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London and English studies : a conversation piece

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LONDON AND ENGLISH STUDIES:
A CONVERSATION PIECE

The principal aim of this article will be simply to provide some discussion and suggestions arising from considerations relating to an advanced undergraduate course entitled "London: Imagining the Metropolis". In the course of preparing the above , however, I found myself increasingly tending towards consideration of the institutional context of the subject under discussion and consequently a supplementary aim started to emerge. This aim is concerned with the nature and significance of what I will term a "conversational" approach to English Studies, at the university and possibly elsewhere, though in some ways conversational "attitude" might be considered as a more appropriate term since it is the spirit of conversation rather than the formalistic exigencies of an "approach" that I wish to appeal to in this respect.

As a foreign lector who has been working for a considerable number of years in this part of the country one of my main functions has been to play the traditional role of facilitating the fluency of students of English in the target language, the formal goundwork of "Practical English", as it is usually termed, being performed in the main part by native teachers who have obvious advantages in this respect, being fluent in the native language and having formally studied the target and, in many cases, the native language of their students. Until recently, generally speaking and certainly at the tertiary level, English Studies have been divided, though by no means rigidly, into a trivium consisting of Practical English, Linguistics and Literature, with some time devoted to teaching methodology (translation usually being examined as part of Practical English, though with the possibility of specialisation in the diploma thesis). In more recent times there have been signs of modification to this "tradition" with the inclusion of subjects such as American Studies, British Studies and so on, whose place was hitherto as a small, subsidiary part of Practical English, providing a basic survey of "Life and Institutions" to provide cultural orientation in reading texts and in taking part in "conversation".

These "more recent times" began, of course, in the wake of events in the latter part of 1989. From this time the language and culture of English-speaking countries has been a good deal less distant, less "foreign", more practically accessible and, it might be argued, more resistant to idealisation and administrative compartmentalisation than hitherto. The implications of such a development have opened the door to an opportunity for a greater range of study but also to greater tensions as the result of potential internal anatagonisms which had been previously reserved for the world outside of the department or faculty and in a situation in which, in any case, only a comparatively small degree of dialogue, if any was possible.

My own concern in this article is related to the development of British Studies, though one should bear in mind that not only American Studies, Australian Studies, Canadian Studies, Carribean Studies, Indian Studies and other forms of post-colonial Studies(including Irish Studies, Scottish Studies, Welsh Studies) are involved in the development of what used to be Practical English, but that to some degree, methodology and translation (more transparently practical than any of the other studies included in this sentence) are also showing tendencies of occupying a more substantial place in the curriculum.

British Studies, it is generally agreed, has partly (there may well be other reasons!) arisen in response to a demand for a more systematic and sophisticated approach to the study of British life and culture than that provided by the relatively limited depth and detail of traditional background studies coverage. As the name "British Studies" suggests and as much of the discussion around the content it should cover and the form that coverage should take also suggests, there is also a relation between not only British Studies and Life and Institutions or Background Studies courses but between British Studies and the discipline which has its roots in Britain, namely, British Cultural Studies. One might want to view British Studies as British (Background/Cultural) Studies. It is to this conversation in brackets, conveniently, perhaps a little dangerously, ellipted for understandable adminstrative purposes, that I now wish to turn, briefly.

The principal aim of background studies is to provide the foreign student with an introductory picture of the target culture, to familiarise that student with the indispensable cultural basics, particularly with respect to differences from the native culture, whatever those are deemed to be. British Cultural Studies (a discipline which, it might be argued has only recently discovered its "Britishness", or had its Britishness discovered for it by non-British practitioners of Cultural Studies), on the other hand, has attempted in an essentially anthropological spirit, though one tempered by and initially formed in the study of English literature and social history and from a primarily but by no means exclusively Marxist perspective on that tradition) to look at its own culture as if from the outside. As the initial lack of awareness of "British" indicated here suggests there is also an international dimension involved in the approach of Cultural Studies as opposed to Background Studies as well as a highly developed and complexly contested theory of cultural hegemenony, of culture as the formation of hegemonies and, with the

