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Introduction Fictions of London

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"When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life,
for there is in London all that life can afford"

Samuel Johnson

In past and present times, London has not only drawn the attention of writers, it has also enchanted or infuriated them and has been a constant source of inspiration¹. In his *Notebooks* in 1881, Henry James reflected that, after having "tried" New York, Italy and Paris, London was the best place for him:

It is difficult to speak adequately or justly of London. It is not a pleasant place; it is not agreeable, or cheerful, or easy, or exempt from reproach. It is only magnificent. You can draw up a tremendous list of reasons why it should be insupportable. The fogs, the smoke, the dirt, the darkness, the wet, the distances, the ugliness, the brutal size of the place, the horrible numerosity of society, the manner in which this senseless bigness is fatal to amenity, to convenience, to conversation, to good manners – all this and much more you may expatiate upon. You may call it dreary, heavy, stupid, dull, inhuman, vulgar at heart and tiresome in form. I have felt these things at times so strongly that I have said – 'Ah London, you too then are impossible?' But these are occasional moods; and for one who takes it as I take it, London is on the whole the most possible form of life. (in Matthiessen 27-28)

¹ I would like to thank Gerd Bayer, Emma Cypher-Dournes and Catherine Pessio-Miquel for their perceptive suggestions.

The British capital has often aroused similarly mixed reactions on the part of its varied inhabitants who may oscillate between fondness and impatience, admiration and revolt, a sense of belonging and a feeling of alienation. For many, the metropolis is a palpable presence. In *London Perceived* (1962), V.S. Pritchett points to the weight of London and of its very name, with images that take the reader back to a nineteenth-century perception of the city: "The very name London has tonnage in it. The two syllables are two thumps of the steam hammer, the slow clump-clump of a policeman's feet, the cannoning of shunting engines, or the sound of coal thundering down the holes in the pavements of Victorian terraces" (9). In the early twentieth century, writers envisaged London as either modern Babylonia or as the heart of the Empire, the "imperial metropolis" to quote Jonathan Schneer in *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (1999). London was thus alternatively presented as a symbol of multiplicity, bustling variety and lively dynamism, and as a place of chaos, decay, disorder and corruption. In *The Soul of London* (1905), Ford Madox Ford called London "the apotheosis of modern life" (111), marked by instability, impersonality, lack of closure and relativity; Arthur Machen named it "Assyrian Babylon" while E.M. Forster entitled a 1937 essay "London is a Muddle". Well before them, the Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle had already described the capital as "an enormous Babel". The entropic vision of a labyrinthine, hostile and even occult city which is now no longer the centre of the Empire², has endured into the late twentieth century, for example in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) where London, "treacherous" (254) and "amorphous" (459) "demon city" (250), is renamed "Babylondon" (459) as an allusion to Babel and the confusion of languages.

However, this dystopian view of the megalopolis is far from being the only one which prevails, and the capital is also considered in a creative and dynamic perspective as the source of endless imagination and regeneration, as the place for growth and change, for new beginnings and possibilities. As Peter Ackroyd underlines in his all-encompassing masterpiece *London: The Biography* (2000), which mixes together geography, history, tradition, culture, a search for Englishness and nostalgia in the way it depicts the capital, the city of London is multifarious and in constant transformation: "London goes beyond any boundary or convention. [...] It is illimitable. It is infinite

London" (779). This quality is certainly one of the reasons for the profusion of London novels published in Britain in the last two decades of the twentieth century and at the very beginning of the twenty-first. London is no longer a city that can be known and contained as nineteenth-century literary representations pretended; to quote Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*, it is a metropolis which refuses to "submit to the dominion of cartographers" (327). London is, as Susana Onega suggests in her introduction to *London in Literature: Visionary Mappings of the Metropolis* (2002), "for ever imperfectly known" (11), and therefore literary explorations are bound to be endless.

Several books and volumes of essays have already been devoted to literary London, but the topic is far from being exhausted, especially as novels proposing new and original views of the capital continue to proliferate. The aim of this collection of papers is to examine two major perspectives: on the one hand, the city as observed by British-born Londoners (of no immigrant origin), and on the other hand, the new multicultural London as perceived by writers who emigrated to Great-Britain from former British colonies and protectorates (Indians, Pakistanis, West Indians...), or who are children of first or second generation immigrants. Our purpose is also to approach representations of London both from a historical, vertical perspective, which is characteristic of Peter Ackroyd's work for example, and from a geographical, horizontal one, as epitomized by Iain Sinclair who proposes walks in and around the city in *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997) and *London Orbital* (2001)³. In the texts analysed in this collection, London is much more than a mere backdrop; to quote Merlin Coverley in *London Writing* (2005), "London becomes a character in its own right, whose presence is bound together with the lives that are lived within its fictional borders" (9-10). London, "a place of the mind" according to Daniela Rogobete in this volume, is thus subjectively and differently constructed by the people who observe and inhabit it. As Virginia Woolf remarks in her review "London Revisited", "each Londoner has a London in his mind which is the real London", and "each feels for London as he feels for his family, quietly but deeply, and with a quick eye for affront" (50).

