Empiricism Falls Apart

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L’art ne reproduit pas le visible, il rend visible. (Paul Klee)

‘there is an innately English sensibility, which is part antiquarian, partly visionary.’ (Capeloa Gil 475)

Introduction

1. London has been and still is a vivid source of inspiration: not only do bookshelves in various bookstores flourish under the London category, but London is a genuine subject- matter of its own, not a mere decor for a plot, or a vague motive in a fiction. Those shelves, be it at Tate Modern or in any Waterstones provide a wide range of guides, essays, suggestions of walks, academic articles in cultural studies, fiction and non-fiction works that are made by and meant for true-born Londoners more than they can appeal to tourists. Besides, as Peter Ackroyd explains, ‘for Dickens (London) was the ‘magical lantern’ which filled his imagination with the glimpse of strange dramas and sudden spectacles (Ackroyd, 152). It is still true: Ian McEwan’s much acclaimed novel Saturday is a present day tribute to Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway: both novels aim at portraying a casual day of a Londoner. So London becomes a field of research of its own, borrowing critical concepts both from geography (mapping, cartography, topography, non-place, etc.) and from literary studies. Indeed are we speaking of real London i.e. a geographical location, or are we dealing with the represented space, mental space, filtered by our emotions, our past? In this paper I wish to address the issues as they are raised by the writers and artists I have been studying over the past two years: Peter Ackroyd, London the Biography, Iain Sinclair, Lights out for the Territory and London Orbital, and the artists Gilbert and George, especially their series dedicated to London -- London E1 pictures.

2. This paper will aim at foregrounding how they represent our empirical relation to the real but also the mythical London. To reach the silenced past of the city the authors explore its space. While Ackroyd envisions London as a series of connections, Sinclair explores London’s terrain incognitae that yields alternative stories. Gilbert and George are also inspired by what the streets bring to the fore.

3. All of them fail to fully master their own relation to the city and are also spoken by it. The knowledge acquired through urban pilgrimage cannot be trusted. Instead fragments of experiences, numerous obstacles in deciphering the city pinpoint the failure to reach London as a whole. We will consider how empiricism is challenged when confronted to London as a network of signs. This will lead us to wonder how English is this new empiricism and to consider the ways the postmodern London renegotiates the very notion of Englishness.In the end, the objects (books, paintings) turn out to be the very object of the quest, more than the city itself. The Modernist heritage of telling the experience of London is continued and yet disrupted in our postmodern times. Ultimately the dislocation of the city contaminates the act of reading.

I. The Endeavour to encompass London

4. As a topographer[1] Iain Sinclair means to map the city through words. Therefore he walks across boundaries and considers the city as a territory to inhabit. ‘The notion was to cut a crude V into the sprawl of the city, to vandalise dormant energies by an act of ambulant signmaking’ (Sinclair, 1997 : 1). How you walk entails what you see, the writing of the place implies elaborating your own tools by exploring a specific place. Adjusting himself to the imperatives of the city, Sinclair explains how he proceeded:

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city ... Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode ... but the born again flâneur is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, eavesdropping on philosophically conversation pieces, than in noticing everything.’ (Sinclair, 1997 : 4)

Sinclair rejects the heritage of the flâneur -- the city dweller who indulges into an aimless wandering. Walter Benjamin, who wished to encompass Paris in the Arcades project spoke of flânerie leading to a kind of ‘secular illumination’ (qtd. in Blazwick 84). However contemporary London cannot be likened to the XIXth century Paris since the postmodern city raises more questions than it gives answers:

The concept of strolling: aimless urban wandering, the flâneur, had been superceded. We had moved into the age of the stalker; journeys made with intent — sharp-eyed and unsponsored. The stalker was our model : purposes hiking, not dawdling, nor browsing. This was walking with thesis. With a prey. ....

The stalker is a stroller who sweats, a stroller who knows where he is going, but not why or how. (Sinclair, 1997: 75)

5. Even if Sinclair has defined his excursions, his reasons for which he is drawn to some site or how he might reach it. The city keeps receding, corroborating Guy Debord’s situationist theory of the city: ‘The city as site of both encounter and spectacle: the artist acts simultaneously as both observer and observed within the same narrative’ (Blazwick 85). To conclude Sinclair aims at unveiling London’s neglected past and to some extent he provokes this encounter between the object and the interpreter.

6. Gilbert and George who have lived at 12, Fournier Street for 40 years have been drawn to East End long before the urban regeneration that turned Spitalfields market into a place to be. In their 20 London E1 Pictures the artists have been collecting sights and incorporating them into what they call their visual library -- bibliothèque visuelle (Baudino & Gautheron 163). In an interview with François Jonquet, Gilbert and George claim they watch the streets, take photos, classify them and use them as an inspiration, inserting photographs into collages, filling their easily recognisable almost square format works. By juxtaposing photographs, vivid colours, enlarged self-portraits, and delineating the limits of the squares by black contours, Gilbert and George give voice to the plurality and simultaneity of minor events, fleeting moments that are meaningless if taken separately, but that are endowed with a specific meaning as they are made to fit into the frame. Their work cannot be dissociated from the location and their artistic endeavour can be likened to Iain Sinclair’s who observes: ‘The poet as a romantic outsider ... an elective alien pensioned by the sites he celebrates’ (Sinclair, 1997:150). Paradoxically the city seems at once to overwhelm the individual and yet validate his literary or artistic project.

7. Peter Ackroyd enters the “Golem” of London by bringing to the fore the continuities, the links that exist between past and present. Indeed, past has left legible signs; we have only lost the meaning of its codes. His vision of the city reminds of Roland Barthes’s seminal quote ‘The City is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language : the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, by simply living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it’ (qtd. in Wirth 1). In London the Biography Ackroyd pictures himself as an expert, a biographer who grants us access to intimate archives of a humanised city.

8. The very object is organised around 32 topics that contain 79 chronologically ordered chapters. Ackroyd then privileges order over disorder, partly forcing the informal development of the city into the framework of a life-span. However, like in music, some motifs repeat themselves. Indeed parts 1: ‘The City as body’, 8: ‘A
By his (Renchi’s) reading, the tunnel under the motorway is a gate of memory. Concrete walls become screens on which are projected phantasmagoric tree shapes. But reaching the tunnel, coming up against the wall ... we find that the concrete is no casual wash. The wall is made with deep grooves, like a sheet of corrugated paper. The effect is of something wrapped and hidden, a stone curtain ... Nothing to be seen, everything to be imagined. (Sinclair, 2003: 138)[4]  

The very gap existing between reality and its interpretation is meaningful. The senses cannot be trusted but yet they give access to a specific non-place in between that might lead in the end to a genuine discovery.

Iain Sinclair compares the walk to ‘a phantom biopsy, a vivid token of human existence in the city’ (Sinclair, 1997: 183). The city turns out to be a postmodern city in the way Linda Hutcheon defines it: postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations. The representation of history becomes the history of representation. What this means is that postmodern art acknowledges and accepts the challenge of tradition: the history of representation cannot be escaped but it can be both exploited and commented on critically through irony and parody. (Hutcheon, 2002: 89) 

London neighbourhoods and 27: ‘East and South’ are devoted to space whereas landmarks in history are dealt with in parts 3: ‘The early Middle Ages’, 5: ‘The Latin Medieval City’, and 30: ‘Blitz’. Another way of re-ordering the topics in order to make them cohere is to match them by opposites 4: ‘London Contrasts’, 12: ‘Crime and Punishment’, and 16: ‘Night and Day’. The continuities also stem from the explanatory frame Ackroyd provides the reader with a time line of major events that come before the tale of London (xiv-xvi), two maps (xvii-x) and an essay on sources (781-793).

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Iain Sinclair wanders around the M 25 anti-clockwise in order to retrieve unvoiced parts of London history. Paradoxically enough, the unvoiced past can be heard and Sinclair mistake a tunnel sight for a tree: ‘The silence of London is an active element; it is filled with an obvious absence (of people, of business) and therefore filled with presence.’ (LB 83)
<19> Just as the wanderings through the city tend to provoke questions, the wanderings through the works of art are challenging. Indeed the works are so monumental gigantic that they 'crush' not only the self but also his ability to deal with signs. Gilbert and George's canvases represent human bodies one and a half times their size. In some pictures they use microscopic photographs of blood, saliva, excrements that are enlarged so as to break into the visible sphere.

<20> The literary works also testify to this idea of gigantism. Iain Sinclair's excursions in *Lights Out For The Territory* (LO) pile up into barely readable documentary fiction, the project of LO circumventing London sounds absurd, since London cannot be grasped by a human being. The M25 is an arbitrary boundary of London, a failed attempt at mastering the growth of the city. However determined the stalker might be, he can but 'stop, turn, retreat, begin again' (LO 184). Peter Ackroyd acknowledges that the whole idea of it is doomed: One can never see it in totality, nor can one express it. One is condemned to it and cannot go outside and see the whole' (LB 584).

<21> In order to reducticate the inability to come to terms with the metropolis, the artists use literary or artistic devices to recreate an urban space through words or images; their aim is to 'mak(e) the familiar unfamiliar, play ... with scale and expectation' (LO 104). They all invert our relation to scale and visibility in order to question our culturally biased minds. In the end the urban space dictates its rules -- walking codes as well as writing codes:

London is a labyrinth, half of stone and half of flesh. It cannot be conceived in its entirety but can be experienced only as a wilderness of alleys and passages, courts and thoroughfares in which even the most experienced citizen may lose the way; it is curious, too, that this labyrinth is in a continual state of change and expansion. ... The readers of this book must wander and wonder ... (LB 1)

Both Sinclair and Ackroyd explain how to proceed; at a metatextual level they suggest we might take our distance from the city/the text. They hint at their inability to come to terms with their ambitious projects, making this illusion the bridge between the stalker, the author, and the reader. It is a work/world of make-believe where authors replace their and our expectations by retreats, surrenders, words and images showing by trial and error how difficult it is to reach the object of the quest: London.

III. London as a Postmodern city

<22> The endeavour of encompassing London has proven unsuccessful; the very discourse of the city echoes the difficulty to make sense. All at once gigantic, mysterious, polymorphous, London is a self-duplicating enigma. Self-duplicating since it contaminates the work of artists. The city renegotiates the very definition of Englishness through various notions. First of all, empiricism -- a very English notion -- based on the principle that knowledge stems from experience rather than from theory is questioned. In contemporary London the knowledge drawn from experience is not to be trusted since our senses betray us supplanted by artificial devices (CCTV). Even with those devices London past and present is a pastiche, recreated, leaving the genuine city out of reach. Rather than mastering the situation, the artist is forced to respond to the surroundings.

<23> Against the widespread misrepresentation that the author is the one who conceives a plot, who arranges situations, provokes crisis and denouement, and can rationally watch the surroundings that might inspire him, the author is acted upon by the city. The knowledge of a plot no longer pre-exists in the author's mind; his mind receives the impressions of the city and is influenced by them. Iain Sinclair claims in a 1979 interview: 'Place needs the person to give it voice. Place activates the poet (Bond & Davidge 135). The second element that corroborates the very notion of Englishness is that of the ruin. As they wander in the city, the authors come across the remnants of London's past. The geographical exploration coincides with a historical quest: the remains -- the ruins of a collective past of the nation. Ruins are what is left behind, uninhabited places, devoid of original function. They can be likened to relics. They signal time gone by while at the same time they inhabit a contemporary space. From this temporal gap springs the imaginary reconstitution of a glorious past, neglected and abandoned. A postmodern ruin of Englishness is Rachel Whiteread's *House*, the 1993 Turner prize winner. A much discussed work of art that resembles a moulding of an iconic English house. Although this work reifies collective memory as it delineates the outside contours of a house, it helps us remember collectively what has been dismembered. The House itself -- a temporary work of art -- ironically signals our belatedness to reach what is already deleted by the ever changing city. That is the nature of riparian London with its cycles of deletion and resurrection. ... House, as soon as the last bricks were cleared, joined that company -- misremembered and ineradicable' (LOFT 92-93).

<24> Along with empiricism, two other notions are worth discussing: nostalgia and the weather. Wandering around ruins induces a feeling of nostalgia in a world that has lost its identity. Unable to reach genuine sites of memory, we are fooloed by recuperated official history, exemplified by blue plaques. 'In time a blue plaque will appear, playing games with fuddy-duddy notions of heritage and culture. An ironic memorial to the absence of memory' (LB 51). The object signals to the ignorant has lost its identity. Unable to reach genuine sites of memory, we are fooled by recuperated official history, exemplified by blue plaques. 'In time a blue plaque will appear, playing games with fuddy-duddy notions of heritage and culture. An ironic memorial to the absence of memory' (LB 51).

<25> As the past is out of reach, those remaining traces are collected, classified for fear they might vanish as well. However dematerialised the past might be it still can be categorised: 'It's a part of the English temperament to want to classify everything including the clouds ... The English disease is precision, Gradgrind facts. The ambition to quantify the ephemeral' (LOFT 92). This ambition to quantify the ephemeral extends to the weather, another topos of Englishness. Obviously in London, the laws of nature are overruled by the postmodern city:

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<26> By delineating various elements such as empiricism, ruin, nostalgia, weather we might redefine Englishness as it is challenged by postmodern London. The idea that London and Englishness may be related is developed by Ackroyd. He argues that: 'the character of the city ... came to define the identity of the nation', and the existence of a various and heterogeneous London has helped to redefine the notion or nature of Englishness itself' (LB 716). The capital city seems to reverberate that London and Englishness may be related is developed by Ackroyd. He argues that: 'the character of the city ... came to define the identity of the nation', and the existence of a various and heterogeneous London has helped to redefine the notion or nature of Englishness itself' (LB 716). The capital city seems to reverberate

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<28> Indeed what Iain Sinclair defines as a must-

<29> In the end London cannot be reached, what remains of the wanderings in the city is the notion of pilgrimage leading to a redemption, usually defined as a purifying walk to sanctuaries or holy places. The urban pilgrimage offers neither redemption nor meaning. Both writer and pilgrim experience the walk but what Sinclair clearly looks for is not a transcendent truth but rather 'the heightened experience of present tense actuality' (LO 147). This self-imposed fugue is absurd: 'Our penitential motorway orbit. No end no beginning' (LO 147). It leads to a feeling of dislocation, of disorientation in space and metaphorically of alienation from oneself.

<30> A work of Gilbert and George might prove a useful case in point *Fifteen Haunts*, 2003, from *20 London E1 pictures*:


On this picture we can see enlarged portraits of Gilbert and George set against a white background. They stand on a scaled down London ground; you can see the cityscape with skyscrapers hardly meeting the knees of the artists. Above their heads magnified bugs—symbolising the common denominator to humanity can be
London is, as Sinclair concedes, ‘difficult to interpret, easy to admire’ (LO 112). Sinclair obviously privileges emotional response, even if it leads to puzzlement, dislocation. For instance, watching a building, Sinclair cannot explain it. ‘The building, an assembly of smooth, chalky blocks, reminds me of Rachel Whiteread’s Ghost. Lacking discernible narrative, this structure is an unrequited art work. In a gallery it would solicit cultural comparisons, validation. Out here we can do nothing, beyond registering its presence, the displacement it achieves’ (LO 112). He prefers to state he does not understand this building rather than to silence it by a cultural reference. This inability to make sense is more relevant since it acknowledges the limits of reading, of decoding.  

This excerpt is emblematic of the role devoted to the reader, to the urban flâneur who aims at deciphering the city. Beyond acknowledging the very existence of the urban experience as an anti pilgrimage, the author redefines the act of writing London. ‘The act of writing London is then a double act : of reading as rereading and rewriting, of invocation and disclosure of the hitherto invisible, whereby what comes to be remarked is what is already at work, and which, in returning, appears as the traces of multiple cultures, histories and events’ (Wolfreys 129).

To conclude the wanderers encounter numerous obstacles when attempting to apprehend London. Time and visibility is questioned; the notion of empiricism falls apart when confronted to a postmodern city, giving way to postmodern semi-documentary fiction. Not only do the works by Sinclair, Ackroyd and Gilbert and George question the literary or artistic codes of representation, they point to the dislocation of the subject matter itself and the resulting displacement of the quest of the city to the quest of the work provoked by the city.

Endnotes

Works Cited
Primary Texts

Secondary Texts
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