

Writing and Reading the Urban (Hyper)Text of London

C. Bruna
Mancini

Università dell'Aquila

In the third chapter of *Technocity* – an online text at www.intercom.publinet.it/2000 – Marco Minicangeli asserts that: “The spatial elements of the city keep track of time. Lines, straight lines, angles, pavements, shops: places where human experience interlaces, where it is possible to ‘remember’ or to plan a future more and more uncertain. [...] The urban space [...] becomes a space for the philosophical reflection, an elective place for the unfolding of energies where ‘anticipation and innovation, memory and entropy’ are spatially visible. The city is, therefore, a place of comparison: desire and law face each other, they refer to each other simultaneously to transgress or to repress. As if by magic, space in the metropolis becomes time, history. Places ‘remember’ something. Returning to the city means regaining possession of one’s own past”¹.

The city *tells* and *sums up* history – like every other text: book, documentary, film, picture, cd-rom – taking the shape of a “theatre of memory” which communicates, with immediacy and polysemy, an historical past precious for the identity and the legitimation of our present. Under the entry “city”, in the Einaudi *Enciclopedia*, Marcel Roncayolo writes that in this term we have to recognize “the gathering of an addition of historical experiences”. Moreover, in his book *The City As a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna*, Donald J. Olsen considers the urban fabric as a complex but legible document which can communicate something about the values and

the aspirations of its governors, its rulers, its architects, its builders, its citizens; an artistic creation aimed not only to give pleasure, but also to contain ideas, to inculcate values, to serve as a tangible expression of forms of thought and morality; a monument/document which can stir up in its observer/decoder fear and wonder, reminding him/her the power of a dictatorship, the wealth of a community, the “truth” of an ideology, aspiring to the sublime².

The city is a text waiting to be read and written or rewritten in literary and narrative terms: a city of signs and essences whose panorama is drenched with (hi)stories relevant to its origins, to its citizens, to the society in which it has developed. Indeed, in *La città postmoderna / The Postmodern City*, Giandomenico Amendola writes:

In the city every part or aspect, every place or network of places is the outcome of all its previous history. [...] Memory is encapsulated in space and needs it. The city remains the main book in which history can be written and, above all, read; [...] the city is still the most complete history book, even if the most complete and difficult one, because it is not only a library crossed, for example, by the Seine or a series of books which can be consulted in a sequential reading – page after page. The city is a reservoir of knowledge and possibility that no one can imagine exhausting and organizing definitively or universally; if it is a history book, it is nowadays associated with the notion of the hypertext, which allows everyone to construct one’s own particular cognitive itinerary. [...] The city is a text whose reading is hard because of the complexity of its messages, because of the increasing polysemy of its parts, and the different abilities and the different codes of the possible readers. Its reading is impracticable, since the images through which the city lends itself to be lived in and communicated are, as all “great images”, complex and intricate.³ (153-4)

Michel de Certeau, in the chapter “Walking in the City” taken from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, describes the sensation of seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center: an urban island, a wave of verticals transformed into a *texturology* in which extremes coincide – extremes of ambition and degradation, brightness and darkness, past and present. On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans, the tallest *letters* in the world compose a gigantic *rhetoric* of excess, a hybrid and multiform *text/texture* in which the spectator/decoder can *read* a universe constantly exploding.

In this case his glance moves upon an endless “performance territory” – as Tiziana Villani defines it (37-45) – which is the city of New York, the “Big Apple”, so many times “bitten”, swallowed up and rewritten by artists in their works. But during the centuries also the city of London has always had a remarkable hold over the artistic imagination with its mighty mass of brick and smoke. Lawrence Phillips – in an editorial suggestively entitled “Literary London: An old, New Subject?”, in the first number of the online review *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* – remembers “the biggest aggregation of human life – the most complete compendium of the world” described by Henry James at the end of the nineteenth century⁴, a wonderful city which is the symbol and the synthesis of civilization and life; and again, the London of Malcom Bradbury’s “aesthetic realism”; the theatricality/simulation of Wordsworth’s London; the topography bound to gender/genre in the cities of Fanny Burney and Charles Dickens; the London seen under the “alien” eyes of authors such as Krishnabhabini Das, Lee Kok Liang, Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul.