If one takes a specifically national angle, imaginative constructions of London take very different shapes in contemporary English literature. In this collection, Paulina Kupisz shows that both V.S. Pritchett in his synaesthetic

² In an interview with William Leith, Julian Barnes wryly remarked: "the Empire is long dead. What is London the centre of in the world? Symphony orchestras, maybe. Symphony orchestras and royalty" (in Leith 14).

³ For a useful distinction between the vertical and the horizontal perspectives, see Hartung (162-163).

essay *London Perceived* (1962), illustrated with photographs by Evelyn Hofer, and Doris Lessing in her collection of short stories *London Observed* (1992), are interested in the “living” London, i.e. in its inhabitants. Pritchett provides a selection of different kinds of Londoners and declares: “London is a zoo” (72). In a 1990 interview, Martin Amis focuses for his part on a typically English feature and states: “London is a pub. [...] It’s a stew” (in Stout 32). However, as Claire Larssonneur shows in her analysis in this volume, Martin Amis’s novel *London Fields* (1989), which won a *Time Out* readers’ poll of London writing, moves away from a traditional representation of England and London towards a more modern or postmodern one marked by “semiotic opacity” and a general feeling of disorientation and defamiliarisation. The narrator remarks: “There was a time when I thought I could read the streets of London [...]. But now I don’t think I can. [...] the streets are illegible. You just cannot read them any more” (367). Amis’s dystopian allegorical vision and dark millenarianism could be contrasted with Julian Barnes’s adolescent and rebellious view of an off-London district in *Metroland* (1980), but also with a more political and sarcastic perspective in Barnes’s collection of essays, *Letters from London* (1995). In *Metroland*, the character Christopher Lloyd ironically remarks that circularity shapes a Londoner’s life: “London was where you started from; and it was to London that finally, stuffed with wisdom, you returned” (27). Peter Ackroyd, for his part, always makes crucial room for the metropolis in his novels, for instance in *The Great Fire of London* (1982), *Hawksmoor* (1985), *English Music* (1992) and *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994). Ackroyd’s belief that the present is the past revisited explains why he is often interested in images of continuity, permanence and synchronicity in London.

In *Graham Swift. Écrire l’imagination* (2003), François Gallix explains that the *genius loci* is an essential dimension of Graham Swift’s fiction and that the novelist has persistently communicated his profound attachment to London (59-63). In Swift’s novels, as Catherine Pessio-Miquel demonstrates in this volume, the sense of place is often “apprehended through a very idiosyncratic and sophisticated language” which, for example in *Last Orders* (1996), “goes far beyond a simple, repetitive mimicry of ‘authentic Cockney’”, but entails the creation of a poetic voice steeped in the vernacular and the local speech, or a “poetics of the voice” to quote Georges Letissier in this collection. In *Last Orders* in particular, Graham Swift takes the reader all the way to a “heart of London, bleedin’ eart-a-Lunnun” (230) that is full of Dickensian resonances. More recently, some novels have emphasized specifically contemporary aspects of London, for example Ian

McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), which focuses on a single day in the metropolis in the context of world terrorism and new forms of consciousness, as analysed by Monica Girard and Claire Larssonneur in this volume, or Will Self’s *Dorian, an Imitation* (2002), which presents a hyperrealistic and apocalyptic vision of gay London or “London’s grey corpse” (26) as examined by Marie-Noëlle Zeender. Will Self continued his exploration of London in *The Book of Dave* (2006), in which a London taxi driver represents the memory of the city.

From the perspective of multicultural writing, it has been deemed interesting to explore John McLeod’s concept, developed in *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), of a postcolonial London where a vibrant multiculturalism is up and coming, but also where racial prejudices still persist and religious fundamentalisms arise, as can be seen in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, or Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995) and *My Son the Fanatic* (1998). What is specific to contemporary postcolonial literature is the way in which new Londoners are shown trying to appropriate, imagine and appraise the city in ways which differ from those of native Londoners. On the one hand, they do suffer from prejudices, racism or nationalism in a basically hostile environment where they might feel bored, lonely or entrapped, as shown by Sam Selvon’s seminal novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), but also more recently, by Diran Adebayo in *My Once Upon a Time* (2000), which Dagmar Dreyer analyses in this volume. In Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), Samad’s British-born son, Millat, experiences this painful feeling of alienation for a Londoner of Asian descent: “he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country” (202). On the other hand, as Salman Rushdie suggests, immigrants can try and make London visible again, since it has long been “ignored, not looked at – in fact unseen” by non-immigrants (Rushdie in Reder 105), and aptly enough, one section of *The Satanic Verses* is entitled “A City Visible But Unseen”. The migrant thus proposes fresh ways of re-mapping the metropolis and redefining its contours, which are not only physical but also imaginary.

