“The poem that responds to London”: writing landscape

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1. Introduction

I would like to begin by saying a few words about the ongoing conversation between literature and geography, which I take to be one of the places where today’s papers might be located conceptually. In a recent special issue of New Formations on ‘the spatial imaginary’ Richard Phillips and Scott McCracken collect together a number of interesting papers examining this conversation, but conclude their editorial introduction by noting that

“Such dialogues are not, of course, without disagreement... in the end, our dialogues were both critical and productive... Nonetheless, the dialogues go on... Speaking productively across boundaries is something that has to be worked at.”

The point of starting with this is not to begin by immediately drawing lines and fostering antagonisms; rather I want to emphasise just how difficult this project is. I also think that this is not, as Phillips and McCracken seem to suggest, a question of cross-disciplinary misunderstandings; I think that the idea of ‘writing landscape’ raises many awkward questions across the arts and humanities, not just between different disciplines, and that our similarities are probably stronger than our differences.

The paper aims to explore some of these issues, reviewing recent work in geography, literary and cultural studies, and beyond. My main concerns are with what we mean by landscape, and with writing, and how these work together. To develop my argument I want to draw on some of
my ongoing research on recent London writing, particularly the work of Iain Sinclair, and on Julian Wolfreys’ assertion that this somehow captures what he calls ‘the persistent experience of the city’.

2. “The persistent experience of the city’

Wolfreys suggests that London is particularly haunted, and that this works to challenge our understandings of the city as mappable, representable, and knowable. Its meanings are multiplied by present absences and absent presences as the past appears as haunting traces in the real and fictional city, which disorient its readers and walkers. London and its representations come to resemble each other

“through the enfolding and unfolding of material and spectral phenomena onto the present experience of both the city and the text, and ... in the re-making of the text as city, a topography comprising and comprised of so many encrypted and covert locations”.

Noting that the city has long been haunted, Wolfreys suggests that it demands a particular attitude from those who encounter it. He asks

“...is it the case that we might read these fluxes and pulsions as challenging the classic efficacy (sic) of mimetic, hegemonic representations, thereby demanding in return a response, and a responsibility, first on the part of the artist and subsequently on that of the reader, spectator, or audience, to the persistent experience of the city?"

We might be forgiven for wondering what this “persistent experience” might feel like, but I want to leave this question for now and return to the response that it demands. Considering Sinclair’s poem Lud Heat, Wolfreys concludes that the architectures of both city and text are highly provisional.

“The city, thus conceived ... demands an activity of responsive, endless reading as a necessary task. If we don’t begin by sensing, feeling, the teeming excess of London’s..."
being, throughout all the discontinuous interrelations, along the chance diachronic and
synchronic axes, we can begin nowhere legitimately in Sinclair’s text. And yet, reading this
text reinforces the sense that there is no absolutely justifiable starting point as such. The
city, and the poem which responds to London, is always already an event of constant
becoming, without origin, without center, without absolute truth, except that truth which is
London itself.”

The city, and the work of art that responds to it, mirror each other in their “teeming excess”;
while there is no starting point to Sinclair’s text, we cannot legitimately begin to read it unless
we recognise this excess.

Wolfreys notes that this experience is “ironically appropriate to the condition of London”. The
city is a palimpsest of the traces left by millennia of inhabitation. Superimposed onto and
penetrating into these archaeological strata is a mess of unplanned revisions, abandoned and re-
used objects, and anachronistic juxtapositions. Concluding his great biography of London, Peter
Ackroyd surveys a spot near Spitalfields and considers the finds that have been made there,
including a Roman burial and the medieval hospital that gave the area its name. In addition to
these different historical moments, individual temporalities mingle in these jumbled places; at
Broadgate Ackroyd notes, “It was a matter of conjecture how many different times inhabited
this small area”.

To make sense of this we might note that, in part, this muddle, and our experience of it, is the
consequence of the city’s lack of effective government, particularly during the nineteenth
century (up until the founding of the London County Council in the late 1880s) and the late
twentieth (after the dissolution of the Greater London Council in 1986). Or we might consider
that this is part of what we call urban life – that all cities might be this mysterious, complex, and
unknowable. Another question to return to – is the experience of place something recognisable
to all, or something within us?