To these and numberless other “representations” of London, I would like to add the labyrinthine streets of London the modern *flâneuse* Virginia Woolf loved to walk; the grotesque and caricatural London portrayed by William Hogarth and Gustave Doré⁵; the dark and dangerous London of many detective and spy stories; the disquieting London which appears in Alfred Hitchcock’s movies; the cataclysmic London of the future predicted by the authors of the British “*New Wave*”⁶. In short, a London that can be *observed, read and decoded*, creating – I would say, quoting Kevin Lynch – the image of the city insofar as its builders and urbanists are concerned. Moreover, this “imaginary”/“imagined” London, moulded through the written word, literature, cinema and art, often precedes and conditions the very “real” city. In the first chapter of his *Londra. Mappa, storie, labirinti / London. Maps, histories, labyrinths*, a book that he defines as a narrative journey “along the paths of memory”, Mario Maffi asserts:

I wandered around Noel Street and Danbury Street and Colebrook Row, remembering and recognizing places and glimpses; at the little Angel Bookshop, at the entrance of Camden Passage, I found and bought an old edition of *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad and I steered toward the great, quiet and dim and still sleepy, pub [...]. Who knows if the same will happen to me as happened to the pro-

tagonist of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe – a whole day in a London tavern, before my eyes the endless variety of the London people, and then at night a mysterious meeting with “the man of the crowd” and a pursuit through streets and lanes? (12-13)⁷

Maffi affirms that London is a “world city” made up of the – real or imaginary – stratifications of past and present, of literary and cultural suggestions and cross-references which exert a peculiar magnetism on the walker; it is a text that branches out in time and space, like a “web of courses” enlarged through the centuries swallowing up valleys, marshes, hills, settlements, town and villages, drawing and redrawing on its own body an authentic tattoo (12-13): “London still remains for many reasons – in the imaginary above all, but in part also in reality – a city whose topography is thick and twisted, dreamy, tortuous, even obsessing”⁸. (23)

It is precisely a labyrinthine web of streets, lanes, subways, tunnels, and bridges always invaded by crowd and traffic, which constitutes and builds the urban hyper-text, protagonist of the ‘epic’ novel *Mother London* (1988) by Michael Moorcock. Through forty years of English history, from the world conflict to the 1980s of Mrs. Thatcher, moving backwards and forward in time, through the legends and memory of the characters who populate the urban space of the huge metropolis; London – the new Jerusalem of our times – becomes a maternal body, sometimes with a monstrously evil disposition: “London is my mother, source of most of my ambivalences and most of my loyalties” (Moorcock 27), David Mummery – one of the main characters – affirms in the first pages of the novel. He is both a writer and a journalist, deeply involved in writing the forgotten, mysterious story of London thanks to his paranormal powers which allow him to read the thoughts of the city and of its people. In the first chapter of the first part⁹, this “urban anthropologist” rapidly walks the streets of London to his bus-stop to find a downstairs seat, two rows back from the driver’s cabin, in a throbbing scarlet double-decker:

From behind the glass he watches his Londoners. *This fabulous flotsam*. They come from Undergrounds and subways (their ditches and their burrows) flowing over pavements to where myriad transports wait to divert them to a thousand nearby destinations. The mist has dissipated. A cold sun now brightens this eruption of souls. [...] Momentarily Mummery feels as if London’s population has been transformed into music, so sublime is his vision; the city’s inhabitants create an exquisitely complex geometry, a geography passing beyond the natural to

become metaphysical, only describable in terms of music or abstract physics: nothing else makes sense of relationships between roads, rails, waterways, subways, sewers, tunnels, bridges, viaducts, aqueducts, cables, between every possible kind of intersection. (7)

The narrative concentrates on the experiences of two other people: Josef Kiss, stage magician and telepath, who compulsively walks the streets of London, tracing out its patterns; and Mary Gasalee, former self-willed coma sufferer, telepathic as well. Through their eyes and their dreams, nightmares, and reminiscences London is prodigiously re-imagined, re-written, re-built. In the first number of *Literary London* Brian Baker writes: "The text is regularly punctuated by italicised paragraphs of 'other', unmediated voices, which signify the Babel/babble that is London's linguistic multiverse [...]. These narrative foci channel the voices and experience of Londoners throughout the post-war period. Each of the protagonists struggles to deal with the cacophony that is the life of the city, each of them spending time in hospitals and on medication because the city is not occluded but too present". Some centuries ago, people of this kind would have been condemned to the stake. On the contrary, David Mummery's theory is that their mutual condition is the product of what he calls "urban evolution":

[...] as a Brazilian native of the rain forest was able instinctively to use all his senses to build up a complex picture of his particular world, so could a city dweller *read* his own relevant *signs*, just as unconsciously, to form an equally sophisticated picture. Mummery found nothing alarming or mysterious about their condition, believing that most people chose to ignore the available information while certain cynics turned it to their advantage and became confidence tricksters, modern witch-doctors, publicists, predators of myriad varieties. Unable easily to block the wealth of information provided by a great city, he, she [Mary] and Joseph Kiss were like powerful wireless receivers who must learn how to adjust their fine tuning to keep a required station. She was not sure she accepted this. (Moorcock 30)

