence*,"<sup>19</sup> Eisenman reads sites as complex and multiple, always subject to absence's deconstructive processes of disappearance and appearance. The Non-Site and Site are always implicated in one another. By supplementing place with non-place, Situationists and Site-specific artists disturb oppositions between virtual and real spaces, either in the implication of the map in the production of its object, the erosion of the material integrity of the art object, or in the uncovering of processes of slippage, deferral and indeterminacy; and thus they approach their various sites by blurring the distinctions under which a city's or artwork's integrity and place is fixed. Site-specific art and performance persistently speculate about the moment at which a synthesis of the experience of space and the concept of space occurs, as other spaces force their way into spatial consciousness. In doing so, these works also intimate a latent disorder, a disorder Michel de Certeau recognized as inherent to the relationship between practice and place, where "things extra and other (details and excesses coming from elsewhere) insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order. One thus has the very relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order. The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Eisenman, *Moving Arrows, Eros and Other Errors: An Architecture of Absence* (London: Architectural Association, 1986), 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 107.

The modern city epitomizes this transitory condition, producing an awareness of our perpetual performance of place which is caught in the act of enunciation, where the walker can never resolve the multiple and conflicting spaces of the city into the place itself. Walkers find themselves witnessing one's own incursion into a reflected space neither inside nor outside a place, discovering one's position at the juncture of spaces that cannot be reconciled with one another. The walker is thus always in the process of *acting out*, of performing the contingencies of a particular spatial practice, which, although subject to the place, can never wholly realize or be resolved into this underlying order. The anthropologist Marc Augé explores the dialectic of place in late twentieth-century culture, keenly aware of the ways in which places are demarcated yet nevertheless infiltrate one another. He argues that postmodernity (or what he terms "supermodernity") constructs "non-places": "Place or non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never totally erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten."<sup>21</sup> Postmodernity is defined through a reading of airports, shopping malls, supermarkets, motorways and a host of other late twentieth-century phenomena, describing these as "non-places." They are places of transition or transformation, to which we have been, and continue to be, endlessly attracted. Purportedly dealing with a "here," contemporary ethnology in fact deals with an "elsewhere," but which is not a singular and distinct space.

Salman Rushdie's London is always a hybrid space, one where there is no purity or singleness of being or consciousness. In a chapter entitled "A City Visible But Unseen" in *The Satanic Verses*, his protagonist Gibreel Farishta is constantly attempting to organize his life and experiences within the city, but is defeated at every turn:

*The city's streets coiled around him, writhing like serpents. London had grown unstable once again, revealing its true, capricious, tormented nature, its anguish of a city that had lost its sense of itself and wallowed, accordingly, in the impotence of its selfish, angry present of masks and parodies, stifled and twisted by the insupportable, unrejected burden of its past, staring into the bleakness of its impoverished future. He wandered its streets through that night, and the next day, and the next night, and on until the light and dark ceased to matter. He no longer seemed to need food*

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<sup>21</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 79.

*or rest, but only to move constantly through that tortured metropolis whose fabric was now utterly transformed, the houses in the rich quarters being built of solidified fear, the government buildings partly of vainglory and partly of scorn, and the residences of the poor of confusion and material dreams.<sup>22</sup>*

This experience of urban crucifixion is not merely the consequence of Gibreel's nomadic and restless mood, but embodies Rushdie's postmodern sense that a city remains constantly unstable, refusing all attempts to map it cognitively in a uniform way. Reminiscent of many of the cartographic anxieties and spatial vexations and distortions discussed in relation to the Situationists and the Site-specific artists, Gibreel continues describing London later in the same chapter:

*But the city in its corruption refused to submit to the dominion of the cartographers, changing shape at will and without warning, making it impossible for Gibreel to approach his quest in the systematic manner he would have preferred. Some days he would turn a corner at the end of a grand colonnade built of human flesh and covered in skin that bled when scratched, and find himself in an uncharted wasteland, at whose distant rim he could see tall familiar buildings, Wren's dome, the high metallic spark-plug of the Telecom Tower, crumbling in the wind like sandcastles. He would stumble across bewildering and anonymous parks and emerge into the crowded streets of the West End, upon which, to the consternation of the motorists, acid had begun to drip from the sky, burning great holes in the surfaces of the roads. In this pandemonium of mirages he often heard laughter: the city was mocking his impotence, awaiting his surrender, his recognition that what existed here was beyond his powers to comprehend, let alone to change. (SV, 327)*

In recent decades the co-existence of the diversity of city cartographies has become a principal concern of urban planners and architects. Sceptical of the possibility of a universal formulation about the city, planners and theorists have increasingly sought to map "affect," the urban dweller's imaginative consciousness of his or her environment. Kevin Lynch's influential study *The Image of the City* (1971) recorded different "readings" of Boston as its citizens produced a lexicon of the cityscape to make it "legible." Whilst urban semioticians and planners have taken issue with Lynch's somewhat

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<sup>22</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), 320. References cited hereafter in text as (SV).

limited cognitive approach, nevertheless urban planners and theorists have recognized the significance of the "reader" in the process of "cognitive mapping" (to use Lynch's term). Reading and writing the city have become the central feature of orientating oneself in an urban environment and this is evident in the repeated figure of legibility in book titles and chapter headings: *The City as Text*, "Imaginary Cities: Images of Postmodernity," *Imagining the Modern City*, "Urban Con-Texts: Reading and Writing the City," *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*. As Nan Ellin notes, "the obsession with the text metaphor for the city and culture is revealed in the extensive use of terms such as discourse, legibility, narrative, the vernacular, and interpretative communities, as well as in the growing interest in 'reading and writing' architecture, the city, and culture."<sup>23</sup>

Yet one of the problems in "reading" the city is that city dwellers are rarely in command of an overall perspective or grasp of things, encountering an interminable series of partialities, clefts, gaps, fissures, strangers, unseen noises, closed or barred doors, opaque windows, or things hidden around bends not traversed. Consequently, cities frequently figure as so complex that they baffle understanding; which in turn causes a metonymic approach to cities — parts in order to interpret the whole — with the sense of overwhelming scale inevitably leading to this fragmentary approach. All city-dwellers are excluded in some way and a resort to imaginative reconstruction or invention is one way of combating that sense of exclusion as one inserts oneself ingeniously into a now legible cityscape. As Hana Wirth-Nesher contends, the city thus becomes legible through multiple acts of imaginative reconstruction, constantly invented and reinvented through narrative.<sup>24</sup> Penelope Lively's novel *City of the Mind* (1991) is acutely conscious of this legibility of the city. Her two principal characters Matthew and Alice emerge from a restaurant, and London lies as a synchronic and diachronic narrative palimpsest before them:

*And so, presently, they are out in the London night. It is a blaze, a swirl of light and colour, sound and smell. They pass from the intimacies of the Soho streets to the frontier of Charing Cross Road, streaming with people and traffic. Matthew takes Alice's arm; an advancing gang of tippy youths*

<sup>23</sup> Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 253.

<sup>24</sup> Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

*divides around them, goes whooping into the tube station. Everyone is talking, shouting. Language hangs in the night air and throbs in giant lettering above shops and theatres. A column of buses stands pulsing in a traffic jam: Gospel Oak, Putney Heath, Clapton Pond, Wood Green. Matthew and Alice pause on the pavement and he thinks of the city flung out all around, invisible and inviolate. He forgets, for an instant, his own concerns, and feels the power of the place, its resonances, its charge of life, its coded narrative. He reads the buses and sees that the words are the silt of all that has been here — hills and rivers, woods and fields, trade, worship, customs and events, and the unquenchable evidence of language. The city mutters still in Anglo-Saxon; it remembers the hills that have become Neasden and Islington and Hendon, the marshy grounds of Bermondsey and Battersea. The ghost of another topography lingers; the uplands and streams, the woodland and fords are inscribed still on the London Streetfinder, on the ubiquitous geometry of the Underground map, in the destinations of buses. The Fleet River, its last physical trickle locked away underground in a cast iron pipe, leaves its name defiant and untamed upon the surface. The whole place is one babble of allusions, all chronology subsumed into the distortions and mutations of today, so that in the end what is visible and what is uttered are complementary. The jumbled brick and stone of the city's landscape is a medley of style in which centuries and decades rub shoulders in a disorder that denies the sequence of time. Language takes up the theme, an arbitrary scatter of names that juxtaposes commerce and religion, battles and conquests, kings, queens and potentates, that reaches back a thousand years or ten, providing in the end a dictionary of reference for those who will listen. Cheapside, Temple, Trafalgar, Quebec, a profligacy of Victorias and Georges and Cumberlands and Bedfords — there it all is, on a million pairs of lips every day, on and on, the imperishable clamour of those who have been here before.<sup>25</sup>*

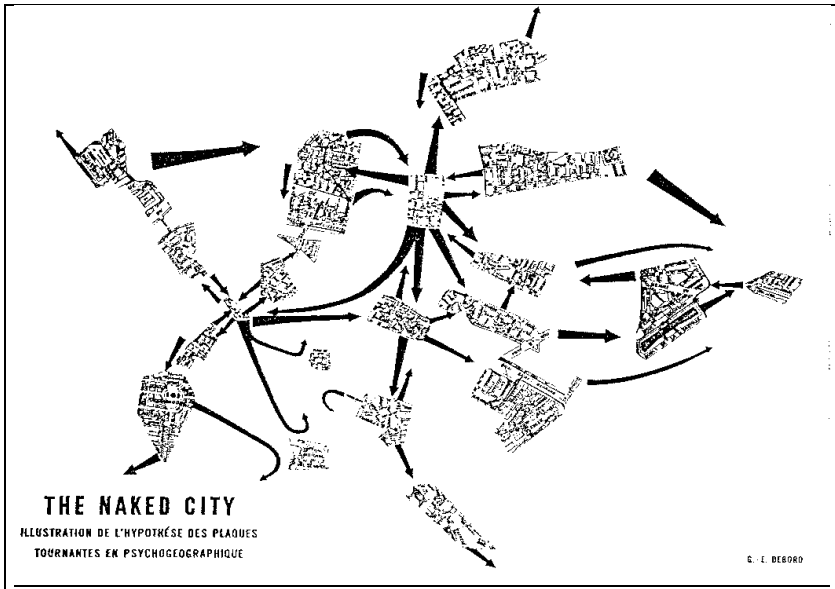
In the light of this, we might agree with Roland Barthes when he says that "the city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it."<sup>26</sup> In the fiction of writers as varied as Penelope Lively, Peter Ackroyd, Salman Rushdie, Alisdair Gray, Iain Sinclair, Angela Carter, Michael Moorcock, Jeanette Winterson and others, there is a distinct attempt to make the city mysterious again. This chapter has

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<sup>25</sup> Penelope Lively, *City of the Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 95-7.

<sup>26</sup> Roland Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," first published in French in 1971, reprinted in M. Gottdiener and A.P. Lagopoulos, *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 86-99.

offered some short "case studies" of urban spatial representation in fiction in relation to several key contemporary issues: the relationship of walking to writing, language and narrative; the concept of time-space as an "antidote" to simplistic concepts of time and space as separable categories; and of cities as sites of resistance to linear narrative, linear temporality and linear logic. Linking literary representations of urban space with ideas from discourses like cultural theory, urban geography, urban sociology and site-specific art, the chapter has suggested that fictional representations of space deliberately foreground the hidden discourses of the sensual and the analytic, of private memory and public representation, of personal "lived" experience and "official" public constructions. This amounts to a demonstration of how spatial constructions are created and used as markers of human memory and social values in a world of rapid flux, where the city is frequently not merely the theme, but also constitutive of the genre, i.e. the city text is not merely a representation of experiential data but is itself an appropriation of a space directed to the formulation of a cultural territory. Recent British city texts elicit a kind of reading or processing that is in many ways isomorphic with the experience of living in the contemporary urban environment. Many of the writers are concerned with fashioning a discourse that is responsive to, but is simultaneously oriented toward an active intervention in, contemporary urban existence.



(Figure 1)

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**Marginally Correct: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners***

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When it was first published in 1956, *The Lonely Londoners* was acclaimed by literary critics who praised Sam Selvon for his endeavour to give an account of a new phenomenon: the arrival of coloured immigrants who settled in the West End of London, between Bayswater and Shepherd's Bush. Over the years, a number of reviewers applauded the loose structure of the novel, best shown in the lack of links between the characters' peripeteia and reminiscent of the Caribbean oral tradition, notably the story-teller's licence. They also paid tribute to the West Indian writer for his major linguistic innovation which consisted of using, in the narration, a modified creole speech which could be understood by any English-speaking reader but which gave the work an undeniable West Indian dimension. They finally extolled the Trinidadian novelist for daring to bring a new social issue to the general public's attention, namely the gradual change of the urban space in London under the pressure of the newcomers, as Clement H. Wyke emphasizes:

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<sup>1</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001). References cited hereafter in text as (WT).

<sup>2</sup> Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956; Harlow: Longman, 1989). References cited hereafter in text as (LL).

*His narrator may also be a story-teller and myth-maker who not only 'tells a ballad,' passing on the latest news, but is one of the crowd [...]. The structure and language of The Lonely Londoners and Ways of Sunlight facilitate and reinforce these narrative strategies. Both works are essentially episodic in structure and make predominant use of Trinidad Creole English. [...] In The Lonely Londoners, this language increasingly yields to Standard English, and at other times to a combination of both, as if foreshadowing a later decreolization of language. [...] The pressures of London culture over the West Indian life style show themselves in this dichotomy of linguistic usage. [...] The speech register, however, shifts to juxtapose with this picture the image of strangers with a religious sense of community.<sup>3</sup>*

More than forty years later, when Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* came out, the literati lauded the half-Jamaican, half-English writer for quite similar reasons: relating the story of an Indian and a half-Jamaican family looking for integration in North West London, in an area between Hampstead and Willesden. They were won over by the young novelist's use of a language influenced by the rhythms of hip-hop music, by her hybrid literary style hinging on various voices and tones, and by her description of a modern multicultural city from the immigrant's perspective:

*The novel, while raw, is the work of a writer with a knack for getting at the heart of a matter, in this case the racial and sexual differences that manage to keep people apart, even in an England where those barriers are rapidly growing more difficult to define. [...] Smith manages to avoid shrillness with liberal doses of humour and a fairly stubborn insistence that her novel is neither feminist nor black nor representative of any particular group, merely comic. [...] Smith has a gift for capturing the vernacular of the people who don't necessarily speak the Queen's English, and it allows [her] to play a lot of linguistic games in [her] book.<sup>4</sup>*

Thus, thanks to a series of linguistic, literary and cultural innovations, *The Lonely Londoners* allowed the reader to discover a new facet of the British capital and *White Teeth* invited him/her to

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<sup>3</sup> Clement H. Wyke, *Sam Selvon's Dialectical Style and Fictional Strategy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991), 34-6.

<sup>4</sup> Saul Austerlitz, "About Zadie Smith," <[http://www.Centralbooking.com/author\\_about.shtml?author=41](http://www.Centralbooking.com/author_about.shtml?author=41)> [9 October 2002].

revisit it nearly half a century later and to wonder if London was still "the very centre of the Empire on which the sun seldom rises."<sup>5</sup>

Reading *The Lonely Londoners* or *White Teeth* amounts to going on a virtual tour of London. The geographic details given by the narrators about the British capital are so precise that they allow the reader to accompany the characters mentally in their daily walks in the streets of London. It is very easy to track on a London map the characters' movements, to identify the major trunk roads along which they move, to spot the places where they live or where they get together as the following passages show:

*Galahad used to go walking in Kensington Gardens, the fog never clear enough for him to see down to High Street Ken. [...] It have a little place, near an entrance to the park (as soon as you cross over the zebra, a little way down from Queensway) where the pigeons does hang out a lot. [...] Galahad make races through the park, heading down for Lancaster Gate. (LL, 123-25)*

*Later, Samad and Poppy walked up through Harlesden, around Dollis Hill, and then, when it seemed they were hovering too near to Willesden, Samad waited till the sun went down, bought a box of sticky Indian sweets and turned into Roundwood Park; admired the last of the flowers. (WT, 180)*

Whether the reader has a prior knowledge of London or not, the impression left by the novel remains more or less the same. A regular London visitor is perhaps more able to catch the whole meaning of Sam Selvon's and Zadie Smith's works, but it is not so obvious, as many scenes are set in marginal areas of the city. Even for those who know nothing of the British capital, an immersion in the universe of *The Lonely Londoners* or *White Teeth* produces a similar sensation: the illusion of going all over the city with the protagonists and their walker-ons, of roaming the streets of London with their connivance even if one has never set foot in the metropolis.

Besides, the two novels do not really include comprehensive descriptions of the areas where the characters live and thus do not allow the reader to have a clear picture of the neighbourhoods mentioned. The narrators often name or evoke the places in question, thereby embedding the narrative in reality, but they hardly depict them in detail and seldom linger on their physical characteristics.

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, "Samuel Selvon and the Language of the people," in: Edward Baugh (ed.), *Critics on Caribbean Literature* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), 159.

The few descriptive paragraphs of *The Lonely Londoners* or *White Teeth* often give an impressionist picture of the places they pinpoint, and lead the reader to think that they could be found in any major European city:

*The bottom of the street, it had a sweet-shop, a bakery, a grocery, a butcher and a fish and chips. The top of the street, where it join the Harrow Road, it had all kind of thing—shop, store, butcher, greengrocer, trolley and bus stop. Up here on a Saturday plenty vendors used to be selling provisions near the pavements. (LL, 74)*

*Travelling in the front passenger seat of the removal van, she'd seen the high road and it had been ugly and poor and familiar [...] but then at the turn of a corner suddenly roads had exploded in greenery, beautiful oaks, the houses got taller, wider and more detached, she could see parks, she could see libraries. And then abruptly the trees would be gone, reverting back into bus-stops as if by the strike of some midnight bell; a signal which the houses too obeyed, transforming themselves into smaller, stairless dwellings that sat splay opposite derelict shopping arcades. (WT, 47)*

The effect produced reminds the reader that Selvon's and Smith's London is nothing but a décor. Although it is broadly faithful and realistic, it is only devised for the needs of a narrative. Whether the reader discovers or recognises this décor does not have much impact on the understanding of the novel, only on the amount of pleasure that its reading brings. Selvon's or Smith's London is just a backdrop to the adventures of paper characters, the answers and interpretations it suggests are as numerous as those who read the novels, whether they come from England, the Indian sub-continent or the West Indies.

The representation of London devised by Selvon and Smith can be appreciated by readers of various social, ethnic or geographic backgrounds, mainly because it is heavy with *déjà vu*. London is a mythical city which has been the subject of numerous descriptions over the centuries. When they undertake to give an account of multicultural London, Selvon and Smith are by force of circumstance compelled to insert their new vision into a larger set of representations which refers to a common heritage. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have noted, "such a recourse to the city by colonials in order to find an identity has too many historical

antecedents to be merely idiosyncratic."\* Moreover, at the beginning of the fifties, it is not really relevant to show the reader round Bayswater, the area where most West Indians live, since the latter have hardly begun to settle in London and the city has therefore not undergone any noticeable transformation. At the end of the twentieth century, although Willesden is home to families stemming from various countries of the Commonwealth, there is nothing in its appearance which fundamentally differentiates it from other parts of London.

If Selvon and Smith manage to evoke the life of coloured Londoners and to describe the imprint they leave on the city, it is because they situate their characters in more popular and familiar settings. The description of the fog has nothing to do with the West Indies (*LL*, 23), mentioning the Metropolitan Line does not conjure up pictures of race riots (*WT*, 174), the lights of Piccadilly Circus do not recall Caribbean nights (*LL*, 90) and Hampstead Heath is usually not associated with Jehovah's Witnesses (*WT*, 42). Yet, those are typical backgrounds to the tribulations that the characters of *The Lonely Londoners* and *White Teeth* experience. When they stage the adventures of their dramatis personae in widely known surroundings, Selvon and Smith make them attractive and within anyone's reach, regardless of any ethnic origin. The trivial references to the weather and to the transportation system allow the reader to take his/her bearings and to better accept the changes that affect the British megalopolis without being disoriented.

Sam Selvon's as well as Zadie Smith's representations of London have no doubt introduced a number of innovations which despite a fifty year difference, propose a rather similar vision of the conurbation; they do not, however, really stand out from earlier writers' who, inspired by new patterns of population, strove to impart a new perception of urban landscape. The reason is simple and does not affect these two writers only as Carlo Rotella makes very clear in the introduction of his work *October Cities*:

*Literary writers are in the business of imagining cities. They build textual places traversed by the minds of their readers. These 'cities of feeling' which are not imagined from scratch tend to descend from two sources: one is other texts, since writers read one another and swim in the greater sea of culture, assemble repertoires and influences, repeat and revise. The*

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\* Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989; London: Routledge, 1991), 90.

*other source is 'cities of fact,' material places assembled from brick and steel and stone, inhabited by people of flesh and blood — places where, however sophisticated we might become about undermining the solidity of constructed terms like 'real' and 'actual' and 'fact,' it is unwise to play in traffic.<sup>7</sup>*

As underlined by Carlo Rotella, *The Lonely Londoners* and *White Teeth* are no exception to the rule. The way Selvon's and Smith's characters respond to the space that surrounds them belongs to the world of literary London which never ceases to develop under the influence of writers who set about recounting a London epic. Confronted with this heritage, it is true that Selvon is not necessarily inventive and that many of Smith's evocations of the British capital recall some commonplaces of English literature. Reading Richard Lehan's *The City in Literature*,<sup>8</sup> which proposes a study of city representation in Western literature, confirms this thesis.

Sam Selvon pictures the city of London as a nerve centre which attracts, from the periphery of the Empire, colonials in search of better living conditions, of a new life which would allow them to forget the evils of colonisation and to attain the long-coveted living standards of their former masters, as the following extract illustrates:

*[Daniel] is a fellar that does take them woman to Covent Garden and Festival Hall, and them girls does have big times in them places, for all they accustom to is a pint of mild, the old fish and chips, and the one and six local. Many times Daniel go round by Moses saying how he take so and so to see ballet and Moses tell him that them girls won't appreciate those things. [...] But Daniel does feel good when he do things like that, it give him a big kick to know that one of the boys could take white girls to them places to listen to classics and see artistic ballet. (LL, 59)*

For the West Indians, settling in London constitutes an answer to the feeling of alienation that slavery and indentured labour have created. As the return to their African or Indian motherland becomes increasingly difficult since the new generations are no longer heir to a unique African or Indian culture, moving to the centre of the old Empire is the alternative which prevents them from being confined to an existence on the margin, and living in

<sup>7</sup> Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press., 1998), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

London becomes an obsession. As Kadiatu Kanneh puts it, "The magic of the mythology of London is described as a fantasy and a way of dreaming the city from the margins."<sup>9</sup>

Even for Zadie Smith's immigrants, settling in London signifies leaving the forgotten periphery of mankind to reach the centre where history is written, freeing oneself from the past and trying to look to the future, no matter how bleak it is:

*A few months after his father arrived in England, he had sat on this bench nursing a bleeding thumb, the top sliced off by a careless, doddering stroke from one of the older waiters. [...] Samad took his open thumb out of the restaurant, past theatreland and down St Martin's Lane. When he reached the square he stuck it in the fountain and watched his red insides spill out into the blue water. [...] Then, with his head between his legs, and his thumb leaking on to the pavement, a primitive impulse had come over him. Slowly, with the dripping blood, he wrote IQBAL from one chair leg to the next. [...] I knew what it meant this deed. It meant I wanted to write my name on the world. It meant I presumed. Like the Englishmen who named streets in Kerala after their wives, like the Americans who shoved their flag in the moon. (WT, 504-06)*

But the tropism exercised by the British capital is not a specificity of the colonial and post-colonial situation and the immigrants from the New Commonwealth are not its first victims. London has always deceived the people who lived in its close or distant orbit. Relying on Dickens's work, Richard Lehan points out that: "Dickens's city was both lure and trap: a lure to those who are called to it as by a magnet, because only the city offers the means of realizing a heightened conception of self; a trap in its workings, which lead to human destruction."<sup>10</sup> Thus in *The Lonely Londoners* and *White Teeth*, the ambition nurtured by several characters, like Big City who is obsessed by the material comfort he lacked in the West Indies and whose only concern is to win the pools (LL, 96-7), or Mo Hussein who makes a point of honour of owning the most famous halal butchers in North London (WT, 472), is not very different from that of Dickens's heroes. Like Pip, they settle in London with "great expectations" in mind.

It seems understandable that a majority of West Indian immigrants wish to live in the British capital. They share the same

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<sup>9</sup> Kadiatu Kanneh, "Racism and Culture," *Paragraph*, 16. 1 (March 1993), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature*, 39-40.

language, the same religion, the same culture with the English and, as Mark Looker remarks, they are "deluded by their British passports into thinking they would be treated as English. The migration from the Caribbean, which began with a few thousand in the late 1940s, had multiplied a hundredfold by the next decade."<sup>11</sup> Yet, when they land on British soil, the West Indians have the feeling of setting foot on a planet whose landscapes are strange and threatening:

*One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet, Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellar who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train. When Moses sit down and pay his fare he take out a white handkerchief and blow his nose. The handkerchief turn black and Moses watch it and curse the fog. (LL, 23)*

The weather conditions peculiar to the British Isles cause a hostile atmosphere to hang over the city of London and suggest that the new immigrants are not welcomed the way British citizens are when they go and live in the tropics. The immigrants do not land on familiar, but on unknown, territory.

Whether they belong to the first or second generation, Zadie Smith's immigrants face the same difficulties. Although they also come from Commonwealth countries, they come to recognize that London is the domain of singularity where all sorts of weird inhabitants indulge in peculiar practices:

*In North London, where councillors once voted to change the name of an area to Niroana, it is not unusual to walk the streets and be suddenly confronted by sage words from the chalk-faced, blue-lipped or eyebrowless. From across the street or from the other end of a tube carriage they will use their schizophrenic talent for seeing connections in the random [...] to riddle you, to rhyme you, to strip you down, to tell you who you are and where you're going (usually Baker Street – the great majority of modern-day seers travel the Metropolitan Line) and why. But as a city we are not appreciative of these people. Our gut instinct is that they intend to embarrass us, that they're out to shame us somehow as they lurch down the train aisle, bulbous-eyed and with carbuncled nose, preparing to ask*

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Looker, *Atlantic Passages: History, Community, and Language in the Fiction of Sam Selvon* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 61.

*us, inevitably, what we are looking at. What the fuck we are looking at. As a kind of pre-emptive defence mechanism, Londoners have learnt not to look, never to look [...].* (WT, 174-75)

Yet, the strange phenomena mentioned by Selvon and Smith have already been described at the end of the nineteenth century by writers such as Conan Doyle. The perception that Selvon's and Smith's characters have of London sometimes recalls that of Dr Watson. Lehan reminds the reader that in the Scottish physician's novels: "we see a mind recording its impressions of the city, with fog, muddy streets reflected in muddy clouds, the pale and yellow light from shop windows [...] a city beset by apprehension and nervousness, haunted by a sense of the eerie and ghostlike: the uncanny."<sup>12</sup>

Of course, Dr Watson's London belongs to swindlers and knifery, and the atmosphere suggested by the fog serves the suspense inherent in the detective novel. But the immigrants' ambiguous behaviour as regards British law and the established order makes them move in a separate world whose nebulous aspect is underlined by the smog. The immigrants often meet people belonging to fringe groups. As *White Teeth*'s narrator remarks: "the city breeds the Mad" (WT, 174). The dark vision given of the British megalopolis insists on an existence which seems out of touch with reality, of which the man in the street is totally unaware, as the numerous episodes which recount the setbacks experienced by the West Indian immigrants who are confronted with British rules show (LL, 50-1). Thus, Selvon does not really distinguish himself from his predecessors and neither does Smith. To say that they introduce the reader to an original representation of London, which in every respect is different from the one given by the other English-speaking novelists, is an exaggeration; both writers draw from their fellow-writers' heritage to create a new fictional world.

Selvon's and Smith's representation of London rests on widely-known foundations and yet most critics have viewed their description of the capital as particularly innovative. The reader wonders which changes they have introduced in the existing image of the city to deserve such a reception. It is above all a question of perspective. London has not undergone radical modifications, its infrastructure has remained more or less the same, thus recalling

<sup>12</sup> Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature*, 88-9.

previous representations, but the observer's perception has completely changed. The parts of London which are under scrutiny, what could be called the city's superstructure, are now seen from a new angle insofar as they are described by coloured immigrants who come from far away places and who communicate, without the benefit of hindsight, the personal feelings the city inspires. A new light is cast on London because the new beholders do not have the same interests or references as their predecessors. They have different preoccupations which cause them to linger on specific aspects which, for anyone else, would be futile. If the description of the working class districts which can be found in *The Lonely Londoners* matches those of other writers, if the long rows of derelict houses which make up the Harrow Road remain the same, the West Indian narrator remarks that their inhabitants have brought radical changes which have not yet altered the external appearance of the area:

*The grocery it had at the bottom of the street was like a shop in the West Indies. [...] Before Jamaicans start to invade Brit'n, it was a hell of a thing to pick up a piece of saltfish anywhere, or to get thing like pepper sauce or dasheen or even garlic. [...] This test who had the grocery, from the time spades start to settle in the district, he find out what sort of things they like to eat, and he stock up with a lot of things like blackeye peas and red beans and pepper sauce, and tinned breadfruit and ochro and smoke herring, and as long as the spades spending money he don't care, in fact is big encouragement, 'Good morning sir,' and 'What can I do for you today, sir,' and 'Do come again.' All over London have places like that now. (LL, 76-7)*

The example of the grocery speaks for itself. It is the contents of the shop which have changed, that is to say the goods stored, not the container. The façade of the building is unaltered, its walls have not been given a face-lift. Indeed, the grocery still belongs to an Englishman but its customers are now West Indian and a slow process of creolization is under way. The average urban dweller is not necessarily aware of this new fact, since flying over the capital or roaming its streets would not reveal it. Yet it is part and parcel of the Londoners' everyday life which ineluctably assumes a new shape. It is thanks to a series of such trivial remarks that the West Indian originality of Sam Selvon's London emerges. Methodically, all that betrays the West Indian presence is brought to light. The narrator often pauses to describe the customs of his fellow-citizens, to show

the latter in public places where they can often be found but where the general public hardly notices them. In *The Lonely Londoners*, Sam Selvon restores the immigrant's visibility, and it is fitting to note that Zadie Smith will take on the same task fifty years later and remove London's new coloured inhabitants from their bedsits, basements, underground stations, in a word from all the squalid places to which they are confined during the day:

*But all the same, she reflected, slamming the door behind her, it was true: it was a nice area, she couldn't deny it as she stormed towards the high road, avoiding trees where previously, in Whitechapel, she avoided flung-out mattresses and the homeless. It would be good for the kid, she couldn't deny it. Alsana had a deep-seated belief that living near green spaces was morally beneficial to the young, and there to her right was Gladstone Park, [...] and in the liberal tradition it was a park without fences, unlike the more affluent Queens Park (Victoria's), with its pointed metal railings. Willesden was not as pretty as Queens Park, but it was a nice area. No denying it. Not like Whitechapel, where that madman E-knock someoneoranother gave a speech that forced them into the basement while kids broke the windows with their steel-capped boots. [...] (WT, 62)*

Yet, if both narrators reveal the immigrants' presence in well-known parts of the city, it is often at some ungodly hour (LL, 90), or when it is foggy, thus insisting that they still remain unnoticed and that it will be difficult for them to be accepted as full citizens (WT, 72). All in all, both *The Lonely Londoners* and *White Teeth* describe an underground world which only gradually rises to the surface.

The way Selvon's narrator describes the fog which hides the West Indian immigrants is significant. The fog which weighs down on them is braved nearly every winter day by any other Londoner. As a constituent of the "city of fact," the fog keeps the same composition. But when one is accustomed to living outdoors, beneath more clement skies where outside temperature rarely falls below fifteen degrees celsius, one feels the effects of fog differently. The mist which covers the "city of feeling" takes an odd turn. London becomes a cold hell which adds an extra dimension to the city:

*It had one bitter season, when it look like the vengeance of Moko fall on all the boys in London, nobody can't get any work, fellars who had work losing it, and all over the place it look like if Operation Pressure gone into execution in a big way. Galahad for one lose his work, and though it was*

*winter [...] the old Galahad not very much affected by the weather. Some miracle of metabolism was still keeping him warm at a time when normal people rattling with cold, and while they bawling and shivering he was able to walk about the streets in an ordinary suit of clothing, sympathising with the huddlers and shiverers in the blast of wind that does sometimes sweep across the city like a vengeance angel. Fellars put him down for mad, seeing him dress like that in the winter, and as for the Nordics, some of them stare at this spade who defying the elements as if he is a witch doctor. (LL, 122-23)*

London is no longer the temperate town to which the expatriate gladly returns after having survived scorching heat and mosquitoes. The British capital is a ghastly place which is unhesitatingly opposed to other parts of the world to which one dreams of going back. The fog and the cold with which the immigrants are confronted, when they wake up at dawn, do not have much in common with those mentioned by the detective who sips his tea by the fireside:

*You could almost convince yourself, at 6 a.m., that you were downstairs in some Continental cabana, or at least street level in Torquay, rather than below ground in Lambeth. [...] It was all white light and clever shade at six in the morning. Hugging a cup of tea at the kitchen table, squinting at the grass, Irie saw vineyards out there; she saw Florentine scenes instead of the uneven higgledy-piggledy of Lambeth rooftops. [...] Then the mirage, sun reliant as it was, disappeared, the whole scene swallowed by a devouring cloud. Leaving only some crumbling Edwardian housing. Railway sidings named after a careless child. A long, narrow strip of allotment where next to nothing would grow. And a bleached-out bandy-legged red-headed man with terrible posture and wellington boots, stamping away in the frosty mulch, trying to squash the remnants of a squashed potato from his heel. (WT, 386)*

Such differences of perception are numerous in Selvon's and Smith's novels. They do not introduce radical changes which would give a hardly credible picture of London, but a new way of conceiving the city whose pertinence is striking. The descriptions of the two writers correspond to an undermining process which challenges the received ideas about the British capital, whether they praise or criticize it. They contribute to showing that there are so many different types of inhabitants that nothing can be taken for granted in today's cosmopolitan megalopolis. As V.S. Naipaul has noted: "Cities like London were to change. They were to cease being

more or less national cities; they were to become cities of the world, modern-day Romes, establishing the pattern of what great cities should be, in the eyes of islanders like myself and people even more remote in language and culture. They were to be cities visited [...] by all the barbarian peoples of the globe, people of forest and desert, Arabs, Africans, Malays."<sup>13</sup>

In *The Lonely Londoners*, the theme of anonymity crops up at regular intervals and fits in with this perspective. One cannot say that it is a new concern for those who live in London in the second part of the twentieth century. But for the people who come from an island which has fewer inhabitants than the capital, where the way of life is based on the extended family and not the individual, where mutual aid is more important than personal success, individualism is not perceived the same way:

*It have people living in London who don't know what happening in the room next to them, far more the street, or how other people living. London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers. (LL, 74)*

The city with which the immigrants are confronted is not different from the one where millions of British people venture every day. The problems it generates are the same for everybody and it claims victims among immigrants and natives alike. But because they live on the margin, immigrants have a passionate relationship with the city which never arouses lukewarm feelings. The living conditions they endure do not allow them to stand back and look critically at their predicament, so they pass exaggerated judgments, as is suggested by the following extract from *White Teeth*:

*'[...] I sometimes wonder why I bother,' said Samad bitterly, betraying the English inflections of twenty years in the country, 'I really do. These days, it feels to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started...but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable, terrible food, dreadful newspapers — who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil's*

<sup>13</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 130.