work of Raymond Williams, of culture as a form of criticism of sedimented or sedimenting social practices. Furthermore, the appearance of British Studies has been fairly quickly followed by that of Irish Studies and Scottish Studies (and probably, though not to my certain knowledge, by Welsh studies) as well as Heritage Studies in England. This begs the obvious question as to what is the nature of the difference between these areas of study. I have tried to suggest one (or some, since initial consideration of the difference instantly opens the possibility of multiplication) with regard to that between British Studies and British Cultural Studies. It might be argued, if one takes the view that British Studies is concerned with the study of Great Britain, as opposed to the British Isles, that Irish Studies caters for the other major island. But what then is the position of Scottish Studies; presumably greater concentration on a smaller unit of population and from a considerably different perspective. Heritage Studies (the English at the beginning may or may not have been ellipted; one would need to know more about details of courses offered) presents another perspective of difference. These are questions I wish only to raise here since to begin to answer them would require not only another article but a great deal more information but they are extremely pertinent to considering the implications of what one is teaching and studying and how.

In another sense, however, this multiplication of different existing or potential subject areas is not for immediate or daunting concern. The more important question is, having recognised it how does one approach it. One answer is to act as if it wasn't there, another is to talk to it. This brings us back to conversation.

Introductory textbooks on philosophy often like to remind us that the term "dialectic" has its origins in the ancient Greek word for conversation. The dialectic in a more sharply philosophical sense suggests challenging the weak points in one argument from the perspective of another; this characterisation has a more agonistic ring to it than the more eirenic concept of conversation. Hegel's more recent use of the term has suggested a more totalising, unificatory approach — thesis and antithesis are transcended in synthesis. Post-Hegelian approaches have chosen to emphasise difference rather than unity; Bakhtin's " heteroglossia" and Derrida's "differance" and deconstruction of discovered oppositional pairings where one term in the opposition is priveliged over the other, would be two examples of this. The approach of Deleuze is characterised by a strategically delayed recognition of the significance of Hegel to modern European thought; instead of reducing difference to oneness in Hegelian fashion, Deleuze looks to Duns Scotus for recognition of the infinite difference involved in the eternal univocity of being. I do not claim to have even an elementary understanding of the thought of these obviously not British (or not obviously British!) thinkers. I would however suggest that their influence is apparent in much British critical and cultural thinking and I do wish to invoke some of their spirits in relation to my thinking here. Before doing so, however, having paid some attention to the dialectical element in conversation and its relation to conceptualisations of diffe-rence, I also wish to summon the spirits of another area of philsophical and lin-

guistic thinking which has stemmed from the work of Wittgenstein, Austin, Grice and, with broader social and academic implications, Habermas. These thinkers have paid considerable attention to the role of language in philosophy or critical thinking and to the role of language in situational context in particular, and in particular, to the context of "conversation". Habermas, in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" and subsequent works, looks at the development of the concepts of civil society and the public sphere with particular attention to the historical development of the role of conversation and serious, disinterested discussion in the coffee-house milieu of eighteenth century England. This might all seem a long way from the humble conversation in the English language conversation classroom but since at least the roots of British Studies lie there it is, I think, a connection worth making. The approach of Habermas takes a more obviously eirenic trajectory than that of Bakhtin or Derrida, but Habermas has been as much at pains to emphasise that it is a trajectory, not an immediately realisable actuality (in other words, a positive basis for constructive criticism) as Derrida has been to stress that the aim of his thinking is not to destroy the philosophical traditions of Western European thinking but to maintain and deepen their rigour. My intention in making such grandiose references to the titans of contemporary critical thought is to suggest that even the humble teacher of British Studies or any part of the English Studies curriculum has something to learn from their courageous approach to open communication and the recognition of difference by conversing with voices different from his or her own, however limited the conversation — and it may well be that the conversation needs to be relatively limited, depending on, to use that well worn but still useful term from pragmatics, "the context of situation".