London's *geography* transforms itself into a *psychogeography*, a text/texture made up of signs, dreams, nightmares, desires, visions and repressed, hidden, unexpressed, or unheard thoughts. In an essay titled "Watching Your Step: the History and Practice of the *flâneur*", Chris Jenks observes that "psychogeography" is a pseudo-science of occulted urban

symbols, lost or erased spatial configurations, the semiology of London's cultural marginalia. A psychogeography, then, derives from "the subsequent 'mapping' of an unrouted route which, like primitive cartography, reveals not so much randomness and chance as spatial intentionality. It uncovers compulsive currents within the city along with unprescribed boundaries of exclusion and unconstructed gateways of opportunity. The city begins, without fantasy or exaggeration, to take on the characteristics of a *map of the mind*". (154)

Walking the streets of London, the three main protagonists of Moorcock's novel can actually "tap" those mysterious "electric currents" which transport "the voices of all the times". Thus, the city acquires such a depth that no metaphor could exactly represent; except, maybe, the hypertext. Moreover, in *Mother London* the metropolis is often compared to a human being, a decrepit old woman suffering from hallucinations and haunted by all the ghosts of her past – she can only whisper her memories to people able to listen to them, bearing on her own body the signs of the tragedies and events which happened to her, like the wrinkles on an elderly face. And here we can refer to another famous British contemporary author, a modern shaman and "psychogeographer" who – like Moorcock – is incredibly enchanted by London. In his works he loves to walk it, to cover it, to observe it, to withdraw from it, to explore it. He is the writer, poet, essayist and director Iain Sinclair.

Brian Baker points out that on the back cover of the dust-jacket of Iain Sinclair's *Dark Lanthorns* (1999), a book designed to mimic the look of a late 1960s *London A-Z* streetmap, there is a reproduction of a map of the London Underground system. The rounded rectangle, at the centre of a system of arteries and veins, is faded, the ink blurred with damp and the names of each station lost and forgotten forever. The print, blue-black on white – rather than the now more familiar colour reproductions, Baker asserts – is indistinct, the lines receding beneath surface like vein below the skin, or better, like blood vessels in a huge brain. An image similar to the one sent to Sinclair by a man, after the publication of *Lights Out for the Territory* in 1998: a map of London, on which the man had superimposed an X ray of his brain tumour.

Talking about the unceasing pilgrimage within that immeasurable and pulsating hieroglyph which is London, looking for the footprints left by people continuously in motion, or on a journey, also Mario Maffi

remembers the whole *côterie* of psychogeographers such as Patrick Keiller, Paul Auster and, of course, Iain Sinclair, whose *Lights Out for the Territory* can be considered: “one of the most recent and suggestive books on London [...]; a mad, visionary and disturbing coming and going, à la Thomas De Quincey, through the map – on the surface and under the ground – of the contemporary metropolis”¹⁰. (267) After all, the subtitle of this novel is *9 Excursions in the Secret History of London*. Moreover, this book reminds me the uncompleted work to which David Mummery – Moorcock’s protagonist in *Mother London* – consecrated his whole life. Maybe, if he had finished it, it would have been very similar to Sinclair’s novel: dreamy, fragmentary, mad, disturbing, deeply and surrealistically “true”. Significantly, indeed, *Lights Out for the Territory*¹¹ opens with the following words:

The notion was to cut a crude V into the sprawl of the city, to vandalise dormant energies by an act of ambulant signmaking. To walk out from Hackney to Greenwich Hill, and back along the River Lea to Chingford Mount, recording and retrieving the messages on walls, lampposts, doorjambs: the spites and spasms of an increasingly deranged populace. (I had developed this curious conceit while working on my novel *Random Daughters*: that the physical movements of the characters across their territory might spell out the letters of a secret alphabet. Dynamic shapes, with ambitions to achieve a life of their own, quite independent of their supposed author. Railway to pub to hospital: trace the line on the map. These botched runes, burnt into the script in the heat of creation, offer an alternative reading – a subterranean, preconscious text capable of divination and prophecy. A sorcerer’s grimoire that would function as a curse or a blessing. (1)