*pact... It drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere.'* (WT, 407)

Selvon's and Smith's characters make angry remarks but their point of view serves as a touchstone, because they test the vision that the other Londoners have of the city. The immigrants undoubtedly dramatize the harmful consequences of urban concentration: unemployment, racism, promiscuity and poverty are extensively disparaged. But on the contrary, some trivial aspects of London life are lauded. The immigrants ascribe a human dimension to the city, a capacity to arouse emotion as the following remark suggests: "To say these things, to have lived these things [...] to write a casual letter home beginning: 'Last night, in Trafalgar square...'" (LL, 137). London is at the same time rejected and worshipped, thus becoming the subject of a love-hate relationship.

The propensity to exaggerate is due to culture shock, as the various comparisons made between Britain and the Caribbean or the Indian sub-continent remind the sceptical reader. They bring out the discrepancies between London and Port-of-Spain (LL, 43) or Chittagong (WT, 213), and by extension the divergences in culture, and thereby create a comic aspect. It is true that the critical eye of foreigners, who in the heart of London draw repeated and naïve comparisons with their mother country, is amusing. Once again, the process is not new; it recalls the work of Jonathan Swift, and especially the character of Gulliver whose travels allowed the Irish writer to criticize the English society of his time. But the difference between Swift and Selvon or Smith is that those who cast a critical eye on British society are not mere strangers. Although they are of Caribbean or Indian extraction, they are far from being Lilliputians. As Selvon's West Indians put it themselves: "We is British subjects" (LL, 40). The way the characters describe London is not simply the result of an observation which would transform London into an exotic place. London is at the same time exotic and familiar, home and abroad, the birthplace of a painful but undeniable multicultural society (WT, 465).

Sam Selvon's and Zadie Smith's London is a constantly evolving multicultural city because it is no longer cut off from the rest of the world. When he wrote *The Lonely Londoners* after the Second World War, Sam Selvon remarked that London was no longer the fortified town which communicated with the other parts of the Empire thanks to battleships. He demonstrated that the

settlement of immigrants in London threw a permanent bridge between the British capital and other parts of the planet. When Zadie Smith took up her pen to write *White Teeth* at the dawn of the third millennium, one-way travelling towards the metropolis had long become obsolete, and she showed that the round-trips made by the immigrants between their homeland and Britain created a two-way movement which was synonymous with fair exchange. In brief, London was no longer a *citadel* but a genuine *city* where everybody was, precisely, a *citizen*. London had ceased to be a rival for its overseas counterparts, it was only a distant continuation of far away towns like Kingston or Dhaka where syncretism could express itself freely as Simon Hattenstone rightly observes:

*White Teeth is a rich, sprawling domestic epic, about how families and people come together and fall apart in the most unlikely ways. It's also very much a book about modern London, a city in which 40% of children are born to at least one black parent, a city in which the terms black and white become less and less relevant as we gradually meld into different shades of brown. White Teeth reflects a new generation for whom race is the backdrop to daily life rather than the defining characteristic of existence. Some people have said Smith is depoliticising race, removing it from its historical context, others say she's ahead of her time, representing modern London as it really is for the first time.<sup>14</sup>*

In fact, the evocation of different customs and habits, which catch the reader's attention at the beginning of the novel, is no source of astonishment when the narratives come to an end because, London, as a separate entity, has ceased to exist.

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## Searching for the Centre: African-Caribbean Women's Experience of London in Joan Riley's *Romance*<sup>1</sup>

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Jamaican-born Joan Riley belongs to the recent generation of black women writers in Britain. Her 1985 debut novel *The Unbelonging*<sup>2</sup> and *Waiting in the Twilight*<sup>3</sup>, published two years later, give centre stage to black female characters, teenagers or middle-aged women who have migrated to Britain. In both works, the author takes up her pen to expose the vicissitudes and daily afflictions of a silenced minority in a changing multicultural society. With reason, critic Barbara Shaw Perry defines Riley's characters as women who "must navigate the treacherous terrain of race, gender, class and sexuality in order to survive and succeed."<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein, Joan Riley's third novel *Romance* is set in London in the early and mid-eighties — a period of economic recession and racial tensions — and dramatises African-Caribbeans' experience(s) of the city, their frustrations and setbacks as black

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Riley, *Romance* (London: The Women's Press, 1988). References cited hereafter in text as (*R*). Italics in subsequent quotations are not mine, but are used by the author for interior monologues.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Riley, *The Unbelonging* (London: The Women's Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Joan Riley, *Waiting in the Twilight* (London: The Women's Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Shaw Perry, "Cultural Identity, 'Resistance,' & Women's Postcolonial Writing from the African-Caribbean/British Borderlands: Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging*," in: Sandra Courtman (ed.), *The Society For Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers*, 1 (2000), 1, <<http://www.sconline.freeserve.co.uk/olv1p7.htm>> [June 2001].

immigrants who strive to integrate into mainstream Britain. Through the central Guyanese characters of Verona — twenty-seven, single, unemployed, and overweight — and her sister Desiree — a housewife and mother of two — Riley gives voice to black West Indian women exposed to constant racial and sexual prejudices. The author constructs city spaces that marginalise female characters who have moved to the metropolitan centre and yet remain on the fringe. We will examine how Riley's female characters respond to the city, each in her own way; how they negotiate their place in a male-dominated urban environment, so as to build up a more positive self-image, and eventually feel at home in "the (M)otherland."

The novel's opening scene shows Verona walking down a deserted street on a cold winter night, heading towards her sister's house: "She saw them before they saw her, the two men leaning against a dusty red Cortina and looking out of place in the regimented grey street. Her heart lurched and her stomach sickened" (R, 1). The intriguing *incipit* sets the tone very effectively. In a few words, Riley depicts an urban setting, both austere and dull, while suggesting the possibility — whether real or imagined — of physical danger:<sup>5</sup>

*The wild idea of retreating around the corner came to her but she forced herself to approach the men. [...] They were deep in conversation and she toyed with a half-formed notion of slipping past and into the safety of her sister's house. [...] She [...] edged towards the pale yellow gate and the neat box-like front garden of the house. [...] Verona's gaze moved longingly to the warm glow of the stained and varnished door. (R, 1-2)*

Obviously, both the gate and the front door function as protective barriers from the city. Joan Riley's initial fictional reconstruction of the city street is based on a symbolic dichotomy, with an inhospitable public environment that contrasts with the private sphere of the house, a refuge from the insecurity of the street. *Romance* is actually set in South London: in Croydon, Norwood, and Brixton, all racially mixed, working-class neighbourhoods. The reader can easily locate the protagonists within those peripheral districts of London, and even follow them in their peregrinations since the omniscient third-person narrator often names areas, streets

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<sup>5</sup> The reader will soon discover that the mysterious men are in fact two colleagues of Verona's who have been harassing her and forcing her to confess to stealing — a crime she did not commit, and an excuse for her employer to fire her.

and sites as the characters move around. However, as can be seen in the opening lines of the novel, the evocations of this charted referential space are left to the characters themselves, who then become "centres of consciousness." Throughout the novel, the author consistently employs internal focalisation, thereby setting the European cityscape in perspective. The reader is given insight into the characters' subjective visions of their surroundings and their responses to them. Not only does Riley challenge Eurocentric fictionalisations of postcolonial London, but she also presents contrasting views, thus avoiding an oversimplified, monolithic representation of West Indians' experience of the city.

After being unjustly fired, Verona — who does not have a place of her own but lives at her sister's — roams the busy streets of South London:

*The day stretched bleakly ahead [...]. Her feet dragged as she wandered the street in aimless indecision. The rain had stopped but the wind, if anything, was worse. It cut through the thick layers of clothing she had cocooned herself in, making her shiver. [...] It was bitterly cold and no doubt the rain would come again, judging from the heavy clouds hanging in opaque masses across the skyline. (R, 39)*

Riley's descriptions of the city are few, and seldom do they enable the reader to visualise the geography of the place. Like many other Caribbean writers, she insists on the weather — her novel takes place in wintertime mostly — thus suggesting the greyness and unfriendliness of the "foreign" city. During her aimless walks, Verona is in no way a *flâneuse* enjoying the spectacle of the street. Wandering within the (de)limited space of South London, the character does not intend to appropriate the city or blend in. Riley purposely refrains from describing the London setting for Verona does not *see* her surroundings. Feeling lonely, self-conscious, and insecure amongst hostile (white) Londoners, the character distances herself from the city and negates the real world:

*She cut across the common — the most direct route — liking the pretence that she was out of the crowded rush of city life. The flat greenness was full of frantic activity [...]. It gave her a sense of freedom as she stepped on the short grass [...].*

*Her spirit lifted, her mind letting go of worry and shifting to her latest fantasy. Narrowly missing a spot where a dog had relieved itself, she moved reluctantly to the winding path. Still, she made believe it was a country*

*lane. At the bottom she pictured a little cottage where she lived, its whitewashed walls wreathed with rambling roses. Do roses bloom in January? she wondered fleetingly. The green fields drowsed under the blossom-scented heat of an imagined Spanish sun. It was a world away from the bleak reality of a South London winter and an endless struggle for survival. (R, 34)*

Immersed deep in reverie, in a world of idle fantasy fueled by her symptomatic reading, soppy novels, Verona escapes the grim reality of her life. The unwelcoming urban landscape serves as a catalyst that prompts fleeting romantic visions. In Verona's mind, the idyllic dreamed place becomes reality while the real world, London, is effaced. This transposition, the fabricated image of a cosy little English cottage, underscores the character's sense of homelessness, her unfulfilled desire to belong and become integrated into British society. Yet, her experience of the street remains one of both confrontation and avoidance:

*"Hoi! Watch out where yer going!"  
The screech of tyres and the strident blare of horns brought Verona's dream world crashing into reality [...]. Her feet froze as she saw that she had wandered into the middle of the road, and the harsh angry noises were from cars surrounding her. [...]  
"Bloody nigger!" he shouted, the rest of his abuse drowned in the roar of his passing.  
She hurried along the pavement with her head bent, feeling marked. Everyone was surely looking at her, laughing at her; [...]. (R, 35)*

In this powerful scene, this moment of disruption, Joan Riley dramatises Verona's non-integration into the city crowd. The abusive white man at the steering wheel is the epitome of modern urban society on the move, the antagonistic force in power. More than the mere evocation of the brutal stresses of city life — including heavy traffic, noise and speed — the incident stirs up a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability related to Verona's "otherness."

Besides, her multi-ethnic residential street, away from "the frenetic rush of traffic" (R, 115), does not constitute a buffer, a safe communal space, within a close-knit neighbourhood:

*Verona's eyes darted involuntarily to the blank, shuttered and curtained windows along the street. So much for neighbourhood watch. I could be raped right here on the street and no one would notice, she thought unhappily. [...] Life in this part of Croydon was hard enough at the best of*

*times, with the isolation and the silent hostility of the neighbours.* (R, 4-5)

The protagonist has to face indifference and sheer individualism, characteristic of modern city life, together with racist demeanours. Verona is wary about her inimical white neighbours, about Mrs. Evans's "false niceness" (R, 9), her "patronizing smile" (R, 155) and racist sexual innuendoes.

Looking for a way out, the character repeatedly takes refuge into the local public library or her bedroom to read cheap romances. There, identifying with slim blond heroines, dreaming of her white Prince Charming, she escapes the emptiness of her existence, and compensates for her frustrations. She also momentarily alleviates her most secret pain — the trauma of rape by her sister's black boyfriend in Guyana, that explains her short-lived affairs with older white Englishmen:

*In the end, she settled for the library, crossing the road where it stood, modern and awkward against a backdrop of sunken gravestones in the older part of the cemetery. The building was like a hollowed-out square, single-storied and open-plan. The middle was a beautifully paved courtyard, where you could sit and enjoy the nature garden creeping across the stones in spring, or watch the antics of the ever-increasing bird-population when they came back from their winter holidays. Verona always found it soothing, liking the soporific effect of droning bees and rustling pages on a summer afternoon. At this time of year she loved to see the way the variegated ivy had begun to fan out along the courtyard stones, starting a new season of growth, in defiance of the wintery chill. She found a quiet corner against one of the wide, full-length glass doors of the courtyard. Getting comfortable in the cushioned black chair, she arranged her four romance novels in a neat pile on the floor and stared pensively at the dripping ivy outside.* (R, 40)

Norwood Library is central to the novel. The highly suggestive quality of its architecture exemplifies Riley's figurative use of city space in her construction of characters. The modern building contrasts sharply with its surroundings — ancient "sunken" tombs; it stands as a symbol of regeneration, as a defiant, soaring space that replenishes the soul. From the outside, the library conveys a sense of order, rigidity, and bareness. The straight, horizontal lines and cubic shape give a crisp and clean feel to the place that resembles a fortress, or even a cloister, and is therefore a retreat with special appeal to Verona.

Within its protective walls, formality gives way to serenity, linked to a marked sense of wholeness. With its glass partitions and patio, the library brings the outdoors in and seems to expand; it obliterates the line between closeness and openness, between private and public. Taking time to "sit," "enjoy," "watch," and "see," while she ignores the people around her — there is not a single reference to the readers in the library — Verona appropriates public space to make it her own intimate spot. Dynamic and tranquil simultaneously, the secret garden nestling in the heart of the busy city is a safe haven that allows Verona to withdraw into herself and unlock her imagination.

After her first love night with Steve, a young Englishman, Verona, "telling herself stubbornly that it was great," yet feeling "unfulfilled" (R, 174), spends some time in the library's courtyard: "She eased into a chair, positioning herself so that the sun beat on her back, seeping through her in a continuous blast of wellbeing. She opened the first book avidly, losing herself in the characters [...]. The way the sun was shining, she was glad the story *Harem Queen* was set in the heart of the desert" (R, 176). As a reading place, the library is a site of pleasure and desire for Verona who savours a union with nature, a moment of "erotic bliss"<sup>6</sup> sustained by both her surroundings and her reading. The library becomes an inspiring stage where the character constructs her virtual *mise en scène*; it is a threshold where real and fictional space, cityscape and dreamscape, merge.

Likewise, Verona loves to "lie in the warm cheerfulness of her buttercup room and lose herself in the champagne world of Rosemarie and her brooding Frenchman" (R, 39-40). The character views both the library and her bedroom as transcending spaces of freedom that momentarily give her the possibility of crossing boundaries and breaking through the limits of her constricted life. Yet, these safe enclosures turn out to be dubious places, traps of self-marginalisation that suggest her placelessness within the European city.

In his psychoanalytical study of the city and the body, Steve Pile states that both are "cartographies of meaning and identity; they

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<sup>6</sup> Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 83.

are intensifying grids of power, desire and disgust."<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Riley operates a metonymic correspondence between cityscape and "bodyscape,"<sup>8</sup> as the ambivalence of space reflects the complexity of the character's psyche and her ambiguous perception of her own body. The author constructs the library and the bedroom as sites of compensation, cocoons that prove to be enclosing, alienating places. In a similar way, the character, who has integrated the white/European canons of femininity, feels trapped in her body — "the fat black woman looking squat and untidy" (R, 74) — yet protected by it: "Verona still felt cut off, padded around by her romance and her fat" (R, 69); "[s]he was safe in the protection of her large body" (R, 3). Verona's voracious need to read, her "endless piles of romance novels that seemed to cover every available inch of floor space" (R, 11) of her "cluttered room" (R, 69), her bulimia for sweets stocked up in her bulging handbag all signify her need to fill up space around her, to fill in a void, a lack within herself. Significantly, on several occasions, Riley mentions Verona's canvas bag which she always carries along with her. The feminine accessory functions as a trope, the symbolic extension of the character's self, her body. Just as Verona stuffs herself with food, she crams books and sweets into her bag; and "the jumbled mess inside" (R, 71) reminds us of her "cluttered room." Evidently, those private spaces in disorder are suggestive of the character's psychic confusion and bodily dysfunctions. Besides, in a recurring nightmare that she has had since she was raped, Verona pictures mentally "[t]he gaping handbag, the woman's body lying in the buttonfront dress, eyes gazing serenely [...]" (R, 89). The wide open handbag is to be associated with the womb, the violated body.

Bruised in her femininity as a rape victim, and discriminated as the displaced black Other in Britain, the character cannot find her place. Despite her desperate quest for a home, roots, love, and recognition, as a black immigrant, Verona disconnects herself from the outside world of London and hides, for she cannot deal with an — unjustified — sense of guilt and shame. Her instability, her constant coming and going between threatening open public sites — city streets, bars — and deceptive sequestered spots, in other words, her relation to the spatiality of the city, highlights her search for

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<sup>7</sup> Steve Pile, *The Body and the City. Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Steve Pile, *The Body and the City*, 167.

identity: "What was *herself* anyway, she wondered unhappily? She never seemed to know from one day to the next who she was; and she sometimes thought her many lives would catch up on her, and it might not be such a bad thing" (R, 74).

By contrast, her sister's experience of London is one of immobility and confinement within the suburban home. In *Romance*, Joan Riley does not use the house as the traditional symbol of permanence, anchorage, comfort, and intimacy. Through the characters of Desiree and her husband John, a native of Jamaica, Riley exposes the evils of racist British society and their pernicious effects on immigrant families. In this connection, the author reveals the cracks in Des and John's marriage and the widening gap that separates them. John is in fact a constant victim of racial discrimination in the workplace, a black man who cannot achieve upward mobility: "Always he had been passed over, usually for a younger, less qualified, less experienced man — someone white" (R, 25). Each rejection he meets with is a dig at his self-esteem. Consequently, he demands that Des quit her job and raise their daughters. He also objects to her resuming school: "she sat in the house vegetating" (R, 23). Quite obviously, John maintains Desiree in a position of dependency to preserve his sense of manhood. The "long, narrow kitchen" (R, 15), the boxed-in room where Des is relegated, becomes the metaphoric space of her cramped life, of stasis on the margin; and the bedroom turns into a site of objectification where Des lets John "use her" (R, 103) for his own sexual gratification. Confined to the unfulfilling role of the devoted, self-denying housewife — who does love her husband and children — Desiree tries to accommodate herself to it and constantly reminds herself and her friends that John is "a good provider" (R, 25; 50; 53): "*I have a duty to support John*, she admonished herself. *If he don't get loyalty from me, where he supposed to get it?*" (R, 10).

By fictionalising tensions, frustrations and bitterness within the gendered domestic sphere, Riley addresses key topics such as motherhood, female identity and social recognition within a traditional patriarchal pattern. The novelist, who explores the intersecting themes of race, class, gender, and space, denounces black British women's plight as an indirect result of black men's victimisation: "[Desiree] shook her head; it might be selfish but she didn't see why she should suffer because someone else made John suffer... as if she had no suffering of her own" (R, 106).

Indeed, Desiree suffers in her own flesh and defines herself as

"a black woman abandoned and alone, without her womb" (R, 102). Her hysterectomy at the age of thirty-two is inscribed in Joan Riley's consistent use of the black female body in pain as a metaphor for loss and lack: "*I won't be a whole woman no more!*" (R, 64). Desiree's mutilated body generates a sense of dispossession and incompleteness. Des strongly feels that she cannot live up to the already limiting role as wife and mother — or procreator — assigned to her. Her barrenness signifies the fragmentation, the annihilation of her self, as a black woman, in a society that ostracises rather than integrates.

Riley's picture of "the forgotten or unglamorous section of [her] people"<sup>9</sup> — to use her own words — in the eighties, the grim years of Thatcherism, is an indictment of British conservatism that makes minorities in general, and women from the black diaspora in particular, its scapegoats. Through Verona's and Desiree's experiences of London as a restricting and marginalising environment, Joan Riley deconstructs the British metropolis as an open place of multiple possibilities and decries the mythic allure of its promise of a better life.

Yet, as the narrative unfolds, the two sisters find the strength and determination to affront adversity — sexism and racism — and claim their rights. Gradually the house becomes a focal point; the kitchen turns into an arena, a site of resistance where Verona and Desiree develop a positive sense of self and place. Once "they ha[ve] drifted into the kitchen" (R, 142), "the door securely shut behind them" (R, 97), the room becomes a convivial, communal space where the two sisters and their friend Mara — a motherly figure and role model — have tea, confide their secrets to each other, and articulate their pains. Joan Riley gives much space to dialogues throughout her novel, thus insisting on the necessity to communicate and connect. Because her female characters manage to forge bonds of sisterhood and friendship, through language, domestic space that used to isolate and diminish now fosters a sense of togetherness and personal growth, through mutual support: "women sustain women," asserts Riley.<sup>10</sup>

Isabel Carrera Suarez, one of the few critics of Riley's fiction,

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<sup>9</sup> "Joan Riley," *BBC Online*. BBC, <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/archive/windrush/j\\_riley.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/archive/windrush/j_riley.html)> [5 June 2001].

<sup>10</sup> Donna Perry, "Joan Riley," in: Donna Perry, *Backtalk: Women Speak Out. Interviews by Donna Perry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 284.

considers that her characters "generally have difficulty in expressing themselves" because "the connective, intimate 'mothertongue' has been lost"<sup>11</sup> — an interpretation to which I do not subscribe. The reason why Riley's characters struggle to put their thoughts and feelings into words is not related to language *per se*, but to their status as oppressed women, as domestic-abuse victims or submissive wives who have been silenced and have thus repressed their emotions. Only together, in places of refuge (or exile?) allotted to them — the kitchen or women's centres — can they verbalise their pent-up anger and re-build their identity, on their own terms. Orality is indeed essential to Riley's construction of characters, as she confirmed during an interview: "When your eyes are on the paper, listen to the sound of the words because if you want to shape a person, what comes out of a person's mouth and the way it comes out is so integral a part of them that if you take that away from them it becomes a different person."<sup>12</sup>

The fact that the characters, who emigrated to England with their parents at an early age, speak in creolised standard English and not in their original dialect, the "authentic" spoken word, is a patent sign of deculturation (as stressed by Suarez), of dislocation and mutation. Their new way of speaking, in between dialect and standard English, like their new way of cooking — Creole dishes, but also "peas and carrots" (R, 80) — shows the metropolitan city as a hybrid cultural space. Because Des and John have both lost their parents — missing links in their West Indian lineage — and have severed their ties with the far-away homeland, they tend to slip into "Britishness" inexorably. John, who watches cricket games on TV and reads the *Sun*, "a prejudiced paper" (R, 79), surrenders to mainstream British culture by integrating its racist values. Once "a real black man" (R, 84), he now appears to his wife as a defeated man who has shed his West Indianness and lost his pride. "Dad never tell us about Jamaica," one of his British-born daughters complains, "he keep saying we're British and musn't bother about the West Indies, 'cause no one can make us go there" (R, 91).

However, Joan Riley chooses to introduce two pivotal events in her narrative that will cause dramatic changes in the house, and

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<sup>11</sup> Isabel Carrera Suarez, "Absent Mother(Land)s: Joan Riley's Fiction," in: Susheila Nasta (ed.), *Motherlands. Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 302.

<sup>12</sup> Donna Perry, *Backtalk: Women Speak Out*, 273.

will prompt the characters' (self-) awareness: firstly, Mara's son's unwarranted arrest for assault and burglary; then, the unexpected arrival of John's grandparents from Jamaica.

Through Jay's incarceration and beating-up, a sub-plot in her narrative, the novelist intends to denounce police brutality and institutionalised urban violence against ethnic minorities in the U.K. It echoes Riley's evocation of the eighties' urban unrest through Verona's recollection of the 1981 race riots: "All she remembered was battling crowds and police behind riot shields, against a backdrop of sheets of orange flames and columns of thick smoke as cars and buildings went up in the destructive fire of years of frustration" (R, 28-9). This apocalyptic vision of a neighbourhood turned into a powder keg exposes the fragmented cosmopolitan city as a battlefield rather than as an integrating melting pot. Jay's arrest, a disquieting incident reminiscent of the Brixton riots, sparks off Verona and Desiree's rage and indignation. The episode thus contributes to their mobilisation and their attachment to a collective racial identity, beyond their individual selves; it then arouses their political consciousness: "[Desiree] wanted to say that they were oppressing the youth all the time; but she knew so little about it. Until today it had just been something on the edge of her mind, like immigration and bad housing. Somehow it had never seemed real; it didn't happen to the people she knew. She felt ashamed at how little she had really cared" (R, 125). Until then withdrawn and self-centred, the two characters now open up to others, outside the private sphere, in a movement of solidarity. Together with Mara and John, the two sisters engage spontaneously in community activism and attend a meeting organised by BUF — Black United Front.<sup>15</sup> This sudden new development in the story is not only a necessary step in the characters' journey toward fulfilment, it is also a means for the author to pass on her own political message and denigrate black (male) leaders whom she considers as timid and inefficient, more inclined to deliver speeches than act. In this matter, and with much sarcasm, Riley makes Verona her spokesperson confronting the dominant male voice: "All I hear is yak, yak, yak. We know what you saying already; what we don't know is what to do. [...] I ain't staying here to listen to no more crap. I might as well go and read my white trash — saves me hearing it secondhand" (R, 129).

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<sup>15</sup> A fictitious organisation in reference to the radical "Black Unity and Freedom Party." See Donna Perry, *Backtalk: Women Speak Out*, 274.

If fighting back on the political terrain proves somewhat unsatisfying for Verona and Desiree, who remain helpless, John's grandparents' visit initiates their final metamorphosis. With Granny Ruby and Grandpa Clifford, the empowering ancestors, they reconnect with their past and their cultural heritage, and revive long-forgotten traditions, such as storytelling, crocheting, or cooking: "The smell of fresh chocolate and nutmeg greeted Desiree as she came downstairs and she felt a stab of familiarity, reminded forcefully of Guyana, warm images she had thought long gone forming in her mind" (R, 148). The family reunion — or re-union — is certainly the occasion to step back in time and reminisce, so as to be able to move forward and envision their future. Remembering, or rather acknowledging whence they come, the two sisters are then better equipped to construct and define their new identities, "their new ways of seeing life" (R, 231), as members of the black diaspora settled on British soil.

Equally important is the grandmother's role as a guiding force, that relates her to the character of Mara. Granny Ruby's wise advice, her feminist discourse of emancipation and self-sufficiency, actually rooted in a matriarchal tradition, inspires Desiree with courage: "If you caan 'gree wid de man, is best fe lef him... [...] Is aright inna England, you can find life fe lead when you lef them" (R, 163-64). Mara's success and self-assurance, after she divorced her male chauvinist husband, corroborates the grandmother's no-nonsense approach to life and gives the two sisters the necessary impetus to change and take their destinies in their hands.

The novel closes on the characters' individual victories: eager to tackle their own possibilities, Desiree will go to college and Verona, who has been rejected by her white boyfriend Steve after announcing her pregnancy, eventually decides to keep her biracial child. The irony of their names — the markers of their individual identities — is then brought to its height. After years of frustrations, Desiree takes up the challenge to realize her own *desires*. As to Verona, named after Shakespeare's city of impossible, romantic love, she finally discards her novels, for there is "no romance in reality" (R, 219). Besides, unlike the two tragic Elizabethan heroes, she is a defiant "survivor," stronger than prejudices and taboos. She decides to go to "the Women's Centre" (R, 197) for advice and stays at "the unmarried mothers' hostel" (R, 220). If in *The Unbelonging* these places of refuge only signify exile and homelessness, in *Romance*, Riley endows them with a more positive connotation. Just like the

library or the kitchen, they are "islands," transitory healing places that momentarily protect female characters who are hurt, but not doomed: "Even this hostel is my choice," Verona claims to her sister (R, 225). Its "neglected garden," "the faded carpets" inside (R, 220), and "the unlit corridor [...] gloomy and dismal" (R, 221) are obvious symbols of the harsh reality of single parenthood and of the difficulties that await her. Yet, Verona, "sounding so strong and capable" (R, 222), and her sister are both willing to take the consequences of their choices. By re-defining their identities, as mothers, they have finally come to terms with themselves and gained a new freedom. The novel closes on Desiree's new vision:

*This was home, and the truth was it wasn't too bad. Granny Ruby was right: there never had been anything to liberate herself from her but herself. You couldn't fight when you were already defeated, only mark time. But now things would be different. The old Desiree was long gone, and all those other battles could come now. (R, 231)*

Such an optimistic and promising ending — of reconciliation and self-affirmation — implies a remapping of the multi-ethnic European city in a postcolonial context. London on the margins is a theme that runs through Joan Riley's fiction. With *Romance*, her representation of urban space transforms London as a possible place of anchorage. Riley's novel suggests that the African-Caribbean diaspora is not to be regarded as a displaced periphery within the centre. Since it contributes to urban diversity and richness, it has the option — if not the right — to appropriate the cosmopolitan city and make it its own, for as Henry Louis Gates rightly asks, "in an era of transnational capital, transnational labor, and transnational culture, how well is the center-periphery model holding up?"<sup>14</sup>

In her introduction to *Let it Be Told: Essays by Black Women in Britain*, Laretta Ngcobo defines the literary project shared by contemporary black women writers in these terms: "Few of our writings are strictly personal in the subjective sense of encompassing individual exploits. Rather, they reflect a collective subject, the common experience of Blackwomen [*sic*]. We deal with [...] subjects that highlight a Black female perspective."<sup>15</sup> Joan Riley's fictional

<sup>14</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons, Notes on the Cultural Wars* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 190.

<sup>15</sup> Laretta Ngcobo, "Introduction," in: Laretta Ngcobo (ed.), *Let it Be Told: Essays by Black Women in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1987), 4.

works definitely fit in with this generic formulation. Besides, feminist critics Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Goozé argue that "[t]he act of writing itself not only inscribes a site of resistance but equally is a means of empowerment. The writing provides a space within which the woman writer can locate and position her identity."<sup>6</sup> With *Romance*, one may actually draw a parallel between Riley and her fictional characters: rather than being a black woman on the margin, be it geographic, social, racial, gendered..., each of them — characters and writer alike — achieves a shift from imposed "otherness" to subjective "I-ness," a re-location of the centre, her *own* centre in accordance with her *own* sense of self. Furthermore, by imagining two very "dissimilar sisters" (*R*, 17) with distinct trajectories, the author insists on the plurality of individual multifaceted experiences in urban Britain, within any given community.

Though Riley's novels have received much critical acclaim from reviewers, too few in-depth analyses have been dedicated to her works, and to *Romance* in particular. The novel's interest is many-sided. Joan Riley's representation of London in the eighties gives insight into the psychological workings of African-Caribbean immigrants in a realistic mode. Besides, the fluidity of her urban settings as alternating metaphors of exile and refuge (or margins and centre) contributes to the portrayal of her characters caught in a never-ending process of identity (trans)formation.

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<sup>6</sup> Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Goozé, "Introduction: Placing Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in: Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Goozé (eds.), *International Women's Writing, New Landscapes of Identity* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), xiv.

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**Invisible Cities: Being and Creativity in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* and Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*<sup>1</sup>**

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*Beware of saying to them that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves.<sup>2</sup>*

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo warns us against revealing that several cities succeed one another under the same name and in the same place. The city is usually perceived to be a permanent space, its inhabitants clinging to an imaginary representation. But, as Marco Polo is aware, there are other cities hidden within the city. These invisible cities are remnants of the past or future developments, which are ignored or simply not perceived. They are also parallel worlds that thrive upon our doorsteps, populated by those who have been disregarded by the dominant ideology. Thus, cities not only "follow one another on the same site and under the same name," but also occupy the same moment in time. Some of these cities are discovered through literature; many will be born and die invisible to the eye of public consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the Arts Faculty at Hull University (UK) and the Carl Baron Memorial Fund for their financial support during the composition of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*. Trans. by William Weaver (1972; London: Vintage, 1974), 30-1.

Meera Syal and Ben Okri provide two different artistic approaches to invisibility. Syal's semi-autobiographical novel, *Anita and Me*, explores invisibility within the frame of a *Bildungsroman*. It is mostly concerned with public acknowledgement from a socio-realist point of view. Urban landscape develops in *Anita and Me* from an almost idyllic childhood space to a troubled reflection of multicultural Britain and its effect on the self. Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*, on the other hand, takes the shape of a fable about belonging, suffering and creativity where urban space achieves mythic status and invisibility is directly related to intrinsic being. Whilst still retaining the historic referent of colonialism and exile, Okri's aestheticised, invisible city represents the sublimation of the human condition. Whereas Syal's novel moves towards visibility, Okri's favours a deeper invisible state. But, despite their differences, both *Anita and Me* and *Astonishing the Gods* use invisibility in relation to self-discovery and creativity.

*Anita and Me* takes us to the fictional Tollington, in the suburbs of Wolverhampton, and shows us the life of an Indian migrant family and their English daughter. Tollington is portrayed as a village plagued by unemployment and decay, which is quickly being absorbed by Wolverhampton and becoming just another of the city's suburbs. Due to their status as migrants, the Kumars are even more remote from social events in Britain during the sixties than the rest of the villagers. Syal employs invisibility as a metaphor for marginalisation in history and society, setting it against a conventional story of teenage angst. It describes how the struggle for self-definition or visibility, albeit dangerous, is a source of creativity and strength for those straddled between two cultures.

The story is prefaced and narrated by the adult Meena, who looks back on her life in Tollington and her relationship with Anita Rutter, the epitome of the English Council estate teenager. Meena tells us from the very beginning that she has:

*[...] always been a sucker for a good double entendre; the gap between what is said and what is thought, what is stated and what is implied, is a place in which I have always found myself. I'm really not a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of a history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* (1996; London: Flamingo, 1997), 10. References cited hereafter in text as (A&M).

In the cross-roads where *Bildungsroman* and teenage fantasy collide, Meena inhabits the space between language and meaning, between words and what they suggest. She is a story-teller who creates her own myths from the "gap" between two sets of apparently rigid structures, playing in and with the overlapping interpretations provided by different frames of reference. *Anita and Me* is a fable or a series of fables about Meena, what she is and what she could be. Perception and self-conception, ambiguity and the struggle for self-definition, play a major part in the novel.

