These pages are not for the person who said:

"I've got a wonderful new flat: you'd never know you were in Naples."

Nor for the person who said:

"What I love about London is its village atmosphere..."

but for the person who, after a reluctant visit to the country,

said, with *real alarm:*

"I mean...there are *so many fields."*

NEED THESE STREETS

I am twelve, in Paris. My father has rented a flat near the Parc Montsouris in the south of the city. My parents let us (two brothers, sister and me) go for a walk the first day. My elder brother leads us purposefully down the Avenue Reille. "No! This way, this way!" I shout (knowing intuitively, as I have always known) "You're going *away from the centre*!" "So what? says my brother, "we're only going for a walk!"

I trail behind, almost tearful at this wilful neglect of what is, for me, an imperative, the urban imperative.

It has always mattered. Twenty six years later I go to Budapest for a month's work. My kind hosts meet me at the airport to take me to my hotel. They speed me, tantalisingly, into the centre and then, horror! out, God knows how far out, to a Holiday Inn type edifice; no harm in that per se; but it is practically *in the country*. I stick it there two nights. As I have dinner alone over a book, serenaded at my very table by a "gypsy" trio, I decide enough! Tactfully I enquire about alternatives. "But", say my hosts, "we thought English people *liked* the country". Not this one, I mutter.

Within the day I am installed in a creaky flat where Nepkoztarsasag meets (what was) Lenin Boulevard. Hot water is erratic; the lift is a mantrap, an advertising hoarding floods the bedroom with a sickly light. Trams clank and splutter outside the window. I am content.

This craving for metropolis may not require the services of an Oliver Sachs; but I do wonder sometimes *why it matters*, casting about in vaguely psychoanalytical way for the source for my metrophilia. I know, for example, that I always fear being not *quite* at the centre of a circle of peers. I have always had an anxiety that I may be, fatally*, just removed*, in time, in space, from an imagined focus of human warmth and complicity. Am I seeking an urban analogy for this imagined 'centre'? Or (later note) is it simpler? After my father's death I found a photograh of him walking purposefully, indeed voraciously, along a city street, a map in hand (Barcelona; immediately identifiable to me, even in this little snapshot; that dense grid of streets contradictorily struck through by the great Avenida Diagonal.

All I know is that my thing with cities is no mere inclination or preference. It is an obsession; and obsession might well unsuit me to write about the City. What I find compelling you might find boringmight bore the reader. And

there is the other danger: it is easy to mistake enthusiasm for inspiration, inspiration for 'good writing'.

But do it I must; there are few enough of us who are specifically, utterly, exclusively committed to the city. Woody Allen is one. The opening of 'Manhattan' borders on the boring. He just goes *on and on*, which is fine by me. In 'Broadway Danny Rose' he is kidnapped by some hoods, put in the trunk of a car and taken out, *out of NYC and into the country!* He is pulled from the car, his blindfold removed and, if I remember correctly, he looks down and he is standing on... *grass.* Not that acceptably wan, flattened grass of Hyde Park or Central Park; we don't mind that, Woody Allen and I; no this is serious bushy, healthy country grass; and he treads this alarming terrain like a scalded cat, doubtless saying "Oh my Gaaad, oh my Gaad..." How accurately I remember this is not important. If I have embellished this scene it is because, well, I can relate to the horror, the horror. Of course some, gingerly, are willing to penetrate that heart of darkness: I am talking to a colleague, a computer expert:

"What are you doing this weekend, Des?"

"Well I thought I'd pick up the girlfriend and go out and see some of them *shires".*

"Sorry?"

“You know, man….Wilt*shire* …Hamp*shire*...wossname?…Somerset*shire*..you know, *shires*.”

Yes there are few of us who are really city-fixated. Where, when it comes down to it, do even the city writers live? While Jonathan Raban commendably lives in Seattle; the queen of the city piece, Jan Morris “divides her time between her library house in North Wales, her dacha in the Black Mountains of South Wales and travel abroad.” (We will overlook that irritating “dacha”; but only just.)

Charles Dickens said “I can’t explain how much I need these (streets)”. Peter Ackroyd describes Dickens walking:

“the three miles from Camden Town to the Strand, down Hampstead Road and Tottenham Court Road, crossing the High Street which leads into Broad St Giles’s and then down St Martin’s Lane. Then across the Strand into an area of squalid corners and alleys, and descending Hungerford Stairs to the river itself.”

And this was at the age of twelve on his way, daily and alone, to his job at Warren’s Blacking Factory. If he later needed the streets “so much” it was

because of the intensity of his forced and early association with them; nothing to do with liking or loving the city. We city-obsessives, well we don't just sort of *like* or *love* the city. We "need these streets".

"With a ladder and some glasses
You could see to Hackney marshes
If it wasn't for the houses in between."
As the music hall song went.

But for me there were no houses in between.

1984 and, after a decade abroad, I am flat hunting in London. After unsuccessful forays in districts above my budget, I lurch south of the river. Purposefully out of the tube at Clapham North and into an estate agent. In ten minutes I am letting myself into a 1930s block of flats equidistant from Clapham Common and Brixton. Within five seconds Iknow I want it. A good flat? Nothing special. Simply that through its original Crittall windows and from each room I can see London *in its entirety*. Four floors atop the modest elevation of Acre Lane affords a view of, well, you name it. OK I can't see the Tower of London because there's something in the way; but that's about it:

what I *can* see west to east is: Chelsea Harbour, Battersea Power Station, the Hilton Hotel, the Post Office Tower, the Houses of Parliament, the MI6 Building, The Shell Mex building, the Millennium Wheel, the Shell Building, the Barbican, St Paul's, the Old Bailey, the Monument, Tower Bridge, Canary Wharf; and across to the northern hills of Hampstead and Highgate.

Not a breathtaking view; just an ineluctable scroll of information; the horizon for eight miles, west to east, studded with major buildings.

For nearly twenty years I have had a working relationship with this view. I don't crane at all hours from my window. The thing is that it be there. I can draw the curtains on this view, ignore it for a week, treat it cavalierly, merely glancing above it for weather information, privately thrilling, the while, to the fact that it is *all there*. Alternatively I dwell on it through binoculars, scanning it at dawn at dusk, at all hours, watching the slow rise of new buildings, the demolition of others, the City University ablaze, the refurbishment over years of the dome of St Paul's, the sad, slow attrition of Battersea Power Station (happily now arrested), registering the rainbows, dirigibles, balloons, helicopters that flash above it; champagne glass in hand watching the pyrotechnics sweep east up the Thames at the Millennium, the backup of planes nudging one by one into the flightpath through to Heathrow, seeing

London some days abject under the rain, serried, squat; on others epic beneath great banks of undisciplined cloud, churning up the Thames, the scattered beams of frustrated sunshine momentarily striking the flanks of City offices, the rise of Foster's shimmering Swiss Re tower ; at the close of long summer days fiery and splendid, ennobled with the rays of the setting sun, redolent of the enormity of its history, its jarring planes and patchy dissonances uniting to give an illusion, almost, of intention and harmony, knit together in a pinky grey dusk, like Petra: "a rose red city - half as old as time."

Down in the street and things are more prosaic. The grime starts at the window panes. Through it I look into Acre Lane, Brixton; a decent, even refined thoroughfare in the photographs of a century ago: tree-lined, white villas behind railings, a carriage in the street and (as always in Victorian photo-topography) the little ghost of the child who moved when the man with the box took the picture.

This was Brixton as "the Belgravia of south London" it was said then, (probably by an estate agent), a Pooterish respectability; nothing grander. Next to my flat is the site of the Hope Tea Rooms, I find on a map of 1850; surely a temperance institution which has since become my local, the Hope and Anchor.

This leafy road joining Clapham to Brixton has long been torn open, the trees gone, the front lawns lost to road widening; the few villas, gutted beyond recognition, are tyre fitters, plumbers' warehouses, low grade late night food marts. Across the road is Fulham Timber; piles of planking, forklift trucks, reversing trucks, a yard which has been burned out three times; arson, says local wisdom. The first time I found a telejournalist with a videocam anxiously waiting on the steps of my block in need of a vantage point. I took him upstairs and he got his flames. The warehouse was rebuilt; then it was claimed that the police used the upper storeys for surveillance. And why not? But being *Brixton* this had to be deemed "provocative". Indeed the timber yard positively *deserved* its new incendiarists, who arrived during the next riots. This time my twelve year old son was out; it was dusk; flames were bursting through the roof and the fire brigade was still to come; drums of paint started to explode. In between detonations the slim figure of my son sauntered past and let himself into the block. I get ready to be cool: Hi Felix. Hi Dad.

Next to the timber yard is Sam's Cafe; surly Turks fry up heart attack breakfasts for the refuse teams. They know each other well, the Turks and the

dustmen. (They can *only* know each other well: “Ere, Ali, you fackin paki, hurry up with my fackin breakfast”).

We move on down the street; Take Two Caribbean Foods and Dinner House Wokaway Chinese Carry Out. No nonsense with urban unrest at Dinner House. From my sitting room during the most recent riot I watched a bevy of lads swarm in and slither across the counter to rob the till, to be chased out, comic-book style, by a white-aproned chef *with a cleaver*. Opposite, too, the Duke of Wellington; the Iron Duke swings rustily above the pavement, looking down with curled lip (but perhaps also some of the relish he evinced for the underclass) on Yardie street mayhem. There have been at least four shootings here in the last couple of years. I am used to the crack-crack-crack of a pistol, the closure of the street, the victim wheeled across to an ambulance. I have had the plainclothes police in my sitting room; they wear carefully ironed grey slacks, white shirts, ties *and light brown leather jackets* in order to pass unnoticed in the Brixton streets. A sign at present padlocked to a lampstandard directly outside my block proclaims:

“Firearms incident. On Wednesday 28th August 02 at about 11 pm a shooting occurred where three black males were shot at by a large group of black males who were outside the Duke of Wellington Public House, In strictest

confidence please phone…" (This of course will *really* enhance the value of my flat.)

On the corner is the shop of Mr Christie, ex-Conservative Councillor on Lambeth Council, until his death. Two floors of junk have lain immobile for the last fifteen years, almost impacted with their weight. Christie was a sort of Mr Boffin, Dickens' Golden Dustman. In a pocket of space at the heart of his shop Christie poured rum for his friends. If any object could be extricated from the geological impactions of his stock he might part with it *at a price*. Egbert Christie was hardnosed indeed, as one might expect given the politics of this big, dignified West Indian.

Next door, a grocer more Conservative still; so conservative indeed that he was always seen at the counter of his grocery store in black suit, white shirt, bowtie, his political allegiances clear from the poster in his window: Mandela shaking hands with Louis ("Hitler was a great man") Farrakhan.

Further down the street is Mr Cheap Potatoe. And you just *know* you are, residentially speaking, in limbo when you have not one, but *three* local shops with Mister in their name; add Mr Clutch and Mister Electric.)

A yellow tank churns past driven by a “south London businessman” as the local press terms him. Today it does not bear a twelve foot polystyrene dinosaur wearing a giant police helmet; indeed the whole thrust of his protest has been largely forgotten, in the best traditions of folklore; I think it involved a holiday in the Seychelles, the capture of a marlin, the subsequent celebration of this catch by the bolting to the roof of his house of a fibreglass simulacrum of the fish (as one does)…er.. and his consequent conviction for this breach of planning permission; but let him go his own sweet way, ploughing up Acre Lane in his tank; his signs, now battered and unused lie in his Acre Lane lock up: “Marvin the Marlin says Get Stuffed” and “We will take no more stick from the old Bill.” (If the above makes no sense that is the fault of our “South London businessman”, not mine. I can only protest is that it is *all true*.)

In the laundrette Bill sits reading about Victorian crime, gaslight, cut-throats, Lestradian detectives with lanterns; I once find him (midst sacks of neglected service wash) fretting over a copy of In the Footsteps of the Ripper and a current A-Z. I help him locate an alley (does it still exist?) where a prostitute was fastidiously eviscerated….(and it *does*!). Bill is about 70 and looks like the little man in a Donald Gill postcard. Avoid Acre Lane in the summer for you do not want to see Bill in his shorts, especially as he rides his child’s bike.

Up and down the road over a decade and a half I have watched them all. There was the karate chop man, a deranged African plagued by imaginary assailants; you kept well clear of him. For a whole summer a bearded Dostoyevskian figure in a long dark overcoat used to pray with fervour in the gutter, eyes baroquely upcast. He once came into the Hope and Anchor, flung himself to his knees on the swirly polyester carpet and prayed fervantly there too, as the punters with their dry roasted peanuts and pints of lager drank stolidly on.

Here comes the guy who walks the streets (in summer too) his head encased in an anti-radiation helmet. Down the road pedals a longhaired balding man in a miniskirt and kitten heels. You avert your eyes for this is another pair of thighs you can do without. And here is Alfie, Town Crier of Brixton, in full eighteenth century town crier fig, on a moped with a special tricorne hat designed to accommodate his crash helmet. Sometimes he is in the pub drinking a half with his towncrier's bell by his side. I have seen him toll his bell to prelude each pub quiz answer, a peal for each item. "Num-bah....Five-ah..

The goddess of wisdom was.....Athen-ah." (clang clang) "Numb-ah...Six-ah..." "Fackin' 'ell" says a man at my table "I've only gone and put fackin' Hebe!" Ask Alfie to show you his cuttings; he has travelled the world in his town crier capacity; flaking articles testify to the visit of "el tradicional pregonero del concejo di Lambet (sic) a Londres, Alfi (sic)…" Last week my eye glossed over the headline: "Town Crier Hit By Crossbow Bolt" Just *another* Town Crier and Crossbow Bolt story I thought; but I suddenly realise it is about Alfie. I meet him the next day outside Brixton Tube, in full town crier outfit. He tells me he reckons the bolt was fired from somewhere near Electric Avenue

I could go on; so could you of your own street; but enough, lest you think I was trying to evoke a cuddly characterful, "tight-knit" community; Sesame Street perhaps; or the Hudson Street of Jane Jacobs' Life and Death of American Cities of 1961. Jacobs, writing mainly about New York, was commendably anti-suburban, anti-Garden City; she wanted to *keep* urban density at a time when the trend was to loosen the urban fabric; but coming as she did from a smaller town she still cherished the idea of the warmth and complicity of small town community. Her 'picture', rather reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's illustrations of Middle American life. is a cosy one:

"people stopping by at the bar for a beer, getting advice from the grocer and giving advice to the newsstand man, comparing opinions with other customers at the bakery and nodding hello to the two young boys drinking pop on the stoop, eyeing the girls while waiting to be called for dinner, admonishing the children, hearing about a job from the hardware man and borrowing a dollar from the druggist"...etc

If you find cute Bedford Falls (in 'It's a Wonderful Life') cute then you will like this. In fact this passage describes precisely what I *don't* find attractive; what city life at its best *is not about*.

City life is above all not *primarily* about community.

More about community, *the myth of community later*; but for now let me say that I simply don't feel that is what my little patch is about. What does all my local colour add *up* to? Community? Hardly; we barely know each other. We don't even know each others names; I don't know the name of the man who has sold me a newspaper daily for *ten years*. I don't especially *want* to know it. I like the man; his laconic contempt for august public figures on the front page of his newspapers ("Fuck 'em") his amused disdain when I pay with coppers ("Wossis then? you give me fuckin' charity money innit?"). I admire

his cool, handsome sons in their posh school uniforms, hungry for a better life (Internet fortunes, City jobs) than their dad had , kicked out of Kenya along with other Asians in the seventies.

Tight-knit community? I don't think so; very loose knit community. We don't know each other well; we don't "look out" for each other; this is certainly not Hudson Street; but then was Hudson Street ever "Hudson Street"? Deyan Sudjic in his book The 100 Mile City thinks that Jacobs (and others) sentimentalise, ruralise the truth of the much less cosy nature of metropolitan society.

We are not looking at a complex highly textured society here in Acre Lane; true, an urban anthropologist might well discover his own complexities in it; could no doubt identify the type of minimal cohesion that makes it operate; shake his head, (if of a leftish bent) over the 'anomie' it revealed; for there is nothing like the (supposed) intimacy of the rural community in Acre Lane. Instead something looser, loose to the point that, (to cite a recent case in a German city apartment block), a mummified corpse could be found upright in front of a television with a four year old newspaper on its knee. That is a shocking fact; but for me it is not *socially* shocking. I do not feel obliged to wring my hands and draw dire conclusions about city life. Indeed, the

shocking looseness of the city is an intoxicant to the young incomer from the provinces. It is the city at its best. Spengler, darkly suspicious of the city, correctly recognised, at least, that modern urban humanity was "neo nomadic". Even earlier Adam Smith (cited likewise by Carl Schorske in his essay 'The Idea of the City') considered the city's enterprising denizens to be "socially unreliable, labile."

This is the paradox; the inhabitants of the largest and most institutionalised of communities, the city, are the ones least liable to stay put; the city was never, isn't and never will be about tight-knit community. The current London Reclaim the Streets activists are, I suspect, sentimental archaists who do not understand the city. They want to village-ize it. Pathetically they try to turf over Whitehall. I don't know, but I suspect that, like so many citizens of London, these people are *from the provinces* and can't hack it in the city; perhaps *that* is what their protest is about. Piss off, please, back to the countryside with your turf and your seeds

It was no surprise for me to discover that the lone nail-bomber of 1999 who targeted blacks in Brixton, Asians in Brick Lane and gays in Soho was....from a village in Hampshire. Clearly he doesn't know that we *like* heterogeneity, that we *like* it that way very much, thankyou. Not that this rural based

bigotry is anything new: "I don't at all like (London)…" writes another provincial: "All sorts of men crowd together there from every country under the heavens. Each race brings its own vices….pimps…gambling…pederasts…beggars.."

This is Richard of Devizes in 1180. Devizes eh? I'm not surprised.

City sociability, the sociability of the streets *can't* ever be a cosy and convivial one; it is a sociability of the barest convenience; its gestures of affability are minimal, almost unspoken. A bleak view? No; it is merely that this is the city and how the city works. Those who have a problem with this may choose to go settle in the countryside. Good luck to them; let them enjoy their decade of ostracisation as "incomers"; we don't have that problem here in the city; move here and you're part of it.

Life for an incomer to the city might be hard and bitter; but you are undeniably *part of the city*; no membership needed. If I regret the smallness of London's population (barely seven million!) then I remind myself of the constant influx of immigrants. Welcome one and all; let's push those population figures back over the eight million mark of the nineteen fifties,

(when London was the biggest city in the world). For there is always in London this massive influx of foreigners. London has always been a major world destination. The Pool of London in the nineteenth century; a huge mass of shipping: Engels was astonished:

"The masses of buildings, the wharves on both sides…the countless ships along both shores, crowding ever closer and closer together, until, at last, only a narrow passage remains in the middle of the river…."

Today as usual I go for a fifteen minute run at six in the morning. During this quarter of an hour twelve planes fly over me on the way to Heathrow. Allowing an average of 200 passengers a plane (a modest estimate for they are mostly 747s) that means when I return from my run *2,400 people have flown in to London*. By the time I have had my shower: 4,800; by 7.00, when I leave for work: 9,600. And it goes on *all day*. Through Heathrow 54 million passengers pass a year. London itself is transit lounge of the world. Of course we need an immigration policy; but in my heart of hearts I welcome influx, legal or illegal. In Rome there is the saying that to be a Roman you have to have been one of seven generations. This to me says 'provincial'. And of course London has had its own form of parochialism; the cockney thing, 'born within the sound of Bow Bells', 'I drank wiv mad Frankie in the Blind Beggar'

bla bla; but cockneys have got lost, like it or not, in a greater, Estuarine city, in a tangle of increasingly exotic demographics. So wake up, Michael Caine; stop going on about being a Cockney. No-one gives a toss any more.

Let us relinquish 'community' then; it is charming when we see it in Norman Rockwell and Sesame Street, but it must remain a middle class dream. What we are left with is a less ambitious, but actually far more complicated and noble task: to put up with each other, to rub along together; and pretty abrasive it can be too; but we do so in the interests of something higher, yes something more glamorous! For the City is....an IDEA!

Not a respectable Anglo-Saxon notion *at all.*

CITY SUBLIME

History is full of cities: there are imaginary, half-imaginary cities, fabled cities, ruined and lost cities. And there are real cities; but even these, for all their reality, *still* implausible, *still* mythical, always more than the sum of their parts. Cities embody Dreams, Faiths, Heavens, Hells. (Hells always better than Heavens; for is not Heaven an essentially *suburban* idea?) Cities are the great embodiments of Idea. (And it has always been cities; there are few mythic towns or villages.)

The Seven Golden Cities of Cibola, (which alas, turned out for their sixteenth century discoverers to be no other than as many dusty villages, each with no gold at all.) City of Babel, Petra, The Nasca City of Cahuachi, the Mississippian city of Cahokia, on the site of St. Louis, Hiraizumi, Byzantium-Constantinople-Istanbul; Sodom and Gomorrah ; Alexandria and Persepolis; Vilcabamba, Samarkand;, Tenochtitlan and Babylon. Bacon's New Atlantis, Thomas More's Utopia; Campanella's City of the Sun; Corbusier's Ville Radieuse, Ubar the Atlantis of the Sands, Quintzoy, ("the greatest city in the world" says Wing's Almanac for 1665) of which we know only that it is 7272 miles from London. And what of the Violet Purple Forbidden City. (Ah, real enough!

After checking into my randomly chosen hotel in Beijing (fourteen storeys of 1970s concrete) I walk innocently onto the balcony and catch my breath for *there it is* in its entirety, in the violet purply dusk!)

Through the long centuries of exploration by Portuguese caravela, by Viking knorr, by Arab camel train came reports of cities; and how seductive they are. Marco Polo tells us of "the splendid city of Kansai, whose name means 'City of Heaven…its grandeur and loveliness, its temples, palaces, monasteries and gardens with their towering trees, running down to the water's edge". Yet even the very discoverers of strange cities were unsure of the truth of what they saw. Bernal Diaz de Castillo tells us Spanish troops, on entering Tenochtitlan in Mexico in 1519 "asked whether the things we saw were not a dream."

Elusive city! even when visited, documented, the truth of it remains uncertain. The teasing apart of travel fiction and travel fact between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries is always hard; Marco Polo in Calvino's Invisible Cities says: "if I tell you that the city towards which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop." The authenticity of Marco Polo's descriptions is at the very heart of Calvino's

book. And, as if there were not already enough dubious texts there has been the publication in the last few years, of a thirteenth century Italian merchant Jacob d'Ancona's description of the Chinese coastal metropolis of Zaitun. Is it a hoax? And if it is a hoax, more interestingly, why should someone have actually wished in the 1990s to *fabricate* a thirteenth century Polo-esque travel discourse in the first place?

Cities, most concrete and tangible of entities, yet hovering always on the brink of the immaterial, the mythic. Even when they became incontestably permanent features of the European landscape they were something other than mere physical presences. The European city in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, the mercantile city or City State, depended not only on an agglomeration of size or wealth for its importance but on Idea. It was "an Island of Freedom in a sea of feudal obligations" as Clara Frugoni puts it.

I stand over a coffee in a bar in Bologna and watch the buses sweep past, noting that they all bear the coat of arms of the Comune di Bologna

The Italians, philosophically, are Idealists. They are unembarrassed to express their Idealism in visual terms, in the coat of arms on the side of a city bus. We, the English, are Empiricists; there is no nation more empirical. We are cautious

of abstractions. Clever as we are we still shrink from concepts; certainly from the City as Idea. ("London is just a collection of villages, actually!" we hear; something London very clearly isn't). The City as an Ideal? The very capital C arouses suspicion! We can cope with the word and that capital letter only if it designates the definable financial district known as 'the City'.

True, for a few precious decades, the forties, fifties, sixties, British cities *did* embrace a modest form of Idealism; possibly with the Idea of the walled Italian medieval city in mind, we seem to have learned the art of civic pride and its corporate expression in city facilities, especially transport. Manchester Town Hall does not look like a Flemish Hotel de Ville by chance. In London we had London Transport; buses and underground trains were red, reliable and manned by chaps in uniform.

But it was brief; now we seem to be reverting to the free-for-all plurality and confusion that Dickens describes in his essay on buses. These days drivers wear shades and walkmans; bus conductors in trainers converse on their mobiles. There may, perhaps, be a man with a clipboard back at depot who despairs of this; who, like me, hankers after the sunlit Ladybird book certitude of livery and uniform; but that modest and brief expression of Idea has gone.

And perhaps it is right that our empirical, fragmentary, differently labelled transport 'system' should be returning, that we are now tussling with the prospect of a private-public mix for the Underground and for the inevitable disintegration of corporate identity, corporate livery that it will bring. We are right to be empirical, practical, non-corporate in our thinking. We are by temperament simply not given to abstraction, especially about an entity so incontrovertibly *tangible* as the City. English readers might, for example, well find extracts such as the following a little disconcerting: Jonathan Raban in his classic Soft City writes:

"The city, our great modern foam, is soft, amenable to a dazzling and libidinous variety of lives, dreams, interpretations. But the very plastic qualities that make the city the great liberator of human identity also cause it to be vulnerable to psychosis and totalisation nightmare" (1974)

And Stephen Barber: "The European city is a hallucination made of flesh and concrete, criss-crossed by marks of negation: graffiti, bullet holes, neon. The city is an immense area of eroded and exploded signs, signs that mediate the city to the individual, to the city." (1995)

(How much 'of its time' each passage is! the ludic, protean feel of the first: "foam.. soft...libidinous...plastic": very seventies!. The second much sterner: "criss-crossed.. marks of negation...bullet holes'. Very nineties! very semiological: 'marks, signs'; the style of a hundred titles in the ICA bookshop).

Discourse (sic) about cities thrives on the semiological: as one writer has it: "It would have been easy to go for London as the *petit objet a,* to think of London as desire's irredemiably unfulfillable character. Rather I have wanted to suggest that London, more often than not, in Eliot or Portheim, Morton or Ealing Comedy, figures the difficulty of an obsessional and neurotic desire to see it as our object rather than to accept how or that we are its subjects. A process of signification congeals round a set of sterotypes...which in their very inadequacy, imperially recruit otherness to give them substance.."

"imperially recruit otherness"! Wonderful! Indeed, full marks to our own, homegrown post-structuralists. But to deliberate on the city in this way is *not* an English forte. Look! We even have difficulties with the very idea of the city as a civic entity (rather than a mere agglomeration of building)! We were not even sure, for Christ's sake, that London even *needed* a central governing body and a mayor! The film City Hall (with Robert de Niro as New York Mayor;

tough, tender) passed over this country with very little trace. It is only in the last year that we have (finally, *finally!*) voted one in.

Why, then, can we not be Idealist about the city? Why are we bashful about theorizing about the city? Perhaps...*perhaps* because we have used up all our Idealism, all our theory on...the Country?

The social, moral, sanitary (and latterly the ecological) superiority of "the country" is a perennial, and tedious theme. "Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain" is lodged, almost genetically, in our brains. 80 per cent of dream of living in a cottage in the country, claims a recent survey, a profoundly depressing statistic. In the last week two newspapers I bought provide country living supplements; where to buy that tumbledown farmhouse, how to get on with the locals, that kind of thing. While the 'Year in Provence' business seems thankfully to have run its course, there will be more and new invocations of rural gemutlichkeit. (I spoke too soon; I find that we now have: Encore Provence. (Oh, to hell with Provence!)

Much of the country business, (like most tourism) is of course a yearning for the past. To move to 'the country' is a bid *for the past*, an evasion of the present

day. 'The Country' equals 'the Past'. The title of one of the hugest best sellers in recent years in Britain been: Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady. (Two for the price of one) And of course the country always, most amusingly, fails to oblige. Crime is rife; the locals have the Sky dishes bolted to their cottage roof; lads skin up in the vandalised bus-stop. The "village shop" is a Costcutter.

The country thing is a particularly British obsession but of course exists everywhere, at every time. Roman poets eulogized the "country". But in its modern form it was probably a French invention, something to do with Rousseau (alright then, Swiss). Certainly I like to think that the true gallic and *metropolitan* spirit resides more in one such as Voltaire, who had no truck with the back to nature thing; he wonderfully traces this pernicious ruralism back to Adam and Eve, no less. Why, he asks audaciously, should we admire *their* "matted hair and broken fingernails"?

Count Rodolfo in Bellini's La Sonnambula returns to the village he knew as a boy.

"Il mulino…il fonte…il bosco…

Cari luoghi, io vi trovai"

Under his benign and condescending city eye (“son cortesi, son galanti, Gli abitanti di citta” intones the chorus) the doings of the little people unfold, most touchingly.

The innate goodness of the country! most wearisome of cliches. But I speak as someone for whom it would be absolutely nightmarish to live in a close-knit rural community (having to say good morning to everyone you pass, *everyday*? No thank*you*!)

The shrewd country-dweller knows perfectly well what the towny wants. In country towns craft shops provide once more the pot-pourri, the corn dollies that *weren’t* made locally one hundred years before. The ironies implicit in the towny love of the country is so familiar to us all. It is hardly clever any more to point it out, let alone make fun of it. But sometimes the irony is dramatic, eloquent. I am walking along a dusty track between vineyards high in the Sorrentine peninsular. The Mediterranean glitters far below and the rugged profile of Capri looms out to sea. A sinewy peasant approaches and we pause and chat. Simply for something to say I comment on the beauty of the place, aware, all too aware of the answer it deserved to elicit; but I was hardly ready for an answer of *quite* such poignancy: for (truly) he

held his work-weary hands out to me and said that the beauty was as nothing to him, he who must work this land.

He was doing his job and I was doing mine; codifying the country aesthetically, morally has always been the business of the urban intellectual.