Armed with a pen and a notebook, and accompanied by the inseparable photographer Marc Atkins, the author *transcribes, records* and *rewrites* “his own” London, a magic text/hypertext/palimpsest made up of signs, drawings, graffiti, footnotes, links we can only divine – more than simply decode by reasoning – like an act of faith; a message written *in* and *by* the city to remind men their own past and, maybe, to reveal them their future and whatever lies concealed, disturbing/*unheimlich*, beyond the boundary of visibility. After all, Maffi too ends his mental, physical and narrative survey of London streets, alleys, routes, rhizomes, signs with the following words:

The intense vitality of London, its lack (or elasticity) of boundaries, its own morphological structure (the river, the labyrinth) still suggest more; they recall other features or implications. If you are occasional visitors or skilful connoisseurs of the city, its "body" appears to you in constant motion – its territory as a tangled map of potential or actual journeys. I think that in the culture of a few cities there is such a strong perception that if you go to this or that neighbourhood, walk the streets, go to this or that meeting place, follow the paths of your own job or your own interests, all that involves a physical displacement full of significances.¹² (265)



- 1 “Gli elementi spaziali della città conservano la traccia del tempo. Linee, rette, angoli, marciapiedi, negozi: luoghi dove si intreccia l’esperienza umana, dove è possibile “ricordare” o progettare un futuro sempre più incerto. [...] Lo spazio urbano [...] diventa uno spazio per la riflessione filosofica, luogo elettivo per il dispiegamento di energie dove è spazialmente visibile “anticipazione e innovazione, memoria ed entropia”. La città è perciò luogo di confronto: desiderio e legge si fronteggiano, rinviandosi reciprocamente a trasgredire o reprimere. Come d’incanto nelle metropoli lo spazio si fa perciò tempo, storia. I luoghi “ricordano” qualcosa. Tornare alla città significa riappropriarsi del passato”. All the translations from Italian are mine. We also want to mention, here, the famous *Le città invisibili* by Italo Calvino.
- 2 In the essay “Toward a Topological Semiotics”, Greimas writes that of the different approaches allowing the analysis of topological objects as complex as a city, the application of the model of communication seems to be the most productive: “Within the framework of this elementary structure, consisting of a sender-producer and a receiver-reader, we can inscribe the city as an object-message to be decoded either by imagining the procedures preceding this message and leading to the production of the city-object, or by paraphrasing the procedure of the reader trying to decode the message with all its allusions and all its presuppositions. In both cases, the city can be considered as a text whose grammar we will have, at least partially, to construct”, (Algirdas Julien Greimas, “Toward a Topological Semiotics”, *The Social Sciences: A Semiotic View*, Vol. 8, n. 4, 1995, p. 38).
- 3 “Nella città ogni parte o aspetto, ogni luogo o rete di luoghi è l’esito di tutta la storia precedente. [...] La memoria è incapsulata nello spazio e ha bisogno di esso. La città resta il principale libro su cui la storia possa essere scritta e, soprattutto, letta; [...] la città è rimasta il più completo dei libri di storia anche se il più complesso e difficile, in quanto essa non è solo una biblioteca attraversata, per esempio, dalla Senna o una serie di libri che possono essere consultati in una lettura sequenziale - pagina dopo pagina -. La città è un serbatoio di conoscenza e di possibilità che nessuno può sognarsi di esaurire o di organizzare definitivamente ed universalisticamente; se è un libro di storia essa è oggi assimilabile alla nozione dell’ipertesto che consente a ciascuno di costruirsi un proprio particolare itinerario conoscitivo. [...] La città è un testo la cui lettura è difficile per la complessità dei messaggi, per la crescente polisemia delle parti, per le diverse abilità e i diversi codici dei letto-