Meena the child is as aware as Meena the adult of the juxtaposition of white, working-class Tollington and the mainly middle-class Indian migrant community her parents cherish. Throughout the novel, the dichotomy between home and outside is emphasised by language, dress and behaviour. Meena's mother swaps "saris for M&S separates" (*A&M*, 61) as soon as she arrives home, and, even though she is always polite to "her English friends," she criticises them to other Indian women (*A&M*, 29). The Kumars seem to negotiate their identities more easily than Meena, perhaps because they are conscious of being migrants and of the difficulties this status entails. They compromise and select whatever suits them best. Meena's mother, for instance, ends up wearing a grey trouser suit to Mr. Christmas' funeral because it is "the nearest shade she could get to a compromise" (*A&M*, 79-80) between Hindu white mourning and the black the majority would be wearing. Diglossia is part of their everyday life. They can still differentiate, albeit symbolically, between here and there, between the India they left and the England they arrived in. The suitcases full of photographs and other items from India that they keep on top of their wardrobe physically separate their past from their present life in Tollington.

To "compromise" is a way of making oneself less conspicuous, as is the containment of Punjabi within family boundaries. Meena regards Punjabi as:

*an indoor language [...] an almost guilty secret which the Elders would only share away from prying English eyes and ears. On the streets, in shops, on buses, in parks, I [Meena] noticed how the volume would go up when they spoke in English: telling us kids not to wander off, asking the price of something; and yet when they wanted to say something intimate, personal, about feelings as opposed to acquisitions, they switched to Punjabi and the volume became a conspirational whisper. (A&M, 203)*

The phenomenon of code switching is naively described here. The "indoor" quality of Punjabi is linked in Meena's mind to feelings and guilt. It is a "secret" in which her parents, aunts and uncles participate fully, but she can only share partially. Meena does not know enough Punjabi even to speak to her grandmother. Still, she is conscious of it being unheard outside her family circle, kept "away from prying English eyes and ears," reserved for the most valued aspects of communication.

The invisibility of Indian migrants and the silencing of Punjabi reflect the situation in England during the sixties, when ethnic minorities were not recognised or fairly represented in government or the media. Meena looks in vain for a reflection of herself in television programmes such as *Opportunity Knocks*, which she regards as the easiest way to fulfil her dreams of leaving home and being famous. However, the non-white population of England is absent from the media.

*But if Tollington was a footnote in the book of the Sixties, then my family and friends were the squashed flies in the spine. According to the newspapers and television, we simply did not exist. If a brown or black face ever did appear on TV, it stopped us all in our tracks [...] But these occasional minor celebrities never struck me as real, they were someone else's version of Indian, far too exaggerated and exotic to be believable. Sometimes I wondered if the very act of shutting our front door transported us onto another planet. (A&M, 165)*

Tollington is on the outskirts of Wolverhampton, which is in itself a satellite of Birmingham, and relatively far from London, the capital of the Swinging Sixties. It is therefore three times removed from popular accounts of "the Sixties." Possession of a Mini is the only link the adult Meena can establish between the "book of the Sixties" in England and her childhood memories. Tollington is reportedly just twice on the news, once due to the demolition of the local school, and the second time after Tracey's near drowning. Migrants are even less represented in the media. They "live" on "another planet." At least, this is the impression that television creates.

Salman Rushdie borrows the words of G.V. Desani's H. Hatter when he refers to the acknowledgement of migrant presence in England: "The migrations of the fifties and sixties happened. 'We

are. We are here.'"<sup>4</sup> Rushdie's claim is primarily ontological. It refers to the existence of migrants in itself as much as to the fact they are in a specific place. The repetition of "we are" is a way of emphasising the correlation between public acknowledgement and intrinsic being. Invisibility is almost equated with non-existence and recognition presented as a condition for being. The Kumars are supposedly the only non-white family in the village. By the end of the novel we are aware that there is another migrant couple, a French woman and an Indian man, who have been so "invisible" that nobody knew they lived there. The only indication of their presence is a hidden statue of Ganesh in their garden that Meena discovers one night "emerging from the jungle" (*A&M*, 127). In order to see the statue, Meena must wrestle with overgrown plants, which she refers to as "jungle" in a curious twist of the typical adventure story. This time the adventures happen in a garden in England and the adventurer is far from being a white, middle-class man. The discovery is similar yet familiar. "We are here" is a shout for acknowledgement of the immigrants of the fifties and sixties, an act that would reinforce their self-consciousness. But the message newspapers and television spread at that time is the opposite of Rushdie's: "They are *not*. They are *not* here."

Teenage magazines such as *Jackie* also deny Meena's existence, since they only cater for white girls. The absence of successful role models influences Meena's attitude towards her body. The protagonist of *Jackie's* comic strip is always "a limpid-eyed, anorexic, blonde heroine (brunette if she was the independent type like a secretary or a champion showjumper) [...] the girls always looked like Sherrie or Anita" (*A&M*, 137-38). In the absence of successful role models, Meena's attitude towards her body changes. She feels it is inadequate for the adventures she would like to live. At this point, her relationship with Anita alters and the wish to be accepted by an older girl becomes a desire to become like her. Anita becomes her "passport to acceptance" (*A&M*, 148) and copying her image the guarantee of the fame, love and success Meena yearns for, a transformation that will whisk her away from the "planet" of her home which seems to her boring, mundane and miles from the rest of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> "Imaginary Homelands," in: Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1991; London: Granta Books, 1992), 15. References cited hereafter in text as (*IH*).

*I had never wanted to be anyone else except myself only older and famous. But now, for some reason, I wanted to shed my body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink and unrecognisable. I began avoiding mirrors, I refused to put on the Indian suits my mother laid out for me on the bed when guests were due for dinner, I hid in the house when Auntie Shaila bade loud farewells in Punjabi to my parents from the front garden, I took to walking several paces behind or in front of my parents when we went on a shopping trip, checking my reflection in shop windows, bitterly disappointed it was still there. (A&M, 146)*

Punjabi, which up to then was a silent and private language, suddenly becomes "loud" enough to embarrass Meena. By avoiding anything that indicates her difference from her ideal, including clothes, language and even her parents, Meena tries to attain her ideal image, which has been shaped by her surroundings. She inspects her image in mirror-like shop windows, both "disappointed" at the way she looks, yet hopeful she can change towards a more standard appearance, "pink and unrecognisable." "Shedding" her body and shutting off her parents' language and culture may be part of her process of growing up and the battle for individuation. But in an environment where whiteness is overvalued, Meena starts a process of self-erasure that starts with loathing her body and adopting the Yard idiolect on purpose, and ends in an almost fatal fall from a horse. Growing up is complicated with a desire to become "white," to be accepted and acknowledged.

Frantz Fanon's influential treatise on colonisation and its effect on the minds of the colonised, *Black Skin, White Masks*, deals extensively with the wish to suppress blackness. It begins with a controversial statement: "At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black man is not a man [...] Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation. Man is a *yes* that vibrates to cosmic harmonies" (*BSWM*, 8).<sup>5</sup> By associating "the black man" with negation of being, Fanon bluntly highlights both the fact that he has been denied recognition and the position of otherness into which he has slipped. Following Hegel's description of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Mind*<sup>6</sup> Fanon explores

<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York: Grove Press, 1967), 8. References cited hereafter in text as (*BSWM*).

<sup>6</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Trans. by J. B. Baillie (1910; London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).

the inferiority complex of the colonised, relating it to the self's quest for absoluteness. Desire for recognition is inherent to the need to form a consciousness of self. Hegel states that "self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the very fact that it exists for another consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized."<sup>7</sup> Meena wants Anita and Sam to accept her, and uses Anita's friendship to establish her own idea of self much as Anita uses her, Sally and Sherrie in the same way. However, Meena's desire for recognition leads her to obliterate herself. Using Fanon's terminology, she has "epidermalised" inferiority without questioning it, wishing to be visible as a human being by becoming less "visible" in terms of difference.

Meena's impulse to erase herself weakens gradually as she becomes more and more aware of the artificial polarisation of society. Sam Lowbridge's inadvertent exclusion of the Kumars from his definition of the people of Tollington during the Spring Fete marks the moment when Meena sees herself as equal to, if not better than, him and Anita. Until then, she had been looking up at both of them as older, more knowledgeable models of Yard youth. Sam's remarks change Meena's relationship to Tollington and to people in general:

*My neighbours, even now, would be sitting over mugs of steaming tea, retelling the story which had made strangers out of friends, labelled friendly passers-by as possible enemies, at least in my [Meena's] eyes. Nothing was safe any more; even my own mama had talked in an unknown poet's voice which made me think that at any moment, the walls of my home could buckle and shake, and crumble slowly downwards into the earth.*

*When I had whispered up all those silent prayers for drama and excitement, I had not imagined this, this feeling of fear and loneliness. But tonight I finally made the connection that change always strolled hand in hand with loss, upheaval, and that I would always feel it keenly because in the end, I did not live under the same sky as most other people. (A&M, 196-97)*

Meena, who until then had not had a doubt about her belonging in Tollington and the Yard, albeit in an imperfect body, starts questioning her position within the village and, therefore, within England. The image of the neighbours chatting "over steaming cups

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<sup>7</sup> Georg Wilhem Friedrich Hegel cited by Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 216.

of tea" presents a close-knit community from which the Kumars are excluded. The "mugs of tea" act as a familiar metonym for white English insularity. "Fear and loneliness" creep into the home Meena thought was safe, dividing the sky she lives in from most other people's. From that moment on, it is Sam she tries to forget by not looking at or talking to him. Further incidents result in Meena's decision to erase Anita from her mind, too.

*I began to realise I could use this enforced separation [from Anita] wisely, I could gradually erase her like a child's pencil drawing [...] and by the end of four months, I calculated, she would be nothing but a smudge, a faint outline caused by an inexperienced, uncoordinated hand. (A&M, 282)*

Anita's exorcism from Meena's mind is not a total erasure. Meena tries to turn her into a "smudge," a shadow of what she has been to her during her childhood and early teens. Meena's "inexperienced, uncoordinated hand" is also left behind. A more mature, coordinated Meena emerges from the hospital bed. She is reborn as she had wished earlier, although not "pink and unrecognisable." Meena's rebirth is more psychological than physical, although this mental change will take her out of Tollington and into visibility.

Sam's almost unbelievable last reproaches highlight the fact that Meena has not exited the frame of *Bildungsroman* and teenage fantasies.

*"You've always been the best wench in Tollington. Anywhere! Dead funny [...] But you was never gonna look at me, you won't be staying, will ya? You can move on. How come? How come I can't?" And then he kissed me like I thought he would, and I let him, feeling mighty and huge, knowing I had won and that every time he saw another Meena on a street corner he would remember this and feel totally powerless. (A&M, 314)*

The moment Sam not only acknowledges Meena but also admits wanting her to "look at" and consider him, marks the point at which Meena finally outgrows Tollington. Strengthened by Sam's revelations, she is ready to leave all behind. The whole novel seems to build up this moment when Sam and Meena spar in a ring of racial prejudice. Sam is still the difficult teenager who is reluctantly attracted to someone he thinks he should not be. Like Mr. Darcy in

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*,<sup>8</sup> he finally gives up controlling his feelings. But Meena is not another Elizabeth Bennet. Having gained power over her fantasy Sam, who does exactly what she "thought he would," she uses the fantasy to counter-attack. Although this final scene with a reproachful, weak Sam and a powerful, self-righteous Meena is in line with *Jackie's* comic strip stories, the fantasy does not carry Meena away in the end. The juxtaposition of Sam's strong Midlands accent with Meena's standard English indicates that Meena has already "moved on." Sam and Anita, on the other hand, are doomed to stay where they are: literally in the Yard in Tollington, symbolically in Meena's childhood memories.

Shedding her childhood and previous fantasies as her sweatjacket sinks with Tracey in the pond, Meena shakes off Sam's and Anita's influence over her. Ready to loosen all links with her childhood friends, go to grammar school and move house, she can still see what drove her towards Anita and Sam in the first place. But, like summer cast-offs, she has psychologically outgrown both them and Tollington. Meena must distance herself from her childhood in order to see her life in Tollington as just a part of something far bigger and more complex.

*I gradually drifted far away until I was outside my body, watching a fat brown girl chew her lip and talk in faltering sentences [...] And then I flew right through the roof of my house and saw everything: [...] I saw that Tollington had lost all its edges and boundaries, that the motorway bled into another road and another and the Bartlett estate had swallowed up the last cornfield and that my village was indistinguishable from the suburban mass that had once surrounded it and had finally swallowed it whole. It was time to let go and I floated back into my body which, for the first time ever, fitted me to perfection and was all mine. (A&M, 325-26)*

Psychological growth and detachment mark Meena's out-of-body experience. In a parody of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*,<sup>9</sup> Tollington loses "all its edges and boundaries" as her vision expands, breaking out of an apparently safe, clear-cut structure and blurring the differences between what she thought was "home" and the outside world. The motorway that the villagers had so resisted

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<sup>8</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, with an introduction by Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea Publishers, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory; James and the Giant Peach; Fantastic Mr Fox* (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 2000)

and which replaces the school, a symbol of the community, links them to an ambivalent urban landscape. The Bartlett estate is a reminder of what Tollington could become. On the other hand, a myriad of possibilities opens up with Tollington's (and Meena's) incorporation into the thriving city. The motorway "bleeds" into other roads, connecting urban spaces across Britain like blood vessels in a living organism. The village becomes "indistinguishable from the suburban mass," just as Meena reduces Anita to a "smudge." Meena realises that ambivalence and multiplicity are possible, and that a sharp, single meaning is not always the best way of making sense of the world. Her body, which she had previously rejected as inadequate, fits her perfectly as the scope of her vision widens.

Syal's use of perspective to blur Meena's clear but partial view is similar to Rushdie's in *Midnight's Children*. In "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie explains how Saleem's description of "the movement towards the cinema screen is a metaphor for the narrative's movement through time towards the present, and the book itself, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more "partial" (*IH*, 13). Meena's out-of-body experience recreates the adult Meena narrating her childhood memories, which are seen from a vantage point. Her past is as invisible as Marco Polo's cities and as imaginary as Rushdie's homelands.

Similarly, *Anita and Me* incorporates a squinted way of looking at things, an ironic stance that helps the adult Meena to keep her distance from the events that happen to her in the present. The very beginning of the novel is a declaration of principles that suppose a criticism of society's values.

*I do not have many memories of my very early childhood, apart from the obvious ones, of course. You know, my wind-swept, bewildered parents in their dusty Indian village garb standing in the open doorway of a 747 [...] living in a shabby boarding house room with another newly arrived immigrant family, Polish, I think it would be quite romantic [...] I slept in a drawer, probably, swaddled in back copies of the Daily Mirror [...] Of course, this is the alternative story I trot out in job interview situations or, once or twice, to impress middle-class white boys who come sniffing around, excited by the thought of wearing a colonial maiden as a trinket on their arm. (A&M, 9-10)*

Meena ironically appropriates "obvious" memories to subsequently undermine them by admitting to their being untrue and narrating

something quite different. Her jocular piling up of anecdotes reveals the absurdity of many assumptions underlying white liberal thinking. She is aware of the "gap" between both history and myth and strives to confuse both. Much as she does in the television comedy *Goodness Gracious Me*, Syal is here giving the adult Meena the possibility of adopting society's assumptions about her self in order to poke fun at them.

Irony has been regarded as a crucial element in the search for an authentic self by existentialist thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Jacob Golomb has stated that:

*as regards authenticity, the effect of a particular type of irony is especially important. I refer to the irony that indirectly casts doubt on the validity of prevailing values and thereby arrests or lessens the reader's motivation to continue upholding them. This effect is achieved by the simulated adoption of another's point of view for the purpose of ridicule, by reducing this point of view to absurdity [...] or by depicting the psychologically disastrous consequences of clinging to prevailing values.<sup>11</sup>*

For existentialist philosophers, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre, the notion of authenticity is, roughly, less about truthfulness and more about self-creation and transcendence, than to giving in to received ways of thinking and behaving. They believe that shedding these ideological values is a necessary precondition for attaining authenticity. Instead of "shedding" her skin, Meena ends up using irony to avoid being fixed by society's commands, attributing more value instead to her incessant self-creation through fiction. The changing urban landscape, with its "bleeding" roads and infinite possibilities, is the perfect environment for a Meena intent on challenging the old values of both white and Indian communities. The protagonist and the city are endlessly becoming, and hence authentic in their pursuit of transcendence.

Although he also uses irony to begin with, Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* is a more sombre challenge to the Hegelian idea that invisibility amounts to nonentity. *Astonishing the Gods* starts

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<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard's treatise *The Concept of Irony*. Trans. by L. M. Capel (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), for instance, concludes that "as philosophers claim that no true philosophy is possible without doubt, so by the same token one may claim that no authentic life is possible without irony." 338.

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity. From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 27.

with a vaguely socio-historical frame. But it rapidly becomes more about self-discovery, creativity and personal realisation, and less about fitting into and being acknowledged by ideological discourses. Okri's fable circles around a nameless character who sets out on a journey in search of visibility and historical relevance, but instead comes across an invisible city and finds himself endeavouring to become one of its invisible dwellers. Like Meena, he first learns to perceive himself as invisible and, therefore, non-existent, through his environment:

*It was in books that he first learnt of his invisibility. He searched for himself and his people in all the history books he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that he didn't exist. This troubled him so much that he resolved, as soon as he was old enough, to leave his land and find the people who did exist, to see what they looked like.<sup>12</sup>*

It is not until he goes to school that the protagonist becomes aware of his and his people's nonentity and resolves to shed his invisibility and become historically relevant. "History books" suppress anything related to the protagonist and his people, leading him to believe that they are not relevant to the world. His desire for visibility is once again the wish to be recognised and considered a human being. This passage is reminiscent of Fanon's account of the formation of an inferiority complex in the minds of the colonised. In Fanon's opinion, the colonised become more accepted the more they adopt the language and culture of the "civilising" nation that erases their culture's original traits (*BSWM*, 18). By accepting the dogmatic beliefs upheld by institutions — the school in this case — he becomes inauthentic as an individual. Thus, the protagonist paradoxically embarks on a quest for inauthenticity rather than authenticity.

The trip into the city represents the protagonist's struggle to abandon his illusions (in the sense of false perceptions of reality) and become authentic. Going through the avenue of mirrors seems to be the first stage in this process:

*The house-fronts, the castle facades, the bridges, the villas, the basilicas, were all made of mirrors [...] They all reflected themselves into an oddly terrifying infinity. When he saw how all things multiplied everything else, multiplying him wherever he looked, he experienced the strangest*

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<sup>12</sup> Ben Okri, *Astonishing the Gods* (London: Phoenix, 1999), 3. References hereafter cited in text as (AG).

*sensation. It was a sense of the happiness he must have known before birth.*  
(AG, 9)

The protagonist's "strange" happiness seems to appear as soon as he sees his image endlessly multiplied in the city. This is related to a time before birth, that is to say, a stage when the ego is supreme and the outside world has not intruded upon his sense of self. Similarly, the multiple reflection of the urban landscape is "oddly terrifying," presumably because it reproduces ideological structures of power — the castle, the basilica — and seeks to absorb his image into the city. Like the "history books," this avenue incorporates the self into ideological constructs unless he can see beyond the façades. Soon, the protagonist starts seeing other things beyond the mirrors, things his guide assures him are, in an allusion to countless fairy tales, "what you are, or what you will become" (AG, 11). The avenue of mirrors highlights the fact that our image does not necessarily reflect what we are within, or it does so only partially. The wonderful sights behind the mirrors could be glimpses into a life beyond rigid, superficial, unquestioning states of being.

The fact that neither the protagonist, his guides nor the city are named emphasises the relationship between being and invisibility or, in this case, absence of linguistic signifiers. Given the importance attributed to invisibility, one would expect the narrator not to describe the city. However, *Astonishing the Gods* contains beautifully written passages describing avenues, buildings and squares. These descriptions are always suffused with the impression that the city is an illusion:

*He was struck by the buildings. They were magnificent; they were bold; they had astounding facades, with stately columns and conch-shell capitals and graceful entablatures [...] The buildings, in their perfection, looked like some kind of dream-created illusion. He was puzzled by the monumentality of things and their apparent lightness.* (AG, 8-9)

Okri's descriptions seem accurate enough, but his use of evocative yet ultimately vague adjectives, including "astounding," "bold," "magnificent" and "stately," points in a different direction. The description of the city is a "dream-created illusion" which refuses to yield any of its mysteries. As the narrator says, it is "a riddle without an answer" (AG, 5). The protagonist does not go into any of the buildings until the very end, when he has become one of the

Invisibles, and the city's maze of facades representing castles, churches, libraries, loggias, palaces, and so on, remain visions that anticipate unseen dimensions. His journey into the city becomes a visit to all the possible cities it contains, most of which he does not perceive in the first instance. Much like the Emperor in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the protagonist will wander aimlessly around the same city without realising that he is just seeing different aspects of it. In order to proceed, he has to acknowledge not only that "sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name," as Marco Polo does, but also that they can co-exist in the same temporal and spatial coordinates.

However, the "astonishing" urban space is ultimately a disposable illusion. Gradually, the protagonist realises that buildings are "materialised dreams" (AG, 35), that the city is "shaped by music, by spirit," that "it was the harmonies in the air that made him sense that the visible city was a pretext and a guise for an invisible realm" (AG, 38). The protagonist must learn that the visible aspects of the city are transient reflections of the invisible city. Just as his image in the mirrors hides other aspects of his being, the visible city is like a by-product of the main city, which is built on dreams and ideas.

*It suddenly appeared odd to him, but the solid things of the city seemed like ideas. And ideas, which were alive in the air, seemed to him like solid things. A house of justice became a mood of green. The fragrance of roses turned into the statues of five Africans along the street. A melody which he started to hum became a giant sun-dial. (AG, 40)*

The city is continually in motion, becoming something else. The fluidity of the urban landscape corresponds to the thoughts and moods of its invisible dwellers, who create a world through their music just as the Ainurs imagine the world in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*.

Creativity, however, comes at a price. What the protagonist takes for a world of happiness (AG, 10) is soon revealed to be one of transcendence achieved first by suffering and then through its absence. The bridge of mist he must cross to reach the inner circle of the city seems designed to test self-reliance and creativity. The bridge turns invisible, then transforms to water, fire, stone, and finally air and dreams. In a way similar to the struggle of Michael Ende's Momo to walk a street where time does not exist in the

eponymous novel,<sup>13</sup> the protagonist must re-learn several times the trick of moving in a space without time, or where time has stopped, whilst at the same time becoming aware of the city's past:

*As if in a mist, he saw whole peoples rising from the depths of a great ocean, rising from the forgetful waters. Then, with a fixed and mystic gaze in their eyes, he saw them walking to an island of dreams. There they began building a great city of stone, and within it mighty pyramids and universities and churches and libraries and palaces and all the new unseen wonders of the world. He saw them building a great new future in an invisible space. They built quietly for a thousand years. They built a new world of beauty and wisdom and protection and joy to compensate for their five hundred years of suffering and oblivion beneath the ocean. They had dwelt as forgotten skeletons on the ocean bed [...] He noticed that there is also light in the depths. (AG, 27)*

This unsettling passage suggests that the city belongs to those who have been forgotten or overlooked, hence their invisibility. But it could also refer to drowned people, probably slave ships crossing the Atlantic ocean, or to oppressed peoples in Africa and America, who had "five hundred years of suffering and oblivion." Whatever the interpretation, the images of "forgotten skeletons" raising and building a city looms over the rest of the text, conferring on *Astonishing the Gods* a particularly bleak atmosphere in spite of the prevalence of metaphors of light. The protagonist is warned several times that transcendence is like not living. One of the clearer warnings he receives comes from the woman who is leaving the invisible city: "'I am going where there is some illusion [...] Too much beauty is bad for the soul,' she said. 'I want illusion. I want some ugliness. I want some suffering. I want to be visible.'" (AG, 77). The woman's words ring ominously throughout the whole novel, turning the protagonist's heroic achievement of total invisibility and transcendence into an ambiguous triumph which could turn into a lifeless imprisonment within dehumanised perfection. In this sense, *Astonishing the Gods* is a double-edged sword which on the one hand advocates creativity and a rejection of conventional social structures, whilst on the other warning against taking the creative drive so far that beauty and happiness end up losing their meaning because they are not juxtaposed to ugliness and suffering.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Ende, *Momo*. Trans. by Maxwell Brownjohn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

Okri himself is aware of this paradox when he states that "my books that seem to be books of light are actually books of despair, and I always say that, with the passing of time, *Astonishing the Gods*, which is seen as the book of light, will grow darker."<sup>14</sup> Okri seems to be blending both Hegelian phenomenology and existentialist ideas in his portrait of the city and its inhabitants. For Hegel, freedom would only be possible after the end of history, whereas the existentialists believe that it is possible only by rejecting current ideology. The city is in a limbo-state where time does not move, where one is aware of the past and aims to achieve perfection but is aware of it being impossible. Passages on the city's past and its future return the city to history and linear perceptions of time. But by insisting on the inhabitants of the city being *in* time, that is to say, continually living in the present and, therefore, not dying or fully living, Okri's narrative becomes a blank canvas where everything is possible.

The narrator's final statement that invisibility belongs to "the blessed" (AG, 159) contrasts with the opening idea that it is a synonym of marginalisation, as well as with Syal's approach in *Anita and Me*. The speech of the third master of invisibility sheds some light into the role of creativity and authenticity in the invisible city:

*Great fame, great visibility, great temporal power are the easiest things for us to accomplish, according to our way. Hence we deem them small, and not worthy of our efforts.*

*The most difficult thing for us is to do things which achieve permanence in the higher universe, and which are unseen, and can never therefore be destroyed. Our highest acts of creativity are in the empty spaces, in the air, in dreams, in unseen realms. There we have our cities [...] We are learning to be masters of the art of transcending all boundaries. We are learning to go beyond the illusion that is behind the illusion. (AG, 148)*

The imaginary world takes over any supposed reality, which is deemed an "illusion." But in the invisible city it seems to have been taken too far. By going "beyond the illusion that is behind the illusion," the Invisibles have left behind all sense of reality and turned the imaginary into the real. This has created a void where illusion is no longer present in the invisible city; everything — dreams, ideas, moods — becomes "real" or at least "present" and so

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<sup>14</sup> Delia Falconer, "Whispering to the Gods. An Interview with Ben Okri," *Island Magazine*, 71 (Winter 1997), 49.

life "beyond" the imaginary can become as prosaic as life in the world of visibility. True to the existentialist philosophy that lies in its background, *Astonishing the Gods* ends with an indictment of the self as a god-like creator of her/his world. It is ultimately a cry for aesthetic excellence and authenticity of being which sacrifices historical representation to a permanent trip into invisible cities. The protagonist has travelled a long way from his desire to be historically relevant to the aesthete's search for excellence and sublime beauty regardless of political or social relevance. To "astonish the gods" is not to bend to ideological discourses, but to find our true selves and recreate our world and ourselves endlessly.

At first sight it may seem that by emphasising an aestheticist stance over a more realist approach, Okri advocates something radically opposed to Syal. After all, the third master of invisibility refers to a "higher universe" where things "achieve permanence" whereas Syal's narrative focuses on an ever-changing urban environment which reflects the ambiguities prevalent in the mental landscape of her main character. However, the paradoxical nature of *Astonishing the Gods* and its refusal to decide whether the invisible city is any better than the visible world indicates the contrary. Okri's allegoric trip into invisibility complements Syal's own exploration of the dichotomy between the need to be socially visible and the drive for individuality and resistance of master narratives.

Both authors employ the metaphors of visibility and the city to overcome the constraints of identity-driven readings which would confine them to various, usually social-realist, autobiographical genres. Okri's Invisibles live "in the empty spaces, in the air, in dreams, in unseen realms;" Syal's Meena, in spite of being a semi-autobiographical character, is comfortable "in the gap between what is said and what is thought." In different ways, both writers endeavour to overcome the strictures of the visible city and permanently dwell on the edge between reality and fantasy, city and mind. *Anita and Me* and *Astonishing the Gods* are parables of individual awareness where urban space achieves mythic status, be it through Syal's remembered fragmentation of the mundane or by Okri's "magnificent" construction of a quasi-Biblical story.

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## York in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*: a City in-between

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*Behind the Scenes at the Museum* by Kate Atkinson is firmly set in York. The very beginning of the novel, though, is already a clue to the way the reader is going to be walked around, through, behind and beyond the geography of the town. The first mention of the setting is "Above the Shop," followed by "the Shop" and "the Backyard" (*BSM*, 9, 10). It is only then that this ensemble is said to "cower beneath the looming dominance of York Minster." The narrator's anonymous family abode is thus marked from the start as of at least as much importance as the touristic highlights of the capital of Yorkshire. Familiarity with the place in which one grows up — this is a fictional autobiography — probably explains why the national heritage aspect of York is, if not quite ignored, certainly taken for granted. This appears as even more natural when one learns that the narrator's extended family has been living in the same town and in the same part of town for three generations — the novel is also a family saga — since the great-grandfather's death at the turn of the last century. Certainly the "Yorkey" quality of York is very much played down, the "pale fretwork ruins of St Mary Abbey and the unnamed broad calm river" (*BSM*, 10) mentioned, one feels, as a half-hearted concession to the reader avid for real details. As to "the stone on Burton Stone Lane — a big, black boulder at what was once

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995; London: Black Swan, 1996). References cited hereafter in text as (*BSM*).

the city boundary" (*BSM*, 198), it comes into the text as it comes into the narrator's mind, through association of ideas when she looks at her sister's tombstone. The Rowntree chocolate factory where Lillian, the narrator's great aunt worked, or Leak and Thorp's where Bunty, the narrator's mother, buys her formal clothes, are of more consequence than the Minster or the castle. The descriptive angle is clearly defined as that of ordinary people living ordinary lives. This familiarity actually feels like lack of pride or pleasure in the town and suggests that York, far from being one of the historic cities of England, is just the place in which the narrator got stuck because her own mother had herself got stuck in it instead of going to Kansas, as she had hoped to do with her American sergeant in 1944.

But if familiarity breeds contempt, it also, fictionally speaking, breeds realism. This realism is obvious in the ease with which the reader can follow the characters moving around the city. The route followed by Bunty, her small daughter Gillian and the narrator from the Shop in one of the old streets around the Minster;<sup>2</sup> to the Museum Gardens, along Blake Street, then to Nell's house in Lowther Street, up Gillygate and along Clarence Street is perfectly correct. The same can be said of the passage where Bunty is described as a child, running to catch the school outing train from her home in Lowther Street "up Lowther Street and along Clarence Street [...] down Grosvenor Terrace into Bootham, [...] over the Ouse on Scarborough Bridge [...] onto Leeman Road [...] onto Station Road" (*BSM*, 194,195).

Although one should immediately point out that the meticulously reported route is in fact, in a subtle almost subliminal way, destabilising the reader's sense of the reality of the city. For s/he knows that, in the first of the above quotations, the narrator is in the first stage of cell splitting leading to the production of a human embryo. In the second one she manages, less magically but no less incredibly, to know about the life and feelings of a mother who never talked to her, or to anybody else. The real streets of York therefore become part of a work of imaginative (re)creation of memory, and that in an imaginary piece of writing. They give the impression of being at the same time on and off the map of a city called York. The destabilisation of the reader actually goes on with the mention of places like pubs and shops which only a true

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<sup>2</sup> This street remains carefully unnamed; the text is thus already walking the narrow margin between fact and fiction, between realism and fantasy.

"York(wo)man" can know. Bunty, for example, in her walk at the beginning of the novel, leaves the Museum Gardens to go to the butcher's (nothing striking there) and then to "Richardson's the bakers," "Hannon's for apples, spring cabbage and potatoes, on to Borders' for coffee, cheese and butter" (*BSM*, 22). On the one hand, the assurance with which the names are rolled on almost suggests factional writing, but on the other, their strangeness to most readers keeps them in the field of straight fiction. The strategy strengthens the impression of a York somehow positioned between two worlds.

One could say, though, that beside destabilising readers' expectations as to realistic description of space, the insistence on everyday ordinary life: going to school, going to the pub, going shopping, etc. represents an attempt at deglamourising one of the most glamorous places in the country, putting it off the historic, touristic map. The highlights in the lives of the inhabitants of York as described in the novel seem to be limited to the Christmas pantomime, the Coronation and the World Cup in 1966. This could seem to contradict the idea of a city on the margin or of the margin of a city. York has been struck off the exclusive national heritage list only to join the mass of undistinguished and undistinguishable English towns living their uniform post-industrialisation lives. But again, this is not quite the case. The lives narrated in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* are not quite everyman's life; they are the lives of those people traditionally kept on the margins of fiction, the lower middle classes whose members usually constitute an uneasy fringe in the imaginary worlds created by novelists. The rising middle classes took over from the gentry and the aristocracy in the novel of the nineteenth century, and the working class invested the world of fiction at the turn of the twentieth century, but this transitional group of shopkeepers living above their shops and of earnest foremen to whom the narrator and her family belong have not quite, until *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, managed to go beyond their role as a kind of human backdrop to the adventures of more exciting characters.

Not only are the York people described in Kate Atkinson's novel as belonging to the blurred social space between two social classes, they also somehow manage to remain on the edge of life and history. This family saga starting with the Boer war gives the — often humorous — impression of an accumulation of missed

chances.<sup>3</sup> It is as if York and its inhabitants had gone through the twentieth century without being touched by its events in any significant manner. The First World War is summed up, rather devastatingly, through Tom's experience. He is "terrified out of his wits at the idea of going to the Front" (*BSM*, 219), manages to get an exemption, but also manages to become a hero when a Zeppelin tears his hand off as he is going back home.<sup>4</sup> The non-hero reappears in World War Two under the name of Sandy Havis. His ship is sunk by the enemy, but he dies accidentally "hit on the head by a crate of spam as he fell into the water" (*BSM*, 103). This way of remaining just beyond, or beside, history is perfectly summarised in the description of the news of Kennedy's death:

*When I hear the news that Kennedy has been shot, I am the only person remaining seated at the dining-room table, listening to the news [...] Patricia, Bunty and then George have all abruptly left the table in the course of an argument which has escalated to proportions which made anything that has happened in the Lone Star State seem small by comparison. The incident had been sparked off by the packet of Featherlight that had turned up in Patricia's blazer pocket. (BSM, 240)*

The same goes for life itself. It starts with the great-grandmother's romantic elopement to the French Riviera with a Frenchman. The elopement, however, turns into a totally unromantic relationship merely consisting of silence and nagging. It continues with Bunty falling in love with a Kansas sergeant, who manages to have his foot blown off and get shipped back to America, taking with him Bunty's hopes of a better, or at least a different life, and one could say it concludes with the narrator herself who, despite all the signs of brilliance which she gives all through the novel, ends up marrying the son of an Italian fish-and-chip-shop owner in Edinburgh, in other words repeating her mother's (non) progress.