Picturesque was the key concept. Indeed two hundred years ago it was an entire *aesthetic.* Ruins were built; whole parks were designed to look like landscape paintings, old men were employed to dress up as hermits and live in grottoes for the delectation of the landowner. Picturesque means pretty much the same today: rural, quaint, overgrown; but it was not just a pictorial fad. It had a moral (or at least sentimental) view of rural life too; the inhabitants are either figures of Wordsworthian solitude or groups clustering in decorative groupings. Basically people sitting around not doing too much. The figures in picturesque landscapes tend to be resting from it, going to it, going home.

"The ploughman homewards plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me"

"me" here meaning (probably unintentionally) the aesthete, the poet. There was a longing for the stability of country life, as well there might be in an age of instability: enclosure, industrial revolution, urbanisation. It is natural that people should have sought reassurance; and seek it still; for the Picturesque thrives just as well in the twentieth century and beyond. It is profoundly rooted in the urban European psyche. Its criteria remain pretty much the same; Roland Barthes writes:

"Among the views elevated by the Guides Bleus to aesthetic existence we rarely find plains (redeemed only when they can be described as fertile) never plateaux. Only mountains, gorges, defiles and torrents can have access to the pantheon of travel in as much as they seem to encourage a morality of effort and solitude."

It is easy to make fun of the Picturesque and its essentially urban optic. In his essay Wordsworth in the Tropics, Aldous Huxley asks whether the poet would have been able to assert his benign and pantheistic view of nature if he had had to survive amidst snakes and earthquakes rather than the "cosy sublimities" of the Lake District.

But at the same time as the Picturesque movement a more dramatic aesthetic category was being elaborated (deriving from Greek aesthetic writings via Edmund Burke). This category was the Sublime, (which Kant described as "an outrage on the imagination".) It was a precursor of Romanticism, especially as applied to landscape, seeking in landscape dramatic contrast and extremes. The distinction between this and the Picturesque (with which it is usually coupled) is clear in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: "Soon after I entered the valley of Chamounix. This valley is more wonderful and sublime, but not so beautiful and picturesque, as that of Servox....Immense glaciers approached the road; I heard the rumbling thunder of the falling avalanche, and marked the smoke of its passage."

When Boswell leaves Edinburgh for London he says farewell to Arthur's seat, "that lofty, romantic mountain".

Like all his contemporaries (perhaps with the honourable exception of arch-towny Samuel Johnson, who once grudgingly conceded that a particular mountain was a "considerable protuberance") landscape-speak came glibly to him. The rest of his journey passes without landscape comment until he reaches Highgate Hill; "...when I had a view of London I was all life and joy". At which point I leaned eagerly over my copy of the diary hungry to

know what London actually *looked like* then; after all he had been able to say the 'right thing' about Arthur's Seat back home; so what about the view of London from Highgate Hill? Nothing. The aesthetic was *just not there*.

Fair enough; Boswell is a hustler, not an aesthete; he is after fame, preferment, women. But he is in line with his contemporaries, even his contemporary *aesthetes;* there is simply very little description of London at the time. London *life* in abundance, yes; but (compared to Dickens seventy or eighty years later) no real sense of the city as "townscape", a way of looking at and describing cities.

The aesthetic discovery of the city lay in wait. Intimations do appear. Defoe in his Tour (1724 - 26) asks "Whither will this monstrous city extend?" Monstrous City: a premonitory hint of excitement here (as well as disapproval). But It was not until the nineteenth century that we get a set of aesthetic responses to the city at all as deep as they had been to the countryside. Forget Wordsworth's poem On Westminster Bridge:

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie.
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

All bright and glittering in the smokeless air..

Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;

And all that mighty heart is lying still"

Wordsworth is describing a sleeping city. He wasn't as happy to find himself crammed into a bus with Londoners.

Byron's description is better, properly urban and unsentimental: no smokeless air here:

A mighty mass of brick and smoke and shipping,

Dirty and dusky, but as wide as eye

Could reach, with here and there a sail just skipping

In sight, then lost amidst the forestry

Of masts; a wilderness of steeples peeping

On tip-toe through their sea-coal canopy:

A huge, dun cupola, like a foolscap crown

On a fool's head-and there is London Town!

It is around now, in the early nineteenth century, that a real aesthetic of the city develops. As Schorske says: "Among the truths that they (writers at the

time) found was the city, with all its glories and horrors, it beauties and ugliness, as the essential ground of modern experience."

And this is where the Sublime comes in, on the spot, as it were, at just the right moment. The main features of the Sublime Burke describes as Obscurity, Power, Darkness, Solitude, Vastness. And more particularly, for their appropriacy to the city, Burke writes about Infinity, Succession, Uniformity. Here was an aesthetic that lent itself very well to the city; its transformation from landscape features to buildings and streets, from the kinetics of waterfall and glacier to the kinetics of the city was an easy one*, potentially*, though few writers discerned it. John Lockhard on Edinburgh:

"The Trongate…one of the finest things in all Europe, for the most part of huge black structures, rising on either side many stories into the air."

"Huge black structures" is a purely 'Sublime' image. Similarly Alexander Smith (in a sort of precursor to the urban disaster movie, City of the Plague) describes Glasgow:

"Draw the fierce streams of blinding ore
Smite on a thousand anvils, roar

Down the harbour bars;

smoulder in smoky sunsets, flare

On rainy night with street and square

Lie empty to the stars."

The basic elements of the Sublime are all here: extremes of dimension, sheerness, dramatic chiaroscuro. ("..flare on rainy night"; a premonition of the use film noir made of wet streets and neon!)

The German architect Schinkel in his visit to Britain in 1826 presciently admired warehouse architecture in Manchester. It naturally took others longer:

"In twenty years or thirty at farthest we shall see here nothing more romantic than shipping warehouses and wharves" complained Edgar Allan Poe of New York. Yes, indeed; how right he was; for it was precisely twentyfive years later that Walt Whitman exclaimed:

"City of wharves and stores - city of tall facades of marbles and iron!

Proud and passionate city - mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!"

Whitman *loves* the wharves and warehouses! A discovery has been made: the discovery of the city as dynamic, thrilling, imaginatively potent, wharves and all.

Descriptions of London become splendidly sublime as the century continues. There is of course de Quincey, already hallucinating to the quasi-urban images of Piranes . In The Nation of London he writes the ultimate 'sublime' evocation of London:

"The great length of the streets in many quarters of London; the continual opening of transient glimpses into other vistas equally far stretching, going off at right angles to the one which you are traversing; and the murky atmosphere which, settling upon the remoter end of every long avenue, wraps its termination in gloom and uncertainty."

Another voice is Robert Mudie, who writes in Babylon the Great (1825), in a wonderfully John Martinesque vein:

"In the streets immediately below, the congregated multitude of men, of animals, and of machines, diminishes as they are by the distance, appear like streams of living atoms reeling to and fro; and as they are lost in the vapoury

distances, rendered murky by the smoke of a million fires.....house after house, palace after palace street after street., and square after square -it stretches on and on, till the eye fails in catching its termination, and the fancy easily pictures it as everywhere gliding into the infinitude of space.."

Country-Sublime tended to be about the vertical. In these passages we see how City-Sublime is about horizontality : "vistas stretching".... "street after street, square after square" (It was only in the twentieth century that the City-Sublime could go *vertical* ; though Samuel Johnson remarked on the height of Edinburgh tenements in the eighteenth.)

Even those shocked, often morally shocked, by London could not resist the Sublime aesthetic. Heine in 1826 couldn't help himself, caught between thrill and appal:

"I have seen the most remarkable phenomenon that the world has to show to the amazed mind of man. I have seen it and I am still amazed. In my memory there remains the stone forest of houses and in between the surging stream of vivid human faces, with all their gay passions, with all their horrible flurry of love and hunger and hate-I mean London."

But just as the picturesque aesthetic required picturesque tourists, so the newly observed city required its own aesthete: its own detached observer: that person was (or later became) the 'flaneur', the city loafer, stroller, observer.

He was an essentially nineteenth century figure, a man of the later consumerist and capitalist city. The earlier Samuel Johnson once endearingly tried to help a dock worker pick up a load, generally getting in the way (to the embarrassment of Boswell). One cannot imagine the nineteenth century flaneurs doing any such thing. Lamb was so detached as to write an essay, not particularly ironic, regretting the dwindling number of beggars, whose picturesqueness, like a good aesthete, he loved. Like Dickens, who sought in cities "the attraction of repulsion" Lamb writes in 1802:

"The very deformities of London, which give distaste to others, from habit do not displease me. The endless succession of shops where Fancy (mis-called Folly) is supplied with perpetual new gauds and toys, excite in me no puritanical aversion. I gladly behold every appetite supplied with its proper food.....I love the very smoke of London, because it has been the medium most familiar to my vision."

Welcome alternative to the preachiness of Wordsworth!

"An indistinguishable world to men,

The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,

Living amid the same perpetual flow

Of trivial objects" etc.

(How much more genial is Lamb's view! How obviously it would be Lamb one would choose for a drinking companion in London.)

A city aesthetic evolved. But of course city-livers do not go around thrilling to the city anymore than farmworkers thrill to the country. It is not the Manhattanite in 'On the Town' who sings New York New York! It is the rubbernecking provincials who have just docked; it is the out-of-towner who sings 'On Broadway'

Most of us, most of the time, take the city for granted. Indeed, like the Sorrentine peasant we might show whatever would be the urban equivalent of work-roughened hands and say it is not beautiful to he who works it.

SEISMIC CITY

Louis Aragon called one of his early novels: Le Paysan de Paris. How about ourselves then, peasants of the city? How much do we reflect on our hillside?

Like the Sorrentine, not very much. What if we were asked to describe where we live? We all have a picture (of sorts) of the city we live in, a triangulation of the life we lead, not at all to scale (or rather to a personal scale). Home, Work, Shops perhaps? Large tracts remain ignored; or within our own mental topographies they are telescoped or miniaturised because they have no bearing on our life. So the city becomes distorted; shrunken here, distended there, by our own priorities. We see these mental maps when someone sketches us a plan…say, how to find the post office. Barthes describes his movements around Tokyo, famously a city of many unnamed streets and minimal house numbers; (and what could be more seductive to the semiotician?) When he asks for directions in the street he admires the way in which his helpful local expresses *his* personal picture of the city "reversing his pencil to rub out, with the eraser at its other end, the excessive curve of an avenue, the intersection of a viaduct". Certainly people are more capable of drawing their own map than of reading an official one: Proffer a map to a

local hoping that he will be able to send you in the right direction; useless! I watch in despair as a stubby, well-intentioned forefinger descends infallibly onto what even I know to be the wrong part of town. But he is the native and I am the tourist so what need has he of a map?

We need maps but we must remember how how symbolic and stylised these themselves can also be. The most famous and institutionalised stylization of a city is the London Underground map. In the first Underground maps the mappers instinctively conformed to actual distance, proportion; the lines wiggled as they still (or perhaps do no longer?) do in The Paris Metro map. But since the system was underground so there was no *need* for the plan to represent real space now. Indeed the *notional* London map of the underground is not just more convenient; it is *actually truer of the underground travel,* (though there is now a move to dilute the brilliant map of Harry Beck and return to a less stylised topography.)

As I go from Brixton to Green Park daily it is in effect static travel; progress is not noticeably made; things do not whiz past; stations flash up at regular intervals as the only indicators of progress. It is like entering a sealed capsule around which time and space flow unseen and from which we emerge at our destination as from the Tardis. Perhaps in the early days of the tube they

understood this better than we do now since then there were *no windows*; for what, after all, was there to see?

The way we travel, the time we spend doing so, makes the prosaic criterion of distance quite secondary. With the average traffic speed in Central London at 11 miles per hour and falling, only the pedestrian experiences a predictable space/time relationship. At a steady three miles an hour you will be at place X by time Y. Nothing else can be predicted. There are so many variables. There are moments when the kinetics of the city exactly match your requirements; the train sweeps in as you enter the platform, the cash dispenser is working and queue-free, the crowd is going your way; times indeed when you seem to experience sheer time travel. You career, late at night, from the farther reaches of North London in an underinsured taxi, driver one week out of Lagos, deep in the embrace of the sumptuous (and probably combustible) upholstery of his mid-seventies Japanese saloon; and thus regally you are rocketed from Tottenham to the West End in eight minutes, so empty are the roads, London by night scrolling past.

At other times city life seizes up. It is as if the city clings to you and weighs you down. Times too when things you expedite almost without thinking suddenly become burdensome; little moments of hell when a small error (a missed bus,

sitting one stop too long in the tube looking at the crossword) and the whole day goes awry.

This theme created a new genre: the 'yuppie nightmare': the missed turning by Sherman McCoy in Wolfe's Bonfire of the Vanities or the frisson of a malfunctioning BMW and mobile phone in Los Angeles South Central at the wrong time of night in Kasdan's film Grand Canyon. Deliciously, too, in one of the Chevy Chase Vacation films. He finds himself lost in the hood. A pimp lolls with two of his girls against a clapped-out Lincoln .

Chase: "Er, excuse me..er...*Sir*...can you tell me the way to the Expressway?"

Too much unfamiliar information for the pimp: station wagon, the full WASP family, including (if I remember correctly) family dog, roof rack of luggage, politeness; he draws himself up, pauses *for some time* to respond at last as he knows best:

"Go fuck yo' momma!"

The yuppy nightmare genre is all about the adjacency of the squalid and the threatening to the safe lives of the well-to-do; it is a dramatisation of

Galbraith's old phrase: 'private affluence public squalor'. A parallel city ghosts us, threatens to pull us through. There has always been a binary feel to great city art; Franco Moretti in his Atlas of the European Novel shows us how simplified this became in the Victorian novel, a simple matter of the West End and the East End; Booth's famous colour-coded socio-economic map of London showed a much more complicated story. Rich and poor (in Booth's terms Wealthy and Semi-criminal) lived in astonishing proximity all over the city. This fact (Moretti says surprisingly, but it is true) Dickens largely neglected, along with and the dramatic possibilities it offered. Balzac, (as we would expect given his finer sociological distinctions), chose a more complex narrative geography.

I am in Chicago and take a bus to see a house by Lloyd Wright. I keep thinking: hey the neighbourhood's *bound* to look up *soon*! It gets worse; I have long been the only white face on a busful of teens with attitude. I get a sinking feeling that this was *a bad idea*. It all looked so clear; a short ride, a brief walk across a park, (a cute, verdant little rectangle on my map); what could be more agreeable? At about seventieth street I get off; there's my park; but why is it about a *mile across* and why is it all *worn down?* And who are those guys hanging around in knots in the growing dusk and why oh why have I got all my money and my air ticket and my passport on me? B*ad idea.*

(And come to think of it, it wasn't er... one of Wright's *major* houses.) Back downtown again on a timely bus that hissed to a halt on the other side of the road, back downtown, feeling craven, yes; but I knew that I'd be a goner if I walked across that park. ("Whaaat, says my friend, that evening...you went on a bus south of *fortieth* street!!" which helps me feel less craven.)

It is not just menace that awaits us on the wrong side of the tracks; there are simply those times when you sort of slip into the wrong insterstices; when the city becomes distended and elusive and uncooperative. I set off from my hotel in Kuala Lumpur to walk to the Petronas Towers (tallest building in the world). I can see it about eight miles away from the top of my hotel; two shimmering steel fuselages, side by side in the heat haze. This is a Mad Dogs and Englishmen stuff. I walk, as I always do, undeterred by heat, traffic, distance in as straight a line as possible right across the (enormously attenuated) city watching the little silver needles appear, then sink back again behind another structure and then, to reassert themselves, a little bigger, after a mile, to be lost once again. But I have made a serious error; the road I was walking turns itself into a sliproad onto a massive expressway; and by now the bank alongside the sliproad is too steep to climb up again, and cars are pouring down and I am constrained to tramp in the teeth of six lanes of traffic thundering citywards, for a mile and a half to the next interchange:

shorts, baseball cap, dark glasses, map; *and* in the midday sun. Just how conspicuous is it possible to get? But finally, out of this compact wall of hurtling traffic, I manage to elicit a taxi, to the credit of the driver, a gloomy Sikh who thinks me mad but who knows that I am good for a big tip. He sets me down shaking his head sadly.

The city eludes and confuses us. Sometimes it seems to have a perverse existence if its own. (Ron Heron had plans for a Walking City: basically little more than an idea for the cover of a sixties future fiction paperback. In fact the paperback cover probably got there first!) But the city moves anyway; daylong, nightlong it seethes with movement. Day to day the very fabric of a city changes; in some cities this is dramatic; 25% of Tokyo is destroyed and rebuilt every five years. I have seen 100% of Tokyo from the summit of City Hall. It has five times the coverage of Mexico City; am I to believe that this granulated texture extending to each horizon will by the year 2005 have metamorphosed *by a quarter*? I almost feel I should, here and now, from the City Hall observatory floor detect a perceptible twitching to the city beneath me, hear its surface creak with activity.

I go down to the streets again where I watch demolition with a different eye: the inquisitive proboscis of a demolition drill nudges and nibbles solicitously at

an apparently sound seventies office block, bringing it down with the greatest care, almost tenderness. This operation is superintended by two Lego-like little men in pressed uniforms, helmets, white gloves, bearing batons like the lightswords of a Jedi.

Practically speaking and day by day we see change happening all the time; indeed we barely notice it. Back in the seventies Alvin Toffler in Future Shock described how he sent his daughter to a local store. An hour later he finds her back at home watching TV: their conversation goes (as I recall) something like this:

Did you get it?

Er, no Dad. The store wasn't there any more.

In fact she was mistaken; she had been to the wrong corner. The point here is that she just *accepted* that a busy store can, within weeks, become a wasteground.

We perceive changes in the fabric of the city in different ways. They may not impinge on us instantly. On our way to work we might register, merely *register* the inconvenience of a hoarding, the noise of demolition; the presence of

massive building works hardly impinges on us, so much is it a part of the city; only after a couple of years does the sudden removal of a hoarding shock us into accommodating something new.

There is thus the continual objective change in the urban fabric. But there is other change, the change in outr perceptions. The Centre Pompidou in Paris by Rogers and Piano is now well-established, indeed old enough to need urgent refurbishment. I was dutifully shocked by it in the late 60s this great bare oil refinery of a building planted athwart the Paris of Bresson, Jean Renoir, Jacques Tati. Oh the picturesque old market! How could they?

But the old market of Les Halles was the shock of *its* era, almost exactly one hundred years before; it was, in its shocking modernity, the Centre Pompidou of its day, and not because of the audacity of its architect Baltard (as I had thought until recently); for Baltard wanted something relatively traditional; stone structures. It was Napoleon III who wanted "de vastes parapluies, rien de plus." ("Just run me up a few huge umbrellas; that's all we need"), an admirably radical architectural request.

Zola, for all his instinctive modernism, nonetheless conveys a degree of shock, the shock of the new in Le Ventre de Paris:

“Florent regardait les grandes Halles sortir de l’ombre...allongeant a l’Infini leurs palais a jour...Elles entassaient leurs masses geometriques...elles apparurent comme une machine moderne, hors de toute mesure..”

“geometric masses....modern machine!”...there has always been shock.

Eyeing our poor old piecemeal London we are perhaps tempted to think that Paris has grown old slowly, organically, elegantly. It did not suffer at the hands of puritanical utopians in the sixties as did London; it was not bombed in the war, true. But Paris had already had its urbanistic trauma; and how!.... Haussmann’s disembowelling and rationalisation. The speed and therefore greater shock of Haussmann’s project was remarkable. Parisians were precipitated into modernity. The photographer Charles Marville was in Haussmann’s team to take photos of demolitions in progress, of the eventrement, or gutting of the city. His photographs show us streets as recent and as raw (notice the newness of the trees) as, say, Ceaucescu’s Bucharest boulevards in the eighties.

The brothers Goncourt note, in 1860: “Our Paris, the Paris in which we were born, the Paris on the manners of 1830 to 1848, is disappearing....I am a

stranger to what is coming and to what is here, as for example to those new boulevards which have nothing of Balzac's world about them but make one think of London or some Babylon of the future." It is interesting to see how *modern* London was perceived to be by the French; how racy as well : Stendhal , for example, admires the "breadth of the (London) streets and the scantily clad women"

Victor Hugo, he too writing around 1860 was painfully conscious of the changes to Paris. In writing Les Miserables he recognises that he will have to deal with the problem of describing the old Paris to an audience of readers in the new 'eventre' or *gutted* Paris of the 1860s. Indeed the cartograpical detail he likes to dwell on is ostentatiously complex: (this is, after all, VH!): his detail is nostalgia-driven, comparable in its intensity to Dickens, (the Dickens , for example, who describes his excursions into the underworld of the St. Giles rookeries in the company of Inspector Field): Hugo writes

"the Rue Polonceau ended here…the petite Rue Picpus passed beyond, rising towards the Marche Lenoir. He who, coming from the Seine, reached the extremity of the Rue Polonceau, had at his left, the rue Droit Mur" etc. at great length. The fact that some of the tortuous alleys (for him so full of the

footsteps and voices of Vautrin, Cosette, Valjean) had simply been razed away must have been particularly painful to him.

Noone understood so well the almost organic complexity and plurality of the city. Sociologically, it is true, Balzac's Paris is far more detailed. But Hugo's vision of the modern city was the more intense. He was the first to explore its three layered nature: street level of course; but also aerial and the subterranean. In an astonishing description in book 13, Part 2 of the 1830 insurrection from the air he writes:

"The eye which might have looked from above onto that mass of shade would have caught a glimpse here and there perhaps, from point to point, of indistinct lights, bringing out broken and fantastic lines, outlines of singular constructions, something like ghostly gleams, coming and going among the ruins; these were the barricades. The rest was a lake of obscurity, misty, heavy, funereal, above which rose motionless and dismal silhouettes: the Tour St Jacques, the church St Mery, and two or three others of those great buildings of which man makes giants and of which night makes phantoms."
(Hugo was writing at a time when the balloon and the camera were coming together in the aerial photography of Nadar).

And of course Hugo explores the subterranean. In The Intestine of Leviathan (Volume 2 Part 5 Book 2 Sections 1-6 p. 856…it's that kind of book) we have the sewers of Paris:

"Tortuous, fissured, unpaved, cracking, interrupted by quagmires….such was, seen retrospectively, the ancient sewer of Paris. Ramifications in every direction, crossings of trenches, goosetracks, stars as if in mines, coecums, cul de sacs, arches covered with saltpetre…the digestive apparatus of Babylon."

This is of course the old sewer. It is interesting that it is through the new, modernised sewer that our hero was pursued; Hugo is remarkably keen to describe the modernity and cleanliness of this system. It is this very sewer down which I boated as a child, in 1959. (My father was a thorough tourist).

London too, at the same time, became alert to the viscera that lay beneath the city and proud of Bazalgette and his sewage systems. Peter Ackroyd quotes the mid nineteenth century Charles Knight:

"Imagine that this great capital of capitals should ever be what Babylon is—its very site forgotten—one could almost envy the delight with which the

antiquaries of the future time would hear of a ...London below the soil...(an inexplicable labyrinth...vast systems laid before them"

(At a bus stop outside Lambeth Town Hall I watch a man in a helmet heave up a metal plate and vanish nonchalently underground.)

In the nineteenth century we learned to perceive the city as a tri-level entity. We also learned to keep up with the growing rapidity of change, of demolition and new construction. To say nothing of perceptual changes. Visual shock followed shock. A century or so earlier the great riverside eyesore, in the view of some, was the raw and repetitive new Houses of Parliament, (with the still to be finished stump of what was –wrongly- to become known as Big Ben) baldly lining the Thames; even today from Westminster Bridge it *is indeed* disconcertingly long and stark, the gothic detail only just sufficient to make it visually digestible.

Two hundred and thirty years earlier, in 1622, Inigo Jones' Banqueting House, in a thoroughfare of redbrick three storey houses near the Whitehall Privy Garden and the Tudor Holbein Gate, must have shocked in its alien modernity (...classicism, the latest thing,... just over from Italy...etc.) just as the Lloyds Building shocked Prince Charles. (Prince Charles is an infallible guide

in this field; his denunciations always prompt me to think: there must be something *in* this building.) A painting actually in the Banqueting House of the mid-seventeenth century, and others of the time, show Inigo Jones' building indeed looking remarkably new, obtrusive, raw, like the Centre Pompidou above a sea of red Tudor and Elizabethan brick.

I first visited the South Bank when I was four at the Festival of Britain in 1951. I suppose I was made to look at the Skylon, the Dome of Discovery. But over the last twentyfive years I have known the South Bank well; it has been a good architectural training ground; there was a time when the Festival Hall looked paltry, utilitarian; now it looks sassy and up to the minute. But what of the Hayward Gallery, the National Theatre, the Queen Elizabeth Hall? Challenging homework indeed for an architectural amateur! My Italian friend was right when he said that British architects could *indeed* be radically modernist but that they designed as if modernism was a *rather nasty medicine* which we need to take: you may not *like* this, was the message, but it is *good* for you.

But my taste has shifted over the last twenty years: from finding some 'brutalist' work simply ugly to finding it ugly *but seeing the point of It;* until one day I find myself actually *liking* it. Last week along the Embankment I

looked across the river and the National Theatre looked stunning. Just as one day in the eighties, walking up Goodge Street I looked up and found the British Telecom Tower was beautiful. No self-congratulations for coming to these conclusions two decades late, and along with many others.

So will all architecture 'come into its own'? will it, by perduring the odium of decades, emerge forgiven, reappraised? No, there is no guarantee that *everything* is going to turn out looking good. I have been 'working on' the British Library, passing it regularly as I do. I *want* to like it; but I cannot reconcile myself to the use, in a thoroughly metropolitan context, of vernacular brick, of however high specification. To me it smacks of a fatal provincialism, an English unwillingness to be properly metropolitan. Augustus Caesar boasted that he found Rome brick and left it marble. The English public, left to their own devices would do it the other way round.

CHOPPER SHOT

The helicopter shot over Manhattan at night, the glittering canyons of light, we've seen it a hundred times. In fact the chopper shot has been around for five hundred years. Aerial views of the city were commonplace very early; take a street plan, tilt it, add pop-up buildings and (quite remarkable since we are pre-flight by about 600 years) we have the urban aerial view; (a bit primitive, it is true, with some conflict in the reconciliation of two dimensions and three.) In his 1572 volume of city views of Europe, Africa and Asia, Georg Braun says: "Perspective to some extent fulfil's man's age-old dream of being able to fly….In these drawings it is used to reveal the city from angles ranging between 30 degrees and 60 degrees above the horizontal". When we *did* get into the air two hundred years after Braun's wistful 'age old dream' aerial topography came true. The photographer Nadar was to float above the face of Paris in the 1840s. Balloon topographers took to the skies of London.

But how to you deal with all that data once you are up there? Landscape art had developed ways to encapsulate the *countryside* in single images. (In the eighteenth century the standard picturesque view consisted of foreground, framing trees, horizons). Could there be any such simplification of

the city? The sheer extent and detail of the city makes it harder to represent. How do you fit something so big into a frame?

The travel poster, the table mat, the postcard, the souvenir, uncool though they may be, are interesting as distillations of a city. A Bolivian first-time visitor to London, (as innocent of London as are we of La Paz) can only approach the city with *some* kind of expectations, a pastiche of London-y things probably only just viable as symbols of the city; the bowler hat (near to non-existent) the red bus, or a view of the Houses of Parliament seen from Westminster Bridge; the stuff of the lowest rank souvenir shop; a folk topography.

There is nothing new in these composite simplifications. Five hundred years ago the co-ordinates of the 'recognisable' London were, naturally, not the distant and barely connected Westminster. Rather London Bridge, the Tower of London and St. Mary Overy, (now Southwark Cathedral); these last two, juxtaposed, commonly summed up Tudor London. Tourists needed summaries of the city, be the destination London, Paris, Rome, Santiago de Compostela (especially the last two: the pilgrim was the early tourist.)

Cities are impudently but similarly summarised too in those nasty waist-high models of famous capitals (through whose streets you walk like Godzilla); better still in Japanese theme parks where St Peter's nestles between the Empire State Building and Big Ben. In the States approaching-to-*life size* summaries of cities are being built: in Las Vegas they have recently built "Manhattan", an impaction into a single sequence of major New York landmarks; proper large buildings too; they constitute a string of hotels. They are now working on an occupiable "Venice".)

What is all this but *topography*? hardly a word to make the heart race. Topography: "The accurate and detailed delineation and description of any locality" says the OED. How sexy can that be?

On receiving details from the London Topographical Society about their activities I quickly realised that I would not exactly be partying at weekends with my new topographical chums.

But city topography is interesting precisely because it can *never* be just that. All topography is necessarily unobjective, unscientific, frequently prompted by motivations (such as commercial self aggrandisement) in conflict with veracity. And yet it was also the growth of civic pride that prompted more

reliable pictures of cities. And not just in the interests of topgraphical truth. As Chiara Frugoni, in her book Images of Urban Experience in the Medieval World points out, these pictures of cities also express ideas: the idea of protection (the prominence given to city walls and the confines of the city, both physical protection but also that of being a citizen of a city state that has a duty to its citizens.) The city as exemplification of Il Buon Governo in Lorenzetti's work, for example.

But depictions of cities in Europe prior to the sixteenth century are very often so perfunctory as to be at times completely negligent of any distinguishing feature, as if they were content to represent simply the concept of Urbs. In Wynkyn de Worde's 1497 Cronycle of Englande the "View of London" could be anywhere. Certainly until the sixteenth century there was a tendency to settle for a symbolic or simply notional view of cities (see The Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493, a gazetteer of countries and cities; the illustrations hardly even bother to represent the cities included. In fact in some cases the same woodblock of a late medieval city is repeated at different points in the text to represent several; now Ulm, now Dusseldorf.)