So far we have not considered London as a landscape. Wolfreys notes Virilio’s suggestion that
landscape can be a ‘passage’ as much as a static view:
“The idea of landscape as a passage rather than fixed site ... is crucial in the textual imagination of London as here considered, whether by “passage” one understands the movement through particular places or that which returns through the temporal passage implied in the conjuration of alternative pasts”

Landscape is therefore a question of movement as well as stasis, of a succession of times and spaces rather than a fixed moment.

I want to suggest that Wolfrey’s argument collects together and illustrates a number of valuable insights. Firstly, he stresses the decentred and provisional nature of writing and reading, avoiding the temptation to tie meaning to the personality or identity of author or reader. Secondly, he treats this as more than simply an effect of reading; Wolfrey seems interested in the relationship between city and author, or city and walker, and suggests that the city and the text actively demand a response. Thirdly, he enlivens landscape, treating it as a ‘passage’ through space and time, a series of encounters or engagements, rather than a static, external object apprehended by an observer. These are the main points that I will be returning to throughout the rest of the paper.

Yet at the same time this persistent experience of London does not seem to have a history; is it something modern, recent, or timeless? And while it may function as a general condition of the city, Wolfrey seems to think that some authors are better at responding to it than others. In his two volume exploration Writing London we encounter a canon of authors – Dickens, James, Stoker, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, Wilde, Machen – as well as newer writers like Elizabeth Bowen, Maureen Duffy, Ackroyd and Sinclair, and others.

To work through these and other questions I now want to go on to consider landscape and writing in turn, before making some final suggestions.

3. Landscape
Over the last ten years geographers - and others - have argued that we need to see our engagement with place as more lively, complex and enchanting than the word ‘landscape’ sometimes suggests. The word landscape can be used to describe both an area of land and something worked, or engaged with, and it could be argued that geographers have until quite recently tended to see ‘environment’ as natural and ‘landscape’ as cultural, so that artists or writers turn one into the other. In this tradition landscape is a cultural production that expresses particular kinds of ideas about land and nature, themselves concepts with long and complex histories. By concentrating on the successful development of practices - like perspective - that helped fix the idea of landscape as something objective and static, cultural geographers have demonstrated the historical and geographical specificity of these ideas.°

Other authors, such as the anthropologist Tim Ingold, have pointed out that both landscapes and environments are made and organised by our engagement with them. This is not simply a cultural image of the world, but a form of practical and sensual contact in which we make places through our encounters with elements of the environment. In geography John Wiley and others have called for a new approach to landscape. Drawing upon a whole series of arguments sometimes summed up - but not exhausted - by the phrase ‘non-representational theory’, they have developed a phenomenology of landscape that emphasises its liveliness and agency. Considering our own engagement with this landscape, they have been keen to stress the temporalities and trajectories of these encounters as well as those aspects of experience that cannot be reduced to vision, or to rational thought.°

While I think there has been less root-and-branch revision in literary studies - probably because space has only recently become an object of extended study - examinations of textual space in literature have echoed some of these debates. Wolfreys’ work is one example, and so is ongoing research into the spatialities of modernist fiction. For example, Andrew Thacker suggests that modernist writing concerns both ‘space’ (movement, history, becoming) and ‘place’ (static location, being, dwelling).° Here he is moving on from an older understanding of modernist literature, one that assumes that mobility and speed replace the static extended descriptions found in nineteenth-century realist fiction, and which is worth a brief re-assessment here.
Twenty years ago, Lennard Davis suggested that these extended descriptions were part and parcel of colonial and capitalist conceptions of land, in other words that "locations are intertwined with ideological explanations for the possession of property". In time these explanations become less useful: "later novels have become somewhat less interested in place and more interested in the self and the language of the self". Echoing Denis Cosgrove’s argument in *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, he suggested that by the twentieth century there was no need for writers to concern themselves with land and property: “The difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century descriptions of space... is that the historical and ideological justification for space has dropped out.” But there is space in modernist writing, and other critics, like Marc Brosseau, are much closer to Wolfrey’s sense of the city. In his study of Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*, Brosseau suggests that New York is represented through fragmentation and motion. Firstly, these spaces are fragmented in such a way as to replicate Robert Park’s description of the modern city as a "mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate". A second and richer expression of the spaces of the city can be found in what Brosseau calls "kinetic description", where the movements of characters are represented through different descriptive techniques: repetitive patterns - a “daily path syntax” - or collages which reproduce the "spatial and temporal succession of the elements of the urban landscape". This gives the urban experience textual form, what Brosseau calls the "geography of the text".