But this is only the first aspect or level of the effort to lift York out of its status and its very existence as a stone and mortar place. Not content with using realism to blur the received image of

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<sup>3</sup> As Bergson demonstrated in his essay on laughter, being the object of someone's sense of humour (here the narrator's) is also, of course, a sign that one is being perceived as on the fringe of the norm, *i.e.*, on the fringe of humanity and therefore a fit subject for laughter.

<sup>4</sup> This has the added consequence of making Albert's death on the Front even more useless, and the lives of people even more marginal in the dispensable quality they thus acquire.

the city, the text uses what is today called magic realism to take it (at the same time) into another, fantasy, fantastic and memory world. The orientation towards the margin of things in general is both strengthened and opened by the presence, right from the beginning of the novel, of this other world. It is introduced with the following description which needs no comment:

*In this street [where the narrator grows up] lived the first printers and the stained-glass craftsmen that filled the windows of the city with coloured light. The Ninth Legion Hispana that conquered the north marched up and down our streets, the via praetoria of their great fort, before they disappeared into thin air. Guy Fawkes was born here, Dick Turpin was hung a few streets away and Robinson Crusoe, that other great hero, is also a native son of this city. (BSM, 10)*

The introduction of a time dimension puts York on another fringe, where memory and fantasy unite to carry the past into the present. This is expressed first through the recurrent mention of the ghosts that inhabit Above the Shop next to the human tenants. Those are responsible for the passage of human time "souring the milk and sprinkling dust on the shelves" (BSM, 25). They accompany the narrator's family through the rituals of their lives getting "ready for their festival celebration" at Christmas just like everybody else. But more importantly, they are the ones who define York as a city composed of the layers of memory(ies) accumulated by successive generations. On Coronation day, for example:

*[the] echoing murmur from the household ghosts vibrates in the evening air. [...] They have seen much happen within these ancient city walls, sieges and air raids, fires and massacres, the rise and fall of empires. They have witnessed the coronation of the Roman Emperor Constantine a stone's throw away and the degradation of the great railway king, George Hudson. They have seen poor Richard York's head spiked on the city gates and the valiant Royalists besieged within them. (BSM, 91)*

Not only is life in York both on and off the map, but it also seems to be in a sort of no man's time that includes the narrator's past reconstructed, or represented as moments of present, and all the past(s) of the town and its former inhabitants. This is effectively summed up in the ghosts' reaction to the fire that destroys the Shop and Above the Shop:

*The household ghosts regard their own charred debris — the melted stained-glass panels, the blackened centurions' helmets, the frizzled periwigs, and raise a collective sigh of endurance. York has been scoured and destroyed by fires many times and they are not in the least surprised at going through another one. (BSM, 215)*

Besides, one should not forget the other, imaginary dimension of the past, hinted at in the first quotation through the names of Dick Turpin and Robinson Crusoe, direct ancestors of the fictitious first person narrator of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, her family and their past(s). The conjunction of the different factors examined so far already seems to define York no longer even as on the border of anything, but as a city of the mind, a city being born again from its ashes, constructing and reconstructing itself from the flakes of its remembered past. One could almost say that it is a cousin to Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.<sup>5</sup>

Except that it does not quite function in the same way. It relies heavily on the realistic surface of the imaginary memory that constitutes the York of the narrator's family, present and past. This memory, like the topographical details described earlier, is determinedly oriented towards the singular, the individual, not to say the trivial of micro-history as opposed to the recorded and recognised events of macro-history. Of course lip service is paid to History, with dutiful chapters about the different wars, celebrations and assassinations which have already been mentioned. But these chapters are literally reduced to the status of footnotes — the title of each of them is given, followed by a numeral. That their importance is only relative is made clear through the fact that, apart from the first three, the "Footnotes" are not inserted in a chronological order. We start with the great-grandmother's disappearance a hundred years back, then go a generation forward to the eve of World War I, then straight into World War II. But "Footnote (iv) — Bonny Birds" takes the reader back to just after Alice, the great grandmother, has gone. We then jump forward to 1958, then back to a day during the Second World War, then further back to a day in the First World War, and things go on in this apparently uncontrolled see-saw manner. The deconstruction of historical (*i.e.* real) memory is continued, first through the tongue-in-cheek seriousness of the fictional autobiography and family-saga part of the novel. The

<sup>5</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972; London: Picador, 1974). References cited hereafter in text as (IC).

historical episodes are in contrast with the narrator's progress which follows a rigidly chronological order, as if any missed detail might threaten proper understanding of the whole. Besides, the narrator's imaginary family's adventures are systematically inserted in the "historical" footnotes. The result is that they gain in verisimilitude while history acquires a definite fictional feel as, for example, when the only Zeppelin probably seen, and probably there by mistake, in the city of York is the one that hits Tom and tears off his hand. But the best example of this shift from historical memory to personal memories is probably that of the bombing undergone by York during the Second World War. The reader follows the narrator's mother as the list of destroyed landmarks lengthens:

*St Martin-le-Grand destroyed, the roof of the ancient Guildhall turned to ash. The riverside warehouses, the Evening Press offices, the Art Gallery, the School for the Blind — all in flames. Not a pane left in the magnificent arched roof of the railway station. The carriage works smashed, trains damaged, schools and houses wrecked [...]. (BSM, 102)*

The shift from the official to the personal, already visible in this quotation, is finalised a few lines further down with the description of what seems to be the really important damage from Bunty's point of view, that of her kind employers' house and shop:

*[...] Bunty [...] was shocked to see the little shop — and the flat above — exposed to the air like a doll's house with the front taken off. She could see the gas stove in the kitchen and the display shelves with Mrs Carter's Worcester plates and, down in the shop, a tailor's dummy headless and legless like a torso, and a couple of frocks hanging on a rail, swaying gently in the breeze. (BSM, 102)*

This scene indicates that the rewriting of history done in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* is more than simply post-modern practice. It also does more than reveal what history means to ordinary people, it gives voice to a female point of view. The ordinary individual, whom we have mentioned as being at the perceiving centre of the novel, is in fact a woman. We already had an intimation of it when exploring the topography of York which led us mostly to shops, relatives' houses and the public gardens where children are aired. That the memory of the bombing is female is obvious. The comparison of the gutted building to a doll's house, with the pathos attached to and felt about cherished china now

exposed in the street speak for themselves. The mention, a few lines later, that the shock of the war for Bunty was the discovery of the bodies of neighbours, a mother and her child, "[the] little baby curled up in his mother's arms, looking so peaceful (for once)" (*BSM*, 102, 103), is just as clear. The humour of the aside only strengthens the mixture of familiarity and shock. The history that is being told is in fact the history of women kept outside history, of women who stay at home and wait for their men's leave, the fateful official telegrams and the end of the current war. It is the history of those whose voices are systematically muted. It explains the author's choice of the lower middle class as human setting, as it fits the position of women (ignored, essential and silent) perfectly. It throws light on the feeling of York as a city somehow outside, or on the margin of, history as well. This fits the status of women within history perfectly well too: there, but not directly concerned, except when it comes to healing the sick and wiping up the mess. Finally, the fact that Bunty, the most silent character in the novel, is the one through whose eyes the above events are seen is also highly significant. For as the narrator reveals to us, Bunty's silence is not empty, it is wilful and covers all those thoughts and feelings deemed unimportant in the writing of History.

The narrative thus puts York, the historical city *par excellence*, firmly on the margin of what I called earlier macro-history, the history of nations, their wars, treaties and betrayals. It is as if the history through which the narrator's family has lived is already on the same level as the ghosts of Constantine, Richard York or Guy Fawkes. But the narrative does not content itself with undermining and deconstructing; it also and in a very conscious manner builds another history of York, a history which appears as layered rather than linear. We seem to enter another time scale, the geological,<sup>6</sup> which works through accumulation and accretion of sometimes not very clearly-defined elements. Again one thinks of the houses in which bits left by previous generations (like the three glass buttons that go through the whole novel) gather dust without any of the succeeding housewives finding enough courage to throw them away.

The best way to show, or uncover, this layered past is probably through a close look at one aspect of the text where space

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<sup>6</sup> This distance maintained with linear time only confirms the notion of a female a-historical past.

and time meet, or seem to meet: that of entertainment. The places where the narrator's family like to go on an evening and at the weekend are mentioned recurrently, naturally enough as they are the closest these hard-working people come to freedom and luxury. It is not surprising, seeing that the novel is very much written from a female point of view, that pubs do not occupy an important place. Respectable women do not go to the pub, so the narrator's father's favourite, The Punch and Bowl, is only mentioned twice. Apart from that, the only other mention of a pub happens when Jack gives Nell "a rueful smile" (*BSM*, 50) at having to leave her company to go to The Golden Fleece for a beer with her brother. Betty's Bar (*BSM*, 105) does not seem to manage to outlast the presence of American troops and their need for female company.

Mixed places of entertainment offer a more interesting case, functioning a little like the accumulation of ghosts from different periods already quoted. The music hall at the Empire where soldiers take their girls during their leave from the Great War (*BSM*, 58), the "dances at the de Grey Rooms and the Clifton Ballroom" (*BSM*, 107) frequented by Bunty during the Second World War, The Acropolis Coffee House (*BSM*, 230) of the narrator's own adolescence and "the Chinese restaurant in Goodramgate" (*BSM*, 236) where George, the narrator's father, takes his family for a meal, are as much part of York as the Minster or the Castle. They just show it from a totally different perspective, digging into people's lives and revealing the slow changes that affect them rather than looking at the proud and apparently immortal monuments erected in past ages. We do not go from Roman to Gothic architecture, we go from native musical tradition to American jazzy rhythms to a growing trend towards dining out on exotic food with "high-pitched string music twang[ing] plangently in the background" (*BSM*, 237). The humour, again, should not hide the basic aim which is to bring back into the frozen official city the ephemeral unofficial lives of ordinary people, although one should note that these ephemeral lives do have a central reference point, and that is the Theatre Royal where you go to see the Christmas pantomime as a family, and where your man-friend takes you when you are past the age of the Acropolis Coffee House.

Cinemas, another aspect of popular entertainment, create another sort of pattern. We are told of the Electric Cinema in Fossgate (*BSM*, 68) and The New Picture House in Coney Street, (*BSM*, 58) both running during World War I, of the Clepton Cinema

(BSM, 101) during World War II and of the Odeon (BSM, 224) in 1963. We could assume, as with the places of entertainment just analysed, that new cinemas were built to replace those made obsolete by changes in fashion and technical progress. But this is not quite the case, for Bunty, a teenager during the Second World War, regrets going to the Clifton, thinking the film was better at the Electric. So we have here a hint of picture houses of different periods standing side by side, just like Romanesque and Gothic churches can be found competing for glory in the same town. Perhaps because the cinema has become the cathedral of the ordinary person of the twentieth century? It is certainly, as far as Bunty is concerned, the only escape from a life which she feels to be totally unsatisfactory. Her thoughts, as she gets up on the morning after the narrator's conception, say it all. She puts on lipstick and "her mirrored self grins ghoulishly back, but in Bunty's 35mm daydreams she's transformed into a Vivien Leigh-like figure pirouetting in front of a cheval mirror." She then goes down "in daydreamland a great curving plantation staircase" (BSM, 12) and she has her early morning cup of tea in "[...] a place where a flimsy veil moves in a summery breeze and behind the veil is Bunty dressed in gauzy white organza with an eighteen-inch waist and a different nose. The man at her side is unbelievably handsome, remarkably like Gary Cooper, while Bunty herself bears a passing resemblance to Celia Johnson" (BSM, 14). It is obviously the cinema that provides visions of paradise to its devotees and no longer the atmosphere of the old Minster. Maybe again because it has never paid attention to the needs of women.

Bunty's cinematic dreams are not, however, at the centre of the imaginary York landscape drawn by *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. They could even be said to be a rather impoverished version of the almost magic (and certainly fantastical) York described, invented, reconstituted (one is never quite sure) by the narrator in her (auto)biographical enterprise. The comparison that immediately comes to mind again here is Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and in particular Esmeralda, the city made of the intersecting and superimposed routes of all those who have been there, a city whose map, the narrator tells us, "should include, marked in different inks, all these routes, solid and liquid, evident and hidden" (IC, 71). York is first marked by important crossroads, one of them being Lowther Street where the narrator's grandmother and her sister and brother settle. This is where young men, friends, suitors

and even a Canadian cousin turn up. This is the place which children leave to start their lives and which they come back to with their own children. The only other place that can really compete is Above the Shop, the centre of the web woven by the narrator telling her life and moves in the city.

One can also say that the map of York somehow goes beyond the city. The young men going to the front in the First World War take it with them: the Ouse where they remember learning to swim as they lie in a crater full of muddy and bloody water or in the colour of the forget-me-nots on the tea-service of Lowther Street (the colour of the eyes of Albert who used to live in Lowther Street and has just been killed). Edmund, arriving from Canada at the beginning of World War II, has obviously had it imprinted in him by his mother, Lillian. Edmund is also one example of the city as the place where people from different horizons, different worlds meet and where their individual histories cross and add to one another. One remembers Bunty's American sergeant, and her sister's Canadian, Will. But there is also Max Brechner, "their butcher on Haxby road" (*BSM*, 56), finding himself treated as an alien during the First World War and being imprisoned in a concentration camp where Lillian goes to throw him apples. And there is Mr Simon, the kind Hungarian Jew, owner of "Modelia — Quality Ladies' Fashions" where Bunty works and experiences the few years of genuine happiness of her life. The reader learns that he and his companion gas themselves when both their sons are killed, hers in the war, his at Dachau. One can say that York is in fact reinscribed in history in an indirect, devious way, through this accumulation of small private lives and griefs. But it is another history, the history hidden under the official one, the history only known to those who know the persons concerned, the history of people generally thought of as dispensable.

But dispensable or not, the lives of these people are not only re-created by the narrator, they are also given back their dignity through the systematic way in which they are woven into the imaginary level of myth and literature, and even of the cinema, the myth-creating medium of the twentieth century. The cinema is a way to lift oneself out of anonymity, and Bunty, as we have seen, is the one who uses this strategy most regularly, reacting to irritating domestic mishaps by "being very brave, rather like Deborah Kerr in *The King and I*" (*BSM*, 181). But fairy tales and the classics are literarily interwoven into the lives of every generation, providing

them with meaning where history fails. There are no less than seventeen references to literature from *Peter Pan* to *Great Expectations*, without forgetting Chekhov or Bram Stoker. There are at least fourteen references to legends and fairy tales, and the most elaborate, about Hansel and Gretel, sums up the process:

*If Hansel and Gretel had stayed lost in the forest for ever, we could have remained trapped with them and forgotten about The Floozy and sour cream and un-iced Christmas cakes. And Gillian wouldn't have died either. But the plot's unstoppable — the witch is burnt to a heap of charred rags and ashes, the wicked stepmother's pardoned, children reclaimed. Hansel and Gretel discover the witch's treasure chest, overflowing with emeralds, diamonds, opals, rubies (!), sapphires, glowing like the bag of boiled sweets Gillian and I are sharing. The Good Fairy sends a shower of glitter from her wand so thick that when I put out my hand I can touch it. (BSM, 183)*

The quotation speaks both of the powerlessness of myth in everyday human life and of its unavailability as a way of putting, not order, but pattern onto the chaos of the world. This is where the imaginary memory pattern of York is finally achieved, starting from a real or a possibly real event and flying up on a trajectory *à la Calvino*.

Except that Kate Atkinson's York differs in an important aspect from the invisible city of Esmeralda mentioned earlier. While there is no repetition in Esmeralda, repetition is an essential part of the pattern of imaginary York. The ghosts remember the number of times York has been burnt and scoured; the text gives us two instances: the historical burning under Nazi bombs and the fictional fire of Above the Shop and the Shop. Isn't there another fire written in the blanks of the text, that of York Minster in the eighties? For this major European historical building, which had escaped damage from bombing (the text underlines it), to be nearly destroyed by lightning, struck people's imagination. It is probably the hidden repetition that can also be found in the lines of characters' lives.<sup>7</sup> They seem to follow cycles, preferably of three. Nell only manages to get married on the third try, two fiancés dying before Frank proposes and survives to take her to the altar. Generation after

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<sup>7</sup> One should note, though, that hidden parts of fictional people's lives are finally revealed in some way or other. The narrator cannot depend, as with the fires, on a communal memory.

generation of women attempt to escape, in vain, their fate as British housewives through fallings for exotic lovers: Alice the ancestor runs away with a Frenchman and it all goes sour, Bunty dreams of America, but things do not materialise, and the narrator, Ruby, falls for an Italian... living in Edinburgh.<sup>8</sup> Twins are also a recurrent family event: Alice had Ada and Williams, Lillian's son in Canada has twins, Bunty's sister has Daisy and Rose and Bunty had Ruby and Pearl. Genetics? Yes, of course. The narrator herself speaks of "the cherub gene [...] a headful of bubbling blond curls" (*BSM*, 80) and forget-me-not blue eyes. It is carried through the generations in Ada, Albert, Edmund, Gillian and Pearl. But we leave the realm of hard science when Lillian, who instantly knew when her brother was killed in France, gives birth to a boy who could be her brother's child. When Edmund turns up in Lowther Street as a young man, they first think that he is Albert's ghost, or his twin across generations. Genetics or the magic power of love to prevent a favourite brother from disappearing? For all we know, Edmund could be the ghost of Albert; he dies like him, very young, in the next war of the century. Besides, the narrator tells us that "the price exacted for this unearthly splendour is, generally speaking, an untimely death" (*BSM*, 80). We know about the two boys. When we check on the others we discover that Ada died at twelve after a bout of diphtheria, Gillian at ten in a car accident and Pearl is the ghost that haunts the narrator all through the novel until she remembers that she died when they were very small. It looks as if the family had its private meteorites crossing its sky and bringing the beauty and tragedy of myth into their ordinary lives. The narrator uses, on one occasion, the word angel to define them, but it is probably better to remain within the field of legend and myth. Especially when one learns that Pearl, Ruby's beautiful blond-haired twin, was killed by Gillian, her beautiful blond-haired elder sister. As if two magic beings could not coexist in the same generation. But Gillian's death a few years after her sister's also seems to reestablish a fairy-tale type sense of moral order.

The spiral has finally taken us away from the York of streets and official buildings and monuments to a York of stars, if one accepts the myth that all the souls of dead people are stars in the sky.

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<sup>8</sup> One should note that in this last generation of women Patricia, the narrator's sister, does escape to the sun of Australia, but because she has understood that one has to run away on one's own.

Or has it? For *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* really always plays a double game, a double game which could, in the end, be specific to the feminine/female imagination and of which Bunty and her cinematic fantasies could be a perfect, if limited example. On the one hand the text carries you away, almost by force, into a York of the imagination teeming with people and characters from the past, where all laws of logic or science are either superbly ignored or used to feed the fantasy. On the other hand, it always starts from objects and situations basic to everyday, and often everyday female, life: husband and children and parents but also household management, its chores and its pleasures, such as a new cooker or the first television. It is probably that constant hovering between the two which turns York into a city of/on the margin in *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. Just like Bunty's life, the novel is always on the margin between living and dreaming, and will never get anywhere else because living remains very much part of dreaming. And somehow, this is comforting, for the dreaming going on in/about York allows it to go on and not to finish like another of Italo Calvino's invisible cities, Ersilia, where "the inhabitants stretch strings from the corners of the houses, white or black or grey or black and white according to whether they mark a relationship of blood, of trade, authority, agency. When the strings have become so numerous that you can no longer pass among them, the inhabitants leave: the houses are dismantled; only the strings and their supports remain" (IC, 61-2). Thus York, the city standing, or floating, between the hard facts of topography and history and the fluctuations of the memory and dreams of its most humble inhabitants becomes and remains as intensely alive to the reader as to the narrator of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*.

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**"Under a beautiful light."<sup>1</sup> Marginality, Regeneration, Relocation:  
Women's Voices within the Glasgow Narrative**

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**The light of regeneration?**

Glasgow is a mutable city. From imperial splendour to industrial explosion, from ferocious urban expansion to precipitous decay, the city's physiognomy and identity have always been affected by, and subjected to, persistent alterations. Considered as a peripheral city within a peripheral country, Glasgow would seem to have inherited its geographical and cultural marginality from the country it belongs to. It is as if the city had doubled and supplemented Scotland's political history as an ex-centric community. Actually, as Christopher Whyte points out, "Scotland [is] an inappropriate context for understanding Glasgow [...] Glasgow is the child, not of a nation, but of empire, which alone can explain the savagery of its expansion and decline."<sup>2</sup> Its story registers a constant passage from marginal to central, from central to marginal. For the city has often been obsessed by the urge to redefine its own location, not only outside and inside its urban boundaries, but also along its national and international frontiers. Glasgow's re-

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<sup>1</sup> A. L. Kennedy, *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (London: Phoenix, 1990), 67. References cited hereafter in text as (NG&GT).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Whyte, "Imagining the City: the Glasgow Novel," in: Joachim Schwend & Horst Drescher (eds), *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth Century* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1990), 318.

mapping of its internal margins and the concomitant redefinition of its identity within broader cultural spaces have been vital to the re-imagination of the city and its representation.<sup>3</sup>

The way the city of Glasgow was imagined and represented in the literary production of the early twentieth century is my point of departure for registering the shift of imagination brought about by a generation of writers during the 1980s, and articulated differently still by several women writers in the 1990s. This shift of representation is symptomatic of the necessity of inserting the city into a wider picture than the one merely self-reflective and troubled by its own inward-looking image that dominated the realist modes from the 1930s until the early 1980s.

"How the city is narrated in novels disseminates certain perspectives, certain ways of seeing and so certain structures of imagination," in the way that the real and the fantastic are entwined in intertextual discourse.<sup>4</sup> Here we might recall Benedict Anderson's thoughts on the nation as 'imagined community,' prompting us to recognise the powerful role played by fantasy in the community-making process within the city.<sup>5</sup> The bond linking the members of a community implies a shared relationship with the city, its landscape and its language — above all — being a common horizon within which the cityscape can be recognised and narrated. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's analysis of the nation as narration we could consider the construction of *city-ness* as "a form of social and textual affiliation."<sup>6</sup> If national communities are cultural constructs and narratives, we can also contemplate cities by emphasizing their *fictio*, their fictional and cultural constructedness. The city's narrative endlessly seeks its plot in texts that have often been translated into metaphors of the city itself.

In the realistic literary production that was predominant in Glasgow in the thirties, images of the underworld — of slums and unsafe streets inhabited by razor gangs and winos — functioned as the inscape of a stigmatised urban identity. Notwithstanding its

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<sup>3</sup> See Tim Hall, "(Re)placing the City. Cultural relocation and the city as centre," in: Sallie Westwood & John Williams (eds), *Imagining Cities. Scripts, Signs, Memory* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 202.

<sup>4</sup> James Donald, "This, Here, Now. Imagining the modern city," in: Sallie Westwood & John Williams (eds), *Imagining Cities. Scripts, Signs, Memory*, 187.

<sup>5</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in: —, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 140.

mutable history, Glasgow has consistently been depicted as in a state of permanent crisis, in emotional and physical decline. A sense of impotence and impending catastrophe nurtured a rhetoric of crisis that writers were not unable to escape, but rather adopted for the sake of a 'clinical' and documentary approach: It was as if the city had become a disease to be diagnosed, rather than the subject of any literary fantasy.

When Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark* appeared on Glasgow's literary scene in 1981, it was immediately clear that something was changing in the writing of the city. With its extensive allusions to a surreal world stretching out from the real one, *Lanark* represents the first piece of fiction by a Glaswegian writer that managed to be rooted in Glasgow and to sprout beyond it. In an often quoted paragraph from the novel, painter Duncan Thaw is discussing and lamenting with his friend Kenneth McAlpin the lack of artistic imagination in Glasgow:

*'Glasgow is a magnificent city,' said McAlpin. 'Why do we hardly ever notice that?' 'Because nobody imagines living here,' said Thaw. [...] 'Then think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place we work, a football park or golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. [...] Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we have given to the world outside. It's all we have given to ourselves.'*<sup>7</sup>

*Lanark's* hero's cry for imagination can be read as an invocation and a desire to imagine, and so to exist, in an alternative way. In the dominant Glasgow narrative tradition, "living imaginatively" in the city as wished by Duncan Thaw was not only impossible, but not even dreamed of.

At the end of the novel, there is a patch of light falling from *Lanark's* pages and reverberating across other pages of the Glasgow

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<sup>7</sup> Novels like: Alexander McArthur, *No Mean City* (1935; London: Corgi Books, 1957) and Archie Hind, *The Dear Green Place* (London: New Authors, 1966) are considered the key texts of the so-called "school of crisis." See Beat Witschi, "Glasgow Urban Writing and Postmodernism. A Study of Alasdair Gray's Fiction," in: *Scottish Studies*, vol.12 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Lanark, A Life in Four Books* (1981; London: Picador, 1991), 243. My emphasis.

narrative through the 1990s. A man, Lanark, has just been told his death will occur the following day. His last thoughts and gaze are devoted to the sky: "He was a slightly worried, ordinary old man but glad to see the light in the sky."<sup>9</sup> We do not know whether a catastrophe has just been overcome, postponed or if it is about to happen. All that we know is that beyond the ruins, the fire, and the plague affecting the surreal city of Unthank/Glasgow, there is a light that never fades and that lets the scene of sterility blaze with a chimerical glow. Beyond all that lies beneath the sky: the slums, the tenements, the Victorian houses, the river Clyde — all those places that have been translated into a narrative *chronotope* in the Glaswegian literary tradition — Lanark's gaze is attracted by what hovers above the sky: the light. The radiance he is glad to see flashing above a barren landscape may be a sign of survival in a city where even ugly things have the solace of happening "under a beautiful light," to use A. L. Kennedy's words (*NG&GT*, 67). It is a glow that *turns grey into gold* and that hints at the city's sensitivity to the lure of unexpected beauty that is caught even in despair.<sup>10</sup> It is a gleam that would come to be identified as the light of 'regeneration.'

### Relocating the margins

Since the end of the 80s, rhetorical narratives of 'renaissance' and 'regeneration' have emerged to describe the ongoing process of urban reassessment and cultural promotion which the city has been undergoing. The reappearance of the working-class urban *patois* on the poetic scene emphasizes the 1990s' "determination to bring to fiction the unimagined: voices, people and places denied cultural existence."<sup>11</sup> To choose this disregarded and despised language is a way to incorporate the outsiders and take ordinary people's stories into account. The attention to hidden, ordinary lives in the city is a common trend in Glasgow writing. Possibly it underlines a secret desire to bring people back into history in a place culturally defined as marginal.

There is an affinity between the unrecorded lives of ordinary people and the invisible stories of women in the urban space.

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<sup>9</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Lanark, A Life in Four Books*, 260.

<sup>10</sup> "This grey but gold city" is a recurrent phrase pronounced by the main character in James Kelman's novel *The Bus Conductor Hines* (1984; London: Dent, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Lynne Stark, "Agnes Owens's Fiction: Untold Stories," in: Aileen Christianson & Alison Lumsden (eds.), *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 111.

Because most studies of Glasgow fiction have been gendered implicitly as male, those that have tackled the social implications of this genre have overlooked or marginalized women. Recording women's lives and women's work does not mean merely bringing them to the centre. It is rather a matter of undermining the notion of cultural centres and of querying marginality.

Drawing on the female side of the city as that which is left on the edge by patriarchal order, marginality may be reconsidered as a cultural position — the space where women negotiate their roles in the city and articulate their desire for community. This desire remains ambivalent as long as the national context is the privileged frame where cultural relocations should be activated and pursued. Consigned to the rims of the national space, women have had to struggle to assert an identity of their own making, exceeding the limits of a national narration. Fostering an alternative imagery of the city is a matter of expressing and responding to desires beyond those solely pertaining to what Julia Kristeva calls "the sociopolitical life of nations" that secures women political recognition: desires for non-belonging and non-identification with certain values insofar as they are male-constructed or posed as gender-neutral.<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that Glasgow women writers are 'country-less.' On the contrary, they share a profound and critical consciousness of being women and of being Scottish — of being Scottish women. Their work addresses social issues from their gender perspective and contributes to the shaping of 'female modes' of national consciousness within the space of the city.

The kind of urban narrative that women plot for themselves unfolds diverse representations of sexual relations and gender roles within the imagined urban community. As a response to the hegemonic male/macho vision that has informed national politics and culture, the female perspective aims at considering the city as a place of negotiation for women through the appropriation not only of independent, alternative spaces, but also of its myths and stories. The legend of St. Thenew, mother of the patron saint of Glasgow, is one such ignored tale rescued and revisited by women in their need for re-appropriation and compulsion to re-tell stories. She represents the first abused and abandoned woman in the recorded history of

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<sup>2</sup> See Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time," in: Catherine Belsey & Jane Moore (eds), *The Feminist Reader. Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 197.

Scottish women. St. Theneu's name, sex and identity have been replaced by a more familiar male figure in the city: 'St. Enoch.' "Her story is virtually unknown, and she is remembered only in the place-name 'St. Enoch' [...]. This archaeological process of trying to "excavate women out of records" in the city is termed by Elspeth King "the Theneu Factor" to stand for the recurrent, countless historical omissions that Glasgow women have undergone. Giving acknowledgement to her story is symbolically to recognize "the part played by women in the early history of the city."<sup>13</sup>

Many initiatives and activities fostered by women in the city have contributed to breaking the Theneu Factor. The first exhibition entirely dedicated to The Glasgow School of Art's women artists, the so-called 'Glasgow Girls,' took place in 1990, the year when Glasgow was the 'European City of Culture.'<sup>14</sup> It was also the year when another women's association, *Women in Profile*, was established with the purpose of setting up a women's art centre with studios and galleries — now the well-established Glasgow Women's Library.

It is apt that 1989 and 1990 are the publication dates of two significant books by female authors who would soon be hailed as the most outstanding voices in contemporary Scottish women's writing: *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989) by Janice Galloway, and the collection of short stories *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990) by A. L. Kennedy. This is not to say that Scottish women writers did not exist before, but that these two books inaugurated a great decade for women writers, characterized by a remarkable blooming of a literary genre and publishing market. We could say with Elspeth King, that all these women, equally and differently, are determined to challenge "the Theneu Factor." Their work is fertile ground for examining a feminist consciousness that reflects, and marks, the changes of this 'mutable' city and of its representations.

### **Out there in the city**

What mostly defines women's narrativisation of the city as innovative is not an idealized or appeased representation of sites and

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<sup>13</sup> See Elspeth King, *The Hidden History of Glasgow's Women. The Theneu Factor* (Edinburgh & London: Mainstream Publishing, 1993), 13.

<sup>14</sup> The Glasgow Girls were the female students at the Glasgow School of Art at the turn of the twentieth century. See Jude Burkhauser, *Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design 1880-1920* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990). See Elspeth King, *The Hidden History of Glasgow's Women* for a discussion on the controversy that beset this exhibition.

tropes of the city. On the contrary, gloomy and unsafe streets haunted by potential violence inhabit their writing, carrying an even more tangible threat inasmuch as it involves gender relations. It is in fact in the streets that women are confronted with the daily cultural construction and practice of the city as a mostly masculine territory, where gender roles are performed and clichés of sexual relations repeated. The city becomes the privileged setting from which to rethink the set of social and gender symmetries that have often put women on the edges. Yet, even if female identity is still asserted and constructed by analogy, supplementarity or contrast to the male one, women point out how not only women but also men have fallen prey and victim to their own macho myths and prescribed roles in the urban — and national — community. Women's writing dismantles longstanding cultural clichés, myths of locality and "ossified stereotypes of community, class and gender" dominant in the Scottish and Glaswegian novel.<sup>15</sup>

The works of writers such as A. L. Kennedy, Janice Galloway and Jackie Kay make use of the female grotesque, irony, and fantasy to undermine the clichés and stereotypes of Scottish urban identity and writing. Their writings redraw the map of womanhood and gender relations, imagining alternative ways of living in the city and, above all, of 'living there imaginatively.' It is especially in the work of A. L. Kennedy that Glasgow's *interior* and *exterior* spaces, like tenement flats and dreary streets, serve as the settings in which even the bleakest reality can be altered by a touch of magic. The most ordinary places, events and people are often captured within a film of elusiveness and ineffability as if they were under the spell of some mysterious enchantment. In a dreamlike state, stories are told from unsettling perspectives, where the unpredictable and unexpected can happen, and other temporalities can cross in the present. In her novel *So I am Glad* (1995), Kennedy fractures the mostly realistic descriptions with a touch of unlikeliness, bringing the reincarnated ghost of Cyrano de Bergerac back to life in the twentieth century. She blends elements of a most recognisable local and temporal setting — Glasgow in the 1990s — with images that evoke another temporal dimension. Time codes are broken and linear temporality is interrupted by an act of ferocious imagination in response to

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<sup>15</sup> Gavin Wallace, "Introduction," in: Randall Stevenson & Gavin Wallace (eds), *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 5.

ferocious solitude. The enigmatic appearance of the man identified with the seventeenth-century French writer may be the protagonist Jennifer's fantasmatic way to populate her "empty, aimless street." It represents somebody to talk to, besides her giddy and lonely radio talking. The person she names Martin may not exist at all, and it is likely that Jennifer is creating him in order to rebuild a relationship with a man, or with human beings in general. She is exercising her power of imagination on the city, making it "anything she does and wants," perhaps to defeat the "threat of indifference" she experiences there: "[T]his is the city I felt sucked around me, swirling my brains with the cold, bright threat of utter indifference [...]. It is impossible to be wrong about a city — it will be anything you do or do not want, quicker and harder than you can think."<sup>16</sup>

Although very real in the exactness and accuracy of details, the city, like its spectral visitor, is grasped in evanescent nuances that cast doubt on its actual being. Here, as in several other tales, we do not know who to trust. This ghostly imagination animates other collections of her 'mostly unlikely stories,' where events, facts and people's existences are doubted, as well as geographical locations on the map. In particular, mountains, lochs and all those historicized landscapes that have functioned as 'authentic' national symbols, are revealed in their stereotypical nature. We do not know if the places that fill books, encyclopedias and tourist guides exist or are lies. If they do exist, an uncanny and disquieting shadow is bestowed on them. The city itself is among these places whose 'truth' we would never know:

*I do know about lies.*

*Which is perhaps why I like this city so much and to walk in it, especially at night, when the dark bolts out of closes and children gather to stalk the buses and stone them to death. The city knows about lies, too. It makes them and loves them and forgets they were never the truth. (NG&GT, 70)*

Kennedy hints at something uncanny in the city. With its suburban flats, solitary roads and peripheries, urban space is not a reassuring place for women. Sometimes, it emanates hostility. Sometimes, the domestic space does too. Sometimes what appears as a safe environment, like the family, turns out to be the site of anxieties, disquieting encounters with the other and with the self.