- ri possibili. La lettura è impervia dal momento che le immagini attraverso le quali la città si fa vivere e si comunica sono come tutte le “grandi immagini” complesse ed intricate”.
- 4 In the short but intense “London”, written in 1888 and published in 1905 in the collection *English Hours*.
- 5 In his famous engravings – *Over London-By Rail* (1872), *Ludgate Hill* (1872), *London Bridge* (1872), *Docks* (1872), *Houndsditch* (1872) – Gustave Doré showed everything the Victorian optimism wanted to hide: the noise, the uproar, the misery, the dirt, the crime, the despair, the vapour of a huge metropolis.
- 6 See the online review *La città e le stelle* at www.intercom.publinet.it.
- 7 “Ho gironcolato per Noel Street e Danbury Street e Colebrooke Row, ricordando e riconoscendo luoghi e scorci, e infine, all’Angel Bookshop, una piccola libreria all’imbocco del Camden Passage, ho trovato e comprato una vecchia edizione dell’*Agente segreto* di Joseph Conrad e mi sono diretto verso il grande pub silenzioso e semioscuro e ancora assonnato [...]. Chissà se succederà anche a me come al protagonista di un racconto di Edgar Allan Poe – un’intera giornata in una taverna londinese e davanti agli occhi l’infinita varietà della gente di Londra e poi a sera un misterioso incontro con l’‘uomo della folla’ e un inseguimento per strade e vicoli?”.
- 8 “Londra resta ancora per molti versi – nell’immaginario innanzitutto, ma in parte anche nella realtà – una città dalla topografia fitta e contorta, onirica, circonvolutiva, perfino ossessiva” (*Id.*, p. 23).
- 9 “*Mother London* has a concentric structure, and the narrative moves from 1980s London back in time to the Blitz of 1940, and thence back to ‘present’ time again. The novel begins with a chapter titled ‘The Patients’, then ‘David Mummery’, ‘Mary Gasalee’ and ‘Josef Kiss’; it ends with ‘Josef Kiss’, ‘Mrs Gasalee’, ‘David Mummery’ and ‘The Celebrants’. Between are four parts, each of six chapters. Parts two and five are mirrored and have chapters that are identified by the names of London pubs; part two begins in 1957 and ends in 1985, and part five begins in 1985 and works back to 1959” (Brian Baker. “Maps of the London Underground: Iain Sinclair and Michael Moorcock’s Psychogeography of the City”, *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, Volume 1, Number 1, 2003, www.literarylondon.org).
- 10 “Uno dei più recenti e suggestivi libri su Londra [...]: un andirivieni folle, visionario e disturbante, alla Thomas De Quincey, attraverso la mappa in superficie e in profondità della metropoli contemporanea”.
- 11 Maffi remarks that, cunningly, “lights out for the territory” recalls the last words of the most famous travel book of the American literature, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, and most exactly when Huck declares that he wants to light out for the western territory.

- 12 “L’intensa vitalità di Londra, quella sua mancanza (o elasticità) di confini, la sua stessa struttura morfologica (il fiume, il labirinto) suggeriscono altro ancora, rimandano ad altre caratteristiche e implicazioni. Che siate visitatori occasionali o esperti conoscitori della città, il suo ‘corpo’ vi si presenta infatti come in movimento costante – il suo territorio una mappa intricata di viaggi potenziali o effettivi. Credo che nella cultura di poche città risulti così forte la percezione che recarsi in questo o quel quartiere, muoversi attraverso le strade, recarsi a questo o quell’appuntamento, seguire i sentieri del proprio lavoro o dei propri interessi, tutto ciò implichi uno spostamento fisico denso di significati”.



Opere citate, Works Cited



Zitierte Literatur

- Amendola, Giandomenico. *La città postmoderna. Magie e paure della metropoli contemporanea*. Bari: Laterza, 1997.
- Baker, Brian. "Maps of the London Underground: Iain Sinclair and Michael Moorcock's Psychogeography of the City". *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 1.1, www.literarylondon.org
- Calvino, Italo. *Le città invisibili*. Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 1993.
- De Certeau, Michel. "Walking in the City". In *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1984: 91-110.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien. "Toward a Topological Semiotics". *The Social Sciences: A Semiotic View* 8, 4 1(1995): 27-43.
- Jenks, Chris, "Watching Your Step: the History and Practice of the *flâneur*", in *Visual Culture*, ed. by Chris Jenks, London and New York: Routledge, 1995: 142-160.
- James, Henry. "London". In *English Hours*. Ed. with an Introduction by Alma Louis Lowe. London: Heinemann, 1960: 1-31.
- Maffi, Mario. *Londra. Mappe, storie, labirinti*. Milano: Rizzoli, 2000.
- Moorcock, Michael. *Mother London*. Bath: The Bath Press, 1997.
- Olsen, Donald J. *La città come opera d'arte: Londra, Parigi, Vienna*. Milano: Serra e Riva, 1987.
- Phillips, Lawrence. "'Literary London': An Old, New Subject?". *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 1.1 (2003): www.literarylondon.org.
- Roncayolo, Marcel. "Città". In *Enciclopedia*. Torino: Einaudi, 1980: 3-84.
- Sinclair, Iain. *Lights Out for the Territory. 9 Excursions on the Secret History of London*, with illustrations by Marc Atkins. London: Granta Books, 1998.
- Villani, Tiziana. "Il territorio performance". In *Architetture della sparizione, architettura totale, spaesamenti metropolitani*. Ed. Felix Guattari. Milano: Mimesis, 1996: 37-45.