Living and working at No. 12 Lincoln’s Inn Fields from 1794, the London architect and Royal Academician John Soane (1753-1837) created a ‘model room’ for the display of casts as early as 1808. The ‘Dome area’, as it is now called, was built on the site of the former stable block at the rear of No. 13, westwards from No. 12, and was to become the oldest part of John Soane’s eccentric house-museum. Rebuilding No. 13 in 1812, Soane annexed new apartments to his older rooms in order to house his ever growing collection of antiquities properly. The building on the freehold he had bought four years before had just been demolished and the first block of the new Portland stone façade laid by the masons, when the architect started writing what is now considered “one of the strangest and more perplexing documents in the history of English architecture” (Dorey 53), his *Crude Hints Towards an History of my House* (1812). The text, written between August and September 1812 and signed by “An Antiquary”, provides an unexpected setting for an equally puzzling narrative. Displaced through time to an unspecified future, the architect’s ‘house in progress’ is envisaged as if in ruins and commented upon by latter day visitors. Set in the mist of a work of rebuilding bound to become both the achievement of a style and the statement of a particular urban aesthetic, Soane’s manuscript plays ominously with destruction and archaeology. The mysterious decrepitude of the abode cannot but raise questions about its origin and function, and the vis-
itors formulate their hypotheses according to the clues provided by the pieces of the museum, now lying scattered on the ground. Not an easy enterprise at all, since Soane’s eclectic propensities as a collector bring them to varied conclusions; what was once “[…] a building […] of much greater extent than appears from the remains now to be seen” (Soane 61), is now identified respectively with an ancient temple, a convent or monastery, “the residence of some Magician” (64), or “a work of the Greeks” (65). Confronted however with the fact that “notwithstanding this building consisted of several stages or stories […] no vestiges remain of a staircase of any kind” (63), on one point at least the visitors do seem to agree: “[…] this very space, if a staircase, could only have been one of those Carcerian dark Staircases represented in some of Piranesi’s ingenious dreams for prisons […]” (63). The stairs mentioned in Crude Hints are plausibly those which appear in plate VII of the second version of the graphic work by an Italian architect, etcher and engraver – Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) as Soane himself suggests – a graphic work going back to 1761, entitled Carceri d’Invenzione¹ and well known to Eighteenth-Century English architects, antiquarians and writers alike².

Nine years after Soane’s strange proleptic vision of ruins in Crude Hints, Piranesi’s staircase, ‘lost’ in the rubble of the house-museum, is ‘regained’ among the broken images of the dreams of an Opium-Eater. It resurfaces, so to speak, in a prominent passage of Confessions of an English Opium-Eater by Thomas De Quincey (London Magazine, September and October 1821). In the excerpt of Confessions, the writer turns to the visual punch of the Piranesian staircase in the attempt to supply the reader with an analogon as close as possible to the experience of his own “chiefly architectural” opium dreams (De Quincey, Confessions 71). These dreams and their distressing architecture – so the story goes – derive from De Quincey’s addiction to opium, a dreadful pathology developed in London in the Autumn of 1804 as the consequence of a first, fateful taste of laudanum. The oniric scenery in De Quincey’s extract includes:

vast […] halls […] Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further, and you perceive it come to a sudden abrupt termination, […] allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below. […] But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs […] Again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is beheld […] and so
on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall. — With the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in dreams (Confessions 70).

True, De Quincey’s ‘quasi ekphrasis’ abounds in ‘poetic licence’; for instance, one cannot find any “Piranesi himself” at all in the Carceri, let alone in plate VII, one of the most popular; what’s more, so far as the Confessions are concerned, De Quincey misquotes the Carceri by calling them “Dreams” (70), and describes them vicariously, according to Coleridge’s account of them, since the Lake Poet of “Kubla Khan” seems to be the only one to have really seen them.