The situational context I wish to consider here is that of teaching a course on London in the context of an English Studies curriculum. Raymond Williams has stressed the peculiar relevance of the English experience in terms of its early and rapid social and industrial development in his introduction to The Country and the City (Williams R. 1973). As Williams points out in the opening paragraph of his book, the relationship between these two conceptual-physical areas is a crucial and complex one:

> In English, "country" is both a nation and
> a part of a "land"; "the country" can be
> the whole society or its rural area. (1)

The city, on the other hand, is characterised as one of the "achievements" of human society that come from that land. This dialogue between these initially opposed concepts is one which Williams uses to great effect to write a more socially situated and socially critical analysis of the English literary tradition and I would suggest that employing initial oppositions in this fashion (though obviously at a far more superficial level than that employed by Williams) is a useful strategy for developing a meaningful and productive conversation in relation to London and the city.

The last words of the previous sentence and Williams' distinction produce another opposition, that of London as a particular place and London as an example of the universal concept of "the city". The strategic significance of exploiting this opposition is that it can allow approaches to London to move from what I will term a "static" approach to a "dynamic" one, though, again, this distinction can perhaps be more usefully viewed as an initial opposition allowing productive dialogue than as a necessary or inevitable progression. But let me first be more specific about what I mean as a "static" approach, which comes closer to what I would think of as a traditional one. In this kind of approach one focuses on factual detail — in the case of London, looking at the basic geography of the city, its development by means of convenient periodisation, Roman London, Anglo-Saxon London, Mediaeval London etc., its notable institutions, figures, districts, products and so on. I do not mean to raise fundamental objections to this kind of approach but rather to suggest that it can be usefully supplemented by recourse to different perspectives from different academic discourses which emphasise change rather than continuity and allow for a more dynamic dialogue with that which is outside of London. I will suggest four areas of discourse which I have found useful in this respect :

1) urban studies and post-modern geography
2) sociology and philosophy
3) literary criticism
4) contemporary fiction.

The first thing which needs to be said is that these are purely illustrative, as opposed to exemplary, and that they are obviously personal. My own predilections and background as a student and teacher are strongly related to the third and fourth categories. This is obvious in that the first and second categories both include two subject areas. One could even suggest a basic opposition between the first and the last two categories. Closer investigation of actual texts deriving, primarily, from these different discourses infact reveals as many areas of intersection as of difference.

Let us begin with the first proposed area and use one text, from a geographical perspective, to begin to justify a more intensive and complex study of London in the context of British Studies:

> To understand London is to grasp the significance
> of its central position in the economy, polity and
> society of Britain. Yet, at the same time, what must
> inform this understanding is London's diversity
> and turbulence. Each of these can only be stood in
> the context of the other, for London's national
> centrality and its compositional differentiation
> promote forces that are at times mutually reinforcing,
> at times antagonistic, but always interdependent.

(Hoggart K. & Green R. p. 2)

This extract, taken from the introduction to London:A New Metropolitan Geography (Hoggart K. & Green R. 1992) indicates the significance attached by the authors to the recognition of divisions in London's situation, both internally and externally, with respect to the country and the wider world. London is not only the capital city of England, the centre of a dominant geographical area (the south-east), the seat of government of the U. K. but also a former colonial capital and a contemporary world city. Useful perspectives in this respect can be provided both by introductory studies of the contemporary British political and social situatiǫn (John Osmond's The Divided Kingdom (Osmond 1987) would be one example and one which provides a useful "core and periphery" model for analysing Britian in terms of regions rather than nations) and by specific studies of London (Anthony King's Globàl Cities (King 1991) provides a pithy characterisation, studded with statistical evidence, of the nature and consequences of London's transition from colonial capital to globàl city). Approaches such as those of the collection of essays edited by Andy Thornley in The Crisis ofLondon (Thornley 1992) focus on issues relevant to London from an internal perspective, including, housing, employment, transport, ecology, urban design, geography in relation to race and gender, community planning, local government and major redevelopment schemes such as Docklands.