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<sup>16</sup> A. L. Kennedy, *So I am Glad* (London, Vintage, 1996), 103.

Home becomes the site of disturbance for women. Even inside their houses, wives, mothers, and young daughters do not cease to be objects of betrayal, violence, harassment and abuse. Home is also the place of a troubled imagination. If violent scenes of fathers hitting mothers or abusing daughters described in some stories are only the fruit of an insane fantasy, they suggest to what extent these troubling fantasies might become real.

The cliché ("the lie" in Kennedy's words) of city violence, then, is restored in Kennedy's writing, though from the women's side. Yet, I suggest that the author's piercing gaze catches glimpses of flagrant and brutal oppression investing both women and men. Violence, physical and psychological, can be registered at different levels as it is displayed and exercised at the root of institutions: across the borders of national community, outside the streets of the city, within the walls of the domestic space, between unknown individuals and in couple relationships. An intractable and indomitable fierceness is worn like a cuirass by both women and men to conceal their fragility in coping with their need for affection.

Violence shapes sexual encounters, too. In *So I am Glad* Jennifer practices a sadomasochistic sexuality that unchains her erotic desire. In her odd and uneasy sexual encounters with her former boyfriend, she exhibits an excess of erotic pleasure that cannot be ascribed to the norm of her gender. She transgresses and subverts the prescriptions of femininity by overturning the roles, and the rules, of standard couple relationships. To recall the title of Kennedy's first collection, the day and 'night geometries' between female and male bodies, between men and women's relationships, depicted in her fiction, have something to do with 'the Garscadden trains.' They have to do with the wish and wilfulness to change the conventional pattern of relationships in the context of that specific local reality: there and then. However, the infinite geometry of relationships transcends the parallel lines of a train track at Garscadden station that allow no union, no crossing, no encounters. This geometry marks the unusual, unpredictable correspondences that can occur in people's lives, beyond any specific geographical or temporal settings. From such a perspective, the ordinary, normal, special, terrible, 'ugly things' that happen in the city all become meaningful. The startling consonance that the writer is able to trace among events, places, and people, manages to bestow a different light on the city, where beauty and horror merge together in the experience of the urban sublime:

*When I walk I see a wonderful city, built in blocks like Boston or New York [...]. There are also times, especially in winter, when the sky is solid blue, the sunlight rich and low and the city becomes beautiful. Even where there are chip shops with the metal shutters and the homes have putrefied around their tenants; even when there are beggars, really beggars, at the feet of each refurbished edifice, the light that falls here makes it beautiful. This is a city where ugly things happen under a beautiful light. (NG&GT, 66-7)*

As the 'city makes lies,' perhaps the lure of 'ugly beauty' is not always true for its inhabitants, the passers-by, or the readers. The city for Kennedy is like a text one can read in multiple ways. It is an open, ambivalent narrative in which statements are concurrently asserted and denied, and of which truth is but an ultimate version of facts and events among other disparate versions. Besides the secrets and lies that fill history's pages, silence resurfaces as the only matter the writer seems to be concerned about:

*[H]ere is a thing I do know to be true, because it has happened to me. Go into any place where history is stored and listen. Hold your breath. Hear how still it is. Librarians and archivists will keep their visitors quiet, but this particular silence has nothing to do with them. It runs through buzzing computer rooms and waits in busy record offices, it is always there. It is the sound of nothingness. It is the huge, invisible, silent roar of all the people who are too small to record. (NG&GT, 64)*

The "role of notable silence in history," as the title of one story suggests, triggers Kennedy's compulsion to make up fictive lives for a 'majority of people' and give them 'proof of existence.' Although the silence she gives voice to is mostly women's silence, her writing imperative is a tribute to anonymous humanity in general. In recording the lives of unknown, nameless people, she negotiates a space for their stories by interfering in legitimate, official versions of history that leave them silent.

A similar observation can be made concerning Janice Galloway's narratives. Her stories — her first novel *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989) and especially her collection *Blood* (1991) — can be read as fragments of a vast panorama. Some of the stories in *Blood* are entitled "Scenes from life" (e.g. *Scenes from life n.26, Scenes from life n.27*) as if they were bits of a wider picture captured in the sparkle of the moment. They do not outline a linear narration that claims to be

exhaustive or synecdochical of an assumed wholeness, whether it bears the name of city, nation or human life. The scenes of life are rather 'moments of being,' in that place, at that time. Glimpses of domestic life of fathers and sons, old pensioners, women, girls visited by doctors, and girls at school, are captured through the veil of wry and dark humour that Galloway employs to convey the way women endure and resist in a male-orientated society.

A sharp, subversive humour is the force that saves Joy, the protagonist of *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, from the grave she is digging for herself within her house. The novel can be read as an interior struggle to survive depression and self-destruction, while recovering from a nervous breakdown. Another reading would examine to what extent living in the city plays a part in the woman's refusal of, and difficult rehabilitation in, society. It is possible, in fact, to observe Joy's relationship with the city: she thinks that "walking is awful. [She] do[es] that when [she] want[s] to feel worse" and she is almost "walled in" in her house.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the 'out-there' world of the city acts right inside her head, inside her home. The city is the façade we do not see, but sense. It is one of the spectral others that inhabit her flat, her closet, her bathroom, her time, since it represents a call to duty: a call to go back to life — outside.

The excess of inside-ness, of indoor descriptions, alludes, by contrast, to what is outside the house that makes her reluctant to join the world. It is as if the city kept beyond her door waits for her to come out of her shell to suck her in with its social demands. All that is external to her house is figured as an institutional trap: school, hospital, workplace, health-centre. In these public spaces of *surveillance* Joy is assigned different names defining her role: she is the lover, she is a teacher, she is a patient, she is anorexic and depressed. The malady of being that possesses Joy is strongly related to what being and living represents in that particular social order: a male dominant community that has no space for a woman like her. As the mistress of her deceased lover, she is bereft not only of her love, but also of a public place to mourn him. Furthermore she does not see herself as 'a proper woman' when she is confronted with what women are supposed to be like through the eyes of men. She is out of place, especially when she is expected to don her female identity like a smart outfit she is not willing to wear. The city makes

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<sup>17</sup>Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (London: Minerva, 1990), 36. References cited hereafter in the text as (TKB).

the conflict resurface as a split between the intimate female self and the public role she is expected to assume.

The struggle is more difficult still when social representation is assimilated by the woman as her own representation. As, for instance, when she fights with her mirrored reflection that she hardly recognises as her self:

*I pluck my eyebrows, the single hair on my upper lip. Nail-scissors to make my pubic hair neat . [...] I paint my toenails [...] I put on my prettiest underwear [...] in case this is what he prefers [...] I have to paint my face because I am pale in cold weather [...] I tint myself Peaches and Cream, stain my eyelids lilac [...] I smear my lips with clear wax from a stick . [...] I smile at the woman in the mirror. Her eyes are huge. But what looks back is never what I want. Someone melting. And too much like me. (TKB, 47-8)*

The recognition of her self is even more problematic when it is exposed to the gaze of the others. After having met an old acquaintance in a supermarket, Joy is bewildered as she catches her own figure in a glass:

*A mirror spread out behind the space where he had been. There was a woman in the frame, gaping [...] She was listening to a distant kiddy-ride playing Scotland the Brave. Her coat was buttoned up wrong so the collar didn't sit right, the boots scuffed and parting from the sole. The hair needed washed and combed and my eyes were purple. I looked like a crazy-woman/wino/raddled old whore. (TKB, 191)*

The popular song "Scotland the Brave" which serves as the soundtrack to this scene of *méconnaissance* accentuates how "men's attitudes towards women are shaped by national identity," as Alison Lumsden points out. It lets the two issues of national and gender identity cross on the woman's body and its representation. In fact, continues Lumsden, here we witness "this negotiation of the interfaces between urban Scottish identity and gender."<sup>18</sup>

In *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* the city stands as a shady, though intrusive, background — distinguishable by the peculiar housing scheme, outskirts, graffiti, garbage in the streets — that subconsciously shapes female identity. In *Blood* the city bursts out in

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<sup>18</sup> Aileen Christianson & Alison Lumsden (eds.), *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, 160.

the crude language of manly speech and emerges as a male-dominated space. The city is, once more, the privileged background that illustrates how gender roles interact within urban society.

Dismay and "fear are at the back of these stories, especially the fear that runs along gendered lines."<sup>19</sup> In the title story that opens the collection, the female body and its fluids — as Julia Kristeva illustrates in her book *Powers of Horror* — are the site of abjection: they represent a dreadful alterity men cannot face.<sup>20</sup> At the sight of blood trickling from the mouth of a girl who has just had a tooth extracted, the man who is with her in the school music room flees. Besides representing men's fear of women, the story is also a critique of gender conceived as a matter of biological differences. As the stories unfold we move from male fear of women to women's fear of encounters with men in the streets, which subject them to the threat of sexist language and attitudes. Gender politics are articulated within a wider system of representations and self-representation involving language, class, social relations, local and national institutions. In two stories, the rise of an early feminist awareness is elicited in the experience of fighting the attitudes of Scottish urban machismo.

In the story entitled "Frostbite," a girl at the bus stop meets a man who habitually wanders through the Glasgow streets. The anecdotes the man tells to the girl are loaded with hatred and imprecations against women, which not only excludes her from a male discourse, but also turns her into the object of his 'excitable speech.' His western Scottish urban dialect is also symptomatic of a latent misogyny within social relations: "Aye. Keep away from bastart women, that's what yi do. Filth. Dirty whooers and filth the lot a them, the whole bloody lot. Get away fi me bitchahell – and he lunged a fist."<sup>21</sup> Bewildered by his behaviour, the girl is seized by a bitter fury through which she finds her way to get by in the city:

*[S]he felt angry; violently, bitterly angry [...] Who did he think he was, lashing out at people like that? And what sort of bloody fool was she, letting him? What right had he? What right had any of them? [...] To hell*

<sup>19</sup> Alison Smith, "Four Success Stories," *Chapman*, 74-5, Autumn/Winter 1993, 178.

<sup>20</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>21</sup> Janice Galloway, *Blood* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), 28. References cited hereafter in the text as (B).

*with this waiting. There were other ways, other things to do. Take the underground; walk, dammit. Walk. (B, 28)*

Anger is the taste we are left with at the end of this story. Anger prompts the girl to give up the bus and walk. In such a choice, though provoked by the man's insults, the girl is not only withdrawing from an ongoing outrage, but has also become conscious of her own rights to the city, and has found 'other ways.'

A more active response, still inflected with rage, to men's presumed power in the city comes from another girl in the story "Fearless." Fearless is the name of a local urban character notorious for "shouting threats up the main streets" (B, 110). He is the local madman whose indecent words, laden with animosity against women, people are accustomed to and accept as a matter of fact. As in "Frostbite," what exacerbates the girl's anger is the deliberate violence and the threat of the "loud, jaggy words which came out of the black hole of his mouth" (B, 114), to which she, though only a small girl, retorts with her caustic gaze: as she bravely turns to stare at him "the words ... stop" (B, 114). However, besides the incomprehensible, hideous words which the man mutters or shouts to women, his language embodies the patriarchal discourse that has appropriated women as its objects. Encounters with men like Fearless do not allow women to forget their persistent and unremitting battle for themselves, within the city-streets and beyond:

*My mother is dead, and so, surely is Fearless. But I still hear something like him; the chink and drag from the close-mouth in the dark, coming across open, derelict spaces at night, blustering at bus stops where I have to wait alone. With every other woman, though we're still slow to admit it, I hear it, still trying to lay down the rules. It's more insistent now because we're less ready to comply, look away and know our place. And I still see men smiling and ignoring it because they don't give a damn. They don't need to. It's not their battle. But it was ours and still is [...]. The outrage is still strong, and I kick like a mule. (B, 115)*

At the end of the story a reversal of emotions seems to occur. The man's anger passes to the girl. By kicking him in the shin, she overcomes her fear of him: she is indeed fearless. I am not suggesting here a reversal of roles; neither is Galloway. Nor is she asserting that a feminist consciousness is constructed exclusively out of fear or rage. Primarily, she is stressing how the narrow frontiers wherein

gender roles are contained can be trespassed with fury, pain, and often with irony.

An entirely different urban scenario opens up in Jackie Kay's writing. Both her poetry and fiction tell of another way of inhabiting the city. Being black-Scottish and lesbian, she introduces important issues of gender, ethnicity and sexuality into the discourse of metropolitan, and Scottish, identity. Glasgow is often the backdrop of her poetic and fictional work. Starting from her personal story of being raised in Glasgow as an adopted black girl in her poetry collection *The Adoption Papers*, she proceeds towards the recognition of her black identity through encounters with the people of Glasgow, who consider her a foreigner or some sort of alien. But it is mostly in her fiction that she takes us into a wider history, where "the street meets the globe,"<sup>22</sup> where Glasgow meets Chattanooga in her fictional biography dedicated to the blues singer Bessie Smith, or Africa in her novel *Trumpet* (1998).

Not only a biography, *Bessie Smith* is also a journey into the author's memory of her childhood in Glasgow, when her own blackness was revealed to her through the blues: "I will always associate the dawning of my own realization of being black with the blues, and particularly Bessie's blues."<sup>23</sup> The "suburban house in a suburban street in the north of Glasgow," where Jackie Kay was brought up, "doesn't seem the most likely place to be introduced to the blues. [B]ut then blues travel to wherever the blues-lovers go" (*BS*, 9) and Glasgow streets turn out to be the place where being part of other stories becomes possible through imagination. Following Bessie's pullman touring America in the child's fantasy, Glasgow becomes one of the blues cities the famous singer would visit, along with New Orleans, Chicago, Philadelphia and others. But Glasgow is not like Chattanooga:

*What does a girl from Bishopriggs near Glasgow know about Chattanooga? She might have heard that song: Pardon me boy, is that the Chattanooga-Choo Choo? [...] I looked up Chattanooga in my atlas. Chattanooga, Hamilton County, Tennessee. It made me feel even closer to her being able to find it in the atlas [...] I tried to picture it. Well, it wasn't like Glasgow. (BS, 17)*

<sup>22</sup> Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 107.

<sup>23</sup> Jackie Kay, *Bessie Smith* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1997), 138. References cited hereafter in the text as (*BS*).

Yet, in her imagination she would picture Bessie Smith "wandering through the streets of segregated America, penniless, friendless. *Down and out*," just like the "many down-and-outs in Glasgow on Sauchiehall Street on a Saturday night" (*BS*, 12). In the blues map the girl is drawing up Glasgow is the point of departure for discovering the world, the place where she would find a play of unexpected correspondences among diverse geographical areas. In tracing the differences and similarities between her city and the distant American cities, she transfers Glasgow onto "a less provincial and more worldly map."<sup>24</sup>

In *Trumpet*, Glasgow's local history is also located in a wider perspective.<sup>25</sup> Glasgow is the place where a young black girl, Josephine, had moved to from a small nearby town to start a new life. She arrives in the city to become a trumpet player and to become a man: Joss Moody. Here s/he marries another woman and together they adopt a black son. In the tales recounted by Joss's wife and son after his/her death, Glasgow is still the city of music imagined in *Bessie Smith*, with "great dance halls" and jazz clubs where Joss used to play. But mostly, it is the city of secrets, misrecognition and revelations disclosed along the borderlines of ethnicity and sexuality. More than being confronted with its dominant maleness — in particular as it emerges in Galloway's fiction — Glasgow is confronted with its dominant whiteness and heterosexuality. The disguised female features that never completely disappear on Joss Moody's 'baby face' displace the usual representation of what both a black man and a Glasgow man are expected to be like. Furthermore, a ghostly trace inhabits the familiar urban inflection in his voice: the ghost of his blackness. With his black skin and broad Glasgow accent he embodies the uncanny otherness within the city.<sup>26</sup> In fact, in a few scenes of Glasgow urban life depicted in the novel, blackness emerges as a scorned and disdained alterity, revealing traces of racism within the society of the 1970s. Nobody at that time in Glasgow, or in Scotland, seemed ready to accept that black people's

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<sup>24</sup> See Iain Chambers, *Culture After Humanism. History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2001), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (London: Picador, 1998). References cited hereafter in the text as (*T*).

<sup>26</sup> For an analysis of home as the site of the unhomely in Kay's writing see Sara Marinelli, "Impossible Origins and Adopted Selves: Traces of Identity in Jackie Kay's Writing," *Anglistica*, 4. 2, 2000, 29-50.

history, especially their experience of ancient and modern diaspora, had at a certain point intersected with Glasgow's history.

In Joss Moody's recalling of his father's journey from Africa to Greenock, near Port Glasgow, when it "was a place all the ships wanted to go at the turn of the twentieth century," (T, 274) Glasgow appears in a new perspective:

*My father turned up in Scotland [...] When my father was six his father persuaded a Scottish captain of a ship to take him to Scotland and give him some kind of education. When the ship arrived into Greenock, next to Port Glasgow, Robert Duncan-Brae was there to meet it. [...] My father became the Duncan-Braes' servant [...] He polished the silver, the dark wood, the hard kitchen floor. [...] When he was eighteen [...] he left [...] and became apprenticed to a Dundee house painter, earning a plausible living, practising his trade. (T, 274-75)*

Here the work of memory, and its fictionalisation, digs into a submerged terrain of the city's history no other Glasgow writer has brought to light. In Kay's storytelling, memories are entangled with fantasies. It is this interplay of memory and fantasy in narration that portrays the city as a shifting landscape.

Glasgow is a transitional space. Imagination and its fictive representation have played a crucial role in the ongoing process of urban relocation, which has often taken the name of regeneration. As illustrated in the writing of Jackie Kay, a different imagining of the city is articulated in the interlaced work of fantasy and memory. For memories are not intended to be the ruins and the ashes from which a new city might arise and regenerate. Rather, the memories of a secluded urban past revived and recovered in the stories told by these women writers tell of other cities within the city: the city of women, the city of different sexualities, the city of ethnic and social groups, the city of transient crossings or more steady encounters. From such a perspective, Glasgow is no longer a marginal place where stories and fantasies end, but the site where other tales commence, intertwining with its history and altering it. It is the city under which light the ignored and silenced sides of stories emerge to render its once stagnant narrative mutable.

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**Bodies of Evidence: Cities and Stories in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* and Irvine Welsh's *Filth***

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*The city's surface is thick with its living citizens. Its earth is richly sown with its many dead. The city is a repository of narratives, of stories. Present tense, past tense or future. The city is a novel.*

*Cities are simple things. They are the conglomerations of people. Cities are complex things. They are the geographical and emotional distillations of whole nations. What makes a place a city has little to do with size. It has to do with the speed at which its citizens walk, the cut of their clothes, the sound of their shouts.*

*But most of all, cities are the meeting places of stories. The men and women there are narratives, endlessly complex and intriguing. (ES, 215)*

Whether maimed, fragmented or dismembered bodies after explosions in central Belfast or the sexual antics of the outrageous and obnoxious Lothian police officer described by Welsh — and the etymology of the word "police"<sup>3</sup> should be borne in mind throughout this essay — locations and the physique are to be considered together in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* and Irvine Welsh's *Filth*. Not only do they provide the scene and the substance of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street* (1996; London: Minerva Press, 1997). References cited hereafter in the text as (ES).

<sup>2</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Filth* (1998; London: Vintage, 1999). References cited hereafter in the text as (F).

<sup>3</sup> From Latin *politia*, administration, government, from Greek *politeia*, citizenship, civil administration, from *polites*, citizen, from *polis*, city.

plots but they also contribute to a plethora of complex narratives and composite personal stories. Bodies and cities are entwined in an intimate dialogical relationship in both novels. This symbiosis highlights Wilson's and Welsh's concerns about life in a postmodern cityscape rife with doubts, contradictions and misconceptions and their commitment to postmodernism. In order to examine marginality and the city, I will study the (mis)representation of the city and the (mis)reading or the wilful distortion of the semiotic environment in *Eureka Street* and *Filth*. I will then examine as a conclusion how degradation, deformity and grotesque representations of bodies reflect the state of the urban network in McLiam Wilson's and Welsh's novels.

### **Stories and narratives**

*Eureka Street*, whose title points at a precise location in Protestant Belfast, is set shortly before an IRA cease-fire and concludes after the announcement of a bilateral agreement. McLiam Wilson gives us a general spectrum of Belfast society, from severe Protestantism to uncompromising Nationalism, from the apology of a certain kind of capitalism to urban deprivation, from loutish behaviour to the unfathomable grief and vacuity caused by a terrorist attack. Protestant Chuckie Lurgan, who lives on Eureka Street, and his best friend and drinking pal, Catholic-born Jake Jackson, guide us through a journey describing the intricacies of the urban codes and social practices in a pre and post-ceasefire Belfast.

Meanwhile *Filth*, whose title indicates foul and offensive bodily or mental states, is set in Edinburgh in the last months of 1997.<sup>4</sup> It takes place in the wake of the close national scrutiny of the state of the British police following the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993. A domestic introspection whose outcome was to be described as "institutional racism" by Sir William Macpherson in his scathing report. We are introduced to Detective Sergeant Bruce Robertson, the police officer who has been assigned to lead the investigation of a racist murder in Edinburgh and who secretly covets being promoted Detective Inspector. We follow his antics and his downfall from the night of the murder to his suicide. His loathsome professional behaviour, his repulsive hidden agenda and his debauched sexual life amidst his crumbling marriage and

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<sup>4</sup> Welsh gives us a series of references enabling us to locate the novel in the second half of 1997, (*F*, 108; *F*, 207; *F*, 295).

health problems give us a glimpse of a repugnant law-enforcement professional gnawed by remorse and guilt-feelings.

Heteroglossia — double-voiced discourse expressing a whole range of intentions<sup>5</sup> — but also displaced and confounded viewpoints are the staple narrative devices used by both novelists. Polyphonic narrative voices — Chuckie Lurgan's and Jake Jackson's — provide us with a more comprehensive picture of the city in *Eureka Street*. A third level is added in the guise of an extradiegetic narrator, therefore extending the scope of the novel and of the narrative frame towards the outer rims of Belfast and the outer frames of discourse. A multiplicity of voices is also to be found in *Filth*: Welsh intertwines Robertson's own depictions of his daily life, which mainly amount to a perusal of his sexual routine and his intrigues in order to become DI, with his estranged wife's observations and with accounts and comments made by the tapeworm DS Robertson is afflicted with.

### **The city's metanarrative**

McLiam Wilson unmistakably portrays Belfast as a fragmented location, a patchwork of various religious and ideological communities with social class as the ultimate factor of division between people. Each person has to find their own voice while still being careful to abide by the prevalent praxis advocated by their community and acknowledged as "the norm" by others. This inevitably leads to communication problems, contradictions, misunderstandings and errors of judgement as codes of conduct and inferences are first and foremost dictated by the city's hierarchical and social constructions regardless of personal motives. Jake Jackson keeps falling victim to this social practice: his university education sets him apart from his colleagues, either when working in a recuperation agency or working as a bricklayer. However, it is religion which deepens his feelings of alienation. Jackson is afraid of appearing or saying something "too Catholic" (*ES*, 2) or "not Catholic enough" (*ES*, 18) or is even chided for "not looking very Catholic" (*ES*, 95) depending on the codes of behaviour expected from him by his fellow citizens. McLiam Wilson therefore implicitly alludes to a dominant metanarrative specific to Belfast which has influenced its

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<sup>5</sup> See: Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 301-31.

inhabitants' way of living and ways of thinking.<sup>6</sup> This code is inherent and partakes in Belfast life: city planners and the city fathers have structured the metropolis according to strict social and ideological delimitations. It is made of all the urban codes, urban policy and religious or social prejudices which have been inscribed in the cityscape. It has rubbed off the richness of people's personal narratives which now lie dormant in the city's texture:

*The merest hour of the merest day of the merest of Belfast's citizens would be impossible to render in all its grandeur and all its beauty. In cities, the stories are jumbled and jangled. The narratives meet. They clash, they converge or convert. They are a Babel of prose. And in the end, after generations and generations of the thousands and hundreds of thousands, the city itself begins to absorb narrative like a sponge, like paper absorbs ink. The past and the present is written there. The citizenry cannot fail to write there. Their testimony is involuntary and complete. (ES, 216)*

By choosing not to challenge the city conventions, citizens sanction the respectability, credibility and potency of the metanarrative to the detriment of their personal stories. Some may even have inscribed these codes on their bodies by means of tatoos, or have visibly displayed them by means of clothing, therefore purposely or unintentionally participating in their diffusion. Belfast's metanarrative punctuates daily life as it is also present in the buzz of helicopters hovering over the city or the death toll announced on the radio, sounds which have rocked Jake Jackson to sleep since childhood and to which he has become so accustomed he barely notices them (ES, 5).

The point of view is radically different in *Filth* as DS Bruce Robertson stands as a representative of the state's metanarrative. Victim of abuse and discrimination as a child due to his birth after the rape of his mother and the criminal activities of his 'biological' father, Bruce Robertson has decided to become a law-enforcement officer. However his professional duties soon become a mere means to absolve his obsession with the body. Empowered by the prestige and the weight of his profession, he confesses more than once to a series of acts of sexual harassment and gratuitous violence

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<sup>6</sup> For definitions of metanarratives or "Grand Narratives," see: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), xxiii-xxiv.

perpetuated under the cover of his official functions. He shows an indisputable relish bordering on obsession for the physical implementation of the metanarrative:

*It's that front-line feeling; that rush when you're at a picket-line or at a big game and you've got your truncheon and shield and the whole force of the state is behind you and you're hyped up to beat insolent spastic scum who question things with their big mouths and nasty manners into the suffering pulp they so richly deserve to become. It's a great society we live in. I hate them all, that section of the working class who won't do as they are told: criminals, spastics, niggers, strikers, thugs, I don't fucking well care, it all adds up to one thing: something to smash. (F, 160)*

The image of an extensive power looming over the citizens and dictating their behaviour infuses both novels and is introduced from the beginning. En route to his flat, Jake Jackson shivers when at a checkpoint his potential girlfriend Mary is greeted by a policeman she knows (ES, 3). Cities are seen under the light of division, whether social, political or ideological. The partition of the city makes it easier to supervise and to govern, to keep tabs on its inhabitants and their daily occupations. It has however brought about feelings of atopia within the population: Belfast appears as a myriad of different sectors, and travelling from one place to another is made more complicated by security checks and by road diversions (ES, 135). The urban space where citizens circulate keeps being twisted and distorted for security reasons. Meanwhile their living space has been ghettoized. Characters are entrenched in their particular districts and their addresses provide them with an obvious means to assert their identity. Chukie Lurgan for instance lives in a Unionist district, a street "so firmly set in the red, white and blue epicentre of the Protestant Loyalist belt of the city" (ES, 32).

On the other hand DS Bruce Robertson confesses more than once to being his job, to being "polis" (F, 3; F, 72-3). He cannot shake off his role as a law-enforcement professional: it permeates his life and his relationships with people. Consequently, his vision of the city is that of an easily partitioned place where everybody has been assigned a particular role and location. This makes it easier to control and corresponds to Foucault's theories of the partition of a city and the exercise of power upon citizens.<sup>7</sup> This also develops within the

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of power and the partitioning of a city, see: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; London: Allen Lane, 1977), 195-228.

police force a contemptuous attitude for those who are on the sidelines, that is to say people who live on the margin of the city and on the margin of society, people Bruce Robertson keeps referring to as "spastics" and "scum." Welsh also insists on a further division, this time more perverse because of its invisibility: Freemasonry. Most of the people he knows, through work or as sex-providers, are Freemasons.

Edinburgh is clearly divided first between the city centre and the outskirts and, within the centre, between the Old Town and the New Town. The racist murder Bruce Robertson has to investigate took place in what his superior Toal describes as "(...) the city's umbilical cord (...)" (F, 7), that is to say stairs connecting the Old Town to the New Town. The apparently purposeless murder committed in the early morning hours of a young black man whose perpetrator is DS Robertson himself. If Welsh alludes to urban partition between different cultures, ways of life or along social divisions, this is not the main theme of his novel. Despite efforts from the Police to bridge the gaps, Bruce Robertson and most of his colleagues retain their dismissive attitudes towards those who are on the margins, i.e. those who do not belong to their exclusive society. As the city is seen through Bruce Robertson's corrupted eyes, this partitioning also exists in his loathsome mind: he, as a "law enforcer(s) of this society," (F, 73) is keen to keep it right:

*This city of ours [Edinburgh] is truly beautiful and we like this part where there is not a scheme in sight. Why could we not simply move all the scum to the middle of nowhere, like Glasgow, where they would blend in more effectively? Come to think of it, that's exactly what we did do, when we built the schemes. Sent them far, but not far enough. (F, 327)*

A well-partitioned city also ensures the safety and well-being of loyal citizens in our consumer age. Amsterdam, where Bruce Robertson takes his winter break with his fellow Lodge member Bladesey, offers the perfect example of what he wishes to find: the 'red district' where drugs and sex are easily available and the rest of the city.

It is in Edinburgh, in a street called South Bridge — therefore also acting as a connection between the two parts of the city — that Robertson performs his only positive and heroic action of the book: he tries to resuscitate a man who has suffered a cardiac arrest (F, 113). This acts as a counterpoint to the murder he committed on the

stairs, but does nothing to redeem him: even though he is praised by everybody around him and temporarily wins respect from some of his hostile colleagues, he does not manage to bring the man back to life.

### **(Mis)representation and (mis)reading**

In *Eureka Street*, Jake Jackson, born a Catholic, lives in Poetry Street, a street whose name and location remind us of his former girlfriend's upper-class influence. Not being a native of Belfast, she never got used to the city and its metanarrative. Jake Jackson insists that Sarah left Belfast rather than him: as an English journalist, she could not endure the city's division mirrored in the mindless violence she was supposed to report. For her readers and for her English family, Belfast is first and foremost a place where murders and booby traps are a daily occurrence. Jake Jackson constantly had to distort the genuineness of the city in order to conform to her visitors' wishes and to present them with a hyperbolic picture of the cityscape. Upper-class, green and leafy Poetry Street does not correspond to what non-Belfast people seek to see in Belfast:

*When her English friends or family had visited us they had always been disappointed by the lack of burnt-out cars or foot patrols on our wide, tree-lined avenue. From my downstairs window, Belfast looked like Oxford or Cheltenham. The houses, the streets and the people were plump with disposable income. From my upstairs window, however, I could see the West; the famous, hushed West. That's where I'd been born: West Belfast, the bold, the true, the extremely rough. I used to send Sarah's visitors up there. There were plenty of those local details up West. (ES, 13)*

Names and surnames, an individual's first social markers in a society and the first device at a novelist's disposal in order to insist on characterization, are misconstrued in order to demonstrate the unsteadiness of Belfast's metanarrative. Pastiche and parody have always been means to oppose metanarratives. Names of characters who are ideologically committed thus become a pastiche of real political activists' names. This soon becomes one of the hyperbolic devices used by McLiam Wilson. Aoirghe Jenkins is an activist in the Nationalist movement. She repeatedly advocates violence and intolerance towards the British state: however, her first name of Gaelic origin offers an incongruous contrast with her Welsh sounding surname. Jimmy Eve, Mickey Moses (respectively the

leader and the public relations man of the "Just Us" Party), and Shague Ghinthoss (a poet whose aim is to win the Nobel Prize for literature) are clearly identifiable characters. Chuckie Lurgan's Catholic friends are also keen to point out that his name sounds like the Irish republican slogan "Tíocfaidh ar La" ("Our day will come") (*ES*, 150). Meanwhile, Bruce Robertson's behaviour in *Filth* is a parody of the police code of conduct and, as Sean O'Brien remarked, his first name is itself an almost perfect anagram of Ian Rankin's famous Edinburgh detective Rebus.<sup>5</sup>

Distortion and contravention may sometimes descend to farcical depths: in order to win the admiration of his Catholic friends, and also spurred by his quasi-maniacal pursuit of fame, Protestant Chuckie Lurgan displays a forged photograph representing him and the Pope sharing a glass of whiskey (*ES*, 32-5). Compulsive lying in order to win admiration and recognition is at the basis of Chuckie Lurgan's social and commercial behaviour: he manages to impress and win respect from his friends by committing forgeries or making spurious allegations. Bruce Robertson has no qualms about lying to his wife, his best friends, his colleagues or members of the public in order to enjoy himself, to improve his career or to spice up his sex life. Yet he blames his daughter's lies about his wife's extra-conjugal affair and this starts the process of self-destruction.

The misreading of signifiers also applies to what has been written on the body: Jake Jackson's bruises at the hands of a jealous RUC officer are immediately read as a clear case of police misconduct. "Amnesty International" is contacted in order to enquire into allegations of abuse put forward by the "Just Us" party members. It is however an ideological conspiracy: stigmas have been deliberately misinterpreted in order to be included in a propaganda scheme against the oppressive nature of the British state. Deliberate misrepresentations of the city and of urban life are prominent in McLiam Wilson's *Belfast*. The appearance of a new graffiti on the city walls reinforces the feelings of doubt, unsteadiness and unreliability some people have started to feel towards Belfast's metanarrative. Confusion at the real meaning of a new graffiti, "OTG," stresses their difficulty in interpreting any verbal or bodily discourses. They suffer from a kind of aphasia as they are incapable of linking a signified to the signifier in a discourse which takes place

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<sup>5</sup> Sean O'Brien, "Loathing in Lothian," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14/8/1998, 7.

outside the rules imposed by the city's metanarrative: they can only speculate on the meaning of the new label and this adds to their tendency to misrepresent reality. As McLiam Wilson reminds us, the history of Belfast has by nature been written on its walls (*ES*, 212). They do not offer a space for commentaries, insurrection or peripheral verbalization outside the city's metanarrative. The walls opposite Jake Jackson's house, scribbled on by "local kids [...] for the purposes of bravado or initiation" and then painted over by "some civic-minded old guy" (*ES*, 22), provide the palimpsests of Belfast's metanarrative. This writing expresses commitments to causes and contributes to the codification of the city: predispositions or prejudices are proclaimed and allegiances to principles or beliefs are thus set on stone. The "Just Us" party propaganda, whether written on the walls or spoken by its officials, participates in the metanarrative of exclusion and discrimination by a series of lies and exaggerations. It thus feeds in the very metanarrative it seeks to eradicate. Like the writing on the wall, Irish history has been erased and replaced by a version edited according to various ideological agendas:

*It wasn't so much that real history was rewritten. Real history was deleted. Its place was taken by wild and improbable fictions. Ireland was the land of story and Just Us campaigners had always been the best storytellers. They told the world a simple story. They edited or failed to mention all the complicated, pluralistic, true details. It had always been thus and the world had always loved it.*

*Theirs was a narrative in which the innocent, godly CATHOLIC Irish were subdued and oppressed by the vicious English and their Protestant plantation spawn. (ES, 326)*

However the new uncomprehensible slogan written on the walls is an important step towards the complete fragmentation of the city's metanarrative. By interrupting the familiar pattern of decipherable or guessable graffiti, by breaking thus the chain of signifiers, it disrupts and questions the signification of all the other signifiers. The logocentric organization of Belfast society, of actions and affiliations signified by the endorsement of one of the factions of the Northern Irish political or religious scenes, crumbles. This adds to the feelings of atopia and is conducive to the reinforcement of the schizophrenic atmosphere of Belfast. From now on graffiti will have to be read in the light of this riddle. Jake Jackson's protégé Roche succumbs to the graffiti frenzy and is caught red-handed writing on

a wall. However his action contributes to the thickening of the plot concerning the meaning of OTG as Roche, a dyslexic teenager, is incapable of spelling correctly the mysterious acronym (*ES*, 204).