Even so, what seems intriguing regarding the triangular relationship between Piranesi, John Soane and Thomas De Quincey is their mutual invitation to an underground voyage, a descent down Piranesi’s steps to be undertaken through a virtual trapdoor placed in the surface of Soane’s text and architecture as well as in De Quincey’s description. Through this phantom trapdoor, one is allowed to ‘do’ some archaeology and follow both architect and writer on an underground route connecting early Nineteenth Century London to an urban landscape of antiquity, not any landscape but that of Rome and not any Rome, but just that seen and recorded by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, a true authority in matters imperial and ruinous. In order to establish the aesthetic attainment deriving from the visionary descent down Piranesi’s stairway, it is convenient in the first place to remember what Soane and De Quincey’s Georgian London was like, that is, what shaped the architectural appearance of Regency London; secondly, Rome, its ruins and Piranesi’s etchings of them will be considered in connection to the vicissitudes of the British Empire; finally, it will perhaps be possible to further clarify what is meant by the phrase “Urban Archaeologies of the Modern” by means of a comparative reading of the “pomp of […] palaces” (Confessions 71) in De Quincey’s opium-dreams and the city buildings by and relating to John Soane designed around the same period: buildings actually built, only projected or merely imagined. Against the background of the historical and social turbulence underlying Britain’s imperial claims, what follows is an attempt to capture an urban mindscape in its own making.

**Regency London**

Caught visually from an urbanistic and architectural angle, early Nineteenth-Century London is promptly sketched: the city was at the peak
of a true building boom accompanied by wild speculation on the one hand and by the aspiration to a stylistic uniformity never before attained on the other. The colour was white – of marble or of fashionable stuccoes; the style was neoclassical; the ground plans were square and geometric. This was the London of John Nash (1752-1835), “a man of flair” and a “shrewd businessman” (Porter 154), the architect who had conceived of a grandiose project involving the city centre, and had been working from 1817 to 1827 for its accomplishment. Supported by stately columns and shaped by classical façades, the great artery of Regent street was born; together with Portland Place, it connected Regent Park north with St James’ Park south and cut the city in two along its axis, separating the wealthy and fashionable West End from the poor, crowded East End. These were the days in which the Opium-Eater was strolling around the desolate Soho Square – a place very little sophisticated, yet also orthogonally conceived: he could hardly lose his bearings, were it not for the heavy dose of laudanum circulating in his body.

This London was learning to become the capital city of an Empire, and turning – under De Quincey’s eyes – into “a colossal emporium” (“The Nation of London” 1:178), investing a fortune in the construction and restyling of institutional buildings like the Bank of England, project ed and realized by Soane himself in 1795. Like all bold, expanding capital cities, Regency London let itself be noticed anthropomorphically in the most traditional way possible, that is aerially, from its head, the caput or cupola; the cityscape, overlooked by Christopher Wren’s Dome of St Paul’s Cathedral, was now enriched with other domes, more commercial and rigorously secular, from that – solemn and now disappeared – of the Rotunda of the Bank of England, to the smaller ones of the coloured glass skylights in John Soane’s Museum. More than ever, the British metropolis was willing to build a temple to any one business, provided it was profitable and representative of the wealth and power of the nation.