Here, as elsewhere, a comparative perspective can be valuable; Savitch's comparative study (Savitch 1988) of the relation between local politics and urban planning in New York, Paris and London provides a useful historical dimension as well as a multiple frame of analysis. Deyan Sudyic's 100-mile city provides a broad-ranging journalistic introduction to to the nature of the new "post-modern city". It can also be valuable to compare the approach and effect of schemes such as Docklands with its provincial counterparts in Birmingham, Cardiff, Manchester or Strathclyde. However abroader theoretical perspective on the relation of urban development to "postmodernism" and/or "late capitalism" leads one to the incraeasingly eclectic field of post-modern geography or post-modern critical human geography, as its chief publicist, Edward Soja has termed it (Soja 1989). This approach is perhaps most effectively characterised in David Harvey's book The Condition of Postmodernity (1989) seen by many critics as an answer to the call for a mapping of the "political unconscious" by the leading U. S. Marxist cultural critic and theoretician, Frederick Jameson. Harvey, like Jameson offers a predominantly Marxist approach to the culture and aesthetics of post-modernity. His work comes out of a line of research increasingly apparent since his Social Justice and the City (Harvey 1973) which saw the change in his work from a geography of what he subsequently characterised as collusive description to one of interpretive intervention. The later work combines study of economics, artistic culture and urban planning in a narrative of resistance to Lyotard's characterisation of "the postmodern condition" as an attitude of "incredulity toward meta-narratives. Here we come across another significant opposition which will reappear in the discussion of literary critical and fictional perspectives later in the

article. For the purposes of this section I wish simply to quote from Harvey's book to indicate the essential nature of the argument it poses in its opposition to a relaxed, eclectical, hedonistic view of the contemporary city, represented for Harvey in such works as Jonathan Raban's Soft City (Raban 1988).

> ... postmodernism, with its emphasis upon the ephemerality of jouissance, its insistence upon the impenetrability of the other, its penchant for deconstruction bordering on nihilism, its preference for aesthetics over ethics, takes matters too far. It takes them beyond the point where any coherent politics are left, while that wing of it which seeks a shameless accommodation with the market puts it firmly in the tracks of an entrepreneurial culture that is the hallmark of reactionary conservatism. Postmodernist philosophers tell us not only to accept but to revel in the fragmentations and cacophony through which the dilemmas of the modern world are understood. Obsessed with deconstructing and legitimating every form of argument they encounter, they can end only in condeming their own validity claims to the point where nothing remains of any basis for reasoned action. Postmodernism has us accepting the reifications and partitionings, actually celebrating the activity of masking and cover up, all the fetishisms of locality, place or social grouping while denying that kind of metatheory which can grasp the political-economic processes (money flows, international divisions of labour, financial markets and the like) that are becoming ever more universalizing in their depth, intensity, reach and power over daily life. (Harvey 1989 p. 116–117).

I include this lengthy quotation since it also has some bearing on the methodological perspectives of this article in which it should be stressed that the aim is to open up a conversation which recognises difference but not one which would " revel in. . fragmentations". Harvey presents a useful theoretical overview of social, cultural and economic developments sinc the time of the Engligtenment, though with a strong emphasis on the late twentieth century and the relation of modernity to postmodernity and Fordist to "flexible accumulative" capitalism, from the perspective of a politically motivated and resistant geography. Again, though, it is important not to take Harvey's approach in isolation. Criticism of his approach can be found within his own field with writers such as Asraf Ghani and Doreen Massey decisively qualifiying the nature of some of its claims from the perspective of the world beyond Europe and feminism. Essays such as those of Ghani and Massey stress the significance, not the fetishism, of place as opposed to space, of the local in relation to the global. I quote Massey, giving her own area of London as an example of this perspective