### **Personal narratives vs. metanarratives**

The bomb explosion on Fountain Street (*ES*, 218-31) faithfully corresponds to what non-Belfasters expect Belfast headlines to be. Dictated by hatred, misunderstanding and absence of compromise, it conforms to the city's metanarrative and brings all the victims' personal narratives to an end, leaving narratorial scars in the city:

*They all had stories. But they weren't short stories. They shouldn't have been short stories. They should each have been novels, profound, delightful novels, eight hundred pages or more. [...] What had happened? A simple event. The traffic of history and politics had bottlenecked. An individual or individuals had decided that reaction was necessary. Some stories had been shortened. Some stories had been ended. A confident editorial decision had been taken.*

*It had been easy.*

*The pages that follow are light with their loss. The text is less dense, the city is smaller. (ES, 231)*

This passage sharply contrasts with the very first sentence of *Eureka Street* which stands as an epigraph to the novel: "All stories are love stories" (*ES*, 1). *Eureka Street* is a novel where, in accordance with Lyotard's theories of the postmodern condition, the metanarrative is challenged and where personal stories, personal narratives, are invested with author-ity. Most people, apart from those who belong to the "Just Us" Party and to extremist groups, have also become disillusioned with what Jake Jackson calls "the dark mists of Ireland's past" (*ES*, 164). Nostalgia for the lost narratives of Irish history does not kindle the heart any more.<sup>6</sup> The reaction to the Fountain Street explosion is consternation and incredulity: the city is in a state of shock as the justification for such a barbarous act eludes Belfasters. The OTG challenge and the Fountain Street explosion are followed by a ceasefire and this completes the dissolution of the city's metanarrative. Belfast, by the end of the novel, has eventually become what McLiam Wilson calls a "city of

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<sup>6</sup> This lack of nostalgia for the "lost narrative" also conforms to Lyotard's definition. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 41.

love" (ES, 345) where people follow their own sentiments regardless of the conventions previously imposed by politics or religion. Belfast is now a utopian ideology-free city. The city's metanarrative is replaced by people's personal stories.

Against all odds, it is Chuckie Lurgan who overtakes the "Just Us" Party and who hammers the last nail in the metanarrative's coffin by bluffing his way into the Northern-Irish political arena. He achieves this by boldly announcing his appropriation of the OTG sign, therefore filling in the empty space of the signified:

*With all the contempt he [Jimmy Eve] could muster, he asked Chuckie what his new party would be called. On the verge of actually passing out, Chuckie had gasped that his new party would probably be called the OTG, he had been having talks with that group and they would announce all the details at the press conference. The audience went crazy. Young women threw their underwear at him, and as the floor manager counted down the last five seconds Chuckie gracefully lost consciousness. (ES, 386)*

Chuckie Lurgan has become the new hero of this post-ceasefire Belfast by appearing capable of answering the questions raised by the baffling signifier. *Eureka Street* fulfills Foucault's hypotheses regarding the struggle for power: only those who succeed in the appropriation of discourse are entitled to knowledge and eventually to power.<sup>10</sup> Bruce Robertson is also aware of the power of knowledge and of the need to appropriate it. He knows that coming to terms with his past would help him towards recovery. However he chooses to disregard this road in order to follow his own physical instincts, much to his detriment: "Knowledge is power, or so they say. But fuck it. Keep your head down and your heart hard and you'll be okay" (F, 334). To Chuckie Lurgan it means successes in his professional and love lives. His capitalist ventures have eventually blossomed: Lurgan manages to turn everything he touches into Irish commodities for the American market. If his climb to wealth did involve exploitation and is therefore not to be promoted as the moral lesson of the novel, it also required a certain gullibility from his American partners. They have been ready to believe everything he has said, confirming thus the inconsistency between the discourse and the reading of the discourse. However, the mystery of the acronym OTG remains. A

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 6-9.

hint is nonetheless provided when Jake Jackson and Chuckie Lurgan meet their friends for the last time in the local pub:

*'I have an idea what it means,' said Donal quietly.*

*'What do you think it means?' asked Slat.*

*'Nothing,' replied Donal.*

*Everyone pulled their disappointed faces.*

*'I'm serious,' said Donal. 'I think it's entirely random. It could be any three letters of the alphabet. It doesn't really matter what they are. This is the city of the three-letter initial written on walls. I think someone's satirizing us.' (...)*

*'So, it's ultimately pointless?' I suggested.*

*'Not at all, satire is never pointless. It makes us look stupid and besides it's just a pretty good wheeze.'* (ES, 356)

Chuckie Lurgan might well have achieved what some critics held against Lyotard's theories of the postmodern condition.<sup>11</sup> He has merely substituted a metanarrative for another metanarrative. The extreme liberalism symbolized by his commercial successes has replaced the dictatorship imposed by creeds and ideologies. McLiam Wilson however offers other alternatives as OTG only seems to be the fragment of a longer sentence. Its author partly erases the rest as he covers the first letters — the definite article "The" — and the last letters with white paint (ES, 299; ES, 387-88). The meaning of OTG is therefore beyond the physical inscription on the wall and stands for more than the acronym it seems to be, or for more than Chuckie Lurgan's capitalist thirst.

In *Filth*, the tapeworm which has taken possession of DS Bruce Robertson's innards provides us with his host's unconscious voice. It enables us to become aware of the traumas which still haunt him — namely the bullying he had to endure at school because of his real father's identity, the taunts and gibes he was subjected to by his mother's husband, the death of his brother and the death of his first love, both of which he is responsible for. Welsh's choice of the tapeworm is a clear and potent metaphor of Bruce Robertson's repressed guilt feelings: it gnaws its host from the inside while bringing his past to light. The host's actions nurture the frustration and the resentment of the worm which grows stronger and whose voice gains potency day by day. Bruce Robertson is at first oblivious

<sup>11</sup> See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), 6-7; *ibid.*, 13; *ibid.*, 20.



what he told his wife Carole about Madeline, the Australian prostitute, and what Carole actually believes (*F*, 239-40) is a mere web of lies. Carole, like most characters in *Filth*, takes Bruce Robertson at face value and does not question what he tells her. Repressed and self-conscious, he hides his childhood scars behind a professional mask. She sums up his attitude and their relationship thus:

*The problem with Bruce is that he keeps it all in. I know that he's seen some terrible things in his job and I know that, whatever he says, they've affected him deeply. [...] His hard front fools a lot of people, but I really know my man. They don't understand what a complicated person he is. To know him is to love him and I certainly know him. (F, 42)*

Bruce Robertson admits that the professional mask he constantly wears distorts his vision. His profession as a police officer offers him a façade behind which he can get away with everything without arousing suspicion. It allows him for example to pretend to work "under cover" when he needs to explain his ragged look or when caught dressed as a transvestite.

*Filth* ends in despair as Bruce Robertson has not succeeded in listening to his interior voice, the narrative of his conscience provided by the tapeworm. The use of the pronoun "we" towards the end of the novel indicates Bruce Robertson's fragmented personality. He confides to a lover: "We hear voices Chrissie. Aw the time. Do you ever hear them? All our life we've heard them. The worms" (*F*, 333). However, if he has heard those voices all his life he has never paid heed to them. He has not managed to resolve his inner conflicts.

### **Grotesque Realism: physical degradation and deformity**

What Bakhtin terms Grotesque Realism is an indispensable component of the two novels studied here. Even though Bakhtin coined the term in his magisterial study of Rabelais,<sup>2</sup> the spirit of carnival and its main component, Grotesque Realism, have always been a central motif of artistic representation and are particularly relevant to the postmodernist obsession with the body. The imagery of Grotesque Realism displays deformed bodies and exaggerated bodily acts: verbal abuse, copulation, ingestion, digestion, defecation. However, Bakhtin insists that, in accordance with what is

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky (1965; Cambridge, Mass. : M.I.T., 1968).

implied by these bodily acts, the grotesque body is first and foremost to be considered in the act of transformation, of metamorphosis, and of evolution towards another sphere:

*This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body; the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary (the nose can also in a way detach itself from the body). Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And the next is the anus. All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere.*<sup>13</sup>

Deformed organs, foul behaviour and lewd allusions are rife in the two novels studied here and the way the protagonists' bodies are exhibited certainly belongs to the imagery of Grotesque Realism. Their fragmented bodies — after brawls, punishment beatings, or as the consequence of states of intoxication — are also potent symbols of the division and fragmentation of the cities they live in. However the grotesque body in *Eureka Street* is a mere element of the theme of verbalisation central to the novel. Jake Jackson's sturdy body has firstly provided him with a means to work: "[...] I'd sometimes earned my living by fighting people, hitting people or just looking like I might do any of those things. Bouncer, bodyguard, general-frightener, all-purpose yob, I had had the full range" (*ES*, 61). If Jackson's bodily protuberances are mere consequences of pub brawls and professional behaviour, it is with Chuckie Lurgan that McLiam Wilson uses the imagery of the grotesque: "Chuckie was not handsome. His sandy hair had started to recede before his twenty-first birthday, his belly rolled like a full balloon and he had the breasts of a thirteen-year-old girl" (*ES*, 45). His attributes are also repeatedly collocated with the adjective "grotesque" (*ES*, 307; *ES*, 336; *ES*, 343; *ES*, 385). Chuckie is at pains to summarize his life's

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<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

achievements when he reaches thirty. The only conclusions he can come up with are his bodily actions:

*On my thirtieth birthday  
I had been alive for:*

	360 months
	1,560 weeks
	10,950 days
	262,800 hours
	15,768,000 minutes
	94,608,000 seconds

*I had*

<i>urinated approx:</i>	74,460 times
<i>ejaculated approx:</i>	10,500 times
<i>been asleep for approx:</i>	98,550 hours (11 years, 3 months)
<i>smoked approx:</i>	11,750 cigarettes
<i>consumed approx:</i>	32,000 meals
<i>drunk approx:</i>	17,520 litres of liquid (approx: 8,000 of which contained alcohol)
<i>walked approx:</i>	20,440 miles
<i>sustained an erection for approx:</i>	186,150 mins, 3,102.5 hrs, 129,27 days
<i>grown approx:</i>	5,40 metres of hair
<i>had sex approx:</i>	175 times
<i>earned approx:</i>	no fucking money (ES, 50-1)

However, Chuckie Lurgan possesses an invaluable gift in self-conscious Belfast: that of calling forth people's intimate narratives — to the astonishment of Max, his gorgeous American girlfriend (ES, 130). His appropriation of the graffiti OTG is therefore a logical outcome of his faculty to prompt verbalisation. His deformed body with his protuberances and his foul bodily actions is a representation of the multi-faceted Belfast which the announcement of the ceasefire has liberated and which explodes in a surreal excess of bodily enthusiasm. Physical love and promiscuity outstrip the metanarrative imposed by the city. Religious or ideological barriers have lost their credibility. Gay and lesbian couples are formed or come out. Races or religion do not impede love any more in a now unprejudiced Belfast. All characters have found love and have all been able to ascertain their own sexual orientations without fear of being excluded from the city's code of behaviour. The liberating spirit of carnival unleashed after the demise of the city's metanarrative has even made changes possible in a Belfast once torn by rivalry and intolerance. A dewy-eyed Jake

Jackson then concludes his narration of Belfast's story with a reassessment of what the city is composed of: "I think of my city's conglomerate of bodies. A Belfastful of spines, kidneys, hearts, livers and lungs. Sometimes, this frail cityful of organs makes me seethe and boil with tenderness" (*ES*, 396). Individuals, with their bodies and their stories, have eventually succeeded in imposing their specificity.

It is however in *Filth* that the hyperbolisation central to Grotesque Realism is most successfully displayed. Welsh has always put a major emphasis on bodies since his first writings. Drugs offer a means of escape from the predicament of urban environment or social poverty by granting users a mental freedom and a sense of exhilaration. However the consequences of drug-taking are dire: the subjection and the degradation of the body. Bruce Robertson's craving and dependency is however purely sexual to start with, even if he has also become addicted to drugs by the end of the novel. He is ready to do anything in order to fulfil his physical needs, including lying to his family and professional misconduct: "[...] a standing prick hath no conscience. And if that standing prick is attached to Bruce Robertson then it hath less than no conscience. You can't afford a conscience in this life, that has become a luxury for the rich and a social ball and chain for the rest of us" (*F*, 109). His narrative is replete with abuse and power struggles: but it soon becomes clear that beside physical gratification, police work and sex are means to assert ascendancy over bodies, either in a sexual or purely physical way.

The image of the tapeworm Bruce Robertson is afflicted with also corresponds to Bakhtin's Grotesque Realism: living in his host's digestive system, it is a link between swallowing and defecating, a link between the external world and Robertson's inner world. The worm, a parasite, nevertheless symbolises rebirth. Nourished by his host's food he grows and he adopts an autonomy of his own, developing thoughts and a survival interest in his host whose life he is by now forced to share. The worm is Bruce Robertson's articulate internal voice and conscience. Not only does it formulate Bruce Robertson's past but it also continually reminds him of his selfish motivations, his self-seeking decision to contribute to the enunciation of the state's metanarrative. The city — Edinburgh — is a boardgame where Bruce Robertson has decided to engage in propitious games. Districts, like squares, have been well delimited

and he is well aware that playing on the minority / margin side is to be on the losers' side:

*Power was everything. You understood that. It wasn't for an end, to achieve anything, to better one's fellow man, it was there to have and to keep and to enjoy. The important thing was to be on the winning side; if you can't beat them join them. Only the winners or those sponsored by them write the history of the times. That history decrees that only the winners have a story worth telling. (F, 261)*

However Bruce Robertson's story will not be heard. He will only be remembered as " [...] [a] sad case who preys on vulnerable, weak and stupid women in order to boost his own shattered ego" (F, 338). Contrarily to Chuckie Lurgan, Bruce Robertson's attitude is not conducive to narration. Not only does he remain silent about his internalized ghosts, but he tries to prevent the others' narration, physically destroying the screenplay his superior Toal wrote about the racist murder by wiping it from his hard disk or blackmailing his female victims into sex and silence. His interview techniques are based on threats and physical intimidation and he is unsuccessful in establishing trust and making people confess. *Filth* ends with Robertson's suicide after the realisation that he hasn't been able to resolve his emotional crises and his feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Only *Eureka Street* therefore corresponds to Bakhtin's carnivalesque as Bakhtin was adamant that the true sense of Carnival and Grotesque Realism was a positive one, a rebirth, a reflection of transformation and the discovery of new positive feelings:

*To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth takes place. Grotesque Realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

What Welsh has done in *Filth* is a parody of a fragmented cityscape where roles are reversed and the police appears through distorted lenses. Regeneration is not a possible outcome. Robertson's life has to end. He hangs himself, taking thus the sexual games he used to play with Chrissie — oxygen starvation (*F*, 116-17) — one step further. It is the only means to get rid once and for all of the Worm, of his memories, of the guilt-feelings he did not want to share with anybody. The last words of the novel are spoken by the Worm and bring an apt conclusion to Bruce Robertson's grotesque life: "I feel myself slipping out of my Host in a large pile of his excrement and sliding down his leg inside his flannels" (*F*, 393).

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## **The City is a Map of the City: Representations of Belfast's Narrow Ground<sup>1</sup>**

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*The Ulsterman carries the map of [...] religious geography in his mind almost from birth. He knows which villages, which roads and streets, are Catholic, or Protestant, or 'mixed'. It not only tells him where he can, or cannot, wave an Irish tricolour or wear his orange sash, but imposes on him a complex behaviour pattern and a special way of looking at political problems.<sup>2</sup>*

Cognitive mapping is, as Gerry Smyth explains in his recent exposition of the geo-spatial dynamics within Irish culture, "the process whereby the subject comes to an impressionistic sense of her / his location in relation to a range of unevenly empowered environments."<sup>3</sup> In literary and visual treatments of Belfast as a contested territory, the mapping and naming of place often functions not only as an index of how locality and history are wedded together, thereby providing a rationale for the Ulster conflict ("[u]nless you know exactly who lives where, and why, much of it does not make sense"), it forecloses and predetermines

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the AHRB Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies for funding the research of this article.

<sup>2</sup> A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: The Roots of Conflict in Ulster*. Second Edition (London: Faber, 1989), 181.

<sup>3</sup> Gerry Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 40.

<sup>4</sup> A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground*, 56.

discourses of identity. Family history and religious affiliation can dictate one's socio-political allegiance, which in turn determines where one can and cannot reside. Residential segregation, due to a combination of religious intolerance, class difference and paramilitary violence,<sup>5</sup> spawns a heightened sense of place. As the Belfast writer Ciaran Carson says, "You have to constantly think of the map because there are lines past which you will not go. They're not on the street, they're in your mind, but that doesn't make them less real."<sup>6</sup>

Focusing on two novels in particular, Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man* and Glenn Patterson's *Burning Your Own*,<sup>7</sup> but drawing on prose memoirs, other novels and visual artworks for comparative purposes, this article will contend that much recent Northern Irish fiction and many visual artworks adopt an alternative socio-geographical model, one which propounds a provisional rather than a strictly deterministic outlook, one akin to the theoretical framework delineated by Doreen Massey whereby place is described as being "formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location."<sup>8</sup> The identities of place are, she argues, "inevitably unfixed. They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing."<sup>9</sup> It is this relational approach, analysing how urban location constructs and is constructed by people in society, that both radically revises and contests A.T.Q. Stewart's depiction of Northern Ireland as a fixed, narrow ground.

Political violence being the preeminent thematic concern of most Northern Irish fiction, it comes as little surprise that, as recent critical surveys have shown, the dominant genre has been that of the

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<sup>5</sup> See F.W. Boal, "Territoriality and Class: A Study of Two Residential Areas in Belfast," *Irish Geography*, 6, 3 (1971), 229-48; John Darby, *Intimidation and the Control of Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1986), 58-9; John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 33-6.

<sup>6</sup> Ciaran Carson, "It's Not So Much About as of Belfast," interview by Arminta Wallace, *Irish Times*, 13 October 1990, Weekend Supplement, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Eoin McNamee, *Resurrection Man* (1994; London: Picador, 1995); Glenn Patterson, *Burning Your Own* (1988; London: Minerva, 1993). References cited hereafter in text as (RM) and (BYO) respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 168.

<sup>9</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 169.

thriller and crime narrative,<sup>10</sup> the ideology and enclosive form of which present Northern Ireland as "a fated place, doomed to inevitable and enduring violence."<sup>11</sup> However, such a worldview is not limited to the thriller since cognitive mapping, delimiting space and identity within fixed co-ordinates, recurs in narratives such as Sam McAughtry's *Belfast*, a childhood reminiscence conveying a strong sense of segregation from and ignorance about those "who kicked with the left foot" (Catholics): "The Border in those days was the New Lodge Road. My purpose in making the old safari into Comanche territory was, I must confess, in order to shoot the line to an audience who didn't know I was doing it."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Danny Morrison's novel *West Belfast* describes the dangers involved in crossing into "foreign territory,"<sup>13</sup> this time a Protestant estate. Characters, therefore, place themselves in the world by erecting what Brian Graham terms "a myth of territory," a narrative crucial to the establishment and legitimation of their identity.<sup>14</sup>

With sectarian segregation, addresses become loaded with incipient meaning, none of which can be gleaned from a travel guide or ordnance survey map. Carson's prose memoir "Question Time" provides a vivid example of the cognitive mapping required to survive in West Belfast. Because he was seen coming to the Falls Road via the Shankill Road, he was stopped by the local militia and interrogated. A detailed account of West Belfast's geography was demanded, even of streets which were no longer present: "The map is pieced together bit by bit. I am this map which they examine, checking it for error, hesitation, accuracy; a map which no longer refers to the present world, but to a history, these vanished streets; a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies."<sup>15</sup> In the

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<sup>10</sup> See Eamonn Hughes, "Fiction," in: Mark Carruthers & Stephen Dodds (eds), *Stepping Stones: The Arts in Ulster, 1971-2001* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001), 79-80 and Eve Patten, "Fiction in Conflict: Northern Ireland's Prodigal Novelists," in: Ian A. Bell (ed.), *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), 128-30.

<sup>11</sup> Eamonn Hughes, "Fiction," 80. See also Aaron Kelly, "'Ordered Dreams': Ideology and Utopia in the 'Troubles' Thriller," *Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*, 11, (2000), 141-47.

<sup>12</sup> Sam McAughtry, "The Eucharistic Congress," in: —, *Belfast* (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1981), 87.

<sup>13</sup> Danny Morrison, *West Belfast* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1990), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Brian J. Graham, "No Place of the Mind: Contested Protestant Representations of Ulster," *Ecumene*, 1.3, (July, 1994), 257.

<sup>15</sup> Ciaran Carson, "Question Time," in: —, *Belfast Confetti* (Meath: Gallery Press, 1989), 63.

absence of a name or address, more cunning methods of placing strangers have been devised. The most well-known strategy, described by Anthony Buckley and Mary Kenney, exploits the distinction between the way a Catholic usually pronounces *a* as "ah" and *h* as "haitch" and the Protestant "ay" and "aitch": "In the 1970s (and no doubt sometimes today), this phenomenon provided a useful rule of thumb for gangs of youths, who used it to decide whether a passer-by should be beaten up."<sup>16</sup> More complex shibboleths are often in evidence in Northern Irish fiction. In Morrison's novel, for example, a group of young Catholics out climbing are accosted by a rival gang: "They knew that people called Protestants lived in New Barnsley, even heard of a neighbour or two referred to as Protestants or 'converts', but had no social intercourse or contact with them and so they were a little afraid." A tribal shibboleth — "Whadda ya call the pope?" — is demanded to ascertain the group's religious affiliation: "Stevie was expecting a denigrating remark though Tommy had suddenly read the situation and realised they were Catholics, they were all Catholics."<sup>17</sup> Such encoded cultural references, or what Allen Feldman calls "the imaginary and projected images of embodied ethnicity and body politics,"<sup>18</sup> defensively legitimize one's sense of identity, yet offer little way out of the strict binary opposition which demarcates place as either Catholic or Protestant. By employing a fixed, immutable sectarian geography, the inferred socio-political ideology underpinning the novelistic treatment of Belfast uncritically depicts the Troubles as "a cyclical, iterative conflict between two tribal monoliths."<sup>19</sup>

However, such strict identarian binarisms are avoided in writing which re-orientates urban space as a locus for the ephemeral and the contingent. Reflecting on life in Belfast, Brian Keenan states that:

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony D. Buckley & Mary Catherine Kenney, *Negotiating Identity: Rhetoric, Metaphor, and Social Drama in Northern Ireland* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> Danny Morrison, *West Belfast*, 18, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Allen Feldman, "Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror," *Public Culture*, 10, 1, (1997), 34.

<sup>19</sup> Aaron Kelly, "'New Languages Would Have to Be Invented': Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man*," in: — (ed.), *Cartography: The City* (November, 2000), 6.

*For some reason, all these fractured images seemed to echo my own thinking about the Belfast I knew. The language of the learning centre, the primitive evangelism of the street preacher, the idiomatic words on the mural and finally the unheard words of the old women — the city's fragmented nature, the non-connectedness of its idea.<sup>20</sup>*

Most striking is his focus on the city's languages, its innumerable narratives: "The language of the learning centre," "primitive evangelism," "idiomatic words," "unheard words." Yet despite their diverse and fragmented nature, one is left with the feeling that nothing changes: "these fractured images" are a legacy from his past. A similar duality occurs in Robert McLiam Wilson's celebrated "Belfast novel," *Eureka Street*. Midway through this text, experiential as opposed to empirical history comes to the fore in a meditative, self-reflective chapter:

*And sometimes, late at night, when most sleep, as now, the city seems to pause and sigh. It seems to exhale that narrative, to give off like the stored ground-heat of a summer day. On such nights, you might cross a city street and for a few golden minutes there are no cars and the very hum of distant traffic fades and you look at the material around you, the pavements and street-lamps and windows, and if you listen gently, you might hear the ghosts of stories whispered.<sup>21</sup>*

Belfast is a built-up city, a living being and a narrative all in one. As in Keenan's account of urban existence, the city's surfaces are brimful of histories; yet the activity (story-telling) is not all one-way since the narrator lays equal emphasis on the inscriptive practices of Belfast's citizens. "The city's surface is thick with its living citizens," he muses, "its earth is richly sown with its many dead. The city is a repository of narratives, stories. Present tense, past tense or future. The city is a novel" (*ES*, 215). Depicting the city as a novel associates it with a teleological, enclosive narrative, one with a definitive beginning, middle and an end: "The citizenry cannot fail to write there. Their testimony is involuntary and complete" (*ES*, 216). By inadvertently hinting at closure, it could be argued that the narrator negates the intended relativism. Towards the end of the chapter, however, he specifically focuses on the

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Keenan, "A Hostage to History," *Guardian*, 21 December 1996, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), 216. References cited hereafter in text as (*ES*).

ongoing process of inscription: "Sleeping cities and sleeping citizens alike await upon events, they attend upon narrative. They are stopped in station. They soon move on, they soon start again" (*ES*, 216). Less emphasis is placed on the city as a "repository" or a "novel:" in Belfast, he says, "in all cities, it is always present tense and all the streets are Poetry Streets" (*ES*, 217).

Eoin McNamee's debut novel, *Resurrection Man*, appears, at first, to adhere to A.T.Q. Stewart's deterministic theory of the narrow ground by demarcating space according to an implacable sectarian geography, the initiatory knowledge of which promises to accord its central characters a privileged, objective overview of the causes and patterns of conflict. Above Ryan's desk is "a cellophane-wrapped ordnance map of the city" on which he, the journalist, marks out locations of sectarian assassinations:

*There were lines on the map too, indicating rivers, areas which had been demolished, suggested escape routes following a bomb, zones of conflict, boundaries, divisions within the heart. Ryan drew a new one on the map almost every day. An evolution had been going on in there over the past three years, a withdrawing behind the lines. He thought he could learn something by keeping a record of encroachments and retreats. He was trying to develop the knowledge that the inhabitants of the city had. The sense of territory that guided them through hundreds of streets. That feeling for the anxious shift in population. (RM, 13)*

On the one hand, both the "encroachments and retreats" and "anxious shift in population" suggest that urban life is diverse and fragmentary; on the other hand, the "evolution" and prevailing "sense of territory" hint that sociological patterns have been predetermined. The novel mediates between these two antithetical standpoints, intimating that change disrupts the apparent fixity. Central to this theme is the image of the map, by which McNamee demonstrates the dangers and ultimate inadequacy of sectarian mapping.

The bookcover for the 1995 paperback edition is symptomatic of how the characters look upon the city: a Belfast street-map covers the shadowy, out-of-focus head of a man, over which shards of glass point towards (or emanate from) the figure's right eye. The image draws on the in-depth cognitive mapping of the terrorist, a manner of thinking which is both necessary for, and results from sectarian conflict. Indeed, the novel's other main protagonist, Victor, a militant (psychotic) Loyalist, can find his way

through the city blindfold: "Big Ivan reckoned that he mapped the city with smells, moving along them like a surveyor along sightlines. Willie thought of pigeons homing. Migrations moving to some enchanted and magnetic precision" (RM, 26). With this mentality, everything must be meticulously controlled. It is vital for the terrorist, we are told, that on news reports "a victim's age, religion and the exact location of the hit be given precisely. Errors were subversive. They denied sectarian and geographic certainties" (RM, 17). Commenting on news reportage and army surveillance, one character states: "There's a new vocabulary. Acceptable levels of violence, seven-day detention orders, the men of violence. It's like the whole thing's under control now. More than that, it's being ordered" (RM, 156). McNamee's narrative suggests otherwise: the violence becomes dependent on "random structures" (RM, 21) and Victor ultimately loses his innate sense of place:

*But sometimes on one of these runs he would say, where are we? He sounded surprised as if he had suddenly discovered that the streets were not the simple things he had taken them for, a network to be easily memorized and navigated. They had become untrustworthy, concerned with unfamiliar destinations, no longer adaptable to your own purposes. [...] More detail was required — people moved, discarded their occupations, emigrated, got lost. Whole streets were erased, expunged from the records, fading into the curtailed memory of the elderly [...].* (RM,163)

McNamee's narrative is alive to Belfast's ever-changing urban topography. What Victor cannot cope with are the specific changes which irreparably alter his perception of the city: "A lot of the housing and port buildings had been demolished. He closed his eyes and recalled with difficulty street after street peopled through the wavering salvage of memory; characters closed in their incomplete histories" (RM, 134).

Crucially, however, this inability to map conflict with any degree of certainty constitutes part of the novel's meta-narrative. As Nuala Johnson astutely observes, "McNamee successfully reveals the constraints on authorial intention to construct and control a cartographic image of the city."<sup>22</sup> The authorial distrust of the supposed panoptic objectivity of cartographic discourse is

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<sup>22</sup> Nuala C. Johnson, "The Cartographies of Violence: Belfast's *Resurrection Man*," *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, 17.6, (1999), 730.

foregrounded not only by his characters' inability to achieve a coherent sense of place, but also by the privileging of two interlinked themes. Firstly, McNamee explores the State's visualisation of territory and the (unreliable) optics of surveillance. As in Morrison's *West Belfast*, characters find themselves questioned by the state police in an effort to ascertain their identity; yet unlike that text, *Resurrection Man* disrupts strict oppositions between us/them by focusing on the inadequacy of tribal/state shibboleths. Whereas the 'narrow ground' thesis provides an unchanging, predetermined set of co-ordinates, McNamee foregrounds a more unsettling contingency, one which cartography and surveillance both fail to account for: "One of the soldiers asked for their names and addresses and their destination. The others crouched in doorways scanning the rooftops, their faces doubtful, as if the buildings themselves, the form and structure of the city, were untrustworthy, possessed of a dubious topography which required constant surveillance" (*RM*, 84). The urban environment itself demands (yet ultimately resists) the State's totalizing surveillance apparatus.

McNamee is here following the example set by Ciaran Carson in his prose piece "Intelligence."<sup>23</sup> This text later appeared alongside a series of photographs by Paul Seawright<sup>24</sup> depicting various aspects of police life in Northern Ireland. Both text and photographs detail aspects of covert surveillance:

*We are all being watched through peep-holes, one-way mirrors, security cameras, talked about on walkie-talkies, car phones, Pye Pocketfones; and as this helicopter chainsaws overhead, I pull back the curtains down here in the terraces to watch its pencil-beam of light flick through the card-index — I see the moon and the moon sees me, this 30,000,000 candlepower gimbal-mounted Nitesun by which the operator can observe undetected, with his infra-red goggles and an IR filter on the light-source.*<sup>25</sup>

Carson's description complements Seawright's work as they both convey a deep understanding of the complex relations between power and surveillance. In one photograph, a member of the RUC is

<sup>23</sup> Carson, "Intelligence," in: —, *Belfast Confetti*, 78-82.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Seawright, *Inside Information: Photographs 1988-1995* (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Carson, "Intelligence," in: —, *Belfast Confetti*, 78.

pictured listening to something coming through an earpiece: A message, orders, a taped conversation? What is significant is the angle from which the shot is taken (above and from behind): 'Who is watching whom?' the viewer asks. A photograph depicting wire grilles covering the outside of the police station begs a similar question as to who really has control. Deflating the sense of order created by the RUC's impressive array of gadgetry, Carson points to "the glitches and gremlins and bugs" that "keep fouling-up, seething out from the hardware, the dense entangled circuitry of back streets, while the tape is spooling and drooling over alphanumeric strings and random-riot situations."<sup>26</sup>

The anxiety aroused by the lack of a stable panoptic viewpoint is linked to a second key thematic concern in *Resurrection Man*: the failure to articulate or control the roots of conflict. McNamee establishes the map as just one of the novel's many inadequate linguistic constructs. Two critics, in particular, Gerry Smyth and Nuala Johnson, convincingly argue that the incongruous multiplicity of the novel's languages (filmic discourse, psychological treatise, gangster clichés) points towards "the suspicion that language cannot adequately circumscribe motive and communicate meaning for politically charged and savagely executed violence in the city of Belfast."<sup>27</sup> "The root of the tongue," both literally and figuratively, "had been severed. New languages would have to be invented" (*RM*, 16). Although the characters themselves articulate a sense of dislocation — "the state of civil unrest had made them feel obsolete, abandoned on the perimeter of a sprawling technology of ruin" (*RM*, 83) — it is important to note that their alienation stems from a dissatisfaction with their linguistic resources:

*Coppinger said that he was experiencing a new species of information. Paramilitary organizations operating under cover names. Politicians issued ambiguous statements of condemnation. In court unidentified witnesses gave evidence from behind screens. The facts were equivocal and it had become impossible to pin down responsibility. (RM, 83)*

While Elmer Kennedy-Andrews correctly argues that such events in the novel become textualised (newspaper reportage,

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<sup>26</sup> Carson, "Intelligence," in: —, *Belfast Confetti*, 79.

<sup>27</sup> Nuala C. Johnson, "The Cartographies of Violence: Belfast's *Resurrection Man*," 724. See also Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 123.

anecdotal accounts), and that narration displaces the real into the mediated (that which is re-presented),<sup>28</sup> nevertheless the underlying emphasis of *Resurrection Man* is on the distortive nature of this representation and its ultimate failure to either encompass the primal scene of violence or explain its socio-political cause.

Indeed, the author explicitly and self-consciously depicts the ultimate failure of cartographic discourse (as a language) to situate and explain this violence. When Ryan stares at his map, he realizes that "the lines and circles ... proposed something beyond the capacity of maps. His markings were like the structure of a language. He expected to hear its guttural sound being pronounced on the streets. He imagined being addressed in it. It would be arcane, full of sorrow, menacing" (*RM*, 13). The "arcane" nature of this structure is suggestive of Stewart's essentially unchanging narrow ground; yet it displays a hermetic inscrutability, and McNamee intimates that one's sense of place here is dependent more on a subjective projection than any historical determinism. Later in the novel, Ryan picks up a street directory and imagines his partner, Coppinger, "bent over this one as if the lamentation of the city was encrypted in its narration of street-names and dead inhabitants and lost occupations" (*RM*, 220). This bears comparison with recent artworks by the visual artist Michael Minnis, who paints sections of Belfast street maps onto aluminium sheets. In both "Letter/Omitted Space" and "Street Index" (1993),<sup>29</sup> the artist compels the viewer to recognise his position as a situated observer by having his reflection stare back from the surface of the map as he attempts to construct the history of the streets (the map is overlaid with the names and occupations of its former inhabitants). Determining one's sense of place here is less reliant on a pre-existing pattern than on the imaginative projections of the observer; yet what McNamee points towards is the observer's ultimate inability to uncover or express in language the roots of conflict.