Roma Caput Mundi
As to classical Rome, it had been under the spotlight in England for several years, entirely for reasons of an archaeological nature: the Augustan Age, the Grand Tour, the echoes of diggings in Ercolanum, Pompeii and Paestum, the opening of the British Museum to the public in 1759, the circulation of prints documenting the richness of classical antiquity, eroded
by time and in ruins. No wonder Soane was well aware of the archaeological feel in the air of London, as he makes clear ironically in the opening of his *Crude Hints*: “In this age of research when the Connoisseur and the Antiquary find a lively interest in whatever relates to former times […] no wonder, in such an age, so much notice has been taken of the ruins and very extensive assemblage of fragments of ancient works partly buried and in some degree attached to a building in this metropolis apparently of later date” (61). For the British, it was now time to state and legitimate their own identity through the construction of an imperial memory, and no candidate would be better than ancient Rome to do the job. It was at this point precisely that mind, history, archaeology, aesthetics and urban experience started intertwining in the city, as they would do for many years. From De Quincey’s 1845 “palimpsest of the human brain” in *Suspiria de Profundis* (*Confessions* 144) to Freud’s Mystic Writing Pad and multi-layered Rome in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) and beyond, the human brain was increasingly seen as being structured like a palimpsest, where things past are neither lost nor erased, but simply preserved covered up by the layers of things present that lie closer to the surface. As in De Quincey or later in Bergson and Joyce (cfr. Patey 36-37), the recovery of total memory and especially of the bottom strata of the palimpsest, of personal and historical memory, was triggered either by extraordinary states like those induced by opium-addiction, or by extreme experiences like the risk of death by water. Suchlike experiences do often occur to the English Opium-Eater in *Confessions*, and are often haunted by the spectre of Rome; it is not by accident, then, that the first time he purchases and tastes opium, he is in the proximity of a temple of London entertainment full of Roman suggestions, the “Stately Pantheon” of Oxford Street; neither is it by accident that his “dreams chiefly architectural” are full of Roman palaces resurfacing from beneath the new London architecture. It made sense, therefore, for the British, to fill up the capital city of the new Empire with a Romanitas displaced of late, it made sense for them to shift stylistically the pantheon of the *Caput Mundi* of old to the ‘commercial head’ of London, the *Rotunda*, classic and severe, of the Bank of England; and again, it made sense to stock an impressive quantity of Roman finds under the domes of a museum like Soane’s, which announced itself as the repository and the *summa* of the metropolitan past and fostered the cultural memory of the city, a museum, moreover, soon to become public and
institutional. It made sense, finally, to devise, in the same museum, a Picture Room working as a palimpsest, in which three of the walls still contain hinged panels that open to display other pictures below. Here, Hogarth’s London (The Rake’s Progress, The Election) rests on the surface while Piranesi’s views of Paestum lie buried underneath, all overlapping one another.

**Ruins and Roman Antiquities**

Nevertheless, with Soane’s *Crude Hints Towards an History of my House* well in mind, it is also right to ask whether it made any sense to conceive of this selfsame museum in ruins in the precise moment in which one was building it; again, whether it made any sense for Joseph Michael Gandy, Soane’s lifelong collaborator, to paint a watercolour entitled *View of the Rounda of the Bank of England in Ruins* (1798) only four years after the accomplishment of the great architectural venture, and whether it made any sense at all to paint another watercolour in 1830, still more perplexing and disquieting, the Bird’s eye View of the Bank of England in Ruins.

As Edward Gibbon had already testified with his monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788), at the time, the equation of the British imperial escalation with that of the Roman Empire was almost inescapable. Gibbon, however, had specified that the experience of four thousand years would preserve the British from plunging back into barbarism and ending in decadence as the Romans had done. But Gibbon was something of an optimist, while Soane the architect and De Quincey the Opium-Eater seem to have had very little to be optimistic about: the first deeply troubled by filial ingratitude and by a strange persecution complex that made him feel perpetually unappreciated, the last *in primum* because of the obvious health problems due to the transition from the “pleasures” to the “pains” of his drug, and also because of the difficulties of fleeing his numerous creditors. Joseph Michael Gandy the watercolour painter and draughtsman, too, penniless as always, had very little to laugh about. Historically speaking, apart from personal disgraces, graver reasons not to be too optimistic were not wanting: the War of American of Independence (1775-1783) had already shaken Britain’s confidence in its own Empire; the French revolution had just illustrated from outside the English borders what barbaric excesses were still possible in civilized Europe, not to mention the turbulent Orient that was beginning to make itself heard, even before the
Opium Wars at mid-century, in the distraught psyche of the Opium-Eater. The echoes of subversion and violence in the air may explain why a tattered imagination made up of ruins and debris corresponds to the glorious new London, all marble whiteness and solidity. Tormented by the “Pains of Opium” at the extremity of his own architectural dreams, De Quincey observes that his archaeological visions waver between the solidity of marble – London has been a “stony-hearted step mother” (Confessions 34) to him – and the inconsistency of the clouds and the watery fluidity of lakes, seas and oceans. In like manner, also from a stylistic and narrative point of view, De Quincey’s prose participates in the same dialectics of temple and ruin when shifting from the sentences “of a grave and solemn complexion” (Confessions 39), of an “impassioned prose” owing much to his readings of Livy and the other classics, to the broken parataxis that, without “a regular and connected shape” (Confessions 62), can return the terror of opium nightmares only fragmentarily.