It is time to return to Wolfreys, and to his claim that Iain Sinclair’s writing matches the experience of London. Clearly Sinclair is a good example of ‘kinetic description’, with his nods to psychogeography, surrealism and the Situationists. But is his London any different to Joyce’s Dublin? Are these cities different to Paris, New York, Mumbai? While we are thinking about this we might consider that this means rejecting mimetic theories of geographical representation while accepting that authors might somehow accurately represent the *experience* of place, as Brosseau suggested humanistic geographers of literature had done.

In the case of Wolfreys, and London writing, we might rephrase this question: if spaces are spectral, then are all sites equally haunted? Certain cities and people do appear to be more haunted than others; for example, Steve Pile explores the way that colonial pasts have produced contemporary hauntings in postcolonial cities like London, Singapore, and New Orleans. The experiences of conquest, displacement and diaspora all possess the potential to make sites
uncanny, as Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs’ *Uncanny Australia* makes clear; the refugee is haunted by memories of lost homelands, even, or especially, when she returns home to find it subtly changed. Of course this haunting relies on histories and memories and where these are completely absent, there can be no trace of those who have gone before us. My suggestion, following Wolfreys, is that some urban sites are particularly rich in these traces.

It is also worth pointing out that it is not only absence in time that creates ghostly effects; connections extended over space create their own absences. London is haunted by postcolonial connections with distant places; some of these, like Cleopatra’s Needle, the obelisk displaced from Egypt to the Embankment, are historical connections, invisible to the many Londoners who pass it every day. Others, like phone or internet connections to Dhaka or Hong Kong, are living connections that fill London with the voices and actions of others far away. The media do not annihilate space but *double* it, as Shaun Moores points out, and this can itself be uncanny. If there is a geography of haunted London then it is not just that there is an unequal distribution of historical incident, tragedy and suffering, but also that some sites are better networked or have more connections with distant places than others do. As Amin and Thrift put it

> This multiplicity is what enables us to argue that life in the city contains magical powers; it is full to brimming with an abundance of life, which in turn, provides many strange thoughts and knowledges.

This way of thinking about the city suggests an answer to one of my earlier questions. Wolfreys’ ‘persistent experience’ does not have a history because London appears to have always been a decentred jumble, but it is possible to begin to think about both quantitative and qualitative changes to this phenomena, moments when it was more or less extensively networked with people and places absent in time and space.

The idea of haunting also allows us to return to the question of the liveliness of landscape. Wolfreys suggests that “The city becomes available as so many ungovernable events of revenance, regeneration, and affirmative resistance to the authority of, on the one hand, the city planners, and on the other, any grand narrative.” He is clearly keen to stress the unruly nature of the city, but in doing so he also highlights its powers over us. The walker or reader of
London risks being overcome by nostalgia or melancholy. As the anthropologist Daniel Miller notes “where we cannot possess we are in danger of being possessed”; possession by London’s past means abandoning the attempt to possess the city, acknowledging the agency is not something residing in us but distributed through the environment.  

4. Writing 

Earlier I suggested that we should remain wary of the idea that urban writing somehow unproblematically captures ‘the urban experience’. Writing is a form of practice with particular outcomes, not a mimicking of life. Geographers have tended to be more interested in context than in text, and have consequently been drawn to historicist accounts of literature and other textual productions, often at the expense of attention to their aesthetic and formal properties. As a result they have been keen to collapse writing into something else, something more important, something that is simply ‘expressed’ in text. Brosseau describes this as the geography in the text.