But early city topography has some epic works; the great view of Venice of 1500; or Antonio Tempesta's sinuous and energetic description of Rome in

1593, where jubilant angels blowing trumpets, coast like superheroes, high above a mannerist Gotham. But Rome was a problem. What do with the old buildings, very, very very old buildings, so old, venerable and impressive that they might eclipse the latest Papal projects? Certainly Rome in the Middle Ages must have seen itself as dwarfed by the monuments of a greater civilisation. Sixteenth century plans of Rome often gave more attention to the Roman monuments of the modern city, in some cases actually 'restoring' Roman buildings to pristine condition, reinventing buildings in their plans even. It was only later, in the seventeenth century and in the context of the growing civic power and a new monumentalism of Papal projects that the ruins are allowed to appear ruinous. (Later their actual ruin became a virtue, became picturesque or sublime in the work of Panini, Ricci or later Piranesi.)

Works such as the Venice view (full of civic triumphalism) or sixteenth century views of Rome are unimaginable for the London of the same date. There seems to have been no *official* project for the delineation of London, even for maps of it, until 1682. It seems as if that unique reluctance to be urban *that is especially English* was already well entrenched, five hundred years ago. When, from 1550, views *were* made they were by Van den Wyngaerde, Braun and Hogenberg, Visscher, Hollar; the names speak for themselves.

But gradually we get pictures of London; and it is good that many are amateur, straggly, literal-minded (not always the same as accurate); many are hybrids, really, half map, half view; and sometimes of such a finicky enumeration of (apparently) each and every house that actually you doubt that it can be reliable. Artists were dealing with a new problem; representing an expanse of built environment. How do you fit it all in? And if you can't, how do you reduce it? Prominence is obviously given to major buildings; churches, palaces etc. with the bits in between expressed by means of a standardised, letraset-style 'rooftop' rendering fading into the distance.

But what is 'major' in a city differs from age to age. City walls, castles, palaces in the sixteenth century; churches in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Nineteenth century views and panoramas give prominence to docks, courts, workshops, shipyards, all the detail that we get in Dickens; the corporate business skyline, actual or projected, of the present day.

For all the desired objectivity of topography there is always a 'period' feel to views that remind us again of their subjectivity. In the Rhinebeck view of 1810 there is a creamy kind of light across the whole urban fabric suggestive of the wholesale application of Regency stucco over the entire metropolis. Very attractive it is too until you remind yourself of Byron's near-contemporary

description of London as “a mighty mass of brick…dirty and dusky”. But just as this view and other Regency topography opts for bleached, creamy light there is also something very distinctly Victorian in the scratchy unsparing engraving of urban scenes such as one finds in the illustrated London News. In Victorian engravings of the city there is always chiaroscuro, a feeling of contrast between light and dark that to us can only suggest (obvious though it is) the dramatic contrasts, social and otherwise, of Victorian London.

Exaggeration is often (even always) a feature of city pictures. Eighteenth century views of London give great prominence to church spires and steeples. Artists eager to display the array of new post-fire churches clearly exaggerate their height, creating a dramatic contrast: a spiritually hierarchical city in which the houses huddle domestically around a forest of spires and steeples, an image beloved of spiritual reactionaries (such as Pugin or Ruskin, or more recently Prince Charles). And then there is the tendency to shift things about subtly to improve the display. A view is a visual catalogue of what a city has to show. If one building obscures another to what degree is it *untopographical* to move things about? shift a steeple just slightly to one side in order to display it better?

But probably the greatest problem, (and the cause for greatest falsification) is a very prosaic one: how to confine a city to the format in computer terms known as 'landscape' (the piece of A4 on its side). A famous and very attractive image in the Museum of London is entitled London from Southwark. There are various things wrong with this seductive view of the city: The artist has made of London a tight burger-ish city of Flemish looking edifices; the Thames, to the east, bends far too dramatically north after the Tower, etc. But above all this picture reveals that most dramatic of falsifications all topographers were *obliged* to make. Pictures can never be *as long as* the cities they portray. A panoramic view can simply not be fitted into a picture space with even a 5:1 ratio. Van Wyck has had enormously to compress sideways the features of London. Most dramatically St. Paul's, (the old St. Paul's of course) has an impacted profile totally unlike its true long, barnlike appearance. A hundred years later, in order to represent the same extent, Buck, in his London panorama, used a 15:1 ratio of height to width; even this may have been artificially squeezing up the panorama; the Illustrated London News 1843 Panorama uses a 25:1 format, again for the same extent, (Westminster to The Tower of London). If this is largely correct then we can see how much (justified) falsification Van Wyck had to impose, quite simply having to make every building one fifth of its actual length or, in the interests of 'display', omitting bits 'in between'.

Basically the city is too big to represent. The ways topographers cope graphically with the enormity of the city is fascinating, a matter of great virtuosity, imagination, stylisation. The greatest seventeenth century view is Wencelaus Hollar's "Long View", ostensibly from the tower of Southwark Cathedral, and made shortly before the Fire. Even here though a 'tour de force' of falsification, since the view is made from a non-existent outlook, all subsequent perspective conforming to this hypothetical point.

Artists of London had to cope with the rambling diffuseness of the city of one million inhabitants, a city that Defoe as early as 1711 had perceived as "straggling and confused." How to fit it all in? The panorama became the fashion, though early panoramas were vehicles for display and (as we saw earlier) not topographically trustworthy. If we want to know what London looked like 200 years ago we need to look at what remains of Girtin's panorama, admirably prosaic, done from the roof of one of the first new industrial buildings in the city: Albion Mills; glimpses of the rooftop that was his workspace shock in their functional modernity).

The eighteen foot Thames-side Grand Panorama of London (1843) is a thrill; I unfold it the length of my underlit hall and trace it left to right, in all its grand

and finicky, noble and ignoble detail from Westminster to Deptford, from the glitter of the West End to the sallow squalor of the East End. We are coasting along only one bank; the bulk of London lies hidden behind the strip of Thamesside building, (much of it nondescript warehouses, wharves) But we have an intense sense of the biggest city in the world, the dank sinister city of de Quincey and Dickens, that lies behind.

So, long before the advent of film, London, (the New York of 1800) had problems to solve in its self-representation. In NY similar challenges awaited solution. The common view of Manhattan remains that of a dense cluster of of downtown skyscrapers. Its verticality was novel and stunning. Louis-Ferdinand Celine vividly describes New York "qui se tenait bien raide…raide a faire peur"…that is: *scarily erect*. But the truth is that most of the building of the island of Manhattan is quite low rise. Indeed low rise is a feature of cities in the States. In her essay on Chicago, Jan Morris reminds us that in "the whole of Chicago, home of the world's tallest skyscraper (this was the eighties; Sears Tower had not yet relinquished its title to the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur) and the tallest residential building too, the average height of structures is two and a half stories". Indeed nineteenth century *pre-high rise* views of New York, of Chicago, of the big new cities of the Mid West, vaunt their *horizontal* bigness . True, the rubber necking gaper (myself) is seduced

by the drama of verticality, but the real massiveness of the big city actually lies in extent, in the horizontal. It is the sheer straight lengths of Manhattan that thrill me most. I recall almost swaying at the edge of the sidewalk, with a *horizontal* vertigo, looking down the entire length of Tenth Avenue from 145th Street. I thrilled to walking the "longest single street in the world", Avenida Rivadavia in Buenos Aires; (an unverifiable claim of course; what is *a street*? But I like the civic pride behind it!)

But very quickly the statutory expression of New York became the vertical one. In his recent book Celluloid Skyline James Sanders describes permanent movie sets of plaster and lath NY skyscrapers stored in an LA backlot. Hollywood saw to it that "every scene in a penthouse, in a rooftop nightclub, every window (looked) on to a glittering view of towers". The artificiality of these backdrops was often quite apparent. Indeed in his film Rope Hitchcock opts for an ostentatiously stylised façade of towers glittering with lit windows.

In fact in the case of New York there have been in the twentieth century different prevailing views. The classic forties and fifties view of New York, used almost to the point of unuseability, was a view incorporating the Statue of Liberty, the tip of Manhattan, an immigrant perception of the city, the

tantalysing view, one might imagine, from Ellis Island. To the 'huddled masses' the city is dwarfing, challenging, fearsome, not quite yet attainable. In the seventies and eighties there was the helicopter shot: the Master of the Universe view, saxophonic, triumphalist, very eighties; but it did do what all topogaphers want to do: give us the *whole city*. But can we take it all in? Is there not as much topographic truth in new selective views, the filming in NYPD Blue, in which the camera skids along the sidewalk to pan neurotically up the side of a tenament to an intense percussive soundtrack, (very edgy, very nineties)? Or in the unexpectedly lyrical, visually luscious topography of the Bronx in Spike Lee's Dothe Right Thing?

A nineteenth century English Miss would make her sketch of Naples to the north of the Castel St Elmo, looking down on the Castel Ovo projecting into the sea; Vesuvius would brood (a hint of vapour above its crater) in the distance. In Rome she would set up her easel in the Borghese Gardens looking west. Today we do the same with our cameras. Most of us go to the prescribed spot for the standard view; everyone has access to the one, the perfect view. I have seen tourists in Italy and Egypt *queue up* to take their snap from the tacitly accepted optimum point; an easy thing to make fun of but actually it is both a personalisation and democratisation of topography, the aesthetics that once used to be the pursuit of a few. Not that I am free of

snobbery, when for example I see a tourist take a nap of Auntie in front of Nelson's column. But, inconsistently, I find myself in Tienanmen Square watching a Chinese tripper take the same snap of grandad, old enough to be still sporting a Mao suit, erect in front of the Mao Mausoleum, and for some reason think *that* is a rather hip photographic event. You could imagine the Photographers Gallery having a whole exhibition of Tienanmen Square snaps and a book of them on sale (£45).

But then in this issue of photography I am actually not qualified to say anything because I haven't got a camera; I never travel with one; and there is a reason, or rather two. I (loftily) feel that taking a picture is a substitute for *looking*. Worse than that: it is a substitute for *remembering*. With no camera you look more carefully. With no camera you *remember more interestingly*; your memories lock together, define themselves in patterns that are the more intense the more they are arbitrary. In short:

You want to *not look at* something? You want to *forget* something?
Take a photo of it.

I remember cities in different ways: there are the vignettes... no I guess I should say clips, (as in internet clips) you can click on and activate: the tilted

Ben Hur-like sweep of cars and vespas round the cobbles of the Piazza Venezia in Rome; for example. This may not be the kind of thing that Wordsworth may have wished to "flash upon the inward eye" but that (and a million others) is what I get. Some clips are bafflingly banal. Cairo comes to me repeatedly in one such *cliché;* a tram rumbling along the rails towards me, its wheels wobbly in the heat haze, in an utterly commonplace suburb. I have intenser, more colourful, more dramatic recollections of Cairo by far; but nothing touches the immediacy and accessibility of that one emblematic memory; no, *accessibility* is the wrong word. I don't access it. It visits me. And Rio. The gorgeousness of Copacabana, the fact that I was living overlooking the beach on Avenida Atlantica, and yet my intensest memory of Rio is a nondescript street corner in the unremarkable district of Leblon where I bought a mask for carnival. I see it in such detail that a description would be boring.

There is (for me at least) one other great shaper of cityscape: it is dream. The city is backdrop to most of my remembered dreams. Dreams of real cities, dreams of compound cities, dreams in which I overfly cities; dreams of street corners, new dreams, recurrent dreams. The cities usually bear a name but it is more or less a label of convenience: "Cairo" is a composite of hot, dusty third world cities; I have travelled large tracts of this pseudo-Cairo, sometimes by

taxi (so clear now, through the rear window of my dream taxi: the warehouses, blocks of flats, balconies: so moving now to remember my dream it almost brings a tear to my eye.) And then there is a particular junction of scruffy streets which I have visited in several dreams. With each dream visit I penetrate a little more this network of streets; I actually have in mind, as I write, a plan as to how they link up; (there are also features of Naples in this dream A toZ, the lanes link together rather like the vicoletti of the Quartiere Spagnolo). My triumph one night was to walk further up one dream street than I had previously done, turn a corner and actually *have lunch* in a filthy little restaurant: Egyptian food; I can see the aluminium basin of brown beans and the water in a shared tin jug in front of me now. Since then I have gone no further up this lane. I can only sleep and wait.

Sometimes I have more complete, formal, panoramic dreams of cities. Mexico City until my recent visit was the purest fiction; it was in fact a dream flight; with that certitude of dreams I just knew that this was "Mexico City". I was, as usual, apparently suspended in the air, moving slowly above a city of mighty coruscating brown structures rearing into the sky, cowls, giant chimneys, towers, Flash Gordon-type edifices and improbably baroque industrial plants against a hazy sky. (Nor was my dream so wrong; it

just turned out, on my trip to Japan, that my "Mexico City" was Osaka.) My Maghreb mediterranean city dream (because I 'knew' where it was) involved an intense high speed car chase, barrelling through dark streets shiny with rain with that special scrolling effect of the video game, until suddenly we slewed left and there were the docks, as innocent and stylised as an illustration from Babar the Elephant, and a fanciful little crescent moon above the latticed gantries.

I dreamed of Vancouver before I went there. 'Vancouver' was to be a city almost in the Arctic circle, fronting the most hyperborean reaches of the Pacific, the white pinnacles of the skyscrapers glittering in reply to the snowy peaks encircling them. In the embrace of these mountains a twenty kilometre grid of wide streets flanked by glossy buildings would rise, massive ziggurats white and clean in the near Arctic air. In the streets would process whole tranches of global demographies, the black, the white, the asian, the oriental, in a state of integration far, far beyond the pedantries of positive discrimination. I needed to feel that there could be a city that was sage and rational and yet magnificent, fashionable, hip, cosmopolitan. If anywhere could manage it would have to be Canada; for surely Canada, for so cruelly longviewed as dull, its

turn had come. Just as Belgium, so long the butt of Europe awoke in the nineties to find itself feted asa hip nation. I wanted to find a city that gave me an intimation of the twenty-first century, a great white icy city perched out on the north of the Pacific Rim.

So much for the dream. Another form of popular 'topography', (a topographical *act,* one could say), is simply that of *climbing a tower*. Like the topographical Panorama, the tower gives us the whole city. Too much, in fact*; too much information*! Too much for me because I find the contemplation of *so much city* overwhelming to the point that it is hard to look at all. Prosaically you can say "ah, there's the x...there's the y... there's my hotel." That is fine, especially if it is your own city. But presented with a mass of information I see from the summit of Tange's City Hall in Shinjuku, Tokyo is truly perturbing; what is one to make of this astonishing expanse of data, this micro-mosaic of detail spreading to each horizon? It is for me not just a matter of how to cope with all this optically but also *emotionally.* A huge city spread out below me is almost painful. Each glance makes me sick with longing, for what I don't know. What I see is too big, the implications too

huge, too moving. It is enough to me that I have been there. There is no need to look more than once; but having ascended 60 storeys then I feel I should wait longer; I find myself dutifully returning to each point of the compass wondering if it would be negligent if I took the next lift down.

From the top of the Sears Tower in Chicago I watch a helicopter rattle past below. For an hour (such is the frequency of its lifts) from the top of the Cairo tower I ponder the great brown city at dusk, like a huge quarry in its delapidation, the tiny pyramids as neat as the little wedges on a pack of Camels, the suburbs creeping towards them. (And this for me carries no threat; thrilling it would be for the city to lap around the Great Pyramid, tenament blocks backed up against its vast brown flanks!) But not all cities are epic from a tower. Sydney is prosaic. Impressive, yes, but not sublime; the concentration of downtown, grandly tacky as it is, gives way rather too suddenly to the suburban: a whole swathe of Ramsay Streets compromising the properly metropolitan texture at my feet.

It need not always be a vertiginous vantage point; there is the modest Monument (two hundred feet) in London; not modest in the eighteenth century, however; Boswell writes "It was horrid to find myself so monstrous a way up in the air." This seems to be the right type of height to be above

London, to be close to its dank buildings, its turbid river, its sinister locked-in feel; close enough to hear the churning and seething of London below you, primitive enough very easily to imagine maid servants hauling their petticoats over the (then) low railings, falling into Fish Street Hill to their death (for the Monument was a popular suicide venue.)

And then of course there is the alternative to the tower; the view from the plane. Sydney is better at 2,000 feet; into my plane window pops the tiniest model of Sydney as neat as a netsuke: the cute little bridge, the Opera House delicate as a snail-shell, the tiny Dufy-esque sailing ships flitting around the bay. Tinier still, so tiny it was shocking, my glimpse (en route from Jakarta to Bangkok) of a tiny Singapore…its great towers the minutest of crystals seen through a microscope!

Taking off at night and passing low over Buenos Aires I feel almost sick at the beauty of the quadrilateral streets glittering to the horizon; or wafting into London above the vast reticulations of light twinkling in a filigree net of gold glittering in every direction. I know the ugly truths that lie beneath but I love that too, the grey city of the day and the velvet and gold city of night, both huge.

Any Heathrow user knows that by and large the best bet for a landing view of London (though we are too cool to actually admit it) is the *right hand window seat* , since the most common flightpath is the one that passes over south London; over Camberwell, Clapham etc. going west into Heathrow. But usually it is all over too soon.

In my most recent flight, a routine 50 minutes from Schiphol I had been bumped up to executive. Lucky because this was the one day I needed absolute access to my window, a day when London was glittering with a preternatural clarity, a day when we were held (for air traffic control reasons) twenty minutes in a tight low circle above the capital. Again and again, our plane purred the length of the Thames, *almost slowly,* as if making love to the city glittering like toytown below.

There is one other 'topographical' act that takes place within the city. It is, I feel, almost something that the city does *for itself*; for the city can knit itself together, almost with a consciousness of its own; acquiring coherence, to lose it perhaps, later, then recovering it again, almost independent of human intervention. There is a sense in which cities are *building themselves*.

At best the City is kind of massive sculpture; no a massive *sculpture park.* We are not talking here about the made-at-a-stroke cities like Brasilia; nor of harmonious, well planned renaissance and baroque cities of Italy or the bigger well supervised developments of Vienna or Paris; simply big cities where zoning, planning, aesthetic controls are not over excessive; where, not over-consciously, the city jostles itself together into a a kind of harmony; Houston or Dallas for example; splendid Sculpture parks; but I like to think aesthetes were *not* excessively involved when it came to one building being juxtaposed to another. A sculpture park, then; the sculptures just happen to be 800 feet tall. Such mega-sculptural groupings accumulate over decades, over a century, disequilibrated at moments in their history, as in the creation of any work of art; reattaining a harmony which is perhaps further unbalanced by a new feature. Manhattan is the epic example (though it is customary to trace such tower grouping back to medieval San Gimignano.) In Manhattan it is fascinating to see how the first bulks of downtown were challenged by early skyscrapers such as the Woolworth building in 1913; how in turn *that* height was challenged with the alternative Decoish verticality of the Chrysler Building and the Empire State mid town; how the dialogue returned in the seventies to the uncompromising statement of the World Trade Centre towers and how, almost, this irruption was felt excessive and

needed mollification by means of the soothing profiles of the Battery Park buildings by Cesar Pelli. (Written, of course, before September 11th 2001).

In fact the dynamic that propels huge buildings skywards is often purely (and I do indeed mean here a kind of purity of motivation) competitive bragging. This was the case in San Gimignano, that proto Manhattan, merchant princes competing for precedence; it was the spirit that made the Empire State building calculatingly just exceed the Chrysler building. And now, to my delight, in Riad we have the naked and declared competition of two sheiks each erecting an epic tower. San Gimignano in Saudi Arabia!

But alas, alack for London, love it passionately though I must; harmonious it was in its safe horizontal way until the 1950s; from 1960 a few promisingly taller buildings; the Shell Building, the Millbank tower, and in the seventies some passable semi-skyscrapers; but basically London hovered disasterously between two stools: its low rise nineteenth century profile and a timid Manhattanisation that barely took flight. (Seifert's cellular Centrepoint is beginning to look rather chic, I have to say.) Euston Tower may no be Mies van der Rohe but it is respectable. Canary Wharf (also by Pelli) is at least unambiguous in its self assertion. It does stand large and proud; and yes, from my window I can trace a certain linear logic through the city to Canary

Wharf, which now, at the time of writing, has been joined by two of a companionable size. London could be knit together if our great architects were allowed to build what they want. The Millennium Tower mooted by Foster was of course never going to get built. Too big, too beautiful, too assertive. Now we are promised an endearing, sensual cigar shaped glass tower by the same architect. This will beautifully moderate the stark outlines of what used to be called the Natwest Tower; suddenly a whole batch of buildings will, almost magically, be given coherence. This will be "completed in 2004." I'll believe that when I see it. But no: I am getting too cynical! It is through my sittingroom window very visibly nosing its way above the skyline.

So there from my window, lies the unsatisfactory ragged profile of London, as ragged as the sky that scuds above it; opportunities lost, muddle, timidity, compromise. The usual old London story in fact. I suppose we'll have to settle for that.

Sydney meanwhile is, for all its surburban outreaches, coming along nicely. Seattle has knitted together sculpturally. Most dramatically, in the last ten years, the Pudong bank of the Huang Po river in Shanghai is *looking good*. The Pearl Television Tower is about to be complemented by the 1400 feet of

the Jin Mao Building. The view *from* the Bund is about to surpass the view *of* the Bund. I will time my return to Shanghai *with care*

PERFECT CITY

But of course planning prevails.

"the city is divided into seven large circuits...passage from one to the other is provided by four avenues and four gates facing the four points of the compass..." Campanella 1601.

Ah descriptions of ideal cities! How plausible, how seductive they are! What a relief their finishedness is, how consoling when we know that actually to live in a city is to live on a building site. But the beauty of le Corbusier's Ville Contemporaine! (or rather the beauty of his *drawings*; an important distinction): the great cruciform 50 storey blocks flanking broad sunlit expressways, (unencumbered by aesthetically compromising road signs, let alone billboards); richly mature parks, a little biplane dipping prettily between the skyscrapers. Oh brave new world!

It is interesting how quite specifically Corbusier got the future wrong, the real future. His radical plans for Hongkong drawn up in the 30s have been, in terms of sheer modernity, quite eclipsed; he is outimagined by what has

actually taken place there. He might have grumbled, as he did in New York, that the skyscapers were too small. Well he had to, didn't he? Actually Corb has been outmoderned by both cities. He got it wrong. Blithely he tells us how the traffic will be:

"Our fast car (rather sweet that "fast") takes the special elevated motor track between the majestic skyscrapers.....(and later...) our car has dropped its speed of sixty miles an hour to run gently through the residential quarters...There are gardens, games and sports grounds. And sky everywhere, as far as the eye can see. The square silhouettes of the terraced roofs stand clear against the sky, bordered with the verdure of the hanging gardens."

It sounds fabulous; I am almost persuaded; but when it comes to details, we, with the benefit of hindsight, smell rats.

"Short passageways in the shape of bridges above the ordinary streets would enable foot traffic to get among those newly gained quarters consecrated to leisure amidst flowers and foliage"

We all *know* what pedestrian overpasses are like. We know the crack addict in a blanket at the end; the abandoned idiot child who like a crab scuttled horribly after me, poor wretch, with his begging bowl on an overpass in Beijing; we know the malevolent winds, the newsprint that wraps itself round your ankle, the smell.

Le Corbusier's programme, supposedly philanthropic, utopian, was of course not based on any democratic or consultative process. The people were not asked what they want. He wrote: "the despot is not a man. It is the…correct, realistic, exact plan…..this plan has been drawn up well away from the cries of the electorate or the laments of society's victims. It has been drawn up by serene and lucid minds"

These visions of perfection are usually set in the future; but we also nurse them about cities in the past; we could call this the Completion Fallacy. How appealing, we might think, by contrast was the London of Canaletto or one hundred years later of Dickens; complete and of a piece. But if we look at Canaletto's Whitehall and the Privy Garden looking North, and look *again* more carefully we see something quite surprising; one half of this painting is given over to a scrubby and unlandscaped garden, a muddy and untidily maintained Whitehall, scaffolding and hoarding and evidence

of demolition where new buildings are going up between Whitehall and King street. In short we are looking at a rather less well-known work by Canaletto: The Whitehall Road Widening Scheme.

Again, Dicken's London; that dark, essentially static city, immobilised by its great and long established institutions? But what is this? In Dombey and Son:

"The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre…Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground;…In short, the yet unfinished Railroad was in progress…"

Topographers, whatever their desire for accuracy, tended to avoid the evidence of change. They would rather replace signs of flux with 'how it is going to be.' In the Ogilby map and panorama of London of 1682 St. Paul's is depicted as finished in a style quite different to its eventual appearance. Perac, in 1577, on the other hand, was quite content to show St. Peters in Rome almost complete but oddly lacking its cupola.

Some topographers take a positive delight in the flux of the city, in demolition and building sites. The city artist George Scharf shows the gutting of part of London almost with glee, even when they were in the process of demolishing the bottom half of St. Martin's Lane where he lived, to make way for the Trafalgar Square developments. There is even a drawing of his *own home* in mid-demolitionin the 1820s

The face of a major city is often created by identifiable power sources (commercial, religious, military, royal) prevalent at the time. In the case of seventeenth century Rome this was the Vatican. In the case of Paris in the seventeenth and eighteenth century the Crown; the same city in the nineteenth century under Haussmann, the State. Though of course there is something more fundamentally French that lay behind hese; we learn, without surprise, that Descartes liked *straight streets*. If on the other hand we look at Washington (in the drawings of its planner l'Enfant) we see the possibility of wholesale city planning from scratch, free of historical precedent and constrictions. Even earlier Buenos Aires had established a grid plan which has been spectacular in its consistent coverage of the urban area.

In the case of New York there is a mix. The city got going in a haphazard London-y way, to be pulled up short at the beginning of the nineteenth century when order was imposed. Haphazard from the tip of Manhattan island northwards as far as City Hall (beyond which it was assumed that the city would never extend, so much so that the back of the building was left plain) the city very suddenly gets straightened up; from then on the city extended northwards within a grid pattern.

Straight streets. Precisely what we might imagine the French philosophical contribution to urbanism would be, fully realised in the boulevards of Haussmann. But this reminds us that London, in its unregulated ad-hocness is *also a philosophical assertion*, an assertion of laissez faire capitalism.

One just has to look at the map of modern London and Buenos Aires or Washington all at about the same time, let us say the early nineteenth century, to see the difference between the unplanned city. London in 1800 is a muddle, though not, of course without its logic. Thoroughfares are meandering. The larger and moderately unifying plans of Nash have still to be implemented. The development of the West End and the great squares of Bloomsbury and Mayfair represent some order; but the bulk of the city is

random straggle, the kind of straggle, especially longitudinal that distressed Defoe much earlier:

"It is the disaster of London, as to the beauty of its figure that it is stretched out in buildings, just at the pleasure of every builder, or undertaker of buildings, and as the convenience of people directs, whether for trade or other wise; and this has spread the face of it in the most straggling, confused manner, out of all shape, uncompact, and unequal."

Defoe in particular must have sorely regretted the fact the post-Fire opportunities were not taken.

London has always been an exception to the European city model; it will probably always be a muddle. Yes there have been times when it could have been sorted out, but overall projects for its great articulation were piecemeal. There are, in London, projected great set pieces: Greenwich, The Mall, Regent Street, Regent's Park; but they never were properly articulated into the rest of the urban fabric, (let alone to one another), for all the grandiose plans for the greater coherence of London that never got built, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century: George Dance's Double London Bridge, Thomas Allom's Thames Embankment, Major-General

Sir Frederick Trench's two mile riverside Colonnade, Soane's Processional Route. All in vain.

(I think especially of a soul mate, Sir John Soane, who, hapless man, in 1826, in London, produced a Design for a "Grand National Entrance into the Metropolis"! Never built of course; doomed ! doomed in each and every word in this project: Grand? OK. Occasionally we can do Grand; but by and large that has never been the way that London has been conceived. National? London has never been a *National* city, not anyway as Paris has been. Entrance? can here be an entrance to as amorphous and struggling a mass as London? London Bridge could perhaps be seen as an "entrance" to London for the traffic from the south and the continent or rather (In 1826, anyhow) the cramped courtyard of an inn off the Borough High Street where practically all coaches from Dover and the continent fetched up. As for the last word of Soane's hopeful project: Metropolis*? forget* it! Metropolis it was, and how; but it was rarely *conceived* with such admirable abstraction.)

Where there are purposeful thoroughfares, roads that lead somewhere (the axis of the Strand, Fleet Street and Ludgate Hill with its culmination at St. Paul's for example), they are hardly processional routes suited to a fleet of

Staff Cars bearing a dictator to his palace. Almost certainly this is right, I tell myself, (stifling Speerian tendencies) for what could be more delightful than bumbling up Fleet street and just sort of pitching up at St. Paul's? If Wren had managed to realise his almost Cartesian project we would no longer have this feeling of discovery; perhaps we should be glad that London remained a cryptic city, did not become a rational one, even when it had its great post-Fire opportunity post 1666. Typically, in terms of city planning, not much happened; what happened was mainly in the way of practical measures; house sizes, materials (brick and stone rather than wood) forms of industrial zoning, width of street housing regulations, banning of overhanging eaves; brisk, practical, mercantile decisions reached typically, in the English way, by modifying and compromising more ambitious legislation.

The grand thoroughfares conceived by Wren or Evelyn just didn't materialise. This is usually seen as a pity. Others are glad. Rasmussen, for example, in London the unique City, says "the rejection of Wren's plan is not a fault but rather a new triumph for what might be called the idea of London".