Going back to Piranesi for a while, however, one can realize that if the marble splendours of London stem from ancient Rome, its visions of ruins also come from there. In 1750, the most widely known work by the Venetian architect and etcher, the Roman Antiquities, still went under the title Monumenta sepulcralia Antiqua, and was conceived as the fantastic record of the remains of underground Rome, of its tombs and mausoleums. To Piranesi, documenting the ambition of the Caesars had meant moreover to exorcise its fatal disruption and decline by way of his daring compositions of primitive forms. Similarly, to some Londoners, emulating the ambition of the Caesars not only meant to shape their unrestrained imperial ambitions and synthesize an ad hoc urban memory for themselves, but also meant to acknowledge the transiency of all empires and their respective capital cities, to come to terms, in brief, with the prospect of decadence and the bugbear, both scary and stimulating, of always having to “make it new”, of having to start from the beginning once again. Not differently from Piranesi’s Rome, then, to the visionary architects and writers of the time, London couldn’t help turning into a huge necropolis. Joseph Gandy, for instance, had opened and concluded his own career as an architect and draughtsman with two peculiar projects abounding in gruesome eccentricity: in 1794, while in Rome, he had projected for London “an English Appian Way lined with tombs and mausoleums, [a] sepulchral avenue marching from Clapham Common toward the Thames”
(Luckacher 1-2), and in 1838, one of his last exhibits at the Royal Academy had been that of a “sketch of an idea for a Cast Iron necropolis” – as Brian Lukacher terms it in the attempted reconstruction of the lost drawing – a “looming cast iron truncated pyramid lined with thousands of cells to receive the multitudes of corpses produced by the great wen that was early Victorian London” (2). Gandy had further confirmed London’s ‘necropolitan drift’ with the aerial view of the Bank of England in Ruins mentioned earlier, a premature fantastic autopsy of the building as crumbled, a sight displaying all the features of a city-of-the-dead, the “vast necropolis rising upon the far-off horizon – a city of sepulchres” (229) as it appears in the “Dream-fugue” of The English Mail-Coach (1849):

Thus, as we ran like torrents—thus, as we swept with bridal rapture over the Campo Santo of the cathedral graves— suddenly we became aware of a vast necropolis rising upon the far-off horizon—a city of sepulchres, built within the saintly cathedral for the warrior dead that rested from their feuds on earth. [...] (229).

Like the necropolis of antiquity by Piranesi, full of pre-Roman shapes and decorations, the underground urban world of the Regency London visionaries calls forth a spurious Romanitas, often made up of Etruscan, Egyptian and Oriental elements and emanating a disquieting aura due to the difficult relationship between the new British Empire and the Orient. One more element of unsteadiness affecting the visionary urban territory of the frantic Londoners is its faculty of suddenly turning its own incommensurable vastness into the narrowest of spaces. All of a sudden, it reverses into a cramped mausoleum or a crypt, so as to resemble once more Piranesi’s vaults in their power to plunge their inhabitants into the agoraphobia of a swirl flight of stairs, torturing them also with the pangs of claustrophobia. Still today, the nearest visual counterpart of such a sensation would probably be that of entering the “sepulchral chamber”, crypt, or catacomb of John Soane’s Museum; not a window looking out on the outside and walls fully covered with antique finds. Mario Praz describes its appearance with the expression “gusto del folto” (48) (“taste for the thick”), a décor that brings to paroxysm the hybridization of classical austerity with the swarming figures of chinoiserie. The same claustrophobic obsession, the same uncanny coming to life of surrounding theriomorphic shapes is again to be found in De Quincey’s Oriental dreams.
Here, the Opium-Eater watches himself being imprisoned in “secret rooms”, in “stone coffins”, in “narrow chambers” (Confessions 73) and harassed by monkeys, paroquets and crocodiles at the pitch of the oneiric anguish due to the opium; language and syntax become plethoric, a paratactic gush of obsessions in which the borderline between subject and object, the principium individuationis is ultimately blurred:

I was stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at, by monkeys, by paroquets, by cockatoos. I ran into pagodas: and was fixed, for centuries, at the summit, or in secret rooms; I was the idol; I was the priest; I was worshipped; I was sacrificed, I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia: Vishnu hated me: Seeva laid wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris […] (Confessions 73).

As in De Quincey’s nightmare which culminates in the wrath of Egyptian idols, at the centre of Soane’s crypt is the sarcophagus of the pharaoh Seti I with its mysterious hieroglyphs, other ‘crypts’ articulating the indecipherable underworld of death buried underneath the urban ground.

A ‘modern proposal’

Piranesi’s staircase, buried under a London that is turning modern, has been seen to lead into an underground located elsewhere, ancient and manifold. This urban world, apart from and together with the clear-cut, solid paradigms of classical Rome and its square geometries, also promotes the strange appeal of textual and material ruins. In the eyes of the Romantic visionary, the urban ruins often look like a labyrinth which is temporal as well as spatial. Here it is easy to lose one’s way and easier still to exchange future and past, boundless metropolis and necropolis, museum and mausoleum, house and catacomb. As in Piranesi’s plates of prisons, the new labyrinth of Modernity is governed by the ideas of sinking and resurfacing, and new strategies and new aesthetic categories are requested to find one’s way through it. In the urban labyrinth of London, always in decadence and demolition, always being rebuilt, the shaping of form, both architectural and textual, merges with dismemberment, ruin and fragmentariness. This, perhaps, is the ‘modern proposal’ whereby the early Nineteenth-Century metropolis tries to clothe in words, images and form its own cultural anxieties, urban and imperial.
1 Piranesi’s first version of the *Carceri – Invenzioni capricciose di Carceri* – included fourteen plates and dates back to 1745, when the artist was in Venice; an altered second version in sixteen plates under the title *Carceri d’Invenzione* was issued in Rome by Piranesi himself (1761). De Quincey seems to refer to Piranesi’s more famous, second version of the etchings.

2 By the time of Soane and De Quincey, Piranesi’s aesthetic authority was well established in England. Jorge Andersen writes: “In the 1760’s a battle of styles began, Greek versus Roman, and his *La Magnificenza di Roma* and *Antichità Romane* supplied ‘the Romans’ like Sir William Chambers with some weighty, if not always correct, evidence for the controversy about taste. Through the brothers Adam details of Piranesi’s engraved work had a widespread influence on English interior decoration. As early as 1757 the artist had been elected honorary member of the Royal Society of Antiquaries” (50). To the two gothic novelists Horace Walpole (1717-1797) and William Beckford (1759-1844) Piranesi provided frightful architectures to imprison their heroes and heroines. In the wake of Burke’s aesthetics of the Sublime, his bewildering capricci stood high in the favour of antiquarians.


Fig. 1: View of the Rotunda of the Bank of England in Ruins by Joseph Michael Gandy, 1798

Fig. 2: Avanzo del tempio di Minerva Medica, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Antichità Romane*, 1756
Fig. 3: Frontespizio II, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Antichità Romane*, 1756
Fig. 4: John Soane’s Museum, the Sepulchral Chamber and the Dome Area above by Joseph Michael Gandy, 8 September 1825