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<sup>28</sup> See Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "Antic dispositions in Some Recent Irish Fiction," in: Fran Brearton and Eamonn Hughes (eds), *Last Before America: Irish and American Writing* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001), 134-36.

<sup>29</sup> See Michael Minnis, "Letter/Omitted Space," in: Liam Kelly, *Language, Cartography and Power* (Derry: Orchard Gallery, 1996), 53 and "Street Index," in: Liam Kelly, *Thinking Long: Contemporary Art in the North of Ireland* (Kinsale: Gandon Editions, 1996), 73.

Such a theme is recurrent in recent Northern Irish art. In Alan Clarke's "Elephant" (1989),<sup>20</sup> for example, a film devoid of dialogue and linguistic narrative, the viewer is forced to bear witness to a series of sectarian killings in the disused factories and deserted wastegrounds of Belfast. Shot by means of a roving steadicam, we follow killers and victims alike on their journeys through the city without the aid of a situating commentary; it is up to us to articulate the lacunae in the narratives as the camera provides lingering close-ups of each victim's body and killer's hand pulling the trigger. Similarly, in the title story of Blánaid McKinney's collection of short stories *Big Mouth*,<sup>21</sup> the narrator, a Belfast-born linguist, attempts to achieve equilibrium by residing within the "stern, lapidary sentences, total functionality and a formal, divine polish" of Latin (*BM*, 118), in contrast to "the chesty rhetoric" (*BM*, 117) and uncontrollable "gallant jabber" (*BM*, 119) of the terrorists: "But I knew that underneath their casual brutality and forlorn whining was a big fucking gap, a huge hole, a hectoring emptiness that screamed the truth at them [...]" (*BM*, 123). Yet as in *Resurrection Man* and *Elephant*, the onlooker is left without a language which can either explain the rationale behind political violence or grant a definitive, stable perspective: "My past is an encyclopaedia of banished unwhisperables" (*BM*, 123).

In contrast to the silence at the heart of McNamee's text is the contention of Glenn Patterson's revisionary novel *Burning Your Own* that there have been *too many* words. This claim is articulated during a parodic auction by one of the protagonists, Francy, a politically non-aligned Catholic teenager inhabiting a marginal location (the dump):

*'Sick to death of always having to take someone else's word for it? Then solve all your problems when you become the proud owner of this very attractive dictionary. Words upon words — every one of you'll ever need and a few more besides — taken apart and listed individually for you to put together again, how you please, in the comfort of your own home.'* (*BYO*, 244)

The ostensible function of this character is to deconstruct tribal shibboleths and mythologies, offering alternative versions of

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<sup>20</sup> I would like to thank Richard Kirkland for bringing this film to my attention.

<sup>21</sup> Blánaid McKinney, "Big Mouth," *Big Mouth* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 115-25. References hereafter cited in text as (*BM*).

names and locally accepted lore. Contradicting the official history of Derrybeg Chapel (BYO 216) and the story of Sammy Slipper's dog (BYO 228-30), he demonstrates that the boundaries between history and myth are fluid and that narrative construction is far from innocent. Seeing through tribal ideology which dictates a destructively oppositional identarian discourse, Francy articulates the rationale behind his refusal to fight against his so-called Protestant enemy: "'That's when it hit me: all these years, they'd been filling our heads with that much shit, it was starting to get in our eyes. We were seeing things; seeing big men when we weren't any sort of men at all — just two wee lads squabbling over a dump and a frigging bonfire'" (BYO, 208). With Rabelaisian excess, he undercuts the sectarian contentiousness of the name of Malachy Martin (the novel's other protagonist, a Protestant adolescent whose name is a source of conflict between his parents), and provides a substitutive nomenclature:

*'Malarkey, Malakos, Malcontent ... Malentendu, Malevolent, Malfeasance, Malformation, Malfunction ... Malice, Malign, Malignant ... Malingering, Malison, Malleable, Malemaroking Martin — hereinafter, Mal du Siècle, Malkin the Ill, The Great Malacophilous ...'* (BYO, 63)

Unlike the novels of Morrison and McNamee, Patterson's text presents an alternative to 'embodied ethnicity'; Francy accepts Mal as an individual, and does not define him in sectarian terms.

The novel's form (a *Bildungsroman*) allows Patterson to explore the pressures and narratives which act on an adolescent in Northern Ireland, compelling him to affiliate with the tribe to secure his identity. The text charts the education and gradual coming of age of Malachy Martin, a ten year old boy belonging to a Protestant family who have recently moved into Belfast's Larkview Estate. Although much of what we see in the novel is presented from Mal's perspective, the text consistently calls attention to his limited point of view: on page 10 we are told that while the gang are discussing Francy Hagan, a young Catholic boy whom he later befriends, Mal has trouble understanding the conversation: "If Mal had been older he might have had words for it. Instead he looked on, trying to account for their actions, as though they were characters in a film he had missed the start of it". On the following page, we are told that this feeling of inadequacy is not an isolated instance: "he didn't

always understand everything when they talked like that, and he was afraid of being embarrassed if he was asked a question" (*BYO*, 11). The novel traces Mal's education and the broadening of his perspective, the viewpoint he has on the world.

Apart from the individual self, there are three (spatial) centres to which Mal finds himself attached, and these centres entail differing affiliations, rules and codes of behaviour and provide him with differing world views. The first is the home or familial base, the symbol of which is the heavy brass bowl with an intricate, handbeaten design that rests "[i]n the centre of the table" (*BYO*, 25). A wedding present, it stands as an uneasy barometer of the state of family relations: "the slightest bump of the table set it clattering" (*BYO*, 25). At a particular moment of crisis, he witnesses his mother spinning the bowl furiously: "It drummed and rattled and bobbed on the table's varnished surface and Mal watched, jaw slack in amazement, as her long, bony fingers flicked the intricately patterned sides, sending it faster, faster, faster . . . She clamped both hands on the bowl, bringing it to an abrupt halt, and looked up, eyes drained of expression" (*BYO*, 35). This scene is repeated later after the usual quarrel about Mal's name: the father leaves and Mal hears "the brass bowl [...] spinning, drumming on the dinette table" (*BYO*, 70). The quarrels themselves follow an inevitable pattern: "There had been another argument at breakfast," we are told on the opening page, "Or, rather, the same old arguments were revived and repeated. Mal glided through the tortuous twists and turns, shifting as easily as his parents from point to unconnected point, all the time anticipating the inevitable descent into namecalling: his names" (*BYO*, 3). The argument then "becomes a fight" with the too-familiar finale" (*BYO*, 3). The inevitability and the cyclicity of the arguments match the bowl's spinning, but also mirror the inevitable and cyclical social ritual of the Eleventh Night bonfire, a second centre around which Mal revolves.

Collecting wood and guarding the centre-pole allow Mal to feel part of the community, to cast off his deep-seated feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. And yet, as Gerry Smyth argues, "[t]he downside of communitarian ideology is the curtailment of individual freedom. [...] Mal is losing his capacity for childish wonder as he gradually becomes socialised into the contradictions of adulthood and the dull, unquestioned, inflexible certainties of

sectarian identity."<sup>32</sup> The bonfire, however, is associated with destruction rather than communitarian well-being; as Francy argues, "We're a shocking lot for burning things." Berating the Protestant crowd, Francy yells: "Youse never knew — what to waste — and what the fuck — to keep" (*BYO*, 246). Such observations are expounded from the book's third centre, the alternative space of the dump. The dump represents a utopia or dystopia, depending on which way you look at it. Either way, society's rules do not apply there: "Lesson number . . . whatever: their rules [...] stop at the fence" (*BYO*, 61). In the dump, Francy provides a version of the theology, or at least a parody of one: "In the beginning was the dump."<sup>33</sup> The novel's opening sentence plays on the Biblical allusion, completing the parody when, at the conclusion of his history of how the dump came into being, he says "And on the last day [...]" The dump is an alternative centre, providing a disorientating perspective for Mal. On page 3 we learn that "the world could seem a very different place from the world into which he walked that morning [...]" Later, we are told that "beyond the dump, across the grass, a solid mass of redbrick walled in his vision. Roofs merged in strange teetering formations, half-houses, quarter-houses were grafted on to the sides of others, filling every gap, blinding every alley and driveway. He lived there, but he did not recognise this place, could not reconcile the jumble with the neatly hedged rows he walked through day to day" (*BYO*, 14). This is a consistent feature of the dump: it turns the centre into the periphery and *vice-versa*. As Gerry Smyth astutely points out, in this 'Other space,' "the oppositionalism endemic to the outside world is replaced by a sort of archaeological imagination interested in the traces and layers of other stories to be found beneath and throughout the currently dominant sectarian story."<sup>33</sup> It is from this centre that Francy articulates alternative versions of history.

Crucial to the novel's thematic focus on alternative perspectives is the use made of maps. Looking at a painting done by his cousin Alex, we are told (from Mal's perspective) that it was "dreadful: bright random swirls of unmixed yellows, reds and blues, and in the centre a tiny square of black, under which were written the words: *You Are Here*." This, according to the cousin, is "a world map" (*BYO*, 126). Undermining the idea that maps objectively

<sup>32</sup> Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation*, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation*, 127.

reflect the world, Alex's "world map" is not a mimetic representation; rather, it is the expression of her desire for order in the midst of chaos, as if a map could securely locate an individual. It also suggests a more universal perspective than the strictly local one advanced by Mal's other cousin, Cathy, who maintained that it was "a street map" (BYO, 126). A second map is drawn when the extended family is out at a restaurant, celebrating the Uncle's good fortune at securing a contract as well as the father's new job:

*Facing him, Alex scored shapes on the tablecloth with the handle of her teaspoon. 'That another world map?' Mal asked her. 'No,' she said, 'it's Ireland.' Ireland; the world: Alex's maps were pretty much of a piece to Mal's eyes: none of them bore the slightest resemblance to what they claimed to be. He watched as she continued her moody scratchings. 'Looks more like a pig, if you ask me.'*  
*'Slow, slow, quick, quick, slow,' Alex loured. 'That's what it's meant to be: 'the old sow that eats her farrow.'* (BYO, 149)

As a counterpoint to the political discussion going on in the background, Alex's conceptual map alludes to Stephen Dedalus's infamous claim that Irish nationalism is a self-defeating, all-consuming ideology;<sup>34</sup> it interrogates, rather than reaffirms, the sectarian cognitive mindset. The novel's conclusion, however, does not offer such an optimistic or questioning deterritorialization; rather, it marks the beginning of direct rule by Westminster, and the surveillance of territory by the army: "An armoured car, the first seen in Larkview, slowed and parked by the roadside beyond the grass. Two soldiers got out, nursing heavy rifles, and called a policeman to them. Then all three pored over a map spread on the armoured car's bonnet. One of the soldiers drew lines in pencil, the other took off his tin hat and scratched his head" (BYO, 249).

Novels such as *Resurrection Man* and *Burning Your Own* explore the intersection of politics and place, laying bare the form and function of sectarian cognitive mapping, and delineate the psychological consequences of such a mindset. They undermine the supposed objectivity and controlling force of mapping by demonstrating the contingent nature of urban existence and by demonstrating the ways in which alternative maps emerge. The texts are not, however, utopic in their examination of the ideological

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<sup>34</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; London: Penguin, 1960), 203.

impositions implicit in mapmaking; rather, they work as creative analogues to recent theories of decolonization which warn against simply replacing one map with another. As Gerry Smyth argues (quoting from Geoff King's *Mapping Reality*):

*We cannot do without maps/names; but instead of replicating the old systems of thought, the goal should be '[a] new, deconstructive reading of the existing map [...] in which the arbitrary status of the existing boundaries is apparent'. The postcolonial map/name, in other words, must forgo the traditional claims on 'truth' and attempt instead to express both the historical contingency and the ontological hybridity of space [...].*<sup>35</sup>

In Patterson's text, all three centres self-destruct: the marriage breaks up (though not irreparably) and the bowl is discarded (*BYO*, 84); the "weight of the sides, the devouring intensity of the inner ball of flame" proved "too much for the improvised centrepole and the bonfire caved in" (*BYO*, 92); and the alternative centre, the dump, is blown up at the end, with Francy resting, literally, "in pieces" (*BYO*, 249). In *Resurrection Man*, Ryan fails in his attempt to gain a panoptic overview of the conflict, and Victor Kelly remains deluded in his sense of self-control right up to the moment at which he is shot dead. However, what distinguishes these narratives from texts such as Danny Morrison's *West Belfast* is the attempt to problematize the idea of 'the narrow ground' and to at least articulate a sense of contingency.

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<sup>35</sup> Gerry Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, 45.

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## Larryogon in Space: *The Barrytown Trilogy*

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Early in Roddy Doyle's *The Van* (1991) we find the Rabbitte family at the dinner table. The two sisters Linda and Tracy are telling their parents about their schoolwork: specifically a domestic project they are carrying out for "Geog'aphy." "Do you not do maps and stuff like that?" asks their mother. "No," say the twins in turn: "Sometimes only," "Nearly never," (*V*, 9) negations whose vague exactness is nearly Beckettian. I want to follow the twins by talking about something like geography in this essay: specifically, I shall be considering the ways in which Roddy Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy*, and especially the third and longest book *The Van*, envisions urban space. But before I do that, I want to take an extended meander towards the subject, by thinking about space and literature a little more generally. For space has enjoyed a resurgence, or perhaps just a surge, in recent literary studies. If not quite the final frontier that we customarily know it to be, it has certainly been one of the latest locations of critical thinking, a fresh move in the ongoing project of finding ways to talk about literature. This can be placed in a slightly larger or longer context.

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<sup>1</sup> Roddy Doyle, *The Van* (1991; London: Minerva, 1992). References cited hereafter in the text as (*V*).

### Literary Geography

Literary critics from Georg Lukacs to Stephen Greenblatt have spent valuable time and brilliant pages trying to think historically about texts: trying to find the strongest link between those two capitalized keywords: Literature and History. But the recent case for space has, among other things, productively estranged that struggle. In a leap of imagination, we can try thinking of the spatial, rather than the temporal, as the privileged zone with which we need to engage the literary: we can try thinking of geography, not history, as the metalanguage with most explanatory purchase. This will literally be a kind of lateral thinking, as our "horizontal" modes of thinking about space displace the "vertical" models with which we are, or at least I am, apt to think of history. And this realignment from diachronic to synchronic, while not yielding any absolute new truth, while not genuinely *replacing* the earlier emphasis on the historical, might grant us a little leverage, might leave us in a new and unexpected place somewhere on the other side of the question — the question, I mean, of literature's worldliness — where it looks sufficiently different for us to have learned something about it, and about the limitations of our earlier attempts.

Some of the most interesting contributions to our recent thinking about culture have been geographical in mode — not least in the work of professional geographers like Henri Lefebvre, or more recently Edward Soja and David Harvey. In a series of books, Harvey has sought to recast concepts of space and time, to think of both terms as not merely abstract categories — a homogeneous, empty space mirroring Walter Benjamin's famous "homogeneous, empty time" — but as dynamic and changeable.<sup>2</sup> Space, like time, goes from being a transparent container — say, a washed-out old ice-cream tub — to a plural, unstable dimension which is impacted upon, but also impacts, the raspberry ripple of social experience going on within it, or melting over its edges in the heat of historical crises. Space is thus no longer something that simply precedes experience, a necessary but universal precondition: it is actively remade in and by experience, by culture, by politics. Even by

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<sup>2</sup> See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); D. Harvey, *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); D. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). Benjamin's phrase appears in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Glasgow: Fontana, 1970), 263.

literature. To be sure, the kinds of space that literature records and reveals are, according to the new geography, social constructs, formed by class or other power interests. Baron Haussman's rationalization and reorganization of Paris is a famous instance, not least because of Benjamin's rich reflection on the process; and in the shapes of great cities, in the grid of Manhattan or the sprawl of Los Angeles, we can read the imprint of projects and politics, the signatures of hierarchy and history. But if literature reflects these dispositions of social space, it also finds itself remaking them: dealing in its own symbolic spatializations, cutting the world up in different ways depending on factors of genre, period, style. The shape of a sentence is moulded by a historical world which may in part be beyond the writer's ken: but the shape of a sentence may itself work to remould that world in imaginative terms, to render real space in a transfigured state. So a new "literary geography" is conceivable which would think through different aspects of a work's spatiality. Its place of origin, market, relation to this or that national context. The choice of locations in the book and their implications as social sites, points on a cultural spectrum. And just as important, the ways in which these factors are transformed by the things that make us call the work "literary" in the first place — the ways in which form forms its own space.<sup>3</sup>

I want to begin to try out this new emphasis on the novels that just about remain Roddy Doyle's best-known achievement: *The Commitments*,<sup>4</sup> *The Snapper*,<sup>5</sup> and — in particular — *The Van*, collectively known as the *Barrytown Trilogy*.

### The Country and the City

The space of Doyle's novels is generally urban: and in this they are like the majority of modern novels. But Doyle's favoured setting, the housing estate on the North side of Dublin, gains in significance when set in the history of Irish writing. For one of the great emphases of Irish literature, historically speaking, has been the rural. When in the 1920s and 1930s Daniel Corkery invoked the land,

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<sup>3</sup> The one critic who has so far managed to unify these concerns into a coherent project is Franco Moretti, whose *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998) is the outstanding case of a new literary geography.

<sup>4</sup> Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments* (1988; London: Minerva Press, 1991). References cited hereafter in the text as (C).

<sup>5</sup> Roddy Doyle, *The Snapper* (1990; London: Minerva, 1991). References cited hereafter in the text as (S).

alongside the Irish language and the Catholic Church, as one of the qualifications for authentic Irishness, he meant the "soil," the earthy stuff of roots whose authenticity was guaranteed though hard to explain.<sup>6</sup> And if the "Irish Ireland" position of Corkery validated the rural, so too did the imagery of the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival, exemplified by such monumental figures as W.B. Yeats, Augusta Gregory, John Synge and George Russell. It has been well recorded that the Revival sought to establish an Ireland of the mind which might point towards political revival and independence — a political trajectory running alongside the cultural "de-Anglicization" requested by Douglas Hyde in the 1890s — while also securing the position of the dwindling Ascendancy remnant themselves as privileged interpreters of the nation's soul.<sup>7</sup> The true representatives of Irishness, for this vision, were rural figures: on one hand the hard-riding aristocrat whose arrogant nobility of spirit finds imagined articulation in Yeats's verse, on the other the dream-dwelling Celtic peasant. The wisdom of the peasantry is intuitive and collective, and thus requires Literary Revivalists to go out, record and translate it, updating it for the ears of a secular age. We may note that this cultural and political process of representation also involves geography, a movement out from the centre of literary activity in Dublin, not to the fabled decadence of Europe (though Synge and Yeats enjoyed this for a while), but Westward into the green spaces of the hidden Ireland, the bogs and plains, forests and remote offshore islands. The countryside, in short, is the home of truth: while the city — at least in Yeats's influential vision of it — is habitually the site of the shopkeeper, the world of business, exchange, wheeling and dealing, fumbling in tills and adding halfpence to pence. It is an Ireland all too visible, which one might indeed wish *was* hidden: and it was indeed occluded by the rhetoric of ruralism that pervaded Irish political as well as literary discourse from the Revival through to the first decades of the Free State. Eamon de Valera's invocations of an ideal Ireland whose heart would be the country crossroads have become as familiar in Irish Studies as Synge's peasants or Yeats's mystics.

Against all this, there has of course been a countervailing tradition in Irish writing, which has taken up residence in the city

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<sup>6</sup> See: Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1930; Cork: Mercier Press, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Among the most capacious accounts of the Revival is Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (1995; London: Vintage, 1996).

and has explored urban space as vividly as any national literature. The list of Irish writers whose favoured locations are the grim inner city or the chic bohemian quarter continues to grow: if Roddy Doyle is its best-known contemporary member, then its most towering figure is James Joyce. The tradition of which Joyce is the exemplar does not simply happen to write about the city: it strategically reinserts the city as the place of Irish experience in the face of an overwhelming ruralist rhetoric in the nation's political discourse and literary inheritance. To write about the city in Ireland has meant, for many writers at least, to choose to be modern: to confront and describe the eclecticism, the variety, the crowd, the mess of the city street rather than the untilled field or the lonely strand.

Still, even within this tradition there are differences and divergences: for part of the point of the city is that it is no one thing, but an uneasy agglomeration of many. In this sense the city stands as a locus of anti-essentialism, and the many writers of the Irish city who have followed Joyce have pursued this diversity. Roddy Doyle, for all his nods and winks at the Joycean inheritance, departs from the earlier writer not least in his focus on working-class experience. As James Fairhall has pointed out, Joyce's teeming inclusiveness never really meant that every social stratum received equal treatment in his work: the world depicted in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* is primarily one of the previously or residually Parnellite Catholic bourgeoisie, the very class whose filthy modern tide was, to Yeats's dismay, rising to power in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Doyle, too, writes about the broad mass of the Catholic population, but in inventing Barrytown he descends to and describes a lower social rung, one which may make up to the majority of Irish experience but lacks power and wealth. In this sense, Doyle's other canonical predecessor is Sean O'Casey, who unlike Joyce or the Revivalists sought to put working-class life into art, and whose struggling tenement dwellers surviving on gab and sentiment are literary ancestors of Doyle's people.

### **Urban Pastoral**

The habitual places of Doyle's novels, then, are the kitchen, the front step, the local bar, the garage where the Commitments rehearse, occasionally the DART platform or carriage, or even the centre of

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<sup>8</sup> See James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

town. Urban places: but as I have said, the city is an inherently complex space, and Doyle's Dublin is not quite a stereotypical urban environment. Admittedly, there are such inner-city figures as the disaffected youths who maraud outside Bimbo's chip van, whom Jimmy Sr dubs "The Living Dead:"

*Even in the rain, they stayed there. They just put their hoodies up. Some of them always had their hoodies up. They were all small and skinny looking but there was something frightening about them. The way they behaved, you could tell that they didn't give a fuck about anything. (V, 188)*

The book proceeds to describe their casual vandalism and public drinking, and how the truly sinister thing about the gang is that unlike other kids, they do not laugh: "They were like fuckin' zombies. When Jimmy Sr saw them, especially when it was raining, he always thought the same thing: they'd be dead before they were twenty" (V, 188). There is inner-city *anomie* to be found in Barrytown, then, a world of glue-sniffing and drug-pushing. Yet many other classic features of city life — speed, crowds, continual bustle and clamour — are hardly in evidence here. Doyle's dialogue, to be sure, has a rapidity all of its own, but it is precisely a discursive matter, not an echo of the whizz of the city that we find in modernist epics of the city like Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*.<sup>9</sup> On one level that might be simply to say that Dublin is not Manhattan — but it is also that Doyle's vision of urban space wilfully cuts across standard categorizations of the country and the city. For the sociologist Georg Simmel, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, to leave the countryside and relocate in the city was to spurn settlement and intimacy, to plunge instead into a world of ceaseless sensory bombardment and impersonality, the awful, blissful anonymity of the crowd.<sup>10</sup> That impersonality that we may still think a characteristic feature of urban life is downplayed in Barrytown, where faces are familiar and names are nicknames. In fact it is precisely in search of this anonymity that, towards the end of *The Van*, Jimmy Sr takes his associate Bimbo on a drinking spree in the

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<sup>9</sup> John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*. With an Introduction by Jay McInerney (1925; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> See Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in: Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

centre of Dublin. He is looking for some kind of sexual encounter to assure him of his worth, and one back on the estate will not do:

*[...] there were plenty of women in Barrytown who'd have come behind the clinic with him; all he'd have to have done was buy them a few bottles of Stag and listen to their problems for a while and tell them that they were still good-looking women when they started crying. He knew them all, and some of them were still good-looking women. But he'd never been tempted, and not because he'd have been afraid of being caught. (V, 256)*

The next line, symptomatically enough, is "They were at the middle of the crowd now, not at the edge" (V, 256). What he is after is the exoticism of the unknown, the brief encounter with a stranger that is precisely what is not available where he lives. So it is not so much a matter of country versus city: rather of the different spaces *within* the complexity of the city. The centre of Dublin — Grafton Street, Leeson Street — is for Jimmy Sr's purposes the big world, where the bright lights shine; where you can see crowds of girls who are "used to money," talking like newsreaders, only three of them not absolutely gorgeous; where a bottle of house red costs £23. Barrytown is also an urban place, but has some of the traditional hallmarks of the rural: face-to-face familiarity, communal gathering-places, a circuit of gossipy knowledge that makes inhabitants of the estate omniscient about each other. In other words, Doyle seems to suggest that city life can in some respects be like village life: even the village life of, say, *The Playboy of the Western World*<sup>11</sup> with its rumours, sports and scapegoats. We can observe this effect in a scene like the one where Bimbo and Jimmy Sr actually drag the newly-purchased van down the road in the middle of the estate:

*The weather was great, of course, and everyone on the left side of the street was out on their front steps getting the last of the sun and by the time they'd got to the corner of Barrytown Road there was a huge fuckin' crowd out watching them. [...] There really was a huge crowd out. It was a bit like Gandhi's funeral in the film, except noisier. It was more like the Tour de France, the neighbours at the side of the road clapping and whooping, the cynical bastards. [...] A kid had his ghetto blaster on full blast; it was like a jaysis circus. (V, 119-20)*

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<sup>11</sup> J. M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*. With an Introduction by T.R. Henn (London: Methuen, 1960).

The huge crowd, the mass-produced electronic sounds of the city; but also a sort of local carnival, the communal festivity of the village. Space in Doyle's Barrytown is a canny blend of experiences that sound typically rural or urban — a refusal of the simple country/city split. As Luke Gibbons has argued, the relation between country and city in Ireland is historically complex: much of the Irish idea of the countryside originates, he proposes, from the city.<sup>12</sup> Doyle's depiction of urban space is testimony to his own grasp of this complexity.

### The Invisible City

But in another sense, to talk about Roddy Doyle's depiction of urban space, or indeed any space, is wide of the mark. What does any place look like, in one of these novels? On this matter, Roddy Doyle is surprisingly reticent. The first location specified in the trilogy's first book, *The Commitments*, is "the Pub," which is immediately filled with the conversation of the aspiring musicians: the closest we get to a spatial description is "They got stools and formed a little semicircle at the bar" (C, 3). The first page of *The Snapper* offers a relative wealth of spatial specifics:

*Jimmy Jr was upstairs in the boys' room doing his D.J. practice. Darren was in the front room watching Police Academy II on his video. Les was out. Tracy and Linda, the twins, were in the front room annoying Darren. Veronica, Mrs Rabbitte, was sitting opposite Jimmy Sr at the kitchen table. (S, 1)*

What are the rooms like, the kitchen, the table? It seems that we do not need to know: on goes the conversation about Sharon's pregnancy. These books start as they mean to go on: they include almost no extended passages describing objects or locations. Even the characters remain outline sketches — to be filled in, perhaps, by screen adaptations, if not by the gap-filling activity of the reader's imagination. Roland Barthes once suggested that realism in the novel functioned in part by the amassing of information, the hoarding of detail as security against the reader's credulity. The density of a prose description, Barthes proposed, was part of its "reality-effect."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> See Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in: Lilian R. Furst (ed.), *Realism* (London & New York: Longman, 1992), 135-41.

Part of Roddy Doyle's originality lies in how he pulls off the trick of seeming "realistic" without ever bothering with such detail.

I once suggested to a Joycean that space was an interesting issue in chapter nine of *Ulysses*. I meant the locations of characters around and outside the room that is the episode's setting, but he took me to mean the space on the page: the typographical innovations, white spaces, Mallarméan borrowings. Lateral thinking indeed. If you think spatially in *that* way about Roddy Doyle, look at his pages from a height, you will see a profusion of dashes down the left-hand margins with which — like Joyce and the French writers who inspired him — Doyle signals dialogue. Paragraphs without dashes are brief and to the point: they may well be doing the narrative work of explaining a character's current state of mind in his or her own idiom, in the deceptively subtle free-indirect discourse that Doyle deploys to hover around his people's thoughts and moods. What they will not be doing is this:

*The grey warm evening of August had descended upon the city and a mild warm air, a memory of summer, circulated in the streets. The streets, shuttered for the repose of Sunday, swarmed with a gaily coloured crowd. Like illumined pearls the lamps shone from the summits of their tall poles upon the living texture below which, changing shape and hue unceasingly, sent up into the warm grey evening an unchanging unceasing murmur.*<sup>4</sup>

That is the exquisite first paragraph of James Joyce's short story "Two Gallants," published eighty years or so before Doyle's work. The narrator here is third-person, distanced, in possession of a lot of knowledge, but the prose is no blunt instrument — it is carefully turned to evoke a scene, to aestheticize the city, to send murmurs of remembered emotion through the reader, and to turn in on itself, playing with and inverting its own vocabulary. Such descriptive prose is simply not part of Doyle's project in the *Barrytown Trilogy*, which subsists on a staple diet of rapid-fire dialogue, plus feelings and actions described with the greatest possible economy.

As a result, *place* in Roddy Doyle's writing verges on being *invisible*. Why should this be? It could, I suppose, be simply that Doyle doubts his literary powers of description, or that he assumes that extended descriptions of scenery will impede the speed of the

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<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, "Two Gallants," in: *Dubliners*. Ed. Terence Brown (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 43.

action and dialogue. But in any case it is plainly connected to Doyle's attitude to his characters. I compared Doyle to O'Casey earlier. O'Casey has frequently been criticized for stereotyping, stage-Irishry, even a covert contempt for the ordinary people he depicts.<sup>15</sup> Roddy Doyle surely cannot be accused of such contempt towards his characters. If Joyce set out in *Ulysses* to demonstrate the dignity and complexity of an ordinary middle-class Dubliner who also happened to be, for good provocative measure, Jewish, Doyle has something of the same desire to make clear not just the salt (salt-&-vinegar) of the earth "decency" of his Northsiders, but also of their mixed emotions, divided loyalties, unuttered thoughts and subconversations — their complexity as people. In short, Doyle respects his characters, not least Jimmy Sr, the family patriarch and protagonist of *The Van*. And it is because of this, I think, that — in contrast with that paragraph from Joyce — every line in these novels is umbilically linked to a character: to an individual's thoughts, emotions or projects. We encounter locations not as the strangers that we really are, but as the characters encounter them: and the characters, as we have already seen, have an intimate relationship with the immediate surroundings of the community. Hence the lack of description and the scanty specification of place: we are not going to be told anything extensive that the characters do not need to know.

In that sense, space in the *Barrytown Trilogy* is, perhaps surprisingly, *subjective* space: its proximity to a character's own perceptions is part of the guarantee of Doyle's good will towards his people. We are not dealing here, though, with a sort of Pathetic Fallacy, in which characters' surroundings mirror their states of mind with all the extraordinary fidelity of the storm which breaks over the love-stricken Dorothea and Ladislav in *Middlemarch*.<sup>16</sup> No, locations in Doyle, in so far as he describes them at all, are apt to be conditioned not by *emotion* but by *need* — by a character's requirements for *action*. Space exists as a field of activity, a potential site for getting this or that task done, a series of aids or obstacles. When venues are described in *The Commitments*, for instance, what the narrator is implying and assessing is their suitability for the band (C, 114). This is even clearer in *The Van*, which is effectively a novel

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), 319.

<sup>16</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. Edited with Notes by David Carroll. With an Introduction by Felicia Bonaparte (1871-72; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

about work. The account we get of the inside of the van does not trouble to evoke the colours of perception: it is a professional inventory and assessment:

*The door was at the back of the van. The driver and passenger seats were separate; you had to get out and walk round to the back to get into the van bit. There was a step up to the door. When you came in the hatch was on your right. It was wide enough for two using their arms and elbows, with a good wide counter, although you'd have to lean out a bit to get the money. (V, 141)*

Space for Roddy Doyle, then — as for his characters — is a space of labour, of potential action. It is a space subjectively perceived, but according not to a Pathetic Fallacy but to what I will dub instead the Pragmatic Formality. I have said that this is a way for the author to allow the characters maximum power over the narrative: and by the same token it forestalls the risk of the author speaking from a height, from a distance, about this social world, and by doing so derogating it. Doyle's eschewal of any account of space which does not revolve around his characters' needs removes the risk of his writing prose like the stage directions of O'Casey, who can often be found scorning his protagonists and their environment in the most well-meaning way.

### **The Space of Language**

If the effect of described places is absent from Doyle's writing, then that density of detail still finds a home, and it is not in the authorial voice at all. Rather the life of the novels, their pulse and particularity, resides and flows through their dialogue. The effect is more unusual than Doyle's bestseller status has encouraged us to think: for the texture of his fiction amounts in effect to a gaggle of voices talking at each other in a void, the white space of the otherwise underpopulated page. The idea of a typographical space is thus suggestive after all, for it points up the way in which the really vivid spaces in Roddy Doyle are made of words. At the start of his career W. B. Yeats wondered whether the earth might be "only a sudden flaming word"<sup>17</sup> and this impulse to have word surrogate for world, to displace space into language, is a feature of much of the canon of Irish writing, in which discursive scaffolds and verbal trapezes teeter

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<sup>17</sup> WB Yeats, "Song of the Happy Shepherd" (1889) in: *Collected Poems*, ed. A. Martin (London: Vintage, 1990), 5.

over a void. The parodies, pastiches and cocktail languages of Joyce; the tomfoolery of Flann O'Brien; the progressively disembodied voices in the dark of Beckett (an unlikely forerunner, one might have thought, for Roddy Doyle); even the heady self-dramatizing displacements performed by the dreamers and boasters in Synge and O'Casey.

I have circled back to the question of nation: and indeed a discussion of space in Irish writing is liable at some point to find itself discussing the imagined space of the nation. What is the status of "Ireland," then, in the *Barrytown Trilogy*?