In this volume, drawing on precise examples from Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), papers by Dagmar Dreyer, Laurent Mellet and Catherine Pessio-Miquel study the modes of a “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (McLeod 2005, 42), which entails the construction of new forms of expression and of a creative – often hybrid – language by Londoners of various backgrounds, and challenges the very concept of national identity. Josiane Ranguin and Flaminia Nicora, for their part, draw attention to the necessity for new Londoners to reinterpret and renegotiate the concepts of home and belonging after a geographical and emotional dis-

placement has taken place. In their analysis of Courtia Newland and Caryl Phillips, Ann Fuchs and Josiane Ranguin analyse more precisely how London is perceived and experienced by the heirs of the Caribbean migrants of the Windrush generation, who arrived in Britain in 1948 on the S.S. *Empire Windrush* and settled for the most part in London. As Sam Selvon suggests in *The Lonely Londoners*, for all its grim aspects, there is something about the cosmopolis which attracts people and prevents them from leaving: "Oh what it is and where it is and why it is, no one knows, but to have said: 'I walked on Waterloo Bridge,' 'I rendezvoused at Charing Cross,' 'Picadilly Circus is my playground,' to say these things, to have lived these things, to have lived in the great city of London, centre of the world".

What all the papers in this volume confirm is that London embraces more than central London and reaches out towards the outskirts of Northern London in Zadie Smith's novels, to Brick Lane in Monica Ali's first novel or to Wimbledon, Chislehurst and Fulham in Graham Swift's *The Light of Day* (2003), whose palimpsestic dimension Béatrice Berna analyses in her paper. As Graham Swift pointed out in the debate in which he took part at the end of the conference, London includes Greater London and, therefore, its suburbs which, according to Georges Letissier in this collection, are not synonymous with rootedness and sedentariness, but on the contrary open out to "the prospect of nomadic rambling". One of the recurrent figures in fictions of London is actually that of the *flâneur* or street-walking detached observer, as Gerd Bayer, Monica Girard and Daniela Rogobete show in this volume. The concept of *flânerie* or aimless wandering finds its most famous articulation in Walter Benjamin's analysis of Charles Baudelaire and of nineteenth-century Paris street-life, but it also brings to mind examples of modernist urbanity by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In her essay "Street Haunting: A London Adventure", Woolf declares that the "greatest pleasure of town life" is "rambling the streets of London" (155), and her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) certainly confirms this view. The contemporary urban stroller differs from the original model in that s/he does not fully engage with the outer world but views it from a distant and sometimes estranged perspective. In some cases, the *flâneur* is a deranged and disturbed individual who withdraws into his/her own private space of imagination, as Gerd Bayer demonstrates in his paper dealing with fictions by Jenny Diski, Tibor Fischer and Jane Rogers. In other cases, s/he can observe his/her surroundings with relish, as do the two teenagers of Julian Barnes's *Metroland* who indulge in the "Constructive Loaf": "the way to crack London's secrets was the Loaf. [...] [Toni's] theory was that by lounging about in a suitably *in-souciant* fashion, but keeping an eye open all the time, you could really

catch life on the hip – you could harvest all the *aperçus* of the *flâneur*" (27-28). The experience of walking around London is thus heuristic, aesthetic and emotional, and the specificity of the *flâneur* is that s/he perceives the modern city in motion but at the same time, when focusing on monuments or heritage for example, the urban stroller may feel the weight and persistence of the past.

The books analysed in this volume thus reveal that at least two visions of London coexist, and that they are not incompatible but complementary. On the one hand, the cosmopolis is timeless, eternal and mythical, as suggested by Peter Ackroyd in his biography: "It is permanent. It is unceasing. Of its essence, it is unchanged" (755-756). On the other hand, at the beginning of the third millennium, new political, cultural, economic, ethnical and architectural sensibilities mean that London is constantly changing – to quote Salman Rushdie, it is "the most protean and chameleon of cities" (201). This metamorphic and flexible dimension of the metropolis is probably what has allowed for an invigorating re-mapping of its contours by both native and new Londoners in contemporary literature.

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