> Take, for instance, a walk down Kilburn High Road,
> my local shopping centre. It is a pretty ordinary
> place, north-west of the centre of London. Under the
> railway bridge the newspaper-stand sells papers from
> every county of what my neighbours, many of whom come
> from there, still often call the Irish Free State. The
> post-boxes down the High Road, and many an empty space on
> a wall, are adorned with the letters IRA. The bottle and
> waste-paper banks are plastered this week with posters
> for a Bloody Sunday commemoration. Thread your way often
> through the almost stationary traffic diagonally across

the road from the newsstand and there's a shop which, for
for as long as I can remember has displayed saris in the
window. Four life-sized models of Indian women, and reams
of cloth. In another newsagent's I chat with the man who
keeps it, a Muslim unutterably depressed by the war in
the Gulf, silently chafing at having to sell the Sun.
Overhead there is always at least one aeroplane. . .
These are just the beginnings of a sketch from immediate
impressions but a proper analysis could be done, of the
links between Kilburn and the world. And so it could be
for almost any place. (Massey 1993).

What is of interest here is not simply the differing approach to place but the shared and differing approaches indicated in the language used by writers such as Harvey and Massey, (e. g. the distinction between "proper analysis" and "impressions", interesting because the post-modern geographical approach derives much of its energy and colour from the latter, as indicated here.

Related to the perspectives of urban studies and post-modern geography is the more abstract approach of sociology and philosophy, or, as it will be presented in very abbreviated terms here a sociological approach to aspects of social philosophy, particularly in relation to post-modernity. Before leaving urban studies, it should also be mentioned that a fuller historical perspective on the development of the city can be found in the works of writers such as Lewis Mumford, to take the classic example of his The City in History (Mumford 1961)or Weber's The City (Weber 1966), -the introduction to the edition mentioned here also presents a useful history of late nineteenth and early twentieth century theorising of the city.

The relation of the city to the concepts of civil society and pos-modernity are usefully approached by Keith Tester (Tester 1990 and 1992). Like Harvey, Tester makes considerable use of some of the concepts of the great German sociologist of the city, Georg Simmel, particularly his essay on The Stranger (in Tester 1994). In his later book, Tester approaches post-modernity by way of Simmel's distinction between form and chaos: we need forms in order to create meaning but then become imprisoned in these forms. Post-modernity is characterised as breaking and interrogating the limits of modernity but its dangerous proximity to nihilism and the necessarily socially privileged perspective of its flaneur-like commentary on modernist concepts of progess are opposed to a recognition of the importance of such challenges to the structures created on the path of modernity's progress. Tester also creates an opposition between what he terms "the will to certainty" and "the will to know", a distinction made in relation to Kant's essay An Answer To The Question "What is Enlightenment?". A similar opposition can be found in Stephen Toulmin's more sanguine perspective on the potentials of post-modernity in his book Cosmopolis (1990), which favourably contrasts the tolerant scepticism of the age of Montaigne with the scientific striving for certainty in the three centuries which followed his and primarily characterised by the Cartesian impulse to establish decontextualised scientific knowledge amid the bloodily dogmatic

post-Reformation era of the Thirty Years War. Tester's book also presents a useful perspective on the perenially useful distinction, originated by Tonnies, between gemeinschaft and gesellschaft, seeing these as states in constant dialogue in the consciousness of modern humanity and its need for orderly rural nostalgia amid the centrifugal comlexity , diversity and change of modern metropolitan existence. Tester's earlier book extends a useful concept of Agnes Heller's, "the natural artifice", an imposed social hierarchy accepted as natural and unquestionable, contrasting it with the increasing impulse towards social relexivity in the philosophy and practice of civil society emerging in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More recently, Tester has edited a collection of essays on The Flaneur (Tester 1994), that archetypal figure of nineteenth century urban life immortalised by Baudelaire and critically developed by Benjamin. These essays look at the continuing relevance of the wandering, rootless, nostalgically aristocratic figure of the masterful male gaze lost in contemplation of myriad Otherness and its relevance to sociological approaches to post-modernity and the city.

My own interest in this second section is the useful bridge it provides for communication between the perspectives of geography and urban studies and those of literary criticism and fiction. Current sociological interest in the flaneur is a good example of this. However, Tester's is, of course, one of a myriad of such approaches (simply one that I find particularly clear, helpful and though-provoking) and it may be that another approach to the city and to London would want to make use of this area in a different way. It is of importance, particularly when dealing with literary representations of the city, however, to provide some perspectives on the nature of the concept of the postmodern.