### A Nation? Not Again...

In one sense this is an inescapably Irish fiction. The dialogue which pumps through the books is dialect: a strain of Hiberno-English, that rich hybrid which for an English reader is apt to veer between the recognizable, the comic and the baffling. All the little inversions and linguistic tics — "Good man," "Will I open the window?", "In your hole you will," "He is of course," "That's gas," "Grand" — mark out unmistakably the location of the work. And at times the inhabitants of Barrytown actually develop an articulated sense of nationality. Jimmy Jr gets the Commitments off the ground with the spatial claim that has become a much-cited syllogism: "The Irish are the niggers of Europe... An' Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland... An' the Northside Dubliners are the niggers of Dublin" (C, 9). Even more emblematic, at the heart of *The Van* lies the 1990 World Cup, in which Ireland progressed to the quarter-finals. On TV in the local pub, the tournament generates a carnival atmosphere in which diverse members of the community assemble in excitement, trepidation and celebration: "He hugged Bimbo again, and Bertie and Paddy, and he went over and hugged Sharon. She was crying as well and they both laughed. He hugged some of her friends. They all had their green gear on, ribbons and the works" (V, 180). One character is even heard singing "A Nation Once Again."

Yet if *The Van* offers such glimpses of collectivity, they cannot be mistaken for an attempt to articulate the nation as truly homogeneous. Not only does Doyle abruptly end the festivities with the one-line paragraph: "And then they got beaten by the Italians and that was the end of that" (V, 183). More important than this, the Dublin community drawn by Doyle is emphatically not pure in its Irishness, secure in a national identity which excludes the rest of the world. In fact Jimmy Jr's claim about the blacks of Dublin implies as

much, at once dividing the national community and finding an identification with people elsewhere. One of the strongest impressions one takes away from the novels is the involvement of this North Dublin community with culture from beyond its shores. The king of the local black market in goods, Bertie, speaks in cod-Mexican: in one memorable moment, "By the time I got my burro corralled an' I'd thrown a bit of water on me face and dusted me poncho it was past closin' time, comprende?" (V, 38). The sport they follow on TV, even on RTE, is not Gaelic football or hurling but the bread and butter of the English First Division. Local girls, we are told several times, look like — not Cathleen ni Houlihan or Molly Malone — but Kylie Minogue: an Australian produced and marketed by a British company. One can imagine the dismay of Douglas Hyde, as a century of de-Anglicization is reversed by satellite TV. From one point of view, all this bespeaks a lamentable failure of indigenous Irish culture: a re-capitulation to England in a renewed form of colonialism, this time under the benign guise of popular culture rather than territorial occupation.

But then, part of the point is that England is in that sense becoming a cultural colony too: an appendage, as critics have feared at least since Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957),<sup>18</sup> of the new post-war Empire of the USA. Barrytown's favourites are more likely to be from the US than the UK: Tom Cruise, whose routines in "Cocktail" they seek to emulate with vinegar and ketchup bottles, or the great canon of American soul to which the Commitments set out to do homage. It is not so much that English culture is taking over the Irish spirit, more that working-class Dublin is becoming like working-class anywhere else, open like its English equivalents to an increasingly global cultural weather. The question then might be whether the kind of cultural consumption we witness in Barrytown is a slavish mimicry of someone else's sounds and images, or a more creative and resourceful business of appropriation, an improvisation on what is available. The result can be a hybrid, like the new project with which *The Commitments* ends: "Dublin country & western" (C, 165). That is even true of the products of the chip van: nothing could be more English than fish & chips, but nothing more Irish than potatoes.

Roddy Doyle's fiction may look, from a distance, quintessentially Irish: and it has played a part, whether he likes it or

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957)

not, in selling Ireland to the world over the last ten years or so. Doyle's accessible, enjoyable, consummately filmable novels have been lassoed into the commercial promotion of Ireland as surely as Caffrey's, John McCourt and the Corrs — all of which he seems to consider unwelcome bedfellows. Yet among the novels' bravest and most original features is their *unIrishness*. I mean, their neglect always to push questions of nation to the forefront, suggesting as they do that other carve-ups of space might be as pressing in everyday life: the borders and frontiers of gender, generation and class; the uneven rhythms and power relations of family and community. Equally, Ireland is unmistakably present in the language of Doyle's work — in the vivid speech of his characters — but it is, in a sense, spatially invisible. Romantic Ireland, we were informed a long time ago, is dead and gone. Ireland, more generally conceived, is not altogether dead and gone in the *Barrytown Trilogy*: in one sense it is very much alive, thriving, breeding, frying, cursing, heaving with the half-comprehended emotional ambiguities that Doyle's free-indirect prose delicately traces in characters' moment-by-moment interactions. But the living Ireland here is not an Ireland obsessed with being Ireland: in fact, it is starting to become like anywhere. The international seas and cross-cultural tangles into which Joyce flung Ireland in *Finnegans Wake* are reprised here in more readily comprehended form: as in the *Wake*, Doyle's Ireland is becoming, for all its vivid localism, ineluctably linked to the rest of the world. The invisible space that I have described in Doyle's fiction — the abstract, de-particularized locations of the dialogue — is also a global space, denoting a world where anywhere is beginning to look like anywhere else. The internationalization enacted in these works has, historically and politically, gains and losses that are not to be too glibly accounted. But Doyle, in at once showing and hiding Ireland, has recorded with rare acuteness the fading of national particularism — as, to grab at an appropriate but stinking metaphor, the queer old fish of nationality is dunked and drowned in the seductive, scalding batter of the world's generality.

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**"It was a madhouse of assorted bric-à-brac:" Urban Intensification in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting***<sup>1</sup>

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Distinct city culture, whilst intrinsically connected to the architecture and artefacts of its physical environment, as Bell and Haddour term it, "concretized,"<sup>2</sup> is also bound up in the lifestyle and habits of the city's inhabitants. A discernibly commercial way of life is perhaps that which is most frequently associated with the city. Due to the evolving nature of commercialism, and the impact of events in the larger world, the city becomes always a subject in process, both forming and being formed.<sup>3</sup> Within this urban landscape the over-worked high-achiever struggling with increasing levels of pressure and stress has become something of a stereotype. However, the city-dweller exists on many different levels, ranging from the faithful participants in the rat-race to homeless drug-addicts, and encompassing every level of multiplicity in between. Those conventionally employed may be viewed as following some fixed, yet hopeless, trajectory, involving perfect futures with their lure of equities and pensions. Those who less obviously conform

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<sup>1</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993; London: Vintage, 1999), 62. References cited hereafter in text as (*T*).

<sup>2</sup> David Bell & Azzedine Haddour (eds), *City Visions* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Doreen Massey describes cities as victims of wider circumstances, for example commercial markets. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place & Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 20.

seem to have opted for the circularity of life and accepted the impossibility of achieving their more conforming counterparts' self-deceiving linearity.

The complex contrasts and shifts occurring between different levels of existence can be seen to reflect the differences and similarities between notions of modernity and postmodernity. Modernity has a distinct association with the proliferating city. Even before the production of the body of literature that would come to be termed modernist the effects of the industrial revolution in the Britain of the nineteenth century, chiefly its propensity to inflict an intense architectural commercialism on the land, were being recorded in the literature of such writers as Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens and George Eliot. In *North & South* Gaskell discusses the thick clouds of smoke,<sup>4</sup> an ecological disaster in the making, permanently hanging over the newly sprawling built environment of her fictional Milton North (based on Manchester), and the manner in which rural working people were finding their lives irreversibly changed. The city is described as, paradoxically, both a place of constricting, even claustrophobic, closeness yet also of sharp separations and divisions. There are precise, and deprived, working class areas where no genteel person ever ventures (*N&S*, 367). Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* graphically emphasises that these harsh inequalities have not gone away; as Bell and Haddour comment in the introduction to their *City Visions*, "the notoriety of Welsh's *Trainspotting* has created a particular representation of Edinburgh that spills over into the popular culture giving it its own particular dominance."<sup>5</sup> The abject poverty and criminality on display seem to negate society's efforts to retain some kind of definable solidarity, or native-ness. This counteracts any notion of a homeland; indeed as Bell and Haddour confirm, it is "no longer possible to maintain the authenticity of a given culture in a diasporic world."<sup>6</sup>

There are dependencies between different groups of city-dwellers, but segregation persists. Few concessions are given to the English reader who must adapt to the consistent use of authentic Scots dialect. Begbie demonstrates exclusivist tendencies with his hatred of homosexuals and Asians. A more acceptable version

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1854/5; London: Penguin, 1970), 59. References cited hereafter in text as (*N&S*).

<sup>5</sup> David Bell & Azzedine Haddour (eds), *City Visions*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> David Bell & Azzedine Haddour (eds), *City Visions*, 53.

would, as Haddour points out, attempt to emphasise Edinburgh as a tourist attraction by "hiding markers of poverty or social exclusion."<sup>7</sup> Welsh's exposure instead supports the idea that there are differing notions and versions of the city, reproducing themselves in a postmodern multiplicity. The body of modernist literary work, indeed its creators also, became inextricably linked with the cityscape. Perhaps the most famous example of this is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This long and difficult piece discusses the rapidly changing technological aspects of working-life and the dehumanising effect these changes wreak upon those who live and work in the city. The poem reflects the city's eclectic mixing of high and low culture with its almost savage intertextuality. The rich cultural mix of Shakespeare, Dante, the Bible and others is intertwined with low, squalid scenes of death, decay and deceit which seem to be of little cultural value — other than in their grubby claims for authenticity. This thorough mixing of cultures questions the traditional divisive hierarchical separations. Those striving to survive in the city — economically, physically, mentally may not seem particularly cultural in any high, aesthetic sense; however they are the same inhabitants who are most exposed to what is deemed to be the city's inherent cultural content and proclaimed legacy — its buildings and historically rich scenery. The so-called high-cultural content is a part of their everyday life. For example within *Trainspotting* Spud meets Begbie at what he familiarly terms: "Queen Sticky-Vicky's statue" (*T*, 120). The foregrounding of the physicality of the architectural piece again echoes Eliot's constant reiteration of the city's brown enveloping fog, he sees the city, "under the brown fog of a winter dawn."<sup>8</sup> Edinburgh's statue becomes "sticky," subtly cloyed and tainted, by its constant contact with the urban atmosphere.<sup>9</sup>

Spud's casual acquaintance with the famous statue simultaneously undermines *and* reinforces its cultural power. This

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<sup>7</sup> A. Haddour, "Citing Difference," in: David Bell & Azzedine Haddour (eds), *City Visions*, 66.

<sup>8</sup> TS Eliot, "The Waste Land" (1922) in: —, *The Waste Land & Other Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 25, lines 61-2.

<sup>9</sup> The brownness of *The Waste Land's* fog is furthermore reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a narrative based in London but undoubtedly influenced by Stevenson's intimate knowledge of Edinburgh. The city atmosphere is portrayed as unremittingly discoloured and unwholesome. R. L. Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* (1886; Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), 20.

irony has assisted, if not caused, the increasingly blurred boundaries between different levels of cultural material. The physical book *Trainspotting* offers a good example of this blurring. Written completely in dialect and centring on an ostracised pastime, drug-taking, the novel may have seemed destined to be a marginal text. Rather than this it has become cult reading (and viewing, in the filmic version) adopted by, and lauded on, multifarious cultural levels. This illustrates the contemporary "all-embracing" nature of cultural identity. The book can be found in varying library sections, emphasising the different levels on which it is studied, including medical, tourism, linguistics and postmodernism. This urge to categorise and contain is further illustrated by the manner in which the narrative is subsumed for differing purposes. The absorption, re-working and re-defining perfectly reflect the hyper-commodification of urban areas. Cityscapes are increasingly taken and transformed into whatever best suits a particular set of lifestyles, cultural tastes and leisure practices. The emphasis is on surface, rather than any purported depth, meaning or usefulness. The "sticky" taint of Queen Victoria's statue reiterates that these changes are not always necessarily for the good.

The eagerness to re-form areas of existence within city life together with the subsequent willingness to sacrifice continuity and logic in return for the free-play of fleeting and unreliable experiences is typically illustrated by what Renton and his friends expect from drug-induced states. Because city culture characteristically exploits markets for new goods and services, it becomes categorised as central to both cultural and consumer activities. Brenda Lee terms it "a market" in itself — for drugs, for people, for identity and for culture.<sup>10</sup> All "needs" are seemingly catered for; a utopian ideal where goods are both provided and circulated. Very little may happen in terms of actual *production*, but whatever is required by the client is made available, for the right price. The city, like a heart, becomes the very centre of circulation, appropriate in a text focusing on the use of intravenous drugs.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Brenda Lee, "City as Market; City as Home," in: Vered Amit-Talai & Henri Lustiger-Thaler (eds), *Urban Lives: Fragmentation & Resistance* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1994), 263.

<sup>11</sup> Greer interestingly connects this idea of cities/circulatory systems/drugs with railway network: Scott Greer, *The Emerging City: Myth & Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 171.

The increasingly sophisticated nature of marketing ensures that the city's inhabitants are effectively sold certain discernible themes. One of the most popular and successful of these themes is that of the city's, and by default its occupants', past. This rigorous continuance of the past constitutes a facile heritage which can be easily packaged, marketed and sold. That which may be termed cultural therefore is inextricably linked with the commercial and destined, therefore, for consumption. One popular "theme" is the city's appearance; discernibly beautiful attributes, or points of interest, are awarded great prestige. In competition with a hierarchy of other cities it is seen to be desirable to amass valuable old paintings and artefacts, indeed to become something of an artefact itself. Everything is reduced to its commercial ranking, with income, exchange and value being prioritised. This provides the working example for the city-dwellers to follow — an amassing of conspicuous material goods and wealth, to the detriment of others, is sanctioned, even subliminally encouraged. Goods and money circulate constantly throughout differing, but connected, markets in a spiral of consumerism.

The contrasting markets for hard drugs and for the Edinburgh Festival are conversely offered by *Trainspotting* and are seen to be equally exploitative: "The pubs, likesay, dead busy, full ay loco-locals and festival types, (...)" (*T*, 153). The locals and the tourists mix in the postmodern city — centre of consumption, where anything can be rendered suitable for the tourist gaze. Not only do the "festival types" keep the legitimate trades buoyant they provide easy targets for the drug-addicts' frequent mugging forays. On a further level of comparison, the healthy circulation of capital stimulated by the festival can be viewed in direct correlation with the support for capitalistic financial growth created by the trading of the drug market. Part of the successful promotion of such events as The Edinburgh Festival relies on the city's postmodern self-awareness of its own image, and its willingness and ability to manipulate, promote and sustain this image.

As suggested above, one of the major results of the de-industrialisation of city centres is that they have evolved into places which may actually *do* very little, in terms of production — in other words, places for looking at. They are simulacra, copies of copies, quite literally shadows of their former selves. They need to be facilitators, to connect with, then live up to, what a city is proclaimed to be all about — in keeping with Baudrillard's hyper-reality, an

exaggerated seemingly unachievable state, "a de-stabilised, aestheticized hallucination of reality," they are hyper-cities.<sup>2</sup> Despite the finite boundaries of a geographical city constant expansion is deemed desirable. This fluidity is assisted by the increasing sophistication of technology, especially the use of virtual space. Endless growth, together with an undermining of physicality, in the name of supposed development, results in ongoing competition for resources, between both commercial companies and inhabitants, as well as other cities.

Renton's frequent trips to other geographical locations as part of an organised syndicate obtaining multiple government benefit payments emphasise the similarities between different cities. Although he may use many addresses they are all treated with equal cynicism. The city has re-invented itself as Ultimate Provider and now must fulfil its promises, in other words "come up with the goods." Part of postmodernity is a distinct democratic urge and Renton illustrates the propensity for citizens to insist on more leeway in their lives; he is adamant that he does not, and will not, work. Like his drug-taking associates he champions an opting-out of competitive society, the ultimate irony being that their addiction to drugs rather perpetuates the capitalistic system they allegedly object to. Their avid consumption assures their drug dealers of an income. The methods used to facilitate their purchasing include shoplifting and fraud, practices which in turn create spiralling inflation. In a system devoted to exchange-value non-conformity, like everything else, has a price.

The Western world's voracious consuming is inextricably intertwined with mediated images from films, television adverts, magazines, travel brochures and so on. Different styles and fashions circulate quickly and simultaneously in this media-led society, creating an era of parallel realities without a dominant style. Parody is prevalent, reflecting the nostalgia for the mediated past. The characters manifest this in various ways ranging from their cynical mugging of tourists to Sick Boy's obsessive parodies of Sean Connery as James Bond. His pun-ridden exaggeration of Connery's accent, in a text already written in dialect, draws attention to the multiple levels of speech and idiom co-existing in the city. Differing speech patterns blur and combine creating hybrids with the potential to

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism* (1990; London: Newbury Park & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), 99.

compete and conflict as much as communicate. In an attempt to ingratiate himself with some female tourists, and totally convinced by his own self-creation of a contemporary dandy, Sick Boy offers them directions, passing his sexual interest off as "*good old-fashioned Scoattish hoshpitality, aye, ye cannae beat it, shays the young Sean Connery, the new Bond, cause girls, this is the new bondage ...*" (T, 29 original italics). Although acting a part himself he is surprised when the tourists are equally self-fashioned, failing to fit his stereotypical idea of "oriental type" (T, 29) visiting the Edinburgh Festival, but rather what he describes as "posh English-colonial" (T, 29). All characters are shown to be part of the endless re-appropriation of copies of copies, a self-perpetuating simulacrum which thrives in the intensified metropolitan environment.

As John Frow suggests, in his descriptions of tourism and sight-seeing, the city and its attractions are not "real" in any tangible sense but are in fact representative signs of themselves, they are "suffused with ideality, giving on to the type of the beautiful, or the extraordinary, or the culturally authentic. Their reality is figural rather than literal."<sup>13</sup> This prioritisation of image, and acknowledgement of differing levels of reality, subsequently also engulfs the city's inhabitants; they join the consumption of images, material goods and products, as part of an ongoing urban commodification. Even experiences are consumed, as the expectation for cities to provide something over and above pleasure and recreation, something also to merely look at, escalates. Frow aptly describes the way in which famous landmarks outwear their usefulness by becoming too familiar, largely due to being over-photographed and as a consequence increasingly represented by mediated images. He claims that viewers forget how to actually look at anything, accustomed, as they are, to being closely guided as to the correct way to appreciate and consume their surroundings. The conditioned response is what is required, not spontaneity or attempts at individuality.

This lack of spontaneity correlates with the anxiety surrounding pleasure in the city. Contradictory emotions and feelings become associated with city-life. The city is a place to strive, but also to enjoy. The images of sub-cultures, such as Bohemians — intellectual and artistic — seem clichéd and sharply delineated from

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<sup>13</sup> John Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory & Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 67.

the characters of the text, drug abusers who are subsisting in filthy "squats." The lack of any financial network of support negates any possible glamour the situation may aspire to, leaving only the harsh and squalid reality, a version of reality ignored by the majority, or acknowledged as an underworld existence, tolerated in order that a more fulfilling life be continued, indeed identified, elsewhere by those more precisely conforming. This reciprocal identification highlights the bleak impossibility of opting out of the dominant systems of society. Within this identifying process "The City" becomes the showcase for the pinnacle of success, but also for the depths of failure. There is no middle-ground and the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, in meeting ideals ensures that growing numbers of failures fall into the margins of urban life. The homeless street dwellers, simultaneously both visible and invisible, in city centres illustrate the lack of suitable spaces available to all, and the inadequacy of boundaries and categories.

Education may seem a possible answer to inner-city tension, a solution for those hidden away without a voice, their stories hard to understand or translate; people of a lowly class speaking in dialect; semi-literate, semi-tamed, semi-wild things. However, within the text formal education is shown to exacerbate, rather than ease the situation. Renton briefly attends university and although an intelligent man he chooses not to capitalise on this intelligence in order to obtain a job but rather to assist in his increasingly sophisticated manipulation of the system. When finally arrested for stealing books, a pastime for at least six years, he is able to use his brief education, and the subsequent reading this visit to academia has encouraged him to undertake, to ensure that he does not go to jail, the fate of his less learned, but equally culpable accomplice. He displays an aptitude for re-invention of self by adopting multiple personas, thinking of the judge in disparaging terms, and in his everyday voice: "It isnae a brilliant job the cunt's goat, whin ye think about it. It must git pretty tiresome dealin wi radges aw day" (*T*, 165), but reverting to a neutral "English," free of accent or colloquialism, to prove his knowledge of Kierkegaard: "I'm interested in his concepts of subjectivity and truth, and particularly his ideas concerning choice; the notion that genuine choice is made out of doubt and uncertainty, and without the recourse to the experience and advice of others" (*T*, 165-66).

Culture is viewed as being capable of causing change. Intellectuals, therefore, have a certain responsibility, perhaps one of

the reasons why Renton decides to avoid becoming one. For this court case Renton successfully manipulates the city's obsession with surveillance and exclusion. He has sufficient intellect and academic grounding not only to keep out of prison but also to question his lifestyle — his hoarding of four thousand pounds worth of the books he steals suggests an urge to continue this learning. However, he prefers his precarious way of living to what he has seen and experienced of the alternative. With an almost Lyotardian eloquence he presents Academia as perpetuating a patriarchal class system by teaching grand narratives as universally correct. Renton, astutely, sees knowledge and information as part of the commercial system of exchange and therefore forever tied to a privileged security he is unable to access, without a considerable compromise. His narrative instead prioritises the local and the vernacular; the multiplicities of this narrative have the power to fragment any notion of a unified city.

The compromises Renton rejects include embracing the city's version of both the spectacular and the popular, exemplified by the instantly accessible land of his mother and father's social club and the game shows on television. Such ties of kinship have already been placed under serious scrutiny by his rejection of his birth family and their close associations with conforming, in favour of his chosen family of like-minded unemployed, uneducated drug addicts. He chooses to view *life* as a work of art rather than a mediated reflection of the images on his parent's television screen. Just as artists release something of themselves into their work, like a purging, a confession, even an excretion of waste products, so too does Renton want to embrace his own version of life, without containment or concessions. The city's sanctioned decorations, the huge advertising billboards and television screens, are part of society's endorsed identity and behavioural code. The graffiti springing up around these validated images, like the tell-tale signs and spoor left behind by a wild animal, despite the latent possibilities for imitation, say more about individual identities than any approved version. The city provides the "backdrop" to the juxtaposing of this varied, self-conscious artistry, it is a tarnished surface, with no depth, like a vast plasma screen. This glassy, surface quality is particularly well illustrated by the way in which the film adaptation of the text transposes gritty realism with surreal hallucinatory sequences. Renton, quite literally, goes down the toilet, into the carpet, and up the walls.

The constant soundtrack of the film mixes and melds the urban with the cinematic and enforces the performative aspects of Renton's life. In his famous speech denouncing consumer goods he claims to be in control of what his life will become by *not* choosing certain things, he creates a mantra for everyone who has ever wanted to opt out of the rat-race:

*Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've produced. Choose life. Well, ah choose no tae choose life.'* (T, 187-88)

Renton opts out of the standardised, what he sees as sanitised, city life but shows himself to be equally enslaved to a different system. He does not work in the accepted sense; however he has a fulltime job, ensuring that he is always able to obtain drugs. This pastime is portrayed as a constant effort, be it defrauding the Social Security benefits system, stealing from shops, stealing from his parents, mugging tourists, or eventually stealing from his so-called 'friends.' The results of his labours are never displayed as justifying the effort, pleasure is instead shown to be fleeting and ephemeral, whilst the majority of life remains squalid and futile. Shopping is marketed as an enjoyable, even therapeutic, cultural activity: "an experience," not simply a means to an end. Renton's frantic race away from the shops he has been stealing goods from offers him an adrenaline rush of an alternative kind, an altogether different retail-therapy. He has not managed to opt out of life with its boundaries and rules of exchange, he has merely chosen to conform to a differing system and remains constricted and contained by the conventions of supply and demand. The notion of differing ideals and varied ways of adopting to a system encourages the espousal of different strands of culture, indeed different definitions of what culture even is. Such multiplicity means that there is an ever-increasing difficulty in compelling all to adhere to the same values. This emphasis on interpreting differing strands of city culture is reflected by the text's attempt to authentically reproduce different accents and idioms.

Despite the conventional impulse of cities to amass high-culture the inhabitants show an almost contradictory urge to instead

display art as played out upon the body and within everyday life. Crowds of city dwellers become part of the spectacle — at pop concerts, football matches and night-clubs. The city is a canvas as well as a cinema screen, an extension of those who live and work there. The performance artists of the Edinburgh Festival embrace the opportunity to visibly play out life on their bodies, to become living art. Early modern art movements, such as surrealism, attempted to collapse the boundaries they felt had been falsely erected between art and life. Surrealists claimed that art should be about reality, however nebulous this entity, and lived experiences. Their work, in a way not unlike the filmic version of *Trainspotting*, posited that life becomes lived out on the surface, an entirely mediated event, consisting of inauthentic images. This is not to say that horrific things do not happen to actual people, the baby, Dawn, dies a squalid, avoidable death. Despite the lack of palpable depth to contemporary, city life, events still have, as John Frow terms it, "direct consequences on human lives."<sup>14</sup>

This tangibility suggests that rather than inauthentic surface the substance of everyday city-life is a mixing of differing realities. Although taking drugs is often described as a means of escape from reality, the drug-takers of *Trainspotting* illustrate that the varying realities they experience are inherent parts of their life, and profoundly not an escape. The insinuation is that as strands of life cannot be easily mustered into a hierarchy of validity, neither can there be any escape. Culture, free-floating and surface-focused is everywhere. But rather than rendering cities redundant their large concentration of populace intensifies strands of cultural reality in these urban areas. The proliferation of different styles of architecture emphasise this mixing of styles. The architecture combines with the art which the city greedily collects to play back scenes of mediated life in a larger-than-life circularity. Do Renton and his associates engage with this visual culture? They are firmly connected to the art of fashion, music, television, videos, drinking, dancing, clubbing and, of course, drug-taking. Like latter-day flâneurs they consume the seedy side of city-life, the more artificial it is the more vivid and 'real' it seems to them. This more real than real, the copy of what was always already a copy is harshly illustrated in Renton's withdrawal hallucinations:

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<sup>14</sup> John Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture*, 4.

*It springs fae the ceilin doon oan top ay us. Ma fingers rip and tear the soft, plasticine flesh and messy gunge but the ugly shrill voice is still screamin n mockin n ah jerk n jolt n feel like the bed's sprung vertical n ah'm fawin through the fuckin flair... Is this sssllllleeeeeeepppppp. (T, 196)*

Dawn, unable to speak or move due to youth and then death is suddenly vividly and violently animated as a lascivious, devouring vampire. More able to horrify Renton, and stir his guilt as an image than she was ever able to do as a living child. The link between contemporary urban lifestyles and the postmodern, with its movement beyond the individual and subsequent de-centring of the subject, seems to be a challenging of control. Renton's hallucinatory insights promise to encourage revolt and anarchy; he is a modern, urban person unprepared to squeeze himself into the stereotypical identity he is offered. As Mike Featherstone suggests:

*[The] de-centred subject has a greater capacity to engage in a controlled de-control of the emotions and explore figural tendencies, immediate sensations and affective experiences formerly regarded as threatening, as something which needs to be kept at bay or strictly controlled.<sup>45</sup>*

The intense concentration of people in cities means that the image of the city becomes reflected in its inhabitants; they are an inherent part of its identity due to their sheer magnitude. This huge mass of characters makes for a kaleidoscopic, confusing reflection. The enclave in which Renton came to know Dawn and her mother, where Simon and he take drugs in search of some ecstatic rush, is typical of the short-lived human communes encouraged to spring up within populations of urban areas. The transitory, and predominantly selfish, nature of such relationships is emphasised by the text, as is the propensity of such selfishness to drain an environment's life-blood.

Within *Trainspotting* Leith is presented as poor, declining, running-down into a shadowy has-been suburb, a bleak outlying area, against which to identify the city's typicality.<sup>46</sup> This lack of substance necessitates a shift towards Edinburgh, as the nearest city, in order to find succour and sustenance. The idea of the city as a

<sup>45</sup> Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism*, 101.

<sup>46</sup> See Haddour, "Citing Difference," in: David Bell & Azzedine Haddour (eds), *City Visions*, 66.

symbolic, but impractical, mother figure, somehow failing to support patriarchal city culture, is reinforced by Queen Victoria's monument, Renton's physical mother's inadequacy, Dianne's mother's inability to keep track of what her schoolgirl daughter is doing, and Dawn's mother's inability to sustain her own child's life. The suggestion is that the city's inhabitants are too numerous, there is too much breeding; bodies proliferate faster than they can be accommodated, nurtured and cherished. On the most simple level cities are shown to attract crowds and dense populations, but not to support them. This is emphasised by the high levels of unemployed, beggars and drug-addicts; categories identified by their conforming other, with their jobs, mortgages and zero-addictions. However, the frenzied pace of life, with its endless demands and highly competitive edge, ensures that increasing numbers constantly join the ranks of the disaffected. The enforcement of identities which are tied up in occupation and material wealth encourages the creation of an underclass of non-persons, who, because of this definition, conveniently require no help or guidance, or perhaps can be held up as examples of a negative identity to be avoided. The sight of homeless and disadvantaged people becomes an intrinsic part of a successful city's character; the fact that all inhabitants cannot sustain the frenetic pace is taken as a sign of success.

The visitors to burgeoning modern cities, who observe the inhabitants of all levels, are no longer passive tourists, content to merely look in museums. They are an intrinsic part of a consuming culture, with an insatiable appetite and an urge to consume everything, even the homeless person on the street. This appetite is derided by Dianne as waitress, with her habit of spoiling the food she serves with her bodily excretions. The postmodern tourist, aware of the surface nature of society, wants to see behind the scenes and to be offered choices, manifested as multiple viewpoints. What is valued in this viewing constantly evolves. Low-life is elevated to interesting or unusual, and therefore worthy of the tourist gaze; it consequently becomes the subject of a compelling narrative. Postmodernism shifts the focus of attention sufficiently to render former categories of identity (used for ranking) inappropriate. The mixed and pluralistic nature of that which is strange, vulgar, peculiar is increasingly likely to be given centre stage. Elements which have previously been excluded are now welcomed.

Part of this move towards diversity has been the embracing of old buildings — formerly declared useless — for renovation and

re-use. Derelict dockland areas are re-born as sites of luxurious and highly-desirable space for both living and working. Although this is labelled "regeneration" the former inhabitants of such run-down areas can, ironically, no longer afford to live in their own, latterly gentrified, neighbourhood. This offers a good example of development and progress not amounting to the same thing. The moneyed classes live contrived, cultivated lives, which focus on amassing further wealth and the connected power to alter and amend, rather than true regeneration, with its insinuations of renewal and repair. Regeneration is part of many cities' "cultural policy," an oxymoronic concept if it is meant to curtail and control what is to be given some kind of elevated status.

*Trainspotting* suggests that it is impossible to keep low and high art and life apart. Their boundary-blurring seems to be the inevitable outcome of allowing, indeed encouraging, commerce and culture to meet, liaise and reciprocate with each other in an atmosphere of ever-increasing aestheticization. Part of this reciprocation is the endless consuming the city engenders. Edinburgh's cultural status is objectified for ease of consumptions; moulded into a saleable commodity. Much like a theme park the city becomes archetypal simulacrum, created, self-reflexively, to fulfil certain purposes. In a world dominated by copies of copies it is understandable that the Asian woman at the train station is equally wary of *any* football fan (identified by scarves), without the need to differentiate the precise colour, hence affiliation, of the fans' accessories (*T*, 49-50). The city is confirmed as a place of constant struggle for domination and supremacy: between classes, between races, between nature and nurture and between the sexes.

A brief return to Eliot's *The Waste Land* reiterates that these same conflicts were at the heart of modernist writing about urban life. The typist is sexually used and cast aside in her dismal bedsit,<sup>17</sup> recalling Dianne's notions of the city as a place to inhabit after dark, a place to obtain drugs and sex. "Trade," in both texts is seen to encompass many money-making pursuits, other than the strictly commercial. Upstarts jostle the class-boundaries, for Eliot the "Bradford millionaire,"<sup>18</sup> for Welsh Renton's appropriation of Kierkegaard. Eliot's hermaphrodites erase the need to know whether a sexual proposition comes from a male or female, just as gender

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<sup>17</sup> TS Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 31, line 215-56.

<sup>18</sup> TS Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 32, line 234.

identity is erased by the drug-addicts' desperation for a fix. The fragmented conversations of both texts reiterate the frustrating, often non-communicative nature of much of the city's language; the sense of loss surrounding the individual perspective. *Trainspotting's* characters take turns to narrate chapters and fail abysmally to communicate with each other.

From the early days of modernism, with its connections to the city it now seems that it is rather postmodernity and city cultures which are inextricably linked. It is difficult to say whether postmodernity has caused the distinct shift in city cultures, or whether the shift itself is partly responsible for the evolving nature of postmodernity. Urbanisation has become a symbol for that which is contemporary, but may also be seen as a symptom. The drugs of the text connect to the fractured, non-linear perspective of postmodernity; if modernity is future-focused and teleological then it cannot understand the unknown, unplanned nature of a drug-induced trip, or conceive the potential not to return from such a trip. Modernity also seeks to safely place its inhabitants within a recognised geographical location, whilst postmodernity is willing to allow perceptions of where a person is centre on the way they feel physically. Ultimate identification draws upon feelings of both belonging and alienation. Julia Kristeva discusses the way in which "Where am I?" becomes a substitute for "Who am I?" commenting that:

*The space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never one, nor homogenous, nor totalizable, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines — for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject — constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray.*<sup>19</sup>

*Trainspotting* illustrates that all humans are strays, vulnerable and unsure of how to identify themselves. The traditional view of "the city," as steeped in history, represented by famous buildings and artefacts, has developed through the modernist principles of the functional, the economic and what is useful; this is reflected in high-rise buildings housing super efficient offices and technological development. However, the image-conscious, self-

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<sup>19</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 8.

conscious, indeed self-reflexive place that the city is *now* can only be described as postmodern. Although the slant has changed the historical tendency for urbanisation to create concentrated centres of intensity has not. The city remains a place where the populace are thrust together, a place where there is work but also life-activities, marketing forces and the means for intellectual stimulation — whatever that has come to mean. However, this intensification of existence seems destined to burn itself out. Life is too close, too immediate, there is too much dirt and noise and most importantly the hierarchy is too bottom-loaded; society bulges with disadvantaged individuals. In attempting to illustrate this situation Welsh has been accused of using stereotypes; whether he does or not the text remains useful as an attack on the embedding of culture and the uneven distribution of power and subsequent control.

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This collection of articles "Cities on the Margin; On the Margin of Cities" deals with the diversity and disparity of urban space in the United Kingdom and in Ireland. It studies the social fabric of British and Irish cities and the interrelationships between people, social classes, or ethnic groups, which compose the postmodern cityscape. It sheds light on the city as it has been described by contemporary novelists who have not yet attracted much in the way of critical attention.

Although this is first and foremost a literary study, social, ethical and ethnic aspects are given great priority. The variety of perspectives adopted by the authors provides contrasting and complementary views on the theme of inclusion/exclusion. The margin stands for those who are left aside and those who see their cities as being on the periphery of British or Irish culture.

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