It is possible to sketch out three common interpretative short-cuts that see writing as a cipher to be solved in certain kinds of geographical analysis. The first, still strangely popular, concerns a comparison between the real site, preferably well known by the critic, and the represented site. John Barrell bravely began his article on the spaces of Hardy’s novels with the admission “I have never been to Wessex”, and in a literal sense none of us here have either. The second approach is more respectable and more common, and concerns some aspect of the biography of the author. Here biographical texts of various sorts are taken to be unproblematically ‘true’, so that they may ground an analysis of fictional writing. Again writing represents only a position, some aspect of the author’s politics or personal history, which is straightforwardly and clearly expressed.

Finally we have a more careful historicism, often informed by the kind of cultural materialism informing the work of Lennard Davis. If we wished to use Sinclair as an example of this, then we would have to find some explanation for his interest in London’s spaces and places. We might see him as part of the return of the gentrifying middle-class to the city; Roger Luckhurst
suggests that recent London Gothic writing mystifies the city for these new inhabitants, making sites occulted, hidden, known only to a few initiates, or perhaps ultimately unknowable. For Luckhurst this is further proof of London’s failure as an inclusive city:

“An occultism that conjures counter-spells is itself intrinsically anti-democratic in its love of the arcane. ... So etiolated is any idea of a metropolitan public sphere that we have turned instead to the private experiences of hidden routes, secret knowledges, flittering spectres, the ghosts of London past.”

Sinclair and Lichtenstein’s book (non-fiction) *Rodinsky’s Room* is a good example of this, turning on the mysterious disappearance of Rodinsky from his room in Princelet Street in Spitalfields and the various myths that this generated. Sinclair wrote that

He [Rodinsky] had evaporated and would remain as dust, his name unspoken, to be resurrected as a feature, a necessary selling point, to be put alongside Nicholas Hawksmoor in the occult fabulation of the zone that the Eighties demanded to justify a vertiginous inflation in property values.  

He suggests that Rodinsky only became meaningful as the area developed: “Those with a vested interest in defining Spitalfields as a zone of peculiar and privileged resonance needed a mythology to underwrite the property values. Rodinsky ... was elected”. The burgeoning interest in the area makes Rodinsky visible, sets the outlines of the myth:

With the reimagining of the area that the developers, the energy pirates of the Eighties would enforce – the need to ground their presumptuous brochures in a neverworld of Huguenots, dancing Hasids, and blandly sinister Masonic serial killers – Rodinsky, his curious history, and his spontaneous combustion, would be dragged into the light.

He imagines a developer spinning this mixture of mystery and the exotic into a winning sales pitch: “Grant us a ghost in the attic, a broken weaver’s loom, and we will do you a dozen kosher Georgian units, at 200K a throw, for the Far Eastern catalogue”. Sinclair admits that his own writing about Rodinsky made him one of “the pilot fish of development: conservationists,
explainers, justifying sentimentalists”. Such a reading is possible, then; but makes Sinclair’s work simply a kind of automatic writing, a necessary consequence or agent of gentrification.

But if writing and reading are not simply the coding and decoding of place, biography or context, what are they?

While ethnographies of writing are thin on the ground at present, it seems to me that we might learn something from research into the movement from text to reader, so I want to quickly review some of the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to reception. We have become used to the idea of the creative reader, following research that draws upon Michel de Certeau’s formulation of the reader as poacher, or upon the idea of reading formations. But researchers across a range of disciplines – media studies, literature, history, geography – have warned us of the limits of this approach. In their recent review of theorisations of the reader in reader-response and other literary studies, for example, Schweickart and Flynn distinguish between ‘text-dominant’ and ‘reader-dominant’ camps. These camps place the responsibility for creating meaning in one site even though they pay lip service to the idea that it is formed between text and reader. Schweickart and Flynn conclude that “the idea of readings as an interaction between two different entities proved difficult to maintain”.