This brings us to literary criticism, my third section and perhaps the one with the least obvious relevance, since the criticism I wish to consider deals directly neither with London or with the concept of the city in general. It does however provide useful background to the prespectives provided by contemporary fiction in my fourth section and does provide a significantly different but related approach to modernity and postmodernity in comparison with those discussed so far.

I have already made reference to Raymond Williams seminal work relating concepts of the country and the city to the interpretation of English literature. In recent years, a number of works of literary criticism often written in direct relation to Williams' perspective have appeared. The first of these I wish to mention is John Lucas' England and Englishness (Lucas 1990), which looks at English poetry from the Restoration to the end of the nineteenth century and its tendency to produce a pastoralised England which no longer bore any relation to the vast majority of people living in it:

> The most openly reactionary poets clung to a pastoral
> vision of England. The rest, reactionaries and radicals
> alike, committed themselves to that vision of
> primitivism which emerged in the later years of the
> century as a regenerative alternative to the decadence
> of the society of the city. (The late nineteenth century

city state was to be feared rather than welcomed). . .
By the end of the nineteenth century most English
people lived in cities. To be English was not to be
English. (Lucas 1990)

Moving into the twentieth century, Tony Pinkney, a writer who has published a great deal on Raymond Williams, produces a stimulating and provocative monograph on the novels of D. H. Lawrence. This divides Lawrence's work essentially into two phases or attitudes. The first is associated with Englishness as opposed to Britishness (the country, not as opposed to the city but the empire and imperialism), the gothic as opposed to the classical and what Pinkney terms the "wet vaginality" of Lawrence's pre-modernist gothicism as opposed to the "dry anality" of much classical modernism, including not only the work of Hume, Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett but that of Lawrence from Women in Love onward. The interesting aspect of Pinkney's argument for the purposes of this article is his use of Ruskin and Morris, the two Victorian writers who perhaps most influenced British town planning in the early part of the twentieth century (and in the case of Ruskin and architecture, of course much earlier).

Ruskin's The Stones of Venice might be argued retrospectively to be an early form of post-modern geography with its eclectic and politically, or at the very least morally, critical approach to the social context of the building and decline of a city state. Its most famous chapter, also published separately, is The Nature of Gothic where Ruskin argues for the moral superiority of the "savage", unfinished nature of the Gothic form, its essential openness (it is interesting to compare this approach with Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue and "unfinishedness") as opposed to the closed, totalisinf perfection of the classical. In an even more recently published work, Isobel Armstrong (Armstrong 1993) argues for the virtues, in terms of political radicalism and scepticism, of much Victorian poetry and suggests its repression in the terse classsicism of modernist poetics. In her approach, less use is made of the idealistic gothic and more of another of Ruskins's six characteristics of the gothic, namely, the grotesque. Here Armstrong indicates how again and again the early, radical work of the major Victorian poets uses a radically grotesque form of representation to indicate aspects of profound alienation in the society their verse attempts to critique. There is much to suggest that this process is still at work in relation to contemporary fictional representations of London, but before moving onto them I wish briefly to mention some other theoretical perpsectives which are not directly even British, let alone pertaining to London, but which have something to say about the darker side of the clean, enlightened surface morality of the Victorian country, city, empire and of twentieth century corporate, flexible capitalism, often using the dark, feminine, subversive discourse of the gothic. The first of these is Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism(Said 1993), whose title is a clear reference to the paired titles of earlier works by Matthew Arnold and Raymond Williams. In this book, Said rather in the fashion of Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea, takes up the story of that