OK. *I quite like* the idea of this anarchic spirit; but stronger, perhaps, is my exasperation at the inevitability of our failure to plan; we will never get it right .I half agree with Giedion; in Space Time and Architecture; he writes:

"The coordinated plan of Christopher Wren for the general rebuilding of London following the great fire of 1666 was rejected by Charles II after only three days consideration…And this just at the time (Giedion continues) when Bernini was laying out the Piazza in front of St Peter's, and Le Notre the gardens of Versailles!"

I share Giedion's exasperation.

It is, again, absolutely typical, absolutely *bloody* typical, that nothing got done; but at the same time gratifying, in fact, that the Crown did not have influence enough on the City to be able to force through the grand vision of some mere *planners*. That, for Rasmussen, is presumably the "idea of London", mercantile, anarchic, independent.

London looked as it did after the Fire and looks as it does now for the same reason. It had its own planning principles, just as Rome and Paris had: its principle was no-principle, pure laissez faire, the great engine of the city got

up and running again as soon as possible with understandable disregard for fancy plans influenced by … wossname…?..Italian geezer… *Bernini.*

It has always been like this; the planning of London has always been piecemeal, underfunded, tentative; its hopeful suggestions tossed aside by "the monstrous town" (Defoe) going its own way. As a result London is the most astonishing mess, a real palimpsest, layer on layer of successive building, demolition, destruction. The face of London is breathtaking in its complexity, in its astonishing juxtapositions, in the way that its muddle of medieval lanes still (in 2003) shows through. The ignominious (but therefore quite chic!) address of the new building by James Stirling, recently completed as a result of promotion from Palumbo is: I, Poultry. Foster's Swiss Re Tower? 30, St Mary's Axe. We should, of course, like that!

Studying nineteenth century pictures of Trafalgar Square I have always been interested to see, in a building abutting the Elizabethan Northumberland House, the premises of Cole's Truss and Rheumatic Belt Depot and Manufactory. I found it hard to believe in the prominence of something so prosaic, so low. I was interested later to find that Matthew Arnold himself had also commented on its anomalous position. But the truss

depot is typical. London, city without shame, lacking all compunctions, unchallenged (save by a coterie of design aesthetes) by any doubts as to what should be juxtaposed with what. And it was always so.

In the sixteenth century Stow grumbles:

"...this common field....encroached upon by building of filthy cottages (notwithstanding all proclamations and acts of parliament made to the contrary..."

In 1734 London is described as

"a babel...a Hotch-potch of half-moon and serpentine narrow Streets, close, dismal, long lanes, stinking Allies, dark gloomy Courts and suffocating Yards....here lives a personage of high Distinction; next Door a Butcher with his stinking Shambles"

Francis Place, writing in 1835 recalls Whitehall in the late eighteenth century:

"Immediately in front of the Horse Guards were a range of apple stalls, and at ...noon every day two very large stalls were set up for the sale of 'bow-wow' pie. This pie was made of meat, very highly seasoned....it seems almost incredible that such a street could be in the condition described."

Recently in the Evening Standard there have been articles denouncing the location of two mobile (but immobile) hot dog stalls, one outside the Royal Albert Hall; the other (to the chagrin of Lord Snowdon) outside the Royal College of Art.

Sometimes (like those old fussers) I fret at thehot dog stalls, at the fact that in Piccadilly Circus the old London Pavilion theatre should have a life-size effigy of a rock star leaning awkwardly from every balcony; (that special toppling forward stance of the waxwork.) On other days I think Ok: Bow-Wow pie in Whitehall; truss depots in Trafalgar Square, bungee jumping at Battersea, inflatable pods in Horse Guards; so why not a polystyrene effigy of David Bowie coated in pigeon dropping keeling over a balcony in Piccadilly Circus? What the hell; that is what London has always been about.

For London has no pervasive tradition of grandeur; in Paris there is a certain ripple effect, the grandeur of the centre rippling concentrically and of course in increasingly dilute form out into the suburbs. There is in New York; in the presumptions of its ground plans at least there is a certain serial grandeur; in London; yes, there *are gestures* of grandeur, limited largely to the trajectories of royalty. There is commercial magnificence in the City; but

we have never really understood, or even wanted bourgeois grandeur. London has a breathtaking nonchalance towards what could be its great sites; there is perhaps not much that we should expect of the conjunction of Oxford street and Tottenham Court Road; yet it is, probably the most crowded intersection in the city; this very corner may actually be one of the five most crowded places in the world. And Oxford Street is a significant axis (and will later get some of the attention it deserves); similarly Tottenham Court Road has some dignity, striking north as it does, purposefully from the busiest of junctions. What do we find here; a brief architectural flourish (the Dominion Theatre to the east showing Grease or Walt Disney's Beauty and the Beast) and a dullish but decent 1900-ish office building on the other side; then to the west there is the extraordinary ignominy of the corner of Hanway Street, where a sort of plywood-built pub is followed by the utter bathos of a row of the merest shacks; some 20 computer and porn shops. Clearly of course they were merely fronting a major site and their leases are fast expiring. (Subsequent note: they have *just* been emptied and razed away within a day. *Subsequent* subsequent note: the site is now a presentable dull premises for an Internet Shop, a Boots and a Sainsbury's; and of course those dodgy little lean-to shops have become, *in recollection*, amusingly raffish!)

But the fact that they had been there for decades exasperated me; when I returned from other more coherent cities I could only reflect that in Paris, say, anomalies like this would have been cleared away at the flourish of a pen in the Hotel de Ville. But then, as Peter Hall says in Cities in Civilization: "London was (or we can say is) "in thrall to Benthamite utilitarianism; Paris adhered to an absolutist, centralist tradition that went back to Louis X1V " Indeed it hardly needs pointing out that here until very recently there has been no Hotel de Ville, no one in charge, by and large no one to give a damn.

But then again.... Sitting in an upstairs window at Burgerking I look out on this corner and watch, one hot afternoon, a cluster of gorgeously tu-tued men, pink tulle, pistachio frou frou, wielding bright yellow waterpistols, waiting at the stop to bus up to Finsbury Park for the Gay Mardi Gras; and I think do I *want* Tottenham Court Road to be some bloody Champs Elysees? No thanks!

I have sort of given up; London is precisely the city that an endemically unurban people, a terminally unurban people (the English) are doomed to have. At intervals there are moments, opportunities for grand and essentially urban gestures. They are almost always fudged; now there is the *Millennium Village.* A development east of the Millennium site. Need it be said? It will *not*

(of course) be a splendid glittering range of daring condominiums flanking the Thames. No, it appears (from the rather wispy drawings I have seen) to be a low rise spread of very modest blocks and an excess of garden. (Millennium *Village;* what is this thing about *villages*? You want village life? Go and *live* in a village!) This takes us to the fact of the *house*.

The major feature of London is the house. It is by and large a city of houses which makes it distinctly different from most other European cities. This is above all a feature of English (as opposed to Scottish) cities. The Scottish are different; like other Europeans they have from very early on built tenement.

Fundamentally the fact is this; the English are an unmetropolitan people and build the least metropolitan cities in the world. This has its attractions. London has always been seen as a kind of garden city. Rasmussen's enthusiasm for the scattered as opposed to the concentrated city focuses on the house.

The origins of the house with gardens which constitutes so much of the fabric of London can, in a simple-minded way, be connected to the saying the Englishman's "home is his castle". This will do, though it is obviously more

complicated than that, Rasmussen cites Elizabethan decrees that new houses may be built only as long as there are unbuilt-on grounds attached to the building. We might here see the origin of the town garden. Whatever the causes of the English love of house and garden it can easily be seen that the idea of flat living, so common in so many other cities, has not until recently prevailed in London. Now, of course, we have become very much a city of flat dwellers since a large percentage of the houses have in this century been converted into flats; (and this does not make for great flats).

But there have been flats: we could identify four moments when the idea of flats was tried: simply we could sketch their history as the Mansion, the Court, the House, the Tower.

The Mansion belongs to the last decades of the nineteenth century: large, ostentatious, redbrick (the kind of buildings we now look on as posh but which were, in E.M Foster's Howards End described as vulgar.)

The next distinct wave was the Court; from the 1930s onwards there were grand blocks in central London, much less grand in Kilburn, Balham, Chiswick etc. Du Cane Court in Balham is a huge block,in plan swastika–like; (it is

said its architect was an enthusiast of Nazi Germany in the thirties). A mummified baby (goes South London folklore) was found in one of the storage lockers. I live in such a block: a Sandhurst Court in Brixton, built in 1935.

Then there is the House,(primarily LCC or Council or Trust Housing ; decent red brick, balconised, modestly utopian); and the Tower; the benighted Tower is the sixties contribution to flat living in London. Yesterday I visited a friend who lives in a Tower overlooking Shepherd's Bush Green. From his fifteenth floor sitting room, looking westwards, you can see 747s floating in towards Heathrow. If you look thirteen floors below you will see a smallish walled piece of lawn, studiedly asymmetrical, with a see-saw in the centre. This uninviting little Eden is, on the floor list in the lift, indicated by the initials A.D. On investigation this turns out to stand for Amenity Deck (one thinks of the Exclusion of Adam and Eve from the Amenity Deck. Certainly this fine day there was nobody there.) The word deck is significant. Does it resonate (a little and belatedly) with Le Corbusier's appeal for the example of maritime architecture? The Empress of France, perhaps, whose decks he describes as "pure, neat, clear, clean and healthy".

But the sixties Tower is too obvious a target and besides, with that fickleness of taste we are beginning to stop in our polemical tracks with a dawning of sincere admiration for some of the achievements of the sixties and the seventies. Trellick Tower in North Kensington is hyper-hip and rightly so too. Some of the big, bad blocks of South London are looking increasingly radical and dramatic. Yes, I am not so stupid as to ignore the real radicalism and excitement in those early days of social housing. In a fascinating issue of the Architectural Design called London Today (June 1961, price 3/6) the sixties adventure had just begun and one cannot help being enormously persuaded by the optimism of the articles. "This montage (says one caption) shows something of the change of scale that is occurring all over London, as the Georgian terraces are replaced by 15 - 20 storey blocks"....exciting! And not just single blocks, of course, but whole *estates* of blocks.

Fear not; this is not the *usual* lament over 1960s architecture. It is a different lament. The problem was that 60s architecture was (however radical) *fundamentally unmetropolitan*. These 1960s estates, apparently so urban, apparently so *opposite* to the rural were in fact the latest (hopefully the last exemplum of the " Garden City"; there is an impatience with streets, a contempt for streets, an insistence on swathes of turf. We are looking at the

last gasp of the principles of eighteenth century landscape gardening; it was the old English ruralising instinct still, covertly at work. Previous attempts at flat living at least conformed to the pre-existent urban fabric; they did not challenge the order of streets and traffic. They were metropolitan. Later Utopian schemes, (the kind of utopianism that liked to call a roof garden an Amenity Deck) did not wish to fit into this scheme. For as much as they built upwards they felt obliged to provide an equivalent amount of windswept land about them, perfunctorily landscaped, the very English ideals of Brown or Repton still just about discernible in the undulating lines and the trifling man-made hillocks (with vandalised saplings.)

The garden city never really applied in Europe. True, the London Square of the eighteenth century, indeed even of the seventeenth century *was* an influence abroad. In that most metropolitan of city projects, the haussmannisation of Paris, it threatened to provide a weakening alternative to what the great planner had in mind. Louis Napoleon wanted London-type squares, but Haussman succeeded in vetoing this, allowing but one square as such, that adjacent to the Hotel de Ville. Haussmann was right; for what is quite so wonderful about London squares? Give me a boulevard anyday. Squares may be right in England (I grumpily concede that people

seem to think they are wonderful even though most of them were and still are inaccessible to the non-resident and non- key holder); but not in France; not in Italy. I recall that in the eighties in Naples tubs of flowers, pretty Englishy type flowers, appeared; hanging baskets too in the dazzling, hectic streets of Naples; some anglophile Neapolitan had obviously been walking around Christopher's Place in London or somewhere in Bath. They lasted about two weeks. Sorry; not right for Naples.

And just as the French planners had difficulty ceding to garden spaces, so do English planners today in ceding to streets; proper streets, that is. The idea of the street beloved of the English is that pathetic computer mock-up of Prince Charles' Poundbury, with homely little shops, one man and a bicycle (old-style bike, of course) and yes, somewhere a car, but a *cuddly* sort of car.

In short English city planning, in particular in the sixties and seventies did not believe in streets, having rather an anglo-saxon obsession with open spaces. In fact the main contribution that the English have made to urbanism (a word which naturally exists uneasily in the English language) is the Garden City; a quite understandable response to the kind of cities described by Engels or Dickens or Gissing. But it was not the tower blocks that made 60s

architecture fail; it was the obsession with space or Space or *spaces;* rather than with streets, streets that went from A to B; big busy streets. That is what cities are all about. English city planning? Its fundamental creed? Create a "space" then *turf* it. (What is this thing about *grass*?) Even the ostensibly more metropolitan visions of such as Richard Rogers in his recent City book are full of spaces; his ideal seems to be Paris; but Paris is not full of spaces; and where there are "spaces" they are full of pseudo-medieval "street acts", even…mime artists, for god's sake! No thanks. Also if we look at drawings of these spaces where are the buggies, where are the plastic bags, where are the goofy gangs of Norwegian youths who have had their hair sprayed green (bless 'em) in Covent Garden? No, these envisioned spaces are enlivened only by little knots of gracefully tapering wraiths that I recall Alan Bennett calling "Precinct People".

Be cautious of those who wish to create spaces with human happiness in mind. Beware of aims such as those of Jacobs and Appleyard (in their Toward an Urban Design Manifesto); they promise us "liveability, identity and control, access to opportunity, imagination and joy; authenticity and meaning, open communities and public life; self reliance and justice."

Why open communities; why should communities not shut themselves off if they wish? Is this Sesame Street? As for *joy,* excuse me, gentlemen, how do you *know* that people want joy? I don't want it. Go meddle in someone else's life.

Like Louis MacNeice I identify the bossiness of the utopian, into whose mouth he puts these words:

With all this rebuilding we have found an antidote
To quiet and self-communing; from now on nobody
Strolling the streets need lapse into timelessness
Or ponder the simple unanswerable questions."
(New Jerusalem)

(I am reminded that the only possible retort to the enjoinder: "*Have a Nice Day!"* is *"I have other plans.")*

In London we have never really had planning. Don't really want it. We like our dismal, piecemeal, unplanned un-mayored city....OK unmayored no more But London is different.

DARK CITY

London is different. Ed Koch, mayor of New York was advised on some issue to compare notes with his counterpart in London. His reply was "You can't call London". This was, I presume, after the dissolution of the GLC. (Now, as I write we finally have a mayor; not the one I want; but I feel it right that there be someone, albeit Livingstone.) The arch-provincial Margaret Thatcher was not against the GLC for political reasons alone. Her abolition of this body could be connected with her statement that there is no such thing as society. Clearly the idea of a city, the abstract idea was anathema to Thatcher; anathema in its abstractness, in that conceptualising required to make a thing an idea. Thatcher can see the city only as an agglomeration of building. She, and, alas, too many people in England, can never see the city as an idea.

But London is not the only city that has problems with its self-identity. Tokyo has in one sense only recently been knit together conceptually as a single city; and not necessarily to the liking of its inhabitants.

I am in the massive Lobby of architect Kenzo Tange's City Hall in Shinjuku, Tokyo (or more prosaically Tokyo Metropolitan Government Offices). By

sheer force of will, by a process of *sheer ideation* this building has attempted to bind up the disparateness of the Tokyo region (twice the size of the Greater London In area) into a single city. Tange's building is considered by architects and others to be alien to Japanese culture. The Japan Times of the 10th April called it "a crude western style power display". It is also alien to the transitory and ad hoc nature of this city in constant threat of destruction by earthquake: "I feel uncomfortable about this building" says one Japanese architect "because in Tokyo everything floats...chaotic things happen in a complex space. City Hall doesn't fit in with the fact that everything is moving" . City Hall is alien to the provisional character of so much building in Japan. Venerable shrines are repeatedly demolished and reconstructed. As we saw earlier in Tokyo itself 25% of the city has been destroyed and rebuilt in the last five years.

Alien it may be, both architecturally and conceptually in its material and abstract monolithicness; the fact remains that it has been done. City Hall! I love the feeling of being in City Hall; and above all of, (incredible for a European), just *strolling in* through the big glass doors past *no* security guards, *no* notices, *no* scanners; just past a single smiling girl at a desk and I have the acres of gleaming grey granite and marble to myself. Screens show unending visual expositions of the the nervous system of the city; traffic

movement, pollution-readings, sewage, all the churning unphotogenic chaos of reality visible from the 60th floor transmuted into the pristine outlines, the sinuous chiaroscuro, the vivid, juicy colours of computer graphics.

Below is the lobby. And in this lobby is an elevation plan for the great Main Government Building Number One; and on the plan the space I am in it says: "Lobby for Metropolitan Citizens".

And as City Man I counted myself...*in*.

In London we are now attempting to recover an at least *mental* Lobby for Metropolitan Citizens. At least I had the satisfaction of seeing people *think London*, (not just, as per usual harping on about it being "a string of villages really" etc)

It is nine in the morning on Saturday and there is a commotion in the street, I lean out still actually half in bed; it is Ken Livingstone's battle bus; and there he is on the open air upper deck waving; and dammit if I don't lean out and wave back. I have no intention of voting for him; but I am so moved at the idea of metropolis that I actually 'wave to Ken'; that's how badly I need it.

I am slogging up the Old Kent Road against the wind; ten or so miles behind me, another four to do. The sinister bulks of the Heygate Estate approach; my guide to the architecture of London tells me that this estate "was used by the American critic Oscar Neuman to support his thesis that private or defensible space is necessary in housing design." Neuman claims, however that the heavy vandalization of this type of estate is due to *lack of the defensible*. The utopian architects of the 1960s no doubt had their *own* bit of defensible space, (a garden behind their Georgian house in Islington perhaps?) but the little people were to live *communally*.

And yet to look at some of the housing round the Elephant and Castle, and in the sunshine, one almost sees Le Corbusier's Ville Contemporaine, *almost* hears the whirr of a little biplane in a cloudless sky and the hum of 'fast cars' on that unencumbered 'special elevated motor track'.

My pace quickens along the New Kent Road to the lamentable pink monolith, set amidst a tumult of traffic, dominated by the dramatic blocks by Erno Goldfinger. The Heygate estate, the Elephant and Castle, they don't daunt me; these are just part of a challenging terrain. They are appalling, but they appall me no more than a tricky crag would deter the rambler with a Wainewright guide in the pocket of his anorak. For I am that rambler. I just do

my orienteering in the thick of the city; and now, just as my outdoor confrere reaches into his haversack for rations, I go down underground to eat tacos at a Mexican stall in the bowels of the Elephant and Castle.

I have always had an intense relationship with London, intense and vague as "London" could only be for a child who had hardly ever been there; really only in tow as a toddler. But I had images from the wireless; In Town Tonight early in the fifties. Am I right in remembering the programme began with the traffic roaring until bidden by a stern voice to halt? Then there were show-biz interviews and other snippets; but the important part of this, the moment I waited for, was the close of the programme when a clipped, Chumleigh-Warnerish voice said "Carry On London!" And I imagined (with what intensity!) an immobilised gridlock around Eros all at once grind thrillingly into motion again; such excitement!

I was about seven at the time. But I had been there once when I was four and stayed with my grandmother in a big house in Camden Hill Square full of shuttered rooms with furniture under dust sheets. She took me on the first day to the London Museum, then in Kensington Gardens. Each day, for three days after that I made her take me to the same museum for only one thing: to see

the model of the Fire of London. I can see the glass case now with tinny little mechanical flames darting up and down between tiny gabled houses,

I was inevitably drawn to London. At the age of twelve my friend and I would spend 14/6 on a day return ticket to London from Cambridge; we would walk around in our short trousers seeing nothing; just being there. From then on it became progressively more and more a part of my life; 1967 in Holloway, a summer above a chemist's shop in Portobello Road 1969, 1970 a bedsit in Norland Square, (three pounds a week.) But always, like any good provincial in a nineteenth century Bildungsroman, I wanted to not just live in it but to 'possess' it in some way or other, a preoccupation that would not occur to a Londoner by birth, secure in the preeminence of his own manor.

I had once had a guidebook called J'ai Paris dans ma Poche (for I had lived a whole year in Paris before I ever lived in London.) I had chanced on a flat at the end of the Boulevard S, Michel. I worked in a local bookshop which specialised in pornography (confined to its cellar). There in the 'cave' I unpacked crates of Olympia Press erotica, astonishingly (for this was after all 1970) still outlawed. Every now and then the little birdlike directrice would call down to me: "Alors monsieur, vous avez fini avec les erotiques?" "Oui

Madame, toute de suite", I would reply stuffing some flagellant classic back onto the shelves.

Dans ma poche. I have a compulsion to pocket cities, to possess them in their entirety. The extent and complexity of the city taunts me. I know that to possess a city at all it must be with the near-hallucinatory instanteaneity ("In a flash my mind's eye shows me a thousand dust-tormented streets") that Durrell encapsulates Alexandria.

But the taxi driver who has done the Knowledge has achieved something of the kind. Compared to his Knowledge my obsession resembles the finicky data-docketing of the trainspotter. So it should ; for it is the same thing. And yet why this derision of the humble trainspotter? For he is responding to a passion greater than the mere accumulation of loco numbers; deep within those muffled figures with video cameras on the platforms at Crewe must burn a real passion; a passion that I, unwilling to omit a hundred yards of the Old Kent Road, would do well to respect.

Trainspotter, mon semblable, mon frere.

To walk every London street? So *supposedly* did Phyllis Pearsall who compiled the first London A-Z and who walked, it is said, every street in the capital. (This would mean, if each of the 24,000 thoroughfares were but an eighth of a mile long, a total of 3,000 miles; judge for yourself. My aim as I set out that first morning was to walk every main thoroughfare in London; the definition of main? Well it had to be *something*, so simply all thoroughfares marked yellow on the London A-Z; an area some ten miles west to east; ten north to south; every main road, in fact, within a five mile radius of Westminster. So my walks covered an area of 100 square miles; and covered some three hundred miles.

Feeling slightly self-conscious of my odd endeavour (resentful even, of the necessary limitations I had had to impose on myself) I set out one day at eight a.m. on a January Saturday and walked from Clapham, through Camberwell and New Cross, concluding at Bermondsey. About five miles. Back home I marked in my route on a large A-Z map, with pink highlighter.

Three years later one stretch of one street remained; and I had kept quite a respectable one: Great Portland Street. To do this in style I rode in a taxi to the top of my very last unwalked street, and then solemnly (and yet feeling a little foolish as I had three years before when I took my first step) walked south until hitting the Christmas shopping crowds of Oxford street. I went home,

unrolled my maps, now tattered, and highlighted the remaining three inches. My task was complete.

I felt I was operating on three levels as I walked. First there was the street itself and its disparate features. Secondly the syntax of the streets, the logic (or, this being London, the lack of it) of what succeeds what, what leads to what. Thirdly the overall and largely retrospective picture achieved by tracing my route over maps; seeing large scale axes, coherences not apparent on site; it was once I had got home that the entirety of London came together both cartographically and mentally.

To walk down a street is to be subject to at very least the importunings of a riot of stimuli; barely connected; faces, clothes, buggies, shopfronts, cars; each thing, in itself for the most part banal or unmemorable; but knitting together into a modest, sometimes even haunting significance.

There is real delight in docketing of details; nationalities, languages, the gamut of Englishes, the shops as they pass you by; the jaunty bravado of their names: Mister Cheap Potato, Fin King Aquatics, Millionhairs Hair Studio, Carpetland, Pheonix Tyres (sic); again, the pathos of buildings renovated and renewed, each time too cheaply; the pathos too of "modern" detail already

old, the Nigerian traffic warden looking like the Chief of Staff of a central African nation; the dank smell of pubs, as much cleaning fluid as beer; the charity shops, the churning portholes of the laundrettes, the newsagents cards misspelled in cheap biro; the faded photographs of burger meals buckled by steam in their orange plastic frames; the market stalls festooned with lurid viscose: all tacky, in juxtaposition all acquiring a certain pathos, or dignity. (It is just such disparities, droll juxtapositions, that you find in the apparently dispassionate paintings by hyper-realists of the 1960s such as Estes.)

This kind of itemisation is itself an already conventional aesthetic, the aesthetic of the eighties and nineties London description of, say Martin Amis. It is enjoyed for its truthfulness, though there is no reason why the mean, the tacky, the squalid should be inherently more 'truthful' in any way. Nonetheless this contemplative but gratuitous docketing of detail, banal and ineloquent, goes back to the nineteenth century. It was always a feature of the novels of Balzac, Dickens, Zola, even Dostoevsky, not much acknowledged as a city writer, perhaps; but the mean streets of the poorer parts of St. Petersburg in Crime and Punishment are described in headache-inducing detail. Indeed Crime and Punishment must be the longest nightmare in print; specifically nightmarish in its headachy itemisation of banal detail:

“To the left, parallel with the walls of the house, and commencing immediately at the gate, there ran a wooden hoarding of about twenty paces down the court. Then came a space where a lot of rubbish was deposited”....

There is a jerky quality to this that is remarkably modern. We can imagine a handheld camera darting up some New York tenement alley.)

But there is more to the experience of walking than mere street detail; there is the kinetic experience: watching the texture and the quality of the building change minute to minute, thickening and thinning as you walk, darting to and fro in history as perhaps nowhere in the world; now twentieth, now, (between an Iceland Supermarket and a double glazing outlet) astonishingly a row of Georgian cottages; now residential, now commercial; but however disparate, item by item the whole knit together and given purpose (at very least the purpose of going in one particular direction!) by a common axis; in London this is an often errant, vacillating axis (the wavering tentacles of the outer suburbs); at other times dramatically purposeful (for all the triviality and bathos of the detail along the way): the Roman roads of Watling Street (from Marble Arch to Cricklewood) or Ermine Street (from London Bridge to

Stamford Hill). And there is always a rich interaction between their purposeful straightness on one hand and the abrupt descents that London so repeatedly provides from the sublime to the ridiculous.

To walk the streets of London is to have a poignant awareness of its vulnerable fabric. Vienna and Paris have the solidity of embastioned fortresses compared to London, with its long rows of houses wittering out into the nether reaches of the city. This unassuming linearity of housing development impressed the Danish architect Rasmussen in the 1930s (London Unique City) but, alas, means housing of a terrible vulnerability; there was little anticipation (when Rasmussen wrote) of how easily a whole row, or almost worse, a *bit* of a row of housing, could be punched out, by an enemy bomb, by a demolition squad. This vulnerability was made all the more easy by the fact that these houses, however admired and coveted today for being “Georgian”, had in many cases been perfunctorily built; shallow foundations, walls that could be resolved with ease into a cloud of plaster dust. The housing stock of London! How poor so much of it is, and yet how pathetically grateful we are for these *regal* categories: Georgian, Regency, Victorian, Edwardian! How we love those "original features"! (by which we often mean no more than some Edwardian door handle or tap, mass produced, of course; because we are

hardly dealing here with fixtures hand-honed in the workshops of the Arts and Crafts Movement.)

There is a constant ferment in the fabric of London; it is chronological as well as linear; there is a continual disparity between what buildings *were* for and what they *are* for now; it is especially in London that, to understand the city at all, you have to ask of any building: When was it built? What was it when it was built? What is it now? At a guess I would say that the answers to the last two questions would be different in London more often than in any other city in the world. One structure could, inside 100 years, have been, in turn, theatre, cinema, bingo hall, a wine cash and carry outlet, venue for computer auctions. A Nigerian shop near my flat began as a phone shop (perfunctory booths from which Colombians phoned their families in Barranquilla); a video rental outline was added, then the booths went; then it was video rental *and cosmetics*; now just cosmetics; three shops up a premises has been within the year an Accommodation Agency, Mobile Phone dealer and Funeral Parlour. Further up the road is a shop that deals with Mobile Phones *and* Martial Arts Equipment.

For months, in fact years, I criss-crossed the city, seeing my large A-Z map inked in with increasing density, acquiring indeed a linear logic indiscernible as

you actually walk it: the density of the streets at the heart of the City, the looser textures of thoroughfares set free of land-value constraints at the north, the mournful repetitiveness of the transtamesian suburbs, the axis, evident only retrospectively, that runs 12 miles from Tooting Bec in the far south to Stoke Newington in the north; or the more obvious west-east axis: Acton, Shepherds Bush, Marble Arch, Holborn and into the East End. There are cities where the major axes are excitingly suggestive of the grand sweep of a quill across parchment (Sextus VI in Rome), nib across vellum (Haussman in Paris), Rotring across graph paper (Neimeyer in Brasilia). You can't feel the same in London; the axes, with a few exceptions are (at best) organic, pragmatic; at worst extraordinarily arbitrary and hence vulnerable to (or, if we are lucky, beneficiaries of) Utopian change.

As I walked I had the impression of passing long sequences of building in which each item was disconnected from the next; a continuous feeling of dislocation, presenting me with a constant need to reassess, revise my expectations. London is an epic confusion, epically diverse, multifarious, monumentally unpredictable, comically dissonant in its juxtapositions, breathtakingly profligate of its opportunities, touchingly full of lurches from the sublime to the downright ignominious.

This is not by chance. We have seen Anglo Saxon reluctance to recognize the city either as an entity or as an idea. London is the kind of city you get if you believe in neither of those things.