This problem is also visible elsewhere, in media studies of the audiences of popular texts. Janice Radway, one of the most original thinkers in this area, was quick to point out the difficulty of recovering meaning from viewers and readers who were engaging with many texts at any one time, and whose interpretations were not stable or easily read off from their cultural position. Media reception work does indeed seem to head in one of two directions. On the one hand readings disappear into everyday practices, so that David Morley’s focus on textual ideologies in television programmes shifted to the reception of those ideological materials, then to family viewing practices and finally to ‘domesticity’ in general – suggesting a retreat from a difficult, if not impossible, task. On the other hand some researchers record interpretations that match the identities of their consumers in some way, as if these were stable and easy to discern. Historical work on reading communities, for example, sometimes suggests that readings follow, rather than challenge, pre-existing ideas. This is a reader-based theory of reception where texts are subordinated to contexts. Ethnographies of fandom also seem to
confirm Radway’s fears; while fans’ interpretations can be highly creative and unpredictable, it is extremely difficult to account for them”.

Finally many of these approaches ignore the affective and practical dimension of reading, when a greater degree of attention to the material properties of books and practices of reading and writing might vastly improve our understanding. But this returns us to Schweickart and Flynn’s recognition that it is hard to reconcile texts and readers. In his afterword to the *New Formations* issue on the spatial imaginary Miles Ogborn reaches a similar conclusion, stating that his review of recent work suggests that:

“there is a significant division in modes of analysis and interpretation. On the one hand are those who use notions of cultural production and formal aesthetics to produce ever more complex readings of the meanings of texts, spaces and their conjunctions. On the other hand are those whose concern with the geographies of production and dissemination, and with the embodied practices of reading and writing, serves to generate a material historical geography of texts which often eschews literary theory, and may even refuse to comment on the content of the texts themselves.”

Ogborn suggest “it is not yet clear whether these different versions of what it means to investigate textual geographies or the geographies of texts can actually speak productively to each other”.

5. Conclusions

I want to conclude by suggesting that things are not as bleak as this might suggest. We are clearly entering into a very productive moment as far as the theorisation of landscape is concerned, and this symposium is proof of that. Research into writing and reading presents us with more of a problem, but if we are prepared to consider what Marc Brosseau calls the ‘geography of the text’ – the materiality of its language, for example the way the rhythm of prose imposes itself upon the reader - as well as the geography represented *in* the text, we might be
able to move on." I think that we do need to see writing landscape, like the experience of place, as something formed as part of the dialogue we call 'the environment', as part of our engagements with place. The question is how to see this writing as a further transformation of that experience, as something generated by distinctive practices. And we would also need to be able to read for the traces of those practices within texts themselves.

It strikes me that we already have a sense of one way - not the only way, obviously - in which experience, text and reading can be connected: through the idea of textual conventions. Established ways of representing the experience of place - like Brosseau’s ‘kinetic description’, associated with modernist depictions of the city - relate, in textual form, something of the speed and unpredictability of the city. And our reading of these conventions effectively performs this experience.

The final question concerns finding ways to make these conventions thoroughly social and historical, as well as differentiating between sites and experiences so that we might be able to say something of the “persistent experience” of London or anywhere else. This would result in something like the ‘historical poetics’ Mikhail Bakhtin called for in his study of the chronotope - a sense of how conventions shift and change. I am suggesting, in other words, that written landscape can be both lively and conventional at the same time.

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3 Wolfreys, ‘Undoing’, 195
4 Ibid., 205
5 Ibid., 196
7 Wolfreys, ‘Undoing’, 200-1
12 Davis, *Resisting_, 87
13 Ibid., 96
15 Brosseau, *City*, 100
16 Ibid., 95
22 Wolfreys, ‘Undoing’, 196
24 Brosseau, *Geography's Literature*.
28 Lichtenstein and Sinclair, *Rodinsky;* 66-7
29 Ibid., 63-4.
30 Ibid., 64.
31 Ibid., 264.