which is always present in Victorian fiction but always peripheral, often barely visible, the story of the colonially oppressed and exploited whose suffering helped to make Britain great and whose suffering was administered from the centre of one of the longest surviving democracies in Europe, London. Interestingly, Said concludes his book with speculations on productively flexible, as opposed to dogmatically antagonistic or unconsciously reproductive strategies in response to the process of imperialism, using some of the ideas of Virilio and making at least one reference to Deleuze and Guattari's "A Thousand Plateaus" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). Their idea of a "war machine" of flexible but disciplined intellectuality plays a major role in plateaus twelve and thirteen where an interesting discussion on the relation of the "nomos" to the "polis" takes place. Much also is made, as Said notes, of metallurgy and its Gothic and eastern origins. These are clearly references very far removed from an area of study specifically focussing on London but they are, I think, worth mentioning as possible areas for speculation in one kind of advanced approach. Finally, and equally interstingly, Jacques Derrida's most recent work Specters of Marx(Derrida 1994), like but unlike that of David Harvey, takes issue with the "good news " of the gospel of corporate capitalist liberal democracy according to Fukayama by stressing the gothic, ghostly aspects of Marx's writing and of communism. This appropriately leads us to our final section.

The last ten years have witnessed the appearance of a number of fictions, mostly in the form of novels, which foreground London and its contemporary situation. Clearly, the latest phase of rebuilding in London's history symbolized by redevelopment schemes which often resemble instant museums of postmodernist architecture. For the purposes of this article, brevity, and another potentially productive opposition, I wish to focus primarily on works by three writers, Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd and Penelope Lively.

Much of Sinclair's work comes out of a prolonged acquaintance with American as much as British writing and film and takes the form of poetry. The more powerful and successful aspects of his writing, however, are present in his prose writings beginning with his essay on Hawksmoor which looks at the siting of Hawksmoor's churches in London in terms of Alfred Watkins' theory of "ley-lines" (Watkins 1994) and in high romantic-gothic style traces a mythology of obsession, violence and sacrifice. The essay encouraged Peter Ackroyd to write Hawksmoor (Ackroyd 1987) a gothic detective thriller in which a present day detective named Hawksmoor tries to solve a series of inexplicable murders whose victims are found at the site of the "real" Hawksmoor's churches but finds himself invaded by a spirit of wondering darkness. The other character in the novel is Nicholas Dyer, a satanically obsessed survivor of the plague years who scorn his tutor, Christopher Wren's belief in increasing reason and light. The novel bears a clear relation to the dialogue between modernity and post-modernity, though as with many fictional representations, in terms of a contrast between modern and pre-modern philosophies (though Toulmin's approach in Cosmopolis bears comparison). A major

influence here, on Sinclair rather than on Ackroyd (who rejects Olson's approach as naievely literalist (see Ackroyd) is the approach to history and locality of Charles Olson. Olson might be argued to be one of the first postmodernist poets. Writing in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust, he became a full-time scholar and writer after resigning from ad adminstrative post in the government. His epic, <u>The Maximus Poems</u> (Olson 1983), celebrates locality, specifically the off-shore island polis of Gloucester, Massachusets, which he uses as a base to oppose the spirit of commercial imperialism which has invaded and ruined the opportunity for true self-discovery which the original American settlers, or some of them, according to Olson's account possessed. A major premiss of his poetics is a determination to reunite "muthos" and "logos", but his mythological approach is a materialist one.

The influences of this work can be seen in Sinclair's approach to London, though the British metropolis is a very different entity to Olson's peripheral sanctuary. Sinclair's second and perhaps most impressive novel, <u>Downriver</u> (Sinclair 1992) might be argued to be as much a travel-book as a novel in its intense evocation of the spirits of place, nut it is not a travel book in the conventional, imperialist, modernist sense. Things are usually perceived by senses other than the eye and those who roam around London's various places in the book are driven rather than pleasurably wandering. Sinclair himself refers to the book as a "grimoire", a narrative conjuring spirits, rather than a novel and in this respect it bears a strong relation to his essay on Hawksmoor's churches. Ivo Hlavizna, in a paper given at Brno three years ago, pointed out the way in which the novel corresponds in its use of location to postmodernist fictional concepts (notably in Pynchon) of the "zone" and to Bakhtin's concept of Menippean satire. The grotesque is constantly in evidence in the work and this adds to a sense of Rabelaisian resistance to the ordered planning of Englightenment. The problem with Sinclair's novel is that it is extremely dense and stylistically demanding, whereas Penelope Lively's novel <u>City of the Mind</u> (Penguin 1992) offers the reader, and particularly the non-native reader a much simpler, more superficial, but more accessible approach to the kinds of questions posed by London through Sinclair's fiction. The "story" of Sinclair's novel is a series of lost souls wandering on a hopeless quest for things they are far from sure of in a necropolitan and authoritarian city of the spectacle far removed from any hint of sane reality. Lively on the other hand offers the reassuringly traditional framework of respectable bourgeois romance. The main protagonist is a thoughtful, recently separated architect who has some work in a Docklands type area of town. He is a thoughtful, roving protagonist and challenged and disturbed by the multiplicity and rapidity of change London presents, less at home in the present London than his young daughter or the thug from the Docklands area who tries to "persuade" him to help "develop" certain properties, but much more aware of the extent and complexity, the archeological levels, of its past and the relation of that past to the present. One could write more about the differing perspectives these novels present on the

present condition of London but the main points to emphasise are their provision of a representation of the minutiae of lived experience in the city and the significance attached to history, in its mythological as well as its modern sense (for Charles Olson "'istorin" is a verb which means to find out for yourself. These brief references are no more than introduction to contemporary literature relating to London; other obvious candidates would be the ethnic and gender perspectives provided by Kureishi and Frears in My Beautiful Launderette and, especially, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid or in Rushdie's The Satanic Verses.

I wish to conclude this section, however, with a brief reference to writer not of fiction but of what he has termed "radio-active narratives" (see Wright 1994). Patrick Wright's name came to prominence with his book on aspects of English identity and history and their representation (Wright 1985). A later book looks at London, or one of it localities, and is entitled, and often written, in a somewhat laconically Benjaminian vein, A Journey Through Ruins (Wright 1993). While the whole collection of pieces in this book can be usefully read in connection with the fiction referred to above, his chapter on "Remembering London's War" pays specific attention to writers such as Ackroyd and Sinclair (one might also include in this context Michael Moorcock's Mother London (Moorcock 1988) which roots itself in London's wartime experience and again lays stress on the significance of mythologies. Here he emphasises the nature of Sinclair's approach to London and to history:

Sinclair recovers the density of the city through a scavenging poetic, which works like an inverted parody of future-oriented urban planning. If the "geometry of opposition" at the heart of his London is occult, this is partly because it has collapsed into the very urban chaos to which it was intended give form. As Sinclair says of these mantic outlines, they are " slack dynamos abandoned as the culture that supported them has gone into retreat". History is not just a matter of old relics: it also lies around as morbidly unfinished business, as ghosts and strange potencies seep round the edges of every reforming design. (Wright 1993 p. 259)

The reflective narratives of Wright, Sinclair and other writers provide a complex, often dense (in both style and conceptualisation) resistance to the sunny certainties of "end of history" urban, corporate planning and design, insisting on reviving the intensity of past, often almost lost, experience; the past is not allowed to be smoothly written and packaged as "heritage", ready for convenient consumption and export.

Conclusions.

The aim here has not been to present either a scholarly piece of research or even *a coherent argument, rather to evoke certain spirits of conversation in relation to* the study of London and to English Studies in general in a Czech context of rapid

and often antagonistic change. It should again be stressed that even the hints provided here are presented in an illustrative not an exemplary spirit. My own course, which I regard as a peripheral hybrid, on the borderline between Literature and British Studies, contains only a small amount of the material referred to here. While there are good reasons for considering London as a major point of focus for a course in British Studies, it may be that it would contain not merely a fraction of the material referred to here (or a fraction of entirely different material) but also only a small degree of the suggested variety of differing discourses outlined, (or again, a small degree of other, differing discourses). My main intent has been, from a background of considerable antagonism at the institutional level, to indicate the need for conversation , in the senses suggesed above and, in Tester's terms, to respect and promote the will to knowledge as much as the will to certainty. It must also be pointed out that the approach offered her, despite its appeal for eclecticism is still highly literary in its preconceptions, since they are my own.

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