We in England (and I say England because the Scots are better at cities than we are) are not really convinced that a city is a "thing", indeed that it is anything more than an agglomeration of building. But, OK, we may not have been very good planners but in London we live in the most startlingly anarchic spread of bricks and mortar ever seen. A city of Ideas, principles? they may have been missing; but sheer blind kinetics there always were. Cruikshank's exciting picture of London Going Out of Town shows this process. Trees and haystacks flee before the march of hods and ladders and pickaxes; a wonderfully futuristic image. Through the smoke the dome of St. Paul's is just visible. I know we are meant to think, oh, how terrible! But I can only feel excitement at the routing of Nature.

The blind centrifugal force of London is exciting; perhaps I should just resign myself to it. Incoherent it is on many levels, historically complex, departing as it did form two centres (at least), Westminster and the City, catching and digesting in its web villages and towns, its progress colliding with, lapping around, absorbing or demolishing previous settlements and villages. During

the centuries London has been a heaving mass of forces elbowing for space, almost a geological phenomenon, with inevitable impactions. Economically it has been the anarchic buccaneering spirit of capitalism itself; it is the city of capitalism; and capitalism, for all its virtues, is never going to be a very pretty sight; an impressive sight but not a pretty one.

But we must embrace London as it has become; love it in spite of its iredeemable ugliness, see the virtues and essential London-ness of some very alarming things indeed!

The building of the sixties and seventies has needed twenty or thirty years to *begin to look right,* very right; suddenly I am regarding at the grey concrete building of the seventies and thinking *brilliant*, utterly and absolutely right for London in their uncompromising audacity: Guys Hospital with that lowering overhang at its summit; the Barbican; stunning towers with their mega-Sienese, fortifications 60 storeys in the air! the South Bank unexpected ly looking good after so long; yes there are some terrible terrible things; the Elephant and Castle complex is thoroughly nasty; but, yet again, *even* it has an undeniably epic terribilita. There are some thrilling tower blocks throughout the city, particularly in south London, great ramparts in the sky. What I like about the buildings is that they are thoroughly in the buccaneering and audacious London tradition.

(There has always been a London tradition for big swaggering buildings that *don't fit in*. In the twenties and thirties it was the blocks of Portland stone; Portland Stone; it has such a dignified ring; surely Portland stone would have been welcomed; surely it is a quintessentially Londonesque building material, the greyness, the sobriety? but no; they too were found to be an intrusion into the fabric of London: "those mountains of Portland stone and concrete that tower above us" Osbert Sitwell muttered in 1928).

In London we cannot talk, as in Paris, of beauty, harmony; that is not he kind of city that London has ever really been; yes, enclaves of harmony here and there; but as a whole, let us face it, London is deeply unlovely; unlovely, but we love it for its great floundering, wounded and fragmented self; the wounds of war, of demolition, of cut price and crackpot architectural utopianism, of just too many years of laissez faire, housing speculation, insufficient planning, bad planning, deprivation of funds, irregularity of funds. It is preposterous in its anarchic clutter, in its wastes of space in the spindliness of its wavering up hill and down dale suburbs.

"London" writes Peter Ackroyd "has always been an ugly place. Contemporary criticism of "modern architecture" apparently emerging

haphazardly and without due planning has been anticipated by dismayed or disgusted Londoners of every century." But it is not just a matter of architecture. Elsewhere in this article he continues:

"London is a dark city because it has been built at the imperatives of money and power rather than the needs or aspirations of its inhabitants."

It notably lacks virtues that other cities have, social, aesthetic, urban, hedonistic virtues. One loves it in spite of its dank, sallow self; no, worse, *because of it*. It inspires the most intense love-hate tributes; *intense* love, *intense* hate. Alexander Herzen, socialist thinker, who came to (wealthy and comfortable) exile in London in 1852 writes:

"On one side the stalactities of the Houses of Parliament would loom through the darkness...on the other, the inverted bowl of St. Paul's....and street-lamps...street-lamps...street-lamps without end in both directions. One city full fed, went to sleep; the other hungry, was not yet awake...for all this I came to love this fearful ant-heap..."

"London, Londres, London" (writes Dickens) "is at its worst. Such a shrill black city, combining the qualities of a smoky house and a scolding wife; such a

hopeless city, with no rent in the canopy of its sky…" There is *passionate love* for the city here! How can that be? But there it is.

As there is in the following, for all the peevish post-colonialist attitudinising of the writer:

"London...revealing its true capricious tormented nature, its anguish of a city that had lost its sense of itself and wallowed accordingly in the impotence of its selfish angry present of masks and parodies, stifled and twisted by the insupportable, unrejected burden of its past, staring into the bleakness of its impoverished future"…

Who knows, the future may be bleak and impoverished in the future (though sorry Salman, it's looking pretty good at the moment); but one way or the other it doesn't matter. For Rushdie it *has to have a* bleak future.

A French observer, Pierre Mailland, said in 1945 (and I presume he himself has succumbed to the perverse enchantment of London but I am not sure) of the lovers of London:

“They become fond of it because its conquest is a love’s labour, because its stones, too well ‘besmeared with sluttish time”, have begun to whisper what sounds to the listener like a personal message or else is never heard.”

London is a sad, hard city; it is epically melancholy. It wakes in me huge emotions. When I am away from London it visits me with a intensity that brings tears to my eyes.

I am in Rio; standing there, on the dazzling sands of Copacabana, with the Atlantic surf crashing in, midst lithe brown bodies in the tiniest bikinis in the world; and I am visited by a vision as sallow as it is intense: a street in West London (corner of North End Rd and Talgarth Road?), on the kerb, in the teeth of the traffic, the 747s stumbling in across a liverish sky; and I ache for London.

Summer 1995 and I have been walking for 5 hours, covering large areas of Wandsworth, Fulham, Hammersmith. I haven't got round to eating. It is very hot, am tired and I want to go home. I plod up the Fulham Road. I am passing the very entrance of the Chelsea and Westminster hospital when down the ramp into my path, apparently unaided rolls a minute wheelchair,

and in it a tiny and ancient woman in winter coat and teacosy hat. "Take me home" she commands. "Can't get home on my own. I live just down the road."

We start off westwards down Fulham Road, squeezing between parked cars, my tiny charge, certainly over ninety rocking like a mummy in her little red chair, issuing peremptory instructions with a bony figure. Finally we home in on her block of flats near Dan Leno Walk. Looking forward to handing her over I speed up.

"Course" she says, turning her shockingly old face to me "won't be no one in; son's gone to Margate, innee? Taken the key."

We are now outside her flat. I am hungry and hot and feeling distinctly unsaintly. "I'll wait here" she commands. You go and check round the pubs see if he's back; he's called John. Tell him his mum's back."

I rehearse this mentally: "John in? Your mum's locked out." to a boozer full of Chelsea fans. I think not. I have an intense picture of this feckless son as a callow youth in football strip and earring. I remind myself that he is a pensioner.

I park her outside and go and check the neighbours. First floor flat; after an ominous scuffling in the hall the door opens onto straining Rottweiler and the ultimate tattooed and dysfunctional family. They “know nothing". At the floor above they know her. "Oh, Annie, not gone and locked herself out again? They usually get the fire brigade for Annie." Who am I to demur at this use of expensive social services?

Within five minutes a fire engine swings round the corner and the crew are out, as handsome and as multi-ethnic as out of an episode of London's Burning. "Got yourself locked out again Annie?...I make my excuses to the little bundle in the chair and leave.

Now I am hotter and hungrier than ever. I walk crossly to Sloane Square and catch a 137. 1 settle into the fusty upholstery and look forward to lunch in 15 minutes.

But no; in two hundred yards we halt. I look ahead and I think, well, yes, obviously, I should have thought of *that* , now shouldn’t I?

For ahead, at the top of Chelsea Bridge Road, midst an ocean of shaven-headed devotees in saffron robes and trainers, twice the height of my double

decker and flanked by motorcycle outriders, lurched an effigy of the Hindu God of Wisdom, the elephant deity Ganesha, en route for a festival in Battersea Park. And how was Ganesha getting to Battersea? More to the point how fast? Answer, since he was being pushed (like his colleague Lord Jaganath) on a huge float by bowed and sweaty acolytes, shoulders to the wheel: one mile an hour.

I got off the bus which had abandoned all attempt at progress and squeezed irascibly through the mass of devotees, their visages radiant with joy, chanting and dancing, their irritating little cymbals going 'ching ching ching' while the great bulk of Ganesha, festooned with garlands swayed above us, a la David Lean and the hot sun beat down.

While walking the streets I had also been reading histories of London and accumulating photocopies of maps and views. I had no interest in these in antiquarian way, simply the information they carried. I found myself looking at a print, l74Oish, standard topography of the time, reliable, unremarkable, of the yard flanking the north wall of the Banqueting House in Whitehall. Not much going on here; rough ground, a dog barking at a passing woman and child; in the background a pointed archway leading out into Whitehall itself.

Looking at this little ogival patch of sunlight through a magnifying glass I felt myself as if pulled though the successive planes of the image to this arch, and then out, out into the sunny street; a carriage was rolling past the shadowed facade of the Horseguards; blinking from the shade I had left behind I looked left and right and looked up and down the street with no surprise because I knew exactly what I would see; indeed I did "see" it; right, to Charing Cross, left down to the Holbein Gate.

I realised that I could, and in no whimsical way, walk into pictures of cities; but, more important, walk out of them too, and not the way I came.

I learned to look at views and know, just *know* where I was heading. I have always had a good sense of direction and I have found that it operates just as well on paper. I knew what I would see if I walked into and through a print and turned first left (a turning magically evoked by the slightest hatching of the engraver's burin) I just know intuitively as well as factually that, if in 1770, I take the second right after Northumberland House on the Strand I will catch the scent of sawdust from the timber yard on the shore, see the York Buildings Waterworks Company Tower at the edge of the river, a hundred yards to my left, and fastforwarding mentally 100 years, there would be instead the smell of fish and meat from the innovative Tesco-like Hungerford market; and ten

years later again the smell of demolished masonry as that market came down to make way for Charing Cross station.

The logical outcome of all this two dimensional knowledge together with my actual "orientation" skills developed into an remarkably intense "mental ambulation". I could, with eyes closed, "walk" (virtually speaking) in detail from Westminster to Charing Cross in the past from Charing Cross to the foot of St. Paul's, some two miles.

True some periods are topographically more patchily recorded than others; and there are some tracts that may never have been recorded. But it is possible to cover much of this route (really the two greatest axes of London until the nineteenth century) with a great deal of accuracy, at intervals say of 1600, 1700, 1800. By the time we reach 1900 photography makes the exercise all the easier; indeed the game is up, not because the challenge to the imagination has gone; rather because there is *too much* information for the imagination to satisfactorily marshal and sequence. For to walk streets in this way does not consist of heavy fingeredly tracing your way along a thoroughfare, picturebook in the other hand. To actually walk through London in the seventeenth century, while depending on a mass of literal material, must be the eyes closed act in which the imagination knits together

the topographical detail into an intense but *not consistently detailed* experience, (as it would be in real lifeafter all; for we do not relate to what we pass through with a consistent focus; sometimes we just pitch up somewhere after half an hour on automatic pilot.).

I am looking at a view of Westminster in the early eighteenth century; more specifically at the adjacent church of St. Margaret Westminster, next to the Abbey. More interesting than both to me is a glimpse at the very back of the picture, some two hundred yards distant, of what I know (from Ogilby's map of 1682) to be King Street. Pepys describes a major traffic jam in this street.

It looks like an unprepossessing row of houses; indeed why should it be anything other than that? What interests me is that it is a way out of an otherwise dull, if worthy view of the Abbey. Because I find that, for mental ambulation to begin it has to do so "out of' some or other scene.

We turn left into King Street then; overhanging eaves, narrow, no pavements to speak of; or perhaps simply no pavements; about this I don't know; but I don't need this detail. Moving up the street we get a glimpse to the right into New Palace Yard, and the Thames with ferries clustered around Westminster Stairs. Forget Canaletto's pellucid views. The weather is poor. Much more

interesting, helpful, to think of London in poor weather. It authenticates the experience somehow. (Canaletto's 'definition' of eighteenth century London is wonderful for its topography, but for atmosphere regrettable; how much more exciting are the grubby brown and grey views of a squat London under leaden skies cross-hatched with wind-driven rain of certain, often by anonymous Dutch landscapists.)

The narrow street reclaims us again; as we walk on we look ahead and see the approaching pepperpot turrets of the Tudor King Street Gate; we pass beneath this (dank, echoey) and out again, now skirting for fifty yards to our right a wall too high to see over that separates us from the Privy Garden, denied to us because it is part of the royal Leisure Centre through which we are now passing; tennis courts, cockpits, tilting yards and the garden, unseen behind the wall, leading down to the Thames; the sound of a woman's laughter perhaps? The plop of a shuttlecock? Courtly railleries? (OK! but even perambulant topographers need a little Georgette Heyer in their arid lives.)

Coaches pass, slowing to manoeuvre the next gate, the Holbein Gate, which we also slide through, backs to the wall to let two horsemen pass. As we emerge behind them we find ourselves outside the Banqueting House; looking

good in spite of being (rather like the Lloyds Building today) not *quite* the latest thing in architecture, but radical, even now in 1690.

The Horseguards building approaches on our left; to the right we see the little arch we emerged from into the street a few pages back; no need to go back there. Four hundred yards more take us to the equestrian statue of Charles 1st. A few men hanging around, the odd horse; a bit dull; but why should the past be any more interesting than the present? Ahead of us (where Trafalgar Square will stand in a hundred and fifty years) a random collection of buildings, one a positive lean-to, sidle up the Strand with the entrance to the Royal Mews to the left. We turn into the Strand and walk east. At this point the visual evidence gets thinner; there is a good view up the Strand but it is later; still, what the hell, let's paste it in. But from now on I have to resort to an aerial (and hence slightly fanciful) view circa 1710 which does indeed show the progress of the Strand up to St. Mary le Strand, but in a summary way; the trail becomes clearer again straight up the Strand as far as St. Clements, in effect as far as Temple Bar, and thence to the very foot of the scaffold-clad giant of a building, temporarily unfinished, awaiting replenished supplies of Portland stone; the new St. Paul's.

My expeditions into pictures in the past has been rewarded by the past sometimes importuning me; there are moments when emerging from the tube or coming out of a shop in 2003 when I get sudden visitation of London past. As I walk the more generous articulations of the modern city I sense a spectral underlay of the tighter more complex network of streets, the dangerous intimacy of alleys and rookeries long demolished. I hear the rumble of wheels and dim cries from the past.

GLOBAL FLANEUR

And if I can walk all the streets, why not all the cities?

Once again there has to some kind of limit:

Alexandria, Athens, Bangkok, Barcelona, Beijing, Berlin, Bogota, Bombay, Bucharest, BuenosAires, Cairo, Capetown, Calcutta, Damascus, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Jakarta, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kuala Lumpur,Lagos, Lisbon,London, Los Angeles, Madrid, Mexico City, Milan, Moscow, Naples, New York, Osaka, Paris, Prague, Rio de Janeiro, Rome, San Francisco, Sao Paulo, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, Santiago, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto, Vancouver, Vienna, Warsaw.

This list, or rather 'canon' changes regularly in my head (in my diary for that matter); I tinker with it according to fluctuating criteria. I have been to all these, but there are others whose neglect embarrasses me (St Petersburg! Johannesburg! Manila! New Delhi!) But of course I will go to these as well. Not to do so is simply not an option.

The list is determined largely by size; the data is from the World Bank (cited in the Economist) and a similar list from the UN Secretariat (Time Magazine) Both

give figures current for 1994 and 1992 respectively and both also made predictions for the year 2000 and beyond. Of course both, for all their authoritative origin, are out of date and unreliable, as are any population statistics. The pullulating, nomadic, undocumented millions in many cities are impossible to establish. In London too; each month large numbers of illegal immigrants just *lose themselves* . Furthermore, what is London? Delimiting what is and what isn't a part of a city is in many cases impossible. Is it the London Boroughs alone; or the post codes? Or whatever lies within the ring of the M25? (a pretty good unofficial criterion). Or the population of the old LCC? the old GLC? the new GLA? So how do you even begin to assess the population of more fluid entities such as Cairo with its constant influx from Upper Egypt who live in virtually uncountable circumstances?

While I need to feel sure of visiting *the biggest* , there are other criteria. There are cities that are moderate in size yet epic in historical significance: Rome, Alexandria, Athens; great religious hybrids: Jerusalem, Istanbul; small but gorgeously situated: Capetown or Naples. There are, of course cities which I've visited and which don't make the list: quite big but not big enough; important, but not important enough; Tbilisi, Cartagena, Edinburgh, Lisbon, Palermo, Aleppo; cityettes I particularly love. I have small but intense memories of each of these but it is mega destinations to which I am drawn,

almost by enchantment; almost robotically do I buy that ticket, board that plane.

In the last four years I have just about rounded it off: 1996: Jakarta; 1997 Seoul, Hong Kong, Bangkok and Shanghai; 1998 Vancouver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Mexico City and Santiago de Chile. 1999: Tokyo, Osaka. Sydney, Singapore, Beijing, Bombay and Calcutta. 2000 Kuala Lumpur. 2001 Cape Town. 2002 Back to Jakarta, Bangkok, Cairo and Milan. 2003 will be Casablanca, must be New Delhi.

I have (just as I did the streets of London) pretty much *done it.*

But done what? Been there? Seen them? Got to know them? What I do is I just walk; walk unselectively, dispassionately and for big distances. I aim to embrace the sheer extent of the city. "Oh, but what can you see in four days?" I often hear "You can't begin to…" The answer is, I see a lot thankyou, and things that a "traveller" would never see. Yes, in Beijing I visited the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven in Tiantan Park. But more compelling for me, more moving , more memorable by far were the miles and miles (10/15 miles a day) I walked round the great concentric rings of Stalin-esque boulevards that ring the city, the underpasses, overpasses,

the heady and audacious new building; (50 stories topped off with a pagoda: I *like* it! Now that's *real* post-modernism!) I am in love with the modern. I want to see how the *real* Chinese live, and that is *in the modern world*.

And so I hop, handluggage only, with no hotel rooms booked, from city to city. It is stressful, it is physically hard, it is expensive (but ask a crack addict how he can "afford" his addiction). No backpacker hostels (all those virtuously *huge* backpacks.). The minimum for these trips for these trips is the three-star concrete block of a hotel; en suite bathroom and big TV (with a wobbly picture) the absolute minimum. There is no greater freedom, physical, existential than a month like this. Forget that farmhouse in the Dordogne; that Victorian Distillery in Skye; that converted eighteenth-century sardine pickling plant on the banks of the Douro, that tumble-down wheelwright's workshop in Thuringia. Join me here in the mighty…OSAKA…where I write this, installed very much downtown, in the Hotel California, watching dubious films on the Rainbow Channel and deciding which skyscraper to go up tomorrow (the Umeda Sky Building perhaps?), which shopping mall to visit, which elevated loop trainline to go round and round on *three times.*

With almost two generations of air travel behind us we affect to hate airports. Actually many of us love them; I love submitting in turn to the importunities of check in, security check, passport control; I love the pseudo-needs of duty-free (seemingly so *money free!* What is it in the air that banknotes, creased with the rigours of their earning, should turn to confetti?) …and then (swinging your Camels in a plastic bag, physically, existentially as free as it is possible to be) undulating semi-corporeally down the rubber walkway to Gate 63.

How beautiful airports are. The sun always shines so richly through the tinted glass of airports; but the glass is never only transparent. It is a palimpsest of data: the fuselage of a 747 outside taxies eerily through a mesh of lights, shadows, reflections, neon signs in reverse. So illusory, so confusing! Again, an attrition of certainty in all the senses.

Outside, though, incontrovertibly physical things take place. The dramatic, (and the slower, the more dramatic) movement of he biggest, most beautiful sculptures in the world (though Kapoor's sculpture, Maryas, at present in Tate Modern, is three times as big and almost as beautiful!)

I celebrated the millennium by specifically requesting two very special airport stopovers; witty post-modern tourism indeed, I thought cockily, having as my destination just the *airports* rather than the cities themselves! But I didn't think that for long when I realised of course that I had been beaten at that little game; for there are already (how could it be otherwise?) *airport* buffs; not plane buffs but *airport buffs*, who spend time and money on *visiting airports*, disdaining that merest of adjuncts, the actual city that lies somewhere beyond the Arrivals gate.

In the last year I have spent time, much more time than necessary, in Kuala Lumpur International, the new HK airport Chek Lap Kok by Foster; and the great Osaka airport Kansai International by Renzo Piano. The KL and HK airports are spectacular. Kuala Lumpur has a shimmery, jungly atmosphere; great green roofs, massive glass vaulting. Foster's Chek Lap Kok airport at Hong Kong is cooler, austerer, more steely. This airport can hardly be mentioned without a nostalgic thought for Kai Tak, the most impudently-sited airport in the world, practically in the middle of HK, where the 747s lumbered in onto a stumpy runway on a very short leash indeed. Dramatic, scary, but it had to go and this is a sumptuous replacement; oh how many hundreds of metres of shimmering walkways, of tinted glass! And outside great deserts of tarmac, so vast a space to play with that the planes appear

to be barely marshalled into order, rather *scattered here and there*, as if someone's toys had not been put away before bedtime. And beyond, across the sea, those steep, slightly improbable looking mountains that you get in the South China Sea.

Kansai is altogether beefier, showier, less cool, more eighties. Getting there is part of the Kansai thrill. The elevated expressway snakes out of Osaka tremendously high above the city, and what a city! One of the great unlovely cities of the world, but what is loveliness when you have such density and massiveness and such a vast, heroically vast, extent of city; and neon-lined canals to boot?

So now we hurtle by bus mile upon mile across the rooftops of Osaka, curving fascinatingly though a whole district of love hotels, their little Disneyesque turrets and crenellations peeping playfully above the great barriers of our expressway, and then *ultimately* (for Osaka is a hard one to shake off) free of the city we approach a thrilling piece of architectural syntax. For miles I have been watching an improbably tall building in the distance; but what was it doing more or less in the countryside? It was the Rinku Gate Tower of some eighty stories and it stood guard at the point where the expressway flung

itself right and across the causeway to the artificial island in the distance where the great Kansai airport lay.

Our bus whipped round the back of the airport and snuck into the departure level. The whole sequence: the relinquishing of the hold of Osaka, the expressway, the tower, the causeway, the airport with its tiny planes toppling earthwards or straining heavenwards on improbably steep trajectories; it was a syntactically delicious sequence of built environment.

And the airport! such splendour! Oh brave new world to have interiors so huge, so gleaming, such splendid restaurants. But Kansai is very eighties, very triumphalist. Its hubris is stunning, confirmed indeed by the alarming fact that the artificial island on which it was constructed *is sinking. (*Ten metres already since its construction in the eighties.) Debussy wrote a piece of music called La Cathedrale Engloutie, the Submerged Cathedral; are we to anticipate L'Aeroport Englouti? Exotic fish winnowing between the Duty Free counters? 747s on the sea bed?)

How beautiful to sit in this splendour for hours with a book and finally to board a flight to Beijing on Dragon Air. And there should be not too much frustration with the sometimes immense times we have to spend in airports. Five

hundred years ago, when we foolishly imagine the "going was good", passengers had to wait far longer than ourselves for right combinations of tide and wind. We should see airports as a means of travel *in themselves, as planes,* so easy at the new HK airport which is the shape of a plane. Once we step inside an airport we are already in a time space envelope; it just happens to be a terrestrial one.

But the truth is just as often a flaccid burger during hours at Newark; or that humour reserved to the more modest traveller. The US passport official learns my destination:

You're going to Canada?

Yes.

(after perfectly timed pause)

Have you seen the *planes* they fly to Canada?

(Airport humour. My friend went to check in at Heathrow for a flight to LA. The check in clerk looked up and said, holding his ticket: "but this flight was for *yesterday*..... *Only* joking!" No doubt Branson had issued a memo that the clerks should *josh* their passengers.)

Inside my 747 I look gloomily, from my poor seat at the back, down the tenebrous cathedral-like aisle at the heads, so many heads, receding into the gloom; and I think of the sheer weight of their baggage beneath me and I look out at the perfunctory little engines so barely bolted on to the wing and I think to myself, almost every time, with a kind of relish, this is a *bad* idea, a *very, very* bad idea. And yet, in such a short time, after the briefest flurry along the tarmac the whole preposterous package, with an almost impromptu flourish, gets aloft! God knows how but it does.

My destinations this time incorporate, I like to think grandly, the 'littoral of the Americas, north and south.

Certainly they are all cities I haven't yet seen: Vancouver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Mexico City and Santiago de Chile. And already I have expectations, most specifically of "Mexico City" and "Vancouver" dreams of which I described earlier.

Of course I *expected* no such thing as my shimmering semi-arctic model city that was my *dream* of Vancouver; it was not with any great feeling of shock that I stepped off my airport bus at dusk into downtown Vancouver to find

myself pretty much in skid row. Real mean streets; endless importuning, shouts, hassles, real seediness. Having all my stuff on me, passports, money etc I flag down a taxi and take it to a hotel, any hotel.

In the morning I find Vancouver necessarily smaller, less splendid than my epic creation, but not unlike it. The main difference was that I had overlooked Vancouver's right to be in any way historical; it had to be synchronic. My first thought was: Hong Kong in the sixties as in photographs by the Magnum photographer, Leung; there was still late nineteenth century Chicago-style mercantile nineteenth century architecture along the waterfront; and I am interested to find myself wishing that those buildings could be torn down and replaced with the glossy architecture of Central waterfront in Hong Kong. They won't be, of course; they will be transformed into the Old Waterfront Museum and Oyster Parlour etc. And it would be *very* puritanical, Corbusian of me to think that this wasn't the right thing to do.

But it is splendid the quay, with big cruisers drawn up and seaplanes flitting about like waterboatmen and big snowy mountains in the distance and the very considerable range of modest (30/40 storey skyscrapers, condominiums all of a style very much their own, "style Vancouver", for, to insist once again,

the vernacular and local variations of bimillennium world architecture are there to be discerned, though they may not yet immediately recognised.

On the plane to Vancouver from New York I saw the Hollywood modernisation of Great Expectations. Dickens is my city companion. The effect that this film had on me was to make me think only how great, how universal and alas how limited Dickens was! And that I had *immediately* to read Great Expectations again. I bought it and set to. I recalled reading Martin Chuzzlewit in a little room in Jakarta, in the intense heat of the afternoon the pages blowing in the airstream of a noisy fan and the call to prayer coming from the mosques outside. The contrast was dramatic: the dankness of

London and the shut out brilliant light of Jakarta, itself so Dickensian in its contrasts. Great Expectations lasted me through Vancouver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Santiago de Chile and…Mexico City

I arrive here at dusk. Or is it dusk? In fact the next day I discover in the paper that I have arrived on the worst day of the city's environmental history, which is saying *a great deal..* Even *I* notice that the atmosphere is a little polluted. (For I am like the Kevin Costner in Waterworld. Costner has gills, having adapted Darwinianly to the new conditions of the planet. Likewise I seem

immune to extremes of exhaust, pollution. I really don't notice it. Long time in cities pent, and willingly pent, *enthusiastically pent* and I seem to have made the same kind of adaptation.)

All the same the worst ever day in Mexico (mainly because of the Guatamalan forest fires) made it bad indeed. A classic rattletrap drive in a stripped down green VW; time for the first post-flight cigarette; one for the driver too as we rocket, tilting like a bobsleigh, down the narrow expressway from the airport, the whole little cab a joyful turmoil of wind, cigarette ash, sparks, snatches of conversation. The sky is red and through this hazy rubescence rear up smog-shrouded silhouettes of buildings, odd, surely wrong profiles? pyramidal, triangular, bulbous; indeed not unlike my dreams. We jerk to a stop outside the hotel Plaza Florentina, a big honest, brutal slab of a hotel.

The next day I walk massively around the city, beginning up the Paseo Reforma, shocked to see a toddler dressed up in the most sadly perfunctory little parrot outfit, dangling beak, little claws hoisted onto the shoulders of his brother (about 7) to beg from cars stationery at the traffic lights, pathos the more so because there were hardly any cars on this Sunday morning at eight o clock.

Does no-one shout out at you here in this city? Here am I walking through the most crowded markets of the city . I might just as well have Rich Gringo written on my back. And not one voice raised to importune me in four days; no, just one and it was the wheedling whine of the US street hustler: “Hey man, where ya *goin* man? You wanna buy etc.” But this was the lone voice of a returned wetback.

In the Zocalo another puzzler; the authenticity of folklore, of the folclorico. “Aztec” dancers. Or rather a reconstruction, as far as I could tell, of what Aztec music, dancing, ritual *might* have been like. The fact is it was absolutely thrilling; incense, dancing, feathered headdresses, drums, all glittering in the sun. If it wasn’t the real thing it is what the real thing *ought to have been like.* Participation ranged from the expert to the amateur, costume from the full Quetzacoatl to jeans and trainers; and (most significant) there didn’t seem to be any tourists there. I have often thought that the authenticity of any folkloric event was in inverse proportion to the number of cameras present at the event. Here, to my astonishment, there was not one to be seen. Whatever, (for why this obsession with authenticity anyway? And why am I here obsessing about it?) the experience was moving and disturbing; there was a gut wrenching response to these drums such as I have never experienced since

hearing massed bateria in the Sambodromo at carnival in Rio; a sound that makes you feel almost sick with emotion.

I made my way haphazardly to the Plaza Garibaldi and the sensational complex of markets beyond; I walked through a covered gallery of fibreglass and plaster brides with fulsome lashes and scary lips, lavishly hobbled in a profusion of synthetic ruffles and mantillas and petticoats and trains; a dreamily Freudian experience to saunter, lemon icecream in hand through corridors of expectantly immobile brides.

Exhausted I get into a cab with a nice man listening to a radio talk about the importance of living calmly and at peace with oneself. "Ah, esto es cierto" he said beatifically as he battled his way at tremendous speed into a space surely *smaller* than his cab, joining the phalanx of VWs charioteering triumphantly down Reforma.

My last day in Mexico City. Finally to Las Bellas Artes where I was struck with the most wonderful picture by Diego Rivera: EL HOMBRE CONTROLAR DEL UNIVERSO. Marxist science and philosophy, Hegelian destiny made graphic; I have never seen such an exciting envisionment of a political philosophy; it is enough to make one a Marxist-Leninist.

Rivera and indeed all twentieth century Mexican painting gave me a sudden revelation. In the Museum of Modern Art I suddenly have a vision of what European art *might have been* if it had not, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (with impressionism) or the first few decades of the twentieth (the formalist, abstract, and conceptual routes we know) been hijacked away from the representational. For here was an alternative art history that Europe might equally have had; representational art had been by no means exhausted by 1900. Here was how it could have continued.

From the Bellas Artes up the Latino Americano Tower. The Sears Tower in Chicago is a meaningless experience, too much like the experience of flight. The Latino Americano Tower is firmly rooted in the ground, (or not so firmly, a fact you are reminded of in every lift by the notices that tell you what to do in the case of TEMBLOR.) The interior is of a pleasantly antiquated modernity. (and there is always a pathos in the *once* oh-so-modern.) From the observation floor Mexico City dwindles away in each direction apparently to the horizon. The glittering of the traffic down the EJE Central like a necklace, a special bronzy glitter that I think may come from the special light of a thousand *tinted* windscreens.

As I look for a restaurant I am transfixed: The coolest car I have ever seen. A matt silver Chevrolet Impala heroically scuffed, spectacularly down on its uppers, its crumpled sagging bodywork all but trailing in the tarmac, insouciantly pumping out black exhaust at the red lights. Behind the tinted windscreen a glass bead rosary glitters and swings from the rearview mirror; behind the rosary side by side two of the dodgiest Zapata-esque moustaches imaginable. Here was one car you would not let your daughter ride in. The lights changed to green, and with the underpowered and tentative roar of a motorboat this epic heap slewed round the curb and with a fuck you plume of exhaust gunned uncertainly up the Eje Central.

I turn down into the Centro Historico stopping for lunch at a restaurant run by a whole family of sweet plump women. I eat black beans, fritters, chicken and listen to a trio, accordeon, double bass, violin outside on the pavement. My lunch costs me $2. I go to the bookshop next door; its stock is almost entirely Marxist Leninist; the owner plays *mambo* records; real mambo, not chacha (which is mambo for gringos.) I then walk haphazardly through the Centro Historico and find myself in a square of printing shops. Under the trees at one end a group of lads in baseball caps have set up a band with primitive PA system. They play rock, lambada, cumbia. It is touching to see these boys go

through the little vanities of the rock artist, the riffs, the air guitar gestures, the one two one twos into the mike in this little square with an audience, under the trees, of about twenty. What happiness to sit there and listen to the delicious queasy sinuosity of the lambada, the shuffle of the cumbia with the sun beating down in the heart of one of the biggest cities in the world.

I leave and spend the afternoon (for I fly tomorrow) buying presents; lead soldiers, a skeleton for my son, little quilted jewel boxes, plaster religious statuettes. I drink a big goblet of orange juice under an awning in the street which has been swamped by a concentration of armed and armoured police ringing some building of importance. My fellow juice drinker is Judge Dredd, in full body armour and helmet. I am slightly distracted from my drink by the fact that the muzzle of his sub machine gun is knocking against my knee.

Back to the hotel to conclude a perfect day in the Piano Bar Chato de Londres drinking tequila.

DOWNTOWN

For city read big. There are small cities. In Britain if there is a cathedral it is a city. But for me it has to be big, the bigger the better.

My obsessions with bigness in cities, whatever its origins, means I understand why Ceaucescu wanted to build his Bucharest boulevards and his absurd Palace. Speer and Hitler's plans for Germania do not seem ridiculous to me (though their mistake would have been this: plan too big and it can look small). I look at John Martin's visions or Ferriss' drawings for The Metropolis of Tomorrow, or the opening shots of Bladerunner and think*, I genuinely think*: hmm, that looks nice, I'd like to live there. (Not least because Bladerunner reassuringly held out the option not of a white and antiseptic future; no; rather of a *Baroque* future!)

I love to contemplate city population statistics, to try to imagine their significance. From behind the digits, all those zeros I hear a muffled riot of voices, machinery, communications. As they said in the film and TV series of that name: "There are eight million stories in the Naked City". There is no way of hearing the voice, the one voice of the city; the city is too huge, too

multifarious, too chaotic; a tangle of delirium and anguish. Such that at times, almost, one yearns for some intervention, apocalyptic almost; an angelic visitation to tell us that it is *all alright*. The films Wings of Desire (Berlin) and City of Angels (Los Angeles) gives us the images of relief from the hell, the undeniable hell that is the city.

Many people, even those who profess to like cities, are concerned at size; they seek a city of a "human dimension" ; one you can walk across in an afternoon, say. And very pleasant these cityettes are: Siena, Bruges etc. But they do not interest me; I have no feeling of being included in their perfection. Indeed I am excluded. The smaller the city the more you are excluded. Only in a big city can the stranger hold his head up high, feel marginally at home; for who knows him? Certainly no one knows him as an outsider. In the real city there may be the poor, the recently arrived; but there is never the outsider.

It is the big cities that make me feel included; In New York, Sao Paulo I feel big. I feel proud to belong to the race that made them, proud to be in the modern age; determined to be forever, both sprirtually and actually: Downtown.

Before I had even visited the continent I was visited with dreams of wandering lost in the shanty town outskirts of some huge South American city. It is dusk. Above the shacks and in the distance I see the glittering downtown skyscrapers; but there is no way to reach them. My frustration is enormous. Italo Calvino describes Penthesilia:

"Every now and again at the edges of the street a cluster of constructions with shallow facades seems to indicate that from there the city texture will thicken. But you continue and you find instead other vague spaces...and so you continue, passing from outskirts to outskirts, and the times come to leave Penthesilia."

The great pull of the centre, hard to resist. I coax a little fuel into the carburettor; two stabs with the foot and away, the second cylinder initially lazy then breaking into song with the first as I skirt a donkey cart at the corner. I ease up in the teeth of a giant khaki army lorry slouching on bald tyres down the centre of the road, worn Russian lettering on the bonnet. The traffic thins, the wind in my hair, the heat a welcome burden on my back, the spurt of water from a broken drain on my ankle; thus I bear down on Grand Cairo, preposterously astride an engine bolted to two wheels. As the wide arterial sweeps round the citadel I catch a sideways glimpse of minarets, the

silveriest of silhouettes against the heat pale sky. Traffic glitters to the far crest of the road, cars, lorries, buses, motorcycles all gunning into the heart of the city. We rumble through the City of the Dead, to the left wide dusty streets dwindle into the city of tombs. And beyond rises the slow black smoke of the eternal rubbish bonfires, vertically into the heat-stilled sky.

Italy has just beaten Brazil in the World Cup; on a motorcycle in Rome this time, I am caught up in a great phalanx of traffic on the Via Nomentana, all of us thundering in joyful complicity down to Piazza Plebiscito; a riot of steaming banners and squealing brakes and car horns; no escaping the inexorable pull, as if in response to a vast electromagnet, downtown.

Intense too the hectic taxi rides from the airport into downtown Rio, such an incremental thrill, the wide chaotic airport road, the favelas tumbling downhill, speeding past the docks and then the first view of the outrageously sexy topography of the city..

The lure of downtown. In Adventures in Baby Sitting the hapless kids from a Chicago suburb are obliged to go with only their baby-sitter…*downtown*; the monstrous ziggurats of 'downtown' loom at the end of the Expressway as their car is haplessly sucked into hell.

Sinclair Lewis in Babbitt describes George Babbitt driving *downtown*; "across the belt of railroad tracks,...factories producing condensed milk, paper boxes, lighting fixtures, motor cars. Then the business centre, the thickening darting traffic, the crammed trolleys unloading, and high doorways of marble and polished granite."

A prescient hundred years before de Quincey was describing this 'thickening'; he begins, evocatively enough:

"I have felt the sublime expression of her enormous magnitude in one simple form...viz., in the vast droves of cattle...upon the great north roads, all with their heads directed to London". Wonderful! cattle, heads down walking dully en masse to be eaten in London! And later:

"Already at three stages distance (say, 40 miles from London), upon some of the greatest roads, the dim presentiment of some vast capital reaches you obscurely, and like a misgiving. This blind sympathy with a mighty but unseen object, some vast magnetic range of Alps, in your neighbourhood, continues to increase."

The centre, the mighty downtown, remains my major obsession. But another image intrigues me almost as much, probably as fanciful, as artificial a construct as the "centre". Look at the picture of Paris in the Tres Riches Heures (1416) or Lorenzetti's representation of Siena (c. 1340) or indeed any picture of a city up to the seventeenth century: the tightly clustered buildings of the medieval or Renaissance city held within the tight embrace of the city walls. Within the certainties of court, guild, church, the benefits, one hopes, of Good Government as conceived by Lorenzetti: without, beyond a few harboured and well husbanded acres of vineyard and strip farming, the uncertainty of countryside, the dark forests, the cry of wolves (evoked so alarmingly as late as the twentieth century by Jacques Brel in his song 'Les Loups entrent dans Paris.') This is, for me, a very vivid juxtaposition, city and country; I love the description in Zola's Ventre de Paris in which Florent, hitching a ride on a vegetable cart finds himself in Paris:

"Il y eut un arret, un bruit de grosses voix; c'etait la barriere, les douaniers sondaient les voitures. Puis Florent entra dans Paris, evanoui, les dents serrees, sur les carrottes."

The third act of la Boheme is set at the Barriere d'Enfer. Sweepers, peasants, sellers of milk pass through customs one winter morning; there is an icy

shimmer to the music. For some reason it is intensely moving; perhaps it is because only when we are on the confines of a city are we able to understand the full, perhaps shocking import of the city. Paris, albeit the fanciful Paris of feckless "bohemians", is most poignant, here at the Barriere d'Enfer.

Clearly this is a sentimental and old fashioned view of Paris, that of an English francophile; (just as the French anglophile retains an essentially Sherlockian view of London.) But I was, after all, first in Paris in 1959. (I was reminded of this recently when I saw again A Bout de Souffle by Godard, filmed in Paris in that very year. Even at the age of twelve I responded very intensely to the city. To see Godard's film was a shock; the retro charm of it, the Citroens ('traction avant' with their running boards), the bars! I could have passed the filmcrew of A Bout de Souffle, passed Belmondo himself, in the streets of Paris that summer!

For me the suburbs always meant a frittering away of the urban fabric into rurality; and I later realised that Paris had them too: the kind of thing you see in Utrillo or Pissarro; an intermediary view of Paris you can see in the later films of Tati; in Mon Oncle, for example in which the almost Disney-esque profile of the old Paris, (so old that it is almost pre-haussmannian) contrasts with

developments such as La Tour Montparnasse. But the real suburbs in films such as La Haine or Nuits Fauves, evocations of Parisian North Peckhams and Hackneys are new for me. I still have an idea of Paris as strictly circumscribed to some twenty-odd arrondissements.

Byron describes the walls of Constantinople: "Four miles of battlements, covered with ivy surmounted with 218 towers". I am impassioned by this idea of circumscription. City gates also have an epic, archetypal significance. While I love the anarchic sprawl of Tokyo part of me is frightened by it and responds to the idea of a *containment*, welcomes the definition of city walls and city gates. Standing on the city walls in Cairo above the huge and dilapidated Ba'ab el Futtuh, though nineteenth century Cairo stretches beyond and beyond again the brutal but thrilling silhouette of the twentieth century city, for all this I am moved by the thought of the city and how it once just...ended. (In a recent return I find Cairo wonderfully bigged up; huge new expressways flanked by 40 storey apartment blocks, each tower surmounted by a rash of satellite dishes creating dramatically fungoid profiles against the heat pale skies. I love, too, the English name of the new Trans-City Expressway: " The Twenty-sixth of July *Corridor!* Brilliant!"

In a sense the walled city is that old emblem the walled garden, the Hortus Conclusus, turned inside out; a post-lapsarian inversion. To be outside the walls is not exclusion from the garden, but from the city. The emblematic value of the walled city is deep. Some people like to see the city as an organic growth out of the land, local stone etc. To me it is potent because it asserts its distinction to the land: that is made by nature, this is man-made. The contrast is poignant. I have simply to see a wall descending to meet a lawn to experience an eery spasm, but in recognition of which archetype, which folk memory?

The Garden City is a dream of uniting the two. An honourable dream; but the Garden City holds no attractions for me. I personally would have no interest in living in one, but dutifully recognise the wholesomeness and sense of its vision. Indeed how persuasive it is sometimes in its plans and drawings! I look at Ebenezer Howard's diagram for a "Group of Slumless Smokeless Cities" or Unwin and Parker's plan for Letchworth; or George B. Post's design for Eclipse Park in Beloit or Louis de Soissons' design for Welwyn Garden City; and I know it "should" be thus. I know that is right, that were the human race visited suddenly by a sweet reasonableness this is how they would live.

In a glass case in the British Library I came upon the prison notebook of Ernest Jones, a nineteenth century Chartist activist, imprisoned in the 1840s. In his notebook, side by side, meticulous drawings of the city "as it was" and the city as it should be, *would* be; the city now is indeed the City of Dreadful Night, a kind of pastiche of Manchester and Birmingham, lowering clouds, warehouses, doleful figures, their faces turned to the walls, filthy canals. And then, on the opposite page, (in the same pernickety, touchingly amateur hand) *the city of the future*; what is moving here is that Jones painstakingly delineates an Ancient Greek city with agora, temples, little clusters of rationally dressed Greek-ish figures under a serene sky; and how you feel for the poor man (pre-Marxist in the simplicity of his socialism) yearning for such a city; you just wish he could have had what he dreamed of.

It is easy to make fun of the Garden City. Even those who deride the utopian rus in urbe plans do so, perhaps against their better nature; Betjeman, in his satirical lines on Slough writes:

"I have a vision of the future, chum…

The workers flats rise up like silver pencils in a field of soya beans."

But alas for satirical intent! The picture is beautiful.

We have the centre; we have the confines, the city walls. So could many cities have been described even as late as the end of the nineteenth century; while other had clearly burst their banks, as it were. It became harder to define what a city was. Attempts to arbitrate what is and what is not the city are various. In London it might be the post codes ("London its post codes spread out like fields of wheat" as Larkin writes in Whitsun Weddings). In Buenos Aires, outside the unambiguously demarcated Capital Federal the urban fabric, according to the Ediciones Lumi Ciudad de Buenos Aires, just *fades away* in a way that would be unthinkable in the London A-Z which doggedly and follows the dissipation of the city to its most ignominious reaches: Chigwell or Bushey or New Addington (places so far away, indeed, that the people there probably wear coloured clothes.)

The idea of a city concluding tidily is, today, not only impossible; it conflicts with what experts conceive to be the "Future of the City". I have difficulties with the idea of the 100 Mile City, to use the title of Deyan Sujic's book. I recognise it as a possible future but my urban vision is an old-fashioned one, a nineteenth century one; the density, concentration, crowdedness of the nineteenth century is something I find it difficult to relinquish. The city of the future, we are repeatedly told, will not in fact be a city; it will be a suburb; yet cannot be a suburb because it will be suburban to no urbs.

Who am I to question this supposition for the future? But New York remains dense; the centre of London is becoming denser each year. There is Los Angeles, yes. But there is also Tokyo. Who is to say the former is to be the model of the future, not the latter?

A public information film about the post-war rebuilding of Glasgow: planners point the stems of their pipes at a map revealing the undesirable density of central Glasgow and describing the way in which this is to be alleviated by an even spread throughout the whole city. The Abercrombie plans for London in the 1940s enshrine an early attack on density; the Model for Bermondsey (1943) is a chillingly vacuous suburbanization of a dense, central zone of London. But the anti-density lobby really came into its own in the 1960s with The Greater London Development Plan and other projects.

Density is "bad". Idealistic city planners abhor it because of their insistence on space, light etc. Health workers find it unhygienic. The police hate it because it breeds crime and impedes (in its labyrinthine escape routes) the detection of the criminal. The State does not like it because it breeds political insurrection; indeed this was one of the main motives behind Haussmann's disembowelling of medieval Paris, and the rationale behind his wide

boulevards (which have, interestingly enough, became a perfect and generously spacious theatre for political protest in the twentieth century.)

Certainly there were grave problems with the density that resulted from sheer poverty, the kind of thing described by Mayhew in London Labour and the London Poor, as depicted by Dore in his views of London. Certainly the old Glasgow tenaments did not harbour families as happy as the cartoon strip Broons. But there is nothing wrong *per se* with levels of density, as Tokyo and New York can show us; true there is an apparent density that shocks us on our visits to cities of the third world; but, as Germaine Greer points out in Sex and Destiny, we may actually be dealing with another problem here, of our own making: the crowdedness of the Indian city may alarm us but, Greer suggests, probably because it is a crowd of the poor and, above all, *the brown*.

I have never experienced the full shock of density as I did in India. In the market lanes and streets of Kalbadevi, Bombay or parts of Calcutta, in Cairo or Rio even I have felt faint at the press of people and traffic, the sheer impaction of human presence and activity; this could, to an anti-urban zealot, be seen as incontrovertible evidence of that great fear of the late twentieth century: over-population. But high concentration of population in

cities, and in particular corners of cities is an entirely notional illusion of over-population. I feel nothing sinister, dangerous in it, nothing that is in itself ominous. I like density, like the press of people in the street, in the buses, almost always a mutually protective press.

Even *ecologically* density is a good thing. Paulo Solari writes: "Life is where crowding is immense. Death comes when the system uncrowds...No eco-thinking can ignore the miracle of crowded living. To do so is to indulge in incoherent fantasizing. Worse it is to betray Gaia."

The density of the city has a centripetal force that *pulls you in.*

Be it bumping into Naples on a charter flight, buffeted cruelly by turbulence, or in the train from Rome describing the long final arc around the suburbs of the city, with the chimneys of Montedison chemical works burning like satanic candles against the hazy profile of Vesuvius...But best of all the arrival in Naples by boat at dusk, from Capri or Ischia, seeing first a simple grey band of land which, as we approach, unravels into subtler striations: foreground, middleground , distant hills. The texture of these bands becomes more granulated, resolving itself into discernible buildings, the evocatively undelit glass dome of the Galleria rising like a moon above the crenellations of the Castel Nuovo. And as we inch into the port the

colour and clangour of the whole preposterous city breaks through and possesses us.

Flying down to Rio: One of the airports in Rio de Janeiro (Santos Dumont) is very close to the centre, closest really to the image, beloved of city planners in the 20s and 30s, (the unplayful Le Corbusier no exception to the trend): an urban sky dotted with planes, settling with the utmost lightness on the roofs of baroque skyscrapers. A beautiful image albeit technologically unfeasible But to fly in to the Dumont airstrip gives one actually the feeling very much of the 30s image of the air travel, so close it is to the centre. Let us come in on one of those silver planes, whose propellers whirred until 1993; let's Fly Down to Rio: Our plane banks over Ipanema and Copacabana, glittering modern condominiums, hotels like ramparts flanking miles of dazzling beach alive with the pulullation of tiny bodies (for Cariocas do not loll on the beach with a book)

There is something powerfully apocalyptic about the view, as if half the population of the great city had swarmed from its rat-holes and crevices summoned en masse to the foot of the Atlantic crashing in onto the sands, as if awaiting, alert some Spielbergian visitation. Several times I have come into a city in this route and I have sometimes felt almost physically sick at the

beauty of it, and not just the beauty; I am moved to tears just at the thought of humanity, massed humanity at the ocean's edge.

My brother in-law drives us to Duxford Aerodrome, where the great hangers house a B52 Stratofortress, an Avro Lancaster, an English Electric Canberra , a Concorde. But we eye our 1940s Dragon Rapide biplane with circumspection, for it is (weather permitting…and that's worrying for a start!) going to take us to, (or rather *over)* London. It looks very small and wobbly. I have brought my opera glasses (not quite Biggles I guess) for our tour of the capital. We check out our six fellow passengers (a bit *overweight* surely?) There is much Dunkirkian banter with our pilot (I'm a bit worried about that C&A blouson; couldn't he have made it something robuster?) I am worried too by the camp little man checking the fuel with a *calibrated wooden rod thrust into the tanks*. Once we have squeezed in I find myself next to the door, which ihas been reassuringly made secure *by a length of rope* .

We totter aloft level out at no very great height and beat our way Londonwards. And this is the nice thing: you never actually *approach* a city by air when you fly in an airliner; you descend on it from meta space and 20 miles out to town. But here we were churning and chugging our way

towards London and actually watching it loom up on the horizon…first (still at a good 35 miles) the Dome; then a tiny but dazzling wedge of light, one of the facets of the Canary Wharf complex. Then at twentyfive miles miles tiny intimations of the great wen begin to click into view: the PO Tower, Tower 42, Euston Tower, until, and slowly the whole city begins to fill itself in, item by item. And suddenly there we are wobbling and lurching in the (surely interdicted?) airspace above the City airport and in the flightpath, surely of planes descending into Heathrow? Well never mind; obviously the pilot knows what's what…(then again…that blouson….)

Anyhow we chunter around over London…spectacular views, of course but's that not really the point, the point is the at we are churning up here in this little bolide and then going to wobble off home again to the provinces leaving this mighty vision untouched, unlanded-on: exquisite aerial foreplay and then enough and Biggles-like back to base. A sweet and improbable memory.

But the thrill is no less, coming into London more prosaically. This obsession is not about beauty; it is deeper than that, even on the meanest little station hopper, or from Gatwick airport. Oh the thrill of being sucked into the real tentacular city (for wherever the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren imagined his

"villes tentaculaires" to be in 1895, the first real octopus was London.) I love to feel pulled inexorably into this, the most attenuated, mournful, doom-laden city in history, to feel cling around me that grimy, unhealthy quality of London, the sallow but intense sexuality of the city, to feel the profound despondency of its interminable suburbs, to see the rain-wet streets glisten like PVC. Rain and neon: made for each other.)

Rain; the almost *viscous* rain of hot countries. At dusk I take the STAR LRT shuttle from my hotel to downtown Kuala Lumpur. The little trains are driverless; you stand in the transparent cockpit of the front carriage as you ride the elevated rail into the thick of the city. Thrill enough; but today there is a massive downpour and for the whole of my 15 minute journey my pod is like a bathysphere, its contours streaming with rain which dramatically distorts the already mobile cityscape, rocking as we are down the rails towards it. The city, like a submarine vision, like Poe's City In the Sea, waves and undulates; towers and skyscrapers liquidly distend and recoalesce as my Perspex egg rumbles ever deeper... downtown.

More thrilling still the skytrain of Bangkok, especially picking it up at the terminus of Somdet Phracho Tarsin Bridge and snaking at an improbable height across the city; the best ride in the world.

In Jakarta no skytrain to compare…but then again a sort of *accidental* one. I hang around Cawang station in the south east of the city, eating at a stall on the platforms. Trains for the centre rumble through but since the only places left are on the roof of the train I stay put until a battered row of coaches churns in; all its doors seem to have been knocked out so I can ride round the city hanging off a handrail (with just a little attitude from the guy in the Bin Laden T shirt) looking down into the teeming streets, and across to the punchy new silhouettes of the city, all the way to Kota.

Other arrivals: The plane banks for landing; I watch the wing tilt from above to below the blur of the horizon. The green light at the tip drops like a falling star through lit villages scattered across the desert. The lights knot into larger groups as we sink through layers of every-warmer air towards the spangled constellation that is, or conceals Cairo.

The decrepitude of the airport, teenage soldiers with outsize boots and obsolete Russian weaponry guard the smeary plate glass exits. Airport employees shuffle across the perfunctorily swept concourses in broken plastic sandals, I manoeuvre my way out to the rank of battered black and white

taxis; the plastic canary dangling from the rear view mirror, the dashboard lined with nylon fur, Om Kalthoum wailing on the radio. Settling into the exhausted upholstery I give my address: Roxy. Roxy, Heliopolis, City of the Sun.

In Calcutta I arrive at eleven in the evening and emerge from the relative order of Arrivals out through sliding doors into the mayhem of a hundred touting taxi drivers and a violent rainstorm. As I am the only person who seems to have no transit plans and as I look so hesitant and green *all* the drivers want me; so you would think that I would manage *not* to choose the two wideboys with an Ambassador cab clearly on loan and parked as furtively under a tree a very wet walk across the airport forecourt. My ride downtown hotel-less and at night was already a dubious venture. So it would have helped if these two guys were not sharing a joint and, er, also sharing the driving, and when I say *sharing* it was one doing the pedals, the other steering. We lurch through roads that could surely never be the grande route from airport to downtown, even in Calcutta. But eventually we get to bowl along with the rain thundering on the tinny roof of the Ambassador; but not for long; for an old and epically dented tram cut across our bows; and from the left another taxi and from the right a flatbed truck; immense klaxonage, of course. I look out through the rain and in the

fitful street lighting see an erect form lashed to the truck, bound in black plastic sheeting, snapping in the wind; but wait what is this? For out of these wind-torn folds emerge hands, exquisite, supplicatory hands, loving hands, downcast hands, hands holding things, jubilant hands; in all ten hands; the ten hands of the goddess Durga. And so I sit in my little cab, with my two simultaneous drivers and their shared joint, gesticulated at pluridextrously by an immobilised, PVC trussed Hindu goddess, listening to the defeated clanking of a very old tram, a growing chorus of horns and the offer, from one of my drivers, to put up my fare because of the delay.

Once the traffic has teased itself out, finally we manage to lumber away down a street surely much too small to lead anywhere? But no; finally to the streets around Dalhousie Square. We turn left and right and suddenly there it is what I deserve! Like a mirage in the rain sits The Great Eastern Hotel, with its twin fluorescent-lit doors each guarded by a doorman in a white, or whiteish, uniform of Ruritanian cut. “Here! Here!” I tumble out and pay, receiving as change a promising-*feeling* bundle of notes, (that proved next day to be so worn as to be unacceptable anywhere). But I am home and I walk across the huge red carpet to the thirty foot long reception desk; for I am in the hotel from the Shining or a sub-continental L’Annee Derniere a Marienbad (“ah, les longs couloirs”..etc etc.) I trot behind the porter to a

room as big as my London flat; but that isn't big enough; so a bit more investigation and a few more tips land me a room *twice* as big. OK, I'll settle for that. Home at last; *on* with the telly, *out* with the duty free and the fags; but no; I have to eat . A two mile corridor trek takes me to the completely deserted Chinese restaurant where I am waited on by three waiters. Afterwards I am even tempted into the ball room; a desert of empty tables in the half light, and at a distance of some seventy feet a stage from which an ululating woman and a small orchestra entertain…no-one.

In the morning I find out from my Bombay Times that Durgas in large quantities are on their way to be consigned forever to the dubious waters of the Limpopo-esque river Hooghly. (Indeed, when I go out the next day there are Durgas everywhere, ravishingly sexy out of their sheeting and wobbling to their fate, poor sweeties, on the back of trucks accompanied by comically and touchingly amateur musicians in braided jackets, with drums and bagpipes.)

Fresh off a plane (if fresh is the word for sweaty and stressed and culture shocked) you are, I suppose, partly there, but your concerns for survival make of you something of a startled rodent, scurrying anxiously around, worrying about where you put your luggage check in ticket, which taxis to choose, will a taxi driver rip you off, will you make it to a hotel with all your painfully conspicuous paraphenalia before you get robbed.

No, the best thing in life, *the very best thing,* is to arrive in an unknown city, to find a hotel, to go to bed *and to wake and find yourself there*, surfacing through layers of consciousness. I am not in my own bed: why is the window on that side of the room? Where am I?..., I'm in SAO PAULO! Yes, it is on that first morning you wake in a city that you are *really there.*

So there, feeling good in bed in my arbitrarily starred hotel, time then to sally out for breakfast, Time in short to go out and *make mistakes*: mistakes of orientation, language mistakes, mistakes of dress, "It's the little differences" (as Travolta says to his colleague in Pulp Fiction after his visit to Paris and Amsterdam)....

A. It's the little differences. I mean they've got the same shit over there as you get over here. But it's just there it's a little different. You know what they call a Quarter Pounder with cheese in Paris?"

B. They don't call it a Quarter Pounder with cheese?

What do they call it?"

A. They call it Royale with Cheese

B. What do they call a Big Mac?

A. Big Mac's a Big Mac but they call it Le Big Mac.

B. Le Big Mac! (incredulous and derisory laugh)

We may gloomily despair at the cultural homogenisation of cities (nuances of culture expressed only through the taxonomy of fast food as Tarantino wittily suggests) but we find that however close city cultures may seem to be we can *always get it wrong*; it doesn't matter how travelled you are you will always get it wrong in a new place.

I am 17 and doing the kind of thing you do when you are 17. After sleeping on the beach at Nice for a week I am now in a sleeping bag under the Pont Neuf in Paris (and how curiously sweet is the smell of six centuries of urine). My friend is also in his sleeping bag but *he* has a blow-up mattress. Ah, la vie de boheme! But as we settle down to sleep we hear a laconic Parisian voice

from the Quai above: "Oh, oh, regarde le bourgeois avec son matelas pneumatique!"

But getting it wrong can be balanced with moments of getting it right. How right that in my same stay in Paris 1965, I should have found myself talking in a bar to a few young English guys, playing pinball with them, and finding out only after half an hour that they were the Kinks due to play Olympia that night. A sweetly emblematic sixties memory... *pinball!*

And there is pleasure in getting it wrong. It is a refreshing, bracing to be culturally disorientated, to be in a world which has at least a tinge of oddness in it: (encountering a pair of racoons gloomily sorting through the rubbish in my brother's inner-city Toronto front yard in my first morning; looking out of the window into the dazzling street on my first morning in Cairo and watching a couple of moustached soldiers walking hand in hand. Indeed finding myself walking with a functionary of the Egyptian Ministry of Education, (a small, bald, fat man in a sweaty nylon leisure suit) like a pair of lovers hand in hand through the streets of Cairo; (but then I needed him as a work contact.)

Some times (and one doesn't have to go far), one lands in somewhere distinctly weird. My first day in Budapest was eerie; one tends to look for language support: some words must be the same. But no; Hungarian is famous for its obscurity. It was like being in one of those curious Balkan-ish countries in a Tintin book in which every sign is utterly unutterable, bristling with exotic diacritics. (For one brief moment I thought I had found some familiar ground. On a building across the road from my flat was a neon hoarding showing a spider's web, and the writing ARANY POK. At last, I thought, I have found a cognate: *Arany* is like *araignee* in French or *Arana* in Spanish, meaning spider. No. I found instead that arany meant *golden* and that Golden Web was a make of tights. Hungarian, in a particularly perverse and Hungarian way, had outwitted me again.

Cities are all about transport, about moving around, careering around. Most of these journeys are banal little translocations; but they have their thrills. In Paris the buses used to have a charmingly perfunctory leather strap across the rear entrance; you just unhooked it and scrambled onto the swaying platform; in motion, bien entendu. Today in London there is still the modest thrill, unchecked (as yet) by nannydom, of leaning off the rail into the wind as your Routemaster judders round Marble Arch. Other thrills: the great urban water rides of the Staten Island Ferries, the Star Ferries of Hong

Kong, Hegarty's ferries of Sydney ("Alright you kin get on now" says a laconic man in jeans: Shouldn't this be "All aboard"?) Not as bad as the cockney rustbuckets that still contrive to take tourists from the Embankment down to Greenwich: "Nah then, ladeez an'gen'lemen...you are nah abaht to pass under Wa'erloo Bridge. If yer look carefully yer'll see it tilts a bit ter the left s on account of it was built by women, cos all the men was away at war." Then there are the tuk-tuks of India and Southeast Asia, the funiculars of Naples, the "bondes" of Rio, the motorlaunches of the Bangkok canals, the dreamlike marble expanses of the Moscow underground, the strange little subways of Glasgow and Buenos Aires (to English ears so evocatively named: el Subterraneo), the lugubrious clanking and spitting trams of eastern Europe; the hyper-modern iridescent trams that slink through the dark Hapsburgian streets of Milan.

And finally a toast to the taxis of the world and their drivers; the strange intimacy you can establish with the backs of their heads, which contrast so curiously with the little identity photos on the dashboards, (next to the family photograph, the Bible, the Air freshener like a Swedish pine, and the swaying talisman or amulet that allows them, on your behalf, to take heart stopping risks with cosmic impunity. In Kuala Lumpur I was quite, quite safe: on the dashboard of my taxi was assembled a touchingly syncretic little

altar. It was like this: in the centre a glowing Buddha, flanked by little red candles. To either side of each candle, guarding the Buddha, two figurines of Snoopy, wearing Stetsons and holding little six shooters.) Jarmusch in his tender film Night on Earth gives the taxi drivers of the world the tribute they deserve. For me one figure will always remain particularly intense: my taxi driver to Calcutta airport; an elderly disabled man of the greatest dignity who limped to his cab, hauling himself with difficulty into his driving seat and who ruled the traffic, with a half brooding, half piratical eye crouched over his beaded steering wheel like the Ancient Mariner. I just *liked his style*, particularly when at a red traffic light, to my horror, he eased himself out of his seat and limped *slowly* over the road to buy himself a *single* cigarette while the lights went green and the traffic backed up behind me and transvestite beggars scrabbled at my window.

Some city journeys are epic some fraught with danger, alarm. My Victoria Line train stops just outside Victoria on the way south. We sit there for 30 minutes. Someone has "gone under a train", which in London Transport parlance means suicide. The Dunkirk spirit cautiously establishes itself. Another thirty minutes. An official comes through and tells us that we are going to evacuate the train and are obliged to walk along the track to Pimlico. "But have you turned off the power" inevitably comes the question;

(one imagines vaguely some large bakelite switch with POWER written above it, and a sturdy gauntleted thumb making the system safe. "That's a good idea, love. I'm glad you reminded me" replies the official sardonically. In a short while we are trooping through the gloom between the rails, above our heads a sparse necklace of low watt bulbs dwindling to infinity. (How astonishingly medieval our underground system is the pedestrian tunnels at the Elephant and Castle so low, so dingy, so comically labyrinthine that they make me laugh as I pass through them, head down.)

I and a companion are on a late night bus careering along the sea front of Naples. There is the driver. There are we too, and that is all. I happen to be looking directly out over the driver's shoulder and about one hundred metres distant see a hunched figure at the side of the road. The bus careers on. The figure springs purposefully into its path. The driver, having brought the bus to a halt, runs, in shock, into the park. We get off and stand, the dead man at our feet, beside empty, brightly lit bus in the Riviera di Chiaia.

There is something angst-inducing about public transport alright; the crowdedness, the unknowness of one's fellow passengers, the sheer steaming madness of them sometimes, the dodgy atmosphere on night bus or tube on weekend nights. There is the silence in the tube. We see it,

perhaps as an example of British reserve. In fact I have found that subterranean travel wherever makes people silent. Be it London, Glasgow, Rome, San Paulo, Paris, Seoul, people are quiet.

In this quietness, in the willingness of people to cram in at a total sacrifice of anything that might be termed defensible space I find something rather moving. To me it is not a terrible thing, not at all a terrible thing that we should, for brief periods of time, tolerate conditions we would not impose on cattle. When Mumford captions one of his illustrations (of people going down into the subway) "Beginning of the typical metropolitan day...Descent into Hades" I don't understand him. (How much happier a classical allusion is the statement, in Latin to boot, by Fulgence Bienvenue, the classicist and engineer who built the Paris Metro: "Per erepto fulmine per inferno vehitur promethei genus": "Prometheus's children are transported in the underground inferno with the power of Jupiter"...by which he meant electricity.)

The Underground: what we are seeing here is the Social Contract (transport division), the temporary and voluntary submission to a greater good. I *like* to feel one of a crowd. I enjoy the utterly tenuous, lowest common denominator that occasions our promiscuous travel arrangements. That it

takes place at all is not *uncivilised*, it is *civilised*. It is nonetheless a *strange* feature of city life, one that George Steiner recognises in the Death of Tragedy. He points out that only relatively recently, in the last 150 years, have humans found themselves in the novel circumstances of being face to face with strangers for significant periods of time without speaking or at least without having to speak. To do so is a metropolitan skill and it is strange and shocking to people not used to it. There is the idea that we should all be laughing and joking, swapping anecdotes, making friends; but that is not how the city works.

We all recognise that moment when onto the tubes lurches the man with the six pack of Tennents in his plastic bag. The one who sings Strangers in the Night and who staggers about trying to shake people's hands ("Put it there pal"). When people don't respond then we are likely to get: "What the fuck's wrong with you, why does no-one fucking talk to one another in this fucking city?" And for a moment you think, conventionally, yes this lone, mad voice must be the voice of sanity in a world gone mad. But no; the silence in the underground is not, repeat *not* evidence of some sinister urban anomie. For me anyhow it is the sound of civilisation, evidence of a tacit urban social contract. In the 1820s Hazlitt wrote:

"In London there is a *public*; and each man is part of it... We have a sort of abstract existence; and a community of ideas and knowledge (rather than local proximity) is the bond of society and good fellowship."

In fact the silent passengers, staring ahead or at most discreetly checking one another out are indulging in behaviour every bit as human and civilised as social chit chat would be: the tacit agreement to travel collectively (often uncomfortably and in extrordinary intimacy) and yet to do so privately. Our way, the metropolitan way, is a good way. And to confirm it we like to flatter our urbanity by evoking the ingenu, mouth agape, in our streets. In the 1850s Parisian literature relished the idea of 'Indians' improbably in its streets (Les Mohicans de Paris). We have Crocodile Dundee. And while we are charmed at Croc doffing his hat and saying G'day to passers by along Fifth Avenue, but sorry, cobber; it won't do in town.

SHANGHAI AND SEOUL

Wherever in the world you go from nowhere will materialise a fat boy in glasses who wants to practice his English. But I was glad to acquire very quickly my Shanghai hanger on. It was past dusk when I got out of a tinny bus into the crossroads near the wrong end of Nanking Road, after lurching

from the airport down weirdly empty avenues six lanes wide beneath the ghostly shadow of improbably lofty overpasses, all dramatically underlit. My map was the merest stylisation of the actual topography. Fat Boy, in return for some pretty intensive ambulatory tutoring saw me right to the hotel I had chosen, more or less at random. I was confronted at reception by the Admiral of the Chinese Fleet (the splendour of his uniform, the profusion of braid); yet no; he was the lobby attendant.

In the hotel bar (oh, tourist bliss, a cosy but serious bar with proper bar stools and a sweet barmaid all to myself!) I toy with the menu but opt, unintrepidly for not one of the following:

Shredded Jelly Fish with Withckiveoll

Yellow Croacker in Green Thick Soup

Two Tastes of Snake Headed

Sauted Frog

Large Sea Slug with Cabbage Hearts

settling instead for four beers and half a packet of cigarettes.

Next morning I wake to the sound of the steady fall of heavy duty hammers. Steady, but too fast, surely, to be the blows of one man? I open the curtains and on a rooftop across the road see a beautiful emblem of human cooperation; two demolition men, their hammer blows alternating, the fall of one just skirting the rise of the other. One wears a tangerine coloured helmet, the other green, made of woven cane. They are smashing open the pretty roofs of a row of nineteenth century houses; frail lattices, modestly grand cornices are briskly resolved into a pile of tangled wire and plaster dust.

Out into the Nangking Road and straight into New World City department Store, its first customer on the stroke of nine; wave on wave of shop assistants in Royal Blue uniforms stand alert behind the counters.

New World City; I love these names, for all their simplicity the most foreign of Englishes.

The Golden Pen shop

Golden Wave

Fortune Duck

Double Happiness Matches.

(And in Singapore a restaurant called New World Fish Head Show Boat)

Outside a restaurant a band of tubby musicians in scarlet jackets oompah for no apparent reason. Down the road slope slender, abstracted beauties, feet barely leaving the ground. Other starchy belles pedal past in trim little suits on bikes with baskets, like fifties Girtonians off to lectures.

I reach the Bund and look out over the great brown churning Huangpo River. I watch tankers and tugs and cargo ships ploughing up and down like the picture on the cover of a Ladybird Book of Ships from the 1950s or the jigsaw I had and loved as a child: The Pool of London, a scene of almost impossibly simultaneous dynamism.

And beyond this shipping, in effect the new Bund, the new commercial and industrial zone, Pudong, a mass of construction. I watch a dirigible weaving in and out between towers and gantries and the Pearl Television Tower (again that curiously foreign English), a futuristic structure of struts and globes 486 metres high. Smugly I say to myself I will go across the river and be the only tourist there, in the new city of Pudong.

I get a taxi and we hurtle up the helter-skelter of a coiled access road up onto the bridge high above the Huangpo, to switchback down again on the far side; in ten minutes I am at the foot of the Pearl Television Tower; I pay my driver who is busy taking a pull from a jar of swampy looking water with some root (or newt?) afloat in it.

I was kind of right and very wrong. I was there with *thousands* of tourists and all of them Chinese; but tourists they were. How could I have imagined otherwise? Tourists snapping each other and giggling and fiddling with their sunglasses and tapping at their mobiles and fussing over their (single) children, while more uncertainly in their midst faltered venerable old couples. I watched one old man in his crumpled Mao suit and cap squinting into the sun at the distant summit of the Pearl Television Tower, tears in his eyes, tears perhaps only of rheumy senility. Or what else?

Back to the Bund; this time we go under the river and my taxi driver is a woman, her cab as touchingly pristine as a Northern parlour; doilies, antimacassars, plastic flowers. As I sit reflecting on the inherently greater finesse of women she too reaches down by the gear lever and quaffs from her jar of primordial broth. What is this stuff?

In the backstreet of motorcycle workshops I am intrigued at a crowd at the entrance of a bare dark interior, like a disused bus depot. In the darkness I find a bank of screens surrounded by tiers of seats. A becharmed audience watches in the penumbra the fluctuant twinklings of a thousand share prices. Greed is good. To be rich is glorious. As Gordon Gekko and Deng Shiao Ping agreed, respectively, in the eighties.

Back in the street I see my second woman driver of the day. She is about eighteen and nursing a great black limousine out into the lane. The glossy paintwork reflects the fresh roses and silver bells taped to the hood.

I stop at a little shop and buy a cute padded miniskirt for a friend and from an antique shop a little stack of bronze turtles for my son.

All visitors out to the airport pass beneath a famous and forbidding hoarding that straddles the expressway. It says (gold letter on red, of course):

DEVELOPMENT IS THE IRREFUTABLE ARGUMENT.

I like this; its unashamed espousal of development; the abstractness of its wording. The fact that it blithely ignores the fact that in some cultures people *can* and *do* refute development. But rather this than the coquettish, self-congratulatory little-me-ishness of a sigh on a rural by-pass:

Camshire County Council. Building Roads for You.

In my Seoul hotel room the first thing that I notice is a plastic box attached to the wall. I peer through it and find it to contain a rubber smoke mask. instructions tell me how to use this bondage item in case of fire. By the window of my tenth floor room is a coiled rope and harness. "Descend to the ground facing the wall. User's responsibility". I go to bed reassured by this pair of devices. I think.

Seoul may not be the most exotic of destinations. Big but not flashy buildings, no particular vibrancy in the streets. But it is definitely odd. That smoke mask.

Everyday things too; cars and car names. Should be universal you think, yet here in Korea there are actually shapes you don't see in Europe, names odd in their near-plausibility and yet further instances of pseudo English:

Daewoo Prince Ace

Sayyong Electric (beautiful!)

Hyundai Galloper Intercooler

Potenta Senator Avella

Orace Turbo Grand Saloon

The oddness of Korean women. Some of the scariest, most stylised lookers in the world float, as if drugged, arm in arm through the department stores. girls with mask-like faces, lustrous hair, plummy lipstick outlined in black lip pencil. So uniform is this look it is as if Korean women were simply conforming to the diktats of some State Department of the Erotic.

Beneath street level, long lustrous and meandering shopping malls; gleaming marble flights of steps, gold painted balustrades; in the centre of the Lotte plaza a futuristic construction of sheaves of glass pulses oh so gently, blushing almost, with light, now here, now there. The roof is supported by columns half doric, half ionic. Heaven could look like this.

Terence Conran would hate it but who would want to go to a heaven designed by Conran?

Down into the subway; one of our masklike beauties in white shorts and cowboy boots volunteers to help me interpret the ticket machine and then clacks off across the concourse embarrassed. Taking the escalator I sink to platform level, a Chopin mazurka floating discreetly from invisible vents. I surface at Tangdaemun market.

Here are odd sights to decode. On one stall there were: a tank full of dead toads; a hedgehog wriggling upturned in a pot; some jars of a dark boot-polish like substance for sale.

At another stall a man is selling live giant snails, a baboon chained to his wrist. And yes, it has to be said, crates of live dogs piled in, pell mell, waiting to be eaten. A sheepish crowd of men jostle round a stall selling seventies type "sex position" books. (Was there ever anything direr, less to do with sex, than the sex “position"?)

As at Porta Portese in Rome, Portobello Road in London, the Marche aux Puces, the market dwindles bathetically to heaps of junk on trestle tables, and from then onto the kerb. And there I found my Seoul souvenir; there beneath the giant stanchions of an expressway, amidst old tools, computer keyboards, betamax videos, amidst all this ignominy dangled from a hook a silver evening bag glittering and clinking in the breeze, so beautiful, so cool to the touch. I buy it and bear it away. In the subway a girl starts talking to me; I tell her I have been to the market and haul my silver bag out from the inside pocket of my leather jacket to show her. Dubious but polite she says that I need frock and shoes to match.

Back downtown by subway. I start up the broad glossy steps that rise to street level to find myself flanked by two immobile lines of black clad riot police. One man per step, like Masai tribesmen leaning nonchalantly on their long black batons, and at their belts, undonned, those beautiful grilled Vader-esque helmets. And yet beneath all this accoutrement merely youths on call up who might, the year before, or the next year be the very students they are preparing to battle in the ritualised spring manoevres of Korean student protest. Menacing the look for sure, but this menace is relieved by touches of Korean oddness; (the oddness of the smokemask and the Daewoo Prince Ace and the lipstick and the hedgehog): their equipment is

supported on the shoulders by two straps. On the left hand strap the word POLICE is written in *candy pink*, in a font one might have found in an early Star Trek episode. On the right hand strap the same word is written in *lime green*. As they move through the streets each carefully numbered platoon rallies behind a violet pennant.

Another night in the Tombstone Bar, this time drinking with a group of barely anglophone businessmen. I write all their names in Hangul, the Korean script, which gratifyingly astonishes them. Until I remind myself that their astonishment would have been the same if a baboon had performed the same task.

The next day to Chongbokkung palace. I pass through an arch into a sea of dappled lawn with, here and there, fountains shimmering in the sunlight; or so I thought for a micro second; but each fountain was a bride, pillars of chiffon, satin and silk dazzling in the heat, ringed with photographers. The general iconography of these photo shoots was that of the 1970s Hallmark card, and none the worse for that. One sweet but grumpy looking bride was, for the purpose of this arduous ritual, wearing under a dress that looked as it it consisted of an entire bolt of ivory satin) a pair of scuffed trainers; which was pretty cute.

In the cafeteria of the palace twenty young guardsmen clearly selected for their height and rectitude (a crack regiment?) shiny peaks to their caps, high-buttoned jackets, glittering trimmings. A multiple homo-erotic fantasy *pace* Tom of Finland. They divide themselves equally over three tables and each orders exactly, but exactly the same: an orange juice and a packet of biscuits.

I visit Youido plaza, so vast that it served as an airbase in the Korean War. (Practical for this, no doubt; but, planners, beware of massive spaces; for if they are too big they won t look big. Obviously the huge space is a favourite of the megalomaniac planner. Think of Jakarta's Merdeka square, the Hitler Speer plans for Berlin, Ceaucescu's planning of Bucharest. even Red Square and the Place de la Concorde are almost too big, as is the Ankara square before the mausoleum of Ataturk, as is Tienanmen Square. Things can get too big, as Leopardi realised in a letter to his sister Paolina, written from Rome in 1822. He writes about the great urban deserts of the new Rome. He compares the Piazza di Recanati to a monstruously vast chessboard in which the people remained nonetheless the size of ordinary chess pieces. I know this myself but I cannot resist the planning megalomania.)

In the National Folklore museum I stand in front of the usual montage of Bronze Age (or is it Iron Age? I have always been a bit vague about these things); life in a Korean village; how many times have I seen this before? folk in sacking garb grubbing around, fiddling with pots and fires in front of conical huts. A hunter returning dragging a stag. It doesn't matter where you are in the bronze age. In the museums of Colchester, Lausanne, Mexico City, Seoul there they are, doing the same things; same clothes, same fires, same pots. And they say that life *today* is the same everywhere. Ha!

Back down town; as I come out of the subway I almost trip up over a recumbant beggar with withered limbs who is propelling himself across my path singing into a karaoke mike, loudspeakers slung under his cart.

To the Tombstone again, and then I stop off to eat mussels sitting on a bench in the street served by a cross and suspicious woman who is not at all happy to have me there. Cautious but friendly fellow eaters offer me rice wine, more and more of it. I try to buy some bottles to reciprocate but she won't sell me any. She wants me out of the way. I leave, and weave back to my hotel at midnight. I pass a videoscreen in the otherwise dark empty street offering gardening advice in English, French, Italian and Korean. Back in my room I turn on the TV just in time to see the two newsreaders seated

against a backdrop of glittering skyscrapers bow gravely, as one man, to concludetheir bulletin.

CITY TOURIST

On the anniversary of the Russian Invasion of Prague 1969 I was chased, guidebook open in hand, up a blind alley by a riot policemen. He cornered me against the closed grille of a shop, truncheon raised and smashed it calculatedly against the grille two inches above my head, then veered back to join his mates (now where was I? Ah, yes : “Gothic Cathedral of St. Vitus.....”) Tourism and the real life of the city; what exactly do they have to do with each other?

Tourism is usually a form of time travel. We go abroad, typically to locations less "developed" than our own, in search of the old, the traditional, the small. "Kyoto offers what all Westerners long for of Japan: naked pebble gardens, the sensuous contours of a temple roof”..(Lonely Planet Guide: Japan)

The juxtaposition of the old and the new is a great favourite of the simpler sort of tourist writing; and who can deny how dramatic it is? Who could resist the option of retreat from an exotic but overwhelming street market to the air-conditioned fastnesses of a five star hotel atrium where fountains plash and a medley from Cats tinkles across from the Piano Bar?

But I *don't* long for the past. Speaking as someone with no pronounced interest in pebble gardens (why this minimalism rather than the neon lit alleys of Shibuya?) or again as someone who thrills more to the mammoth twin towers of Tange's Tokyo City Hall more than by the "sensuous contours of a temple roof'" I am dissatisfied with this invariability of touristic time travel, by the attitudes behind it and the literature that is the fruit of it. A Year In Provence. Need one say more?

This escapist and ultimately condescending pursuit of the past is, in any case, doomed; indeed always has been. The traveller into the past will always be disappointed. Gauguin, a hundred years ago, was horrified to find the South Sea Islanders eating tinned food. The English aesthetes in Forster's Where Angels fear to Tread, shudder at the thought that one of their number has fallen in love with a native of the Tuscan town of Monteriano; she has to be rescued because (this is the crucial fact) he is...a dentist. "A dentist in Monteriano!"; Medieval Tuscany and Modern Dentistry are simply incompatible.

I travel only to cities. I am not interested in the bits in between. I am interested in the present; but I am a time traveller too; time travel, that is,

into the future, again like the German architect Schinkel, who, when he came to Britain between May and August 1826 eschewed the normal locations of the picturesque or sublime traveller for the industrial cities. There is a fascinating sketch of Manchester, densely packed factories, bare and repetitive, a canal. Schinkel was of course shocked at the starkness of the industrial buildings he saw but was seeking a glimpse of the future. We may make fun of Sidney and Beatrice Webb and touring the promised land of the Soviet Union in the 1930s; but at least they were *looking forward*, visiting factories, power stations. I can identify with that.

We, the aesthetes and travellers, can move on, benefit from the innovations of the twentieth and twenty-first century; but the peoples of the Mediterranean (for Foster) or for us of the third world are, for the most part, expected to live in the past, in a world where things are "still" done.

We are all hip to the irony that tourism destroys the very places that tourists want to see. But perhaps we aren't aware of *how* embedded these ideas are in the discourse of tourism. Simple-minded guides opt for a National Geographic style: "Against a backdrop of new housing Don Goncales still

(still; that is the word to look out for) burns incense/drinks snake's blood carves walking stick handles." (This is a made up one but fairly accurate.)

For "still" is a key word here: the villagers *still* do this or *still* wear that. "Less than one kilometre from a computer store...in central Cairo there are mud brick houses where goats *still* wander though living rooms." (Rough Guide: Cairo. My emphasis)

Let us try Bangkok, in the same series:

"Although"..(here we go again) "the city is incredibly urbanised (tut, an urbanised city) "beneath its modern veneer lies an uncompromised Thai-ness". "Veneer"? "beneath"? "uncompromised"? The whole sentence dooms Thailand to the past. We are allowed the privileges of modernity but Thailand isn't.

"Despite" writes the Lonely Planet City Guide to Seoul "despite its tall buildings and modern infrastructure Seoul offers the visitor a wealth of cultural insights." The modern buildings clearly provide none whatsoever. Why this "despite"?

OK, so much for the Lonely Planet Guides. Let's try another: "Much of the centre is now given over to uninspired modern skyscrapers and office blocks but there are still (still) a few squares" Rough Guide Brazil. Actually I recall some of the modern architecture in Recife as quite characterful. Again, I don't believe the writer looked or *knew how to look*.

Architecture is a particular problem; architecture is, after all, the most visible and undeniable sign of the modern. Most guides automatically see modern architecture as destructive of local culture. I suspect that for most guidebook writers modern means bad; they don't even know how to look. Apkujong, a major suburb of Seoul just south of the Han river is deemed by the Lonely Planet Guide to be a "modernistic hell". I went there to see. It was just modern; indeed modern in a rather 'traditional' manner. It was like on of those drawings by le Corbusier; rows of massive blocks of flats, beautifully maintained and long straight roads. Why hell? I would *gladly* live in one of those flats.

‘Typical’ is another word that is common in the simpler guide books, often those produced by the tourist boards of the countries in question. The tourist seeks the typical, but it is sometimes hard to find; which obliges us to raise a

semantic eyebrow, surely, one thinks, if it is typical then, well, at least there should be a good few of it around?

'Typical' goes together nicely with 'still'; so we might get something like "It is still possible to find a typical native costume, ...pizzeria...Indian village...candomble ceremony".The irony is rich.

(Interestingly enough, of course one might well encounter 'typical' things, but in circumstances you might not expect or wish. To return to the last item on my list: candomble, the black magic rituals of Brazil; yes indeed it 'still' exists, in Recife, for example, folksy little shop-ettes in the municipally restored historic centre of the city sell the paraphernalia of candomble to tourists. But a chance leafing through of the Recife Yellow Pages made me realise there was more to it than that. While having no interest in ethnic mumbo-jumbo per se I went to the Velho Preto, the Old Black Man, a neon-lit store of talismans, artefacts, candles, statues, curses; down the aisles customers toted wire baskets, selecting the right product to effectively curse their neighbour, queuing patiently at the checkout to pay by credit card. Not a tourist in sight of course; this was not 'typical'; this was the real bloody thing.

Likewise Feng Shui. I go into the emporium of Sin Yong Long in Singapore. He sells, amongst his huge stock a “De Luxe Feng Shui Altar” and a gorgeous pinky-peach plastic construction it is, with “background Lighting, Extension Board, Power Socket, On-Off switch in a choice of Golden Blue, Pink, Rosewood” for only 430 Singapore dollars. Or if we’re talking ethnic how about a custard yellow and blush pink “De luxe Buddhist Lotus Altar. Latest design with Power socket and on/off Switch.” I have checked in the UK periodical Feng Shui for Modern Living (£2.95 monthly). No sign of Blush Pink Lotus Altars there. (A later note: In chinatown Bangkok I am glad to report that you can buy Hello Kitty Buddhist shrines.)

The fear is that the modern world, modern living, above all modern architecture is all becoming the same; that you "could be anywhere", that Brisbane looks like Buenos Aires looks like Seoul. *Of course* at first sight there is truth in this. Modern architecture is indeed a world style and there is a large common denominator of uniformity. But then again perhaps we have not learned to look; learned to see the differences, indeed the *growing* differences, the *growing* localisations of modern architecture. There is simply no way that the extravagances of Jakarta or Bangkok might appear in London or Frankfurt. All too easily we look at something big and glossy and

think, oh, modern architecture. But we should look more carefully; learn to discriminate more. Besides, we have, historically, been here before.

Let us imagine a tourist in the eighteenth century going from London to Paris to Turin and then back through Geneva and Brussels; this tourist might very well consider the local architectures of these locations was being lost beneath the homogenising influence of a new international style, the classical: same columns, same deployment of the classical orders etc. Anyone who looks at topographical prints of the eighteenth century might very well not be sure, (were it not for anecdotal foreground detail) whether the scene was St. Petersburg or Lausanne or Madrid. Even earlier precedents of International style could be identified: International Gothic, the Romanesque; all styles which prevailed from Durham to Palermo. Perhaps a Rough Guide author of the thirteenth century bewailed the internationalism of the ogival arch. ("The pilgrim may *still* discern a few traditional round arches....") Almost certainly a trawl through travel writings of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe would bring to light some handwringing over homogenisation of architectural style: one thinks particularly of the Europeanisation of Russian cities under Peter the Great or Catherine in their respective centuries. Did the Lonely Planet Guide to St Petersburg 1784 write: "Despite its huge classical buildings and modern European

infrastructure St Petersburg offers a wealth of cultural insights.....although the city is incredibly modernised beneath this veneer lies an uncompromised Slavic spirit. Traditional peasant carts can still be seen here and there amidst the speeding troikas...."

The supposed conflict between the old and the new (between the 'real' culture of the country and the global medium of modern architecture is a conflict that national tourist boards are all too aware of. They realise, sometimes with perplexity, that tourists will insist on wanting the ethnic, the old-fashioned. Socialist (or ex-socialist) countries are good at institutionalising this; they are masters of (god help us) the “folkloristic manifestation”, the peasant dance troupe, ethnic dress. Indeed they have their own methods of encapsulating these things for the simpler minded tourist. (And that does not exclude those with a Rough Guide in their backpack.)

Shenzen is known, if at all in the west, as the place with the largest number of construction cranes in the world (as, it has to be said, are several other locations in China!); hence it is one of the fastest growing areas in the enture history and geography of the globe. Imagine my (naive) enthusiasm in finding in Hong Kong a leaflet entitled Shenzen Excursion. In fact (and as an old hand should have realised this was unlikely to be a Daily Worker-type

sponsored glimpse of a socialist future) there was barely a mention in this brochure of the multi-storey wild west city, nary a picture of a skyscraper. Shenzen Excursion provides the following Disneyfications of Chinese Culture:

*Splendid China (D599) which "reproduces of more than a hundred scenic wonders in seventy famous places arrayed in their geographical order...you will also have a comprehensive experience with the traditional dishes, antiques and handicrafts of different nationalities."

Not if I have anything to do with it I won't. Nor will I be joining Tour D5110: China Folk Culture Villages, with its "life-size villages representing typical ethnic architectural styles of 21 selected nationalities have been built in it (sic). Folk songs and dancing (no, please, *anything* but folk songs and dancing) of different ethnics are performed by professional artists...."

It is fun to make fun of tourists; especially fun to make fun of those who call themselves travellers. The traveller is a culturally sensitive adventurer who goes off the beaten track, etc etc. The tourist is the despised visitor who conforms to the usual itineraries. The tourist tends to stay in the cities. The traveller penetrates the hinterland.

I found a picture of two travellers in my Indonesia guidebook; the caption read: "Travellers prepare to leave for..." Each of the 'travellers', great steak and milk-weaned Antipodean lunks, each of some six foot four inches sported a massive pack; they were seated authentically in bicycle rickshaws virtuous in the authenticity of their holiday experience, about to be pedalled into the heart of darkness by...two skinny little local boys apparently aged about ten. Travellers! I love it.

To hell with the self-styled traveller, his lofty ethnicity, his disdain for cities, and for the modern (which he doesn't half love back in Sydney) To hell with his risible assumption that he can have something to do with the lifestyles or the culture of people one hundred times poorer than himself.

Let's hear it for the tourist; for the twentyfirst century tourist.

There are, of course different types of travel journalism. Writing about travel is difficult; writing about travel involves decisions as to what we can do with our ignorance. Because how ever old a hand we are there will be an older hand, (delighted to correct any mistake); and so on ad infinitum. Old Hand has a certain style:

“in 1973 I went to China on a flight inaugurating a regular service between Addis Ababa and Shanghai. On board were a number of members of the Ethiopian royal family…” (Eric Newby)

Indeed how *else* does one go to China?

Old Hand is but one type of travel writer, the original one perhaps. but nowadays we don’t want our travel writers to be too knowing; and the travel writers don’t want to be either (all that tiresome research). Today there are two newer modes The first of these is Reckless and Mad. Redmond O’Hanlon, for example, in What am I Doing Here? Or Hunter Thompson in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas; the idea of a stimulant-fuelled trip to hell. PJ O’Rourke has one foot in this camp. So did Cassidy and Kerouac; (Or so I thought until I happened upon an early Kerouac book on his travels to England which is Adrian Mole-like in its ingenuousness; I recall sentences like “There were “bobbies” in helmets at Dover” etc. Indeed at his stage of his travel career Kerouac belonged to Travel Writer type 3: Little Me.)

The arch exemplar of Little Me is at present Michael Palin actually a TV journalist, for this is the man who goes travelling all alone around the world with only a camera crew.

If you are a Little Me tourist you go around all innocent wonder and bonhomie; Ohh that looks nice, can I have a bit, mmm…I wonder what it was? probably prefer not to know actually, ha-ha, oh, my God it was a whaaat?!!! hey what on earth;s that chap doing over there with a hatchet and a struggling cockerel…etc.

All very amusing . And very irritating; I once saw the ineffable Palin in pseudo-solitary mode on top of a lorry; he and some hapless African local were bouncing along a dusty track. Palin conceived the idea that it would be cute, (and make cute footage), to *swap hats* as they swayed along, side by side. But Mr Local was having none. Palin of course (droit de seigneur) insisted and so local man briefly, and with some distaste, donned Palin's hat, no doubt wondering, quite rightly, why he had to put on this white man's hat in front of a video camera, and why the white man wanted to wear his.

I know about these three modes, naturally enough, because unconsciously (and alarmingly) I find myself adopting them in turn. Doubtless there are

others: where, for example, does Chatwin fit in? a bit of each? And what about the grumpy Theroux? Teddy Bearish Bryson? My travel writer categories need expanding.

My intense, selfish appetite for cities means I make an ungracious guest when I visit new ones. "Right" says my generous sister in law in Toronto, on my first morning in the city "Would you like me to show you round town?" I wonder what to do. I want to explore the (modest) excitement of downtown Toronto myself and I dread polite commentary and suggestions. Rudely I make my excuses and go off on my own. (In actual truth this was my second day in Toronto. I had spent the first driving around the Italian quarter negotiating (in Italian) a place in a kennel at which my brother could lodge a Pyrenean Mountain Hound).

In Sao Paulo I knew I could trust my taciturn host. He sensed what I wanted. For the whole of one afternoon he drove me madly round one of the greatest urban agglomerations in the world, from lunchtime to dusk; the rain drummed on the roof of the car, dusk fell and we swooped into underpasses, between the lowering cliffs of Avenida Paulista, rocketing through tunnels, out onto expressways. He understood.

In New York my mentor was a friend of a friend called Bob. Bob lived near the apartment I had been lent in west 53rd street. He would meet me each morning in a diner for breakfast and check up on me:

"OK yesterday I told you to see the Citicorp building. Didja see it?"

"Yes Bob."

"OK. And I told you to see the Seagram Building. Didja see it?"

"Er, well, actually Bob, you see…"

"*Ass…hole*! See it today, willya?!"

Bob was perfect, even if he did try to make me pick up women in bars ("Go on, do that British accent".) Bob is like me. He knows every street and every building. I have seen tears in his eyes when he talks about the city.

So as a guide I am as impatient as he is. I will cluck and nag at my visitor taking them to the version of the city I want them to see. Sights and approaches are preordained: how for example shall we approach the Piazza Navona from precisely *that* direction because thereby (in the tradition of the old and aesthetic Baedeckers) the contrast between the meanness of the access and the splendour of the Roman square is most accentuated; My visitor to Buenos Aires will (and I mean will), after a walk

from the Plaza de Mayo (with pause, not optional) to visit the twenty five storey baroque-ish Edificio Barolo, reach in time for tea the Confiteria Mulino with its huge mottle mirrors and its elderly cummerbunded waiters and a visit to the Colon theatre, home of opera in Buenos Aires and closed when I lived there; but not so closed that you could not pay a man with a torch to show you this titanic space, his lightbeam magically eliciting from the otherwise unpenetrated gloom, an ormolu cornice here, a caryatid there.

SNAKEMAN

Venice, as everyone knows has' too many' tourists. The city governors actually display photos of a polluted city to stop people coming there. The City and Tourism are generally seen to be as some way in conflict. In essence they are, for if the city is supposed to embody a particular culture (the very thing that the tourist wants), then the tourist is obviously the outsider and other than that culture.

Fine. The question is what happens in an age of mass tourism? What happens when a city of seven milllion people has eighteen million visitors per year passing through it? For that is the case in London.

We are not talking here about the actual problems that this causes; the party of Kiwis, each with a frame rucksack, who decide it's a good idea to take the tube at 5.35 in the afternoon. My worries are more abstract. What is the definition of the city if tourists largely, or sometimes *exclusively* occupy large tracts of it? Surely if three times the 'indigenous' population of London comes to visit that city it is no longer possible to think of tourism as *incidental accessory* to city life, nor even to see it as an accessory; rather it is absolutely and permanently a part of it.

Some cities have to be seen as (at very least), two tiered. There are the inhabitants and there are the tourists ('inhabitants' covers all gradations of permanency and commitment; it is the nationality-profile of a city; nothing to do with 'born and bred' Londoners.)

Then there are the tourists; they are a fluctuating but major part of the demographics of the city. The city they see is a sort of 'London', a reduced, sanitised version of London conveniently packaged; of course there are different versions and different echelons of the tourist industry to them. There are the retired 60ish democrat-voting American couples, in their brand new Burberrys from Regent Street (hoping for rain to justify the expense and to authenticate the London experience;) they stay in the Park Lane Hotel or another of the lower ranking posh hotels. They like the British Museum, Bloomsbury, the Wallace Collection. There is the Finnish lad with his group of school mates who plays virtual reality games in Trocadero, gets himself snapped standing alongside the effigy of Sid Vicious in the Rock Circus and is secretly worrying what his mum will say about his Camden Market nose stud when he gets back to Jakostad.

The city they visit is the same we inhabit, but their city consists of an enormously reduced and simplified overlay upon the original, a network of tourist destinations, of well-trod throroughfares curiously insulated from the networks of the indigenes. Even where the two superimposed maps, the tourist and the local, share points of articulation they remain tantalyzingly separate. Those tourists you see, poor things, perched on an overstuffed Angus Steak House banquette, are a mere *15 yards away* from a steamy little Chinatown dimsum shop. Why aren't they *in* it?. But perhaps an Angus "steak" is what suits them best; and it suits me better too for them to stay there. I suppose we can rub along well enough.

Lack of intrepidity keeps the tourists from deviating from Piccadilly or Oxford Street. Perhaps we should prefer it that way. If they are happy trailing through a 'Royal' or 'Pop History' or 'Historical' or 'Cockney' version of the city, so be it. It leaves us the real bits.

But what is 'authentic?' (I hear myself ask before someone gets the question in first); and of course I *know* in a post-modern-y sort of way we are meant not to arbitrate what is authentic and what not. I *know* all that; but still I find the distinction nags at me; I can't accept the lazy relativism of the post modern. No, I like to think there is a difference.

Let us take a particular part of London and consider its "authenticity." Covent Garden for example. This seems quite clear. Covent Garden was the vegetable market of London; it had been this since 1656; it was closed down and transferred to a 64 acre site at Nine Elms, Battersea. For a long time debate was waged over whether the area was to be redeveloped as office space. If this had taken place the area would have gone from being one kind of "authentic" place (a fruit and veg wholesaler) to being another: offices. It became (I am still dealing with the simplified story here) an "artificial" place, a complex of genteel shops and cafés redone in bogus eighteenth century manner. Now it was full of tourists buying scented candles and pomanders and watching irritatingly 'wistful' mime artists. Covent Garden, then, went from the authentic to the inauthentic.

That is the simple story. In fact it is more complicated than that, both historically and in its current development.

To begin with Covent Garden, it could be said, began as "inauthentic", designed very consciously by an Inigo Jones who imposed an Italianate vision of town planning quite alien to the muddle of London. It was an astonishing sight for the Londoners of 1640. And its promoter, the 4th Earl of

Bedford was anxious for it to be, as it were, an inauthentic place, free of the loutishness of authentic, unreconstructed London, the tough Old London of cutpurses and roaring boys, the London of Elizabethan and Jacobean bourgeois comedy. He declared that the houses should be for "Persons of the greatest Distinction." Some writers on Covent Garden are surprised at his readiness to permit the selling of fruit and veg where the modish rich had just moved in; no doubt he needed the money. But in doing so he promoted a typically London muddle, the kind of muddle of which we should be proud; for it is specifically London-like, this consciousness of what things *should be* defeated by the sheer elan of the authentic; in the history of Covent Garden the very authentic; fruit and veg in the market; S &M at the Ben Jonson's Head (William Hickey in 1768 reports "three Amazonian tigresses pummelling a young man with all their might...") street gangs, (e.g the Mohocks). Mrs Phillips sex shop which sold "all sorts of fine *Machines* called Cundums." She also stocked books: Crazy Tales or Female Flagellants. (If we think that's quaint then consistency requires that we feel the same about those copies of Latex Lover or Asian Babes in Ann Summers, the new 'Mrs Philips'.)

The market went its own authentic way, with occasional attempts at control. In 1748, for example, there was a move to ban the market because

it was untidy, noisy, inconvenient, but it continued to flourish and become progressively more diverse and more unruly; the entire market area was regulated and redesigned by Charles Fowler in 1831. But with these changes a certain inauthenticity could be said to have prevailed. "Fashionable Londoners" the London Encyclopaedia tells us " liked to mingle with farmers, costermongers and flower-girls." In the last pictures of Covent Garden market in the late sixties show the space before Inigo Jones's St Paul' Church is full of crates and lorries unloading. If this was authenticity again then we can surely say that what Covent Garden became in the eighties was decidedly inauthentic. The idea of the Italian piazza much loved of London ciabatta eaters, just as it it had been in three hundred and fifty years before, again came to the fore. It was to be "continental"; it was to be a place for the theatre of life, the swirl and bustle of street life.

(One has only to go to the English National Opera to see just how entrenched is the preoccupation of the anglo-saxon mind with such scenes; barely a production that does not have a" swirl and bustle" market scene; it is how we like to think Italians and Spaniards behave; basically, in fact, it is a rather unmetropolitan vision; in real cities the crowd swarm straight ahead down straight roads: the crowds of Oxford Street of Nanjing Road in Hong Kong: no swirl, no bustle; they are Crowd.)

Since the eighties I would say Covent Garden is, almost miraculously becoming '*authentic'* again. The street performers are more vulgar, the shops tackier, "Mr Punch" seems to be on the way out. Last Christmas I saw a bald, moustachioed man smoking a pipe and dressed in a frilly pink tutu being hoisted in a spotlight to a height of 100feet by an HGV crane to touch the Christmas Tree and bring it blazing into light with a touch of his tiny wand. Young black boys boys ride their wierd little bikes round the market; sitting at a cafe table I watched helmeted construction workers high on the scaffolding of the new Royal Opera House frugging to a punkish band outside the Transport Museum.

A return to authenticity? Well at least one of many fluctuations in Covent Garden in the last three hundred and fifty years. The real history.

Mind you there are things which are indisputably undeniably inauthentic. One of the most offensive sights in London are the gemutlich little figures that totter out to ring the hour on bells with irritating little hammers, attached to the corner of the unashamedly sixties Swiss Centre. In a Swiss village this would be (I*suppose*) cute; bolted to a modern building in Zurich it would be just corny, but we'd put up with it. But that this object should

be stuck on the outside of a *modern building* in downtown *London* is intolerable. A friend and I have considered an attack on this object. Flame throwers perhaps? A small bomb?

Then there is the similarly trifling instance of "Brixton Town Square", funded jointly by Brixton Challenge and Lambeth Council, with the assistance of English Heritage. A piece of derelict land has been turfed over (always in England the response to any urban space). It now sits vacuous and unvisited surrounded by wire netting. I suspect I know where this comes from; someone in Lambeth Council had a vision of Jamaican colour and bustle, (an ENO production of Porgy and Bess? An inept 'folk' market scene daub bought one holiday in Kingston?) This was to be a meeting place for 'the people' (rather than people; crucial distinction)

Why is this place doomed? Why will it for ever remain inauthentic? Because it already exists. It exists outside Brixton Underground station two hundred yards away; as anyone knows this is one of the busiest, craziest places in London. On Saturdays I have seen, (in the robes and breastplates of imagined tribes of Israel) ranting preachers denouncing sodomy and vilifying whole races and nationalities. The local dossers dance drunkenly clutching

cans of Special Brew, the South Korean girl missionaries in their plum-coloured lip gloss, shimmy sexily to the sound of tambourines; and the king of the loonies sets himself up a recliner to sunbathe on the traffic island in the middle of Brixton Road while the same old lady blows through a comb and lavatory paper and the incense men waves his incense and the " big-big-biggie man" sells the Big Issue. Then there is the apocalyptic ranter whose incessant message is that we will all *roast in hell*. I watched him once surrounded by mocking kids: he didn't miss a beat:

"For He died, for the....(*'ere you're just bloody kids...you know nuffin' right?)...*for the remission of your sins".

It all happens in and around Brixton Tube station. I have found myself part of it, being beaten up in the ticket concourse (in front of about fifty amused onlookers) by an enraged lover swinging her handbag who had laid in wait with me. A few weeks ago I was forced against a bus shelter, on a Saturday morning, in mid-crowd, by a crack addict fizzing with anger.

So to hell with "Brixton Town Square". It is doomed. Even if they do clear all the crazies and the preachers away from the underground, and they are forced to move elsewhere it won't be to "Brixton Town Square". Real city life

stubbornly and awkwardly fuses and knots in places to hand, irrational, cramped, impractical. In spite of the success of Covent Garden the "Town Square, Brixton" smacks just too much of a site calculatedly designated for bustle.

So much for the Authentic. Then there is the Exotic. And this is just as elusive and unreliable. Paris in the nineteenth century may, today, appear to have been definitively exotic. But for the artists there and then it was stuffy, it was bourgeois. There was a yearning for something quite *other*: for the Exotic, in particular the Oriental, the fervidly imagined stews and harems of Constantinople. This yearning for the exotic was a particularly French thing: there are the paintings of Delacroix, the poems of de Musset (Namouna Conte Oriental), Baudelaire, Madame Bovary dreaming vaguely, of things oriental ("the Sultans, with their long pipes, swooning in arbours in the arms of dancing girls!") etc through to Loti or, more distateful, essentially cynical renditions of the Exotic, Gauguin's Tahiti paintings, Puccini's Madama Butterfly.

(By the way, even Orientals seek the oriental exotic. Through Singapore every night up Desker Road is pedalled a whole flotilla of stony-faced Japanese tourists in cycle rickshaws. As they round the corner a fusillade of

flashbulbs illuminates a cluster of spectacular lady boys, who wiggle and squeal in their tiny dresses as the tourists are pedalled away again to the safety of their hotel.)

Tourism was an escape from the perceived lassitude of European bourgeois society. As Mallarme writes:

La chair est triste helas et j'ai lu tous les livres...
Je partirai! Steamer balancant ta mature
Leve l'ancre pour une exotique nature!

In tourist thought and discourse home is never exotic, obviously. Exotic is other places, and almost always other times.

There is certainly a reluctance to see the present as exotic. Time perhaps that we did? What could be more exotic than the world today? In Cairo I am sitting at night under an awning at a street wedding. I am sharing a table with a beautifully uniformed senior policeman who takes a toke of a joint and with the greatest care and politeness passes it on to me. Drinks are served by a dwarf in a gallabeah. (All true but I guess all rather 'Alexandria Quartet').

I am in Jakarta at the time of the Jakarta Highland Games (don't even ask). I find myself in a very dark and louche bar in Blok M, wedged between two drinking companions: on my left a kilted Scotsman who fixes me with a defiant eye as he elaborates the finer points of caber tossing. On my right, pressing herself against me, a bar girl; there is *much* less to her skirt. So in my left ear I have…"well the thing you *dinnae* want to do when you aactually *release* the caber is…." And in my right: "You wan' fuck me? You like fuck? Cheap price. You wan' fuck? etc"

Outside my very window in Brixton I hear a row in the street. I look out. A driver has got out of his car and is arguing with a pedestrian. The pedestrian has a large snake coiled carefully around the top of his shaven head (not unusual; I've seen him round a few times (indeed he was in St Martin's Lane last night, well out of his manor). Things get heated; snakeman reaches into his jacket pocket and brings out (as one does in emergencies) a…*spare snake* and points it like a pistol at the face of the motorist who jumps back into his car and drives off. Snakeman folds up his spare snake with solicitude and puts it gently back into his pocket.

I travel with my nine year old son to Cartagena, the historic Caribbean coastal city of Columbia. He has been there before and I have not; he speaks Spanish, mine is just an optimistic admixture of Italian to Portuguese. He is my guide.

I already know his skills as a guide; we stand in front of an imposing walled mansion in Bogota. “Look Dad.” He says in in clear piping voice, pointing as only a child can point: ”That is the house of Gacha ,the second biggest narcotraficante in Columbia”. “That’s nice ” I say, eyeing the bodyguard at the gate with his sub machine gun “Now let’s see what’s down *this* street.”

We end up, more safely, at a funfair in a little tin box *approximately* the shape of a rocket ship (innocent of any such nannyish contrivances as seat belts, handles, security catches) hurtling around in the air thirty feet above the ground. On the ghost train the little carriage that is to take us wobbling through inferno initially doesn’t work; something to do with the rain perhaps? Only when the man bare-handed clangs together two spitting and crackling electrodes do we lurch forward into the dripping nightmare of a fair ground ride free of all safety precautions, dangling rubber skeletons and luminous ghouls the least of my fears.

We fly to Cartagena together; the hotel is fine, an old building round a courtyard. But the next day my son decides that we need a little luxury, daytime at least. We get into a cab and he tells the driver to take us to the Hotel Caribe, a five star hotel. “It’s very good, Dad, *anyone* can go and use the pool”. Dammit, he knows the doorman, and in we sweep, spending an afternoon lolling by the sumptuous pool. The next day we ride a speedboat to Isola del Pirata with a whole bunch of other tourists and he shows me how to work my snorkel.

The next evening is New Years Eve. The place to go is to a historic Plaza in the old town. There is a bar there with a little trio who play cumbias and gaitas. Outside kindly policemen distribute lethal handheld rockets to tiny children and fire their revolvers in the air. I drink in the bar with a jolly pockmarked hooker and, (in Querelle de Brest-style white uniform) a matelot to my left; for the flagship of the French navy, the Jeanne d’Arc has docked. Felix tears around the square with a bunch of other kids and finally falls to sleep with his head on the leather padded bar; I feel a bit guilty; should the lad be sleeping at ten past midnight at a smoky bar next to a hooker? But on waking up he refuses to go back to the hotel. There is slight commotion in the square; and here comes a little knot of people, a couple of policemen, a few bodyguards and in their midst the white haired and bespectacled

President of Colombia. My son gets up, pushes his way through the little crowd and *shakes the President's hand*.

But it's my turn next. For my matelot has told me that tomorrow is open day on the Jeanne d'Arc. And so for this once I can plan the day. I tell my son the next morning that we are going to see another *particularly interesting* baroque church; (not one of the boring old ones visited today.) Oh, Dad, do we *have* to? Yes; and it involves *a long tram ride* to the port as well. (Daa...ad!) When the baroque church turns out to be an aircraft carrier the lad falls silent, though neither of us was impressed by the bridge; no ship's wheel to lash yourself to here. Disappointingly we discover that the steering is done by a kind of computer game joystick a few inches high in the center of a little dial labelled 'gauche/droite/avant/arriere'. How nautical is *that* ?

CROWD

"London is really just a string of villages, actually." Yes, here is an abstraction we are happy to deal with: 'community'.

As we saw Deyan Sujic (100 Mile City) denies the idea of community as an inherently urban feature in present-day cities; or even the past. He finds fault with Jane Jacobs but is harder still on predecessors such as the authors of Family and Kinship in East London:

"Once you look past the astonishingly condescending view that the academics had of their subjects, you find a fundamental misapprehension about the nature of city life…the model for the 'natural' order of urban organization…is the farming hamlet and the fishing village, where everybody knows everybody else…",

There are, of course, communities in cities. Sujic is almost too eager to deny this. And they may, in the past, have been more socially cohesive (the "tight-knit community") there are certainly fewer communities in which the

family is the main sub-group; they are rather ethnic/national (loose but quite distinct West African groupings,for example, within the larger West Indian black populations of London) to the community of this or that age group; the young together, the middle aged together etc, (Such age stratifications are, needless to say particularly disliked by the tight-knot community people) There are even sexual communities; parts of town are gay, at least recreationally.

The new enthusiasts of tight-knit community, (secretly, perhaps, pining for ethnic singleness of the 'London' in an Ealing comedy) know that an altogether different model is desirable, nay *compulsory* today; community is to be a blending together of the diverse; of diverse ages, nationalities, religious persuasions, above all races. This is the message in the London soap opera Eastenders. But the truth isn't so cosy. Black and White communities in London do not mix much. Black and Asian interaction is uncommon. All that Eastenders TV stuff ("What's yours ,Tariq? Pint please, Winston, old son. Having one Tel?") is well-intentioned, but we are looking at a fundamentally middle-class and liberal yearning for Jacobs-like community. (And not only an idealistic one either; perhaps also a *scared* one.) *Actual* racial interaction takes different forms; indeed it often flies hilariously in the face of the solemnity and the certitudes of political correctness; it is an altogether more

trenchant business. I am in PC World in the City buying a bit of software. At a desk sits a Sikh with two white fellow employers. They were all looking at a phone headset, clearly a new part of staff equipment. "Well", says one of the white guys "*You* won't be using this Vijay; it'd never go over your fackin' turban." They all laugh. I recall an elderly Rasta taxi driver leaning back in his car as we drove through Brixton; somehow the issue of racism came up; perhaps it was a poster on a wall. "Raacism? He said in a slow, creaky, Jamaican voice…Raacism?."…long, long pause……"' *white man's business*."

The city is not about community, not in any cosy, dynastic, co-operative sense. In London there is very little feeling of community. This city is astonishingly uncohesive. I have walked hundreds of miles, north-south, east-west. I don't feel community. I feel instead what Murray Bookchin in his analysis of the city calls "a common "humanity" rather than a parochial "folk". And by humanity I am sure that Bookchin meant nothing cuddly or cohesive; just a theoretical (and rarely called upon) solidarity. One thing for sure; it doesn't need us to hob-nob in the street to exist.

Put it this way; when did I last feel a sense of community, or at least a feeling that disparate communities could get along? When, in the most recent

Brixton riots, I observed from my window that the gangs trashing shops across the road were half black, half white, Community? Whatever. But it made me think, good, whatever was happening was not that urban nightmare, black/white polarisation.

So, we can't count on or expect to find community. What we *do* find, however, variety, infinite variety, multiple-choice, a fact that has infinitely excited (and sometimes appalled) writers in the city. Conrad writes in the Secret Agent":

"Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents...a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives."

Baudelaire describes "plunging into the Crowd" ...and yes it is not community that cities are all about; it is crowd. The two are clearly different. Crowd is mere (or rather *sheer!*) quantity. The crowd is a roughshod substitute for community; it may for a while *look* like community, it may share some of the outward appearances of community but it is the opposite of it.

For community has some qualitative features, some lowest common denominator. The crowd on the other hand is purely random and promiscuous quantity.

We might imagine that lack of community was a modern malaise (or *perceived* malaise). But the age of the crowd, of a new perception of the crowd, was the nineteenth century. Bagehot a propos of Dickens, writes: "London is like a Newspaper. Everything is there and everything is disconnected, there is every kind of person in some houses; but there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbours in the lists of 'birth, marriages and deaths'..."

The Crowd has been invested with different forms of significance, notably in Canetti's Crowds and Power. The psycho-anthropological character of this book reflects a wariness of the crowd well warranted by a century of crowd-politics. (The surprising thing is that in this book we don't find much concerning the crowd *as crowd*, sheer concentration of numbers and the effect that this is to supposed to have on both its unconscious components - 'anomie' or whatever- and on its detached observers who might respond to it with horror or excitement.)

In the case of London the perception of the crowd, the way in which observers have responded to it, has its own history. In the eighteenth century the crowd was seen in terms of healthy mercantile bustle, or, especially later in the century and in the early nineteenth century- (the drawings of George Scharf or the description in Pierce Egan's London) with a new feeling for the crowd as circus or fairground, curiosities and grotesques included.

But there were further responses to the crowd to come in the nineteenth century. Intimations of a more fearful image of the crowd; "in the first half of the nineteenth century sketches of the city often depicted features which were later to cause disquiet: crowds, aggressive bustle, sharp division between poverty and affluence." (Victorian Artists and the City). In terms of the crowd the picture got darker, culminating in Dore's image of Ludgate Hill in which the crowd has a sullen abjectness, dangerously on the brink of riot. The crowd could become the mob: "Thousands of the lowest of the London rabble" says Dickens. In a letter of 1849 to the Times in a description of an execution at Horsemonger Lane he talks about the "wickedness and levity of the immense crowd". He describes the hysterical all-night party atmosphere that prevailed. Dickens wrote (again), of another visit to a public hanging outside Newgate Prison: "I should have deemed it

impossible that I could have felt any large assemblage of my fellow creatures to be so odious"

(Can one *twice*, or more often, attend public executions and *twice* tut-tut at the ghoulishness of your fellow attenders? To accuse Dickens of hypocrisy here would be naïve; but clearly there was a conflict between his moral concerns and his fervid imagination. Indeed half his art lies within the space between the two.)

Shortly after reading the Newgate account I found a print from the 1850s of a public execution outside Newgate and there is the very scene Dickens describes; but the most chilling detail? (really only discernible through a magnifying glass): A vendor pulls a little handcart through the crowd; on its side is painted: (B)aglioni's Bang Up Ginger Pop.

The crowd has always frightened the establishment. Under Napoleon III Haussmann's plan for the rationalisation of Paris was largely conceived with civil war and hence crowd control in mind. Napoleon himself, as early as 1793, had already considered new straight streets for the same reason. .
If from one political point of view (the conservative and reactionary one) the crowd was a rabble, from another it could embody a corporate heroism

that goes back to Peterloo or to the Peasants' Revolt. This form of crowd has a central role in the amphitheatre of totalitarianism. The crowd was not the 'mob' or the 'rabble' but The People. And If the People do not rally in sufficient numbers then numbers can be created. I recall standing in a Naples square at a political rally of some sort in which attendance was conspicuously sparse. But for the man with the microphone it was a different matter: as groups trickled in he was proclaiming: "Migliaia e migliaia di lavoratori, di operai, di intellettuali stanno scendendo in piazza.! Milgliaia…"…Thousands and thousands of workers intellectuals are coming out onto the streets…)

The old crowd, the Dickensian crowd, was scary because it was unwashed and potentially criminal, even worse: radical. In the twentieth century the new crowd offers a new threat: it is *common.*

"A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many I had not thought death had undone so many, Sighs, short and infrequent are exhaled. and each man fixed his eyes before his feet." For all the Dantean reference here, Eliot is appalled at mass society, at the communal but voluntary mass movements of the undead; but they were merely clerks walking to their desks in the City,

having alighted at London Bridge Station off commuter trains, poor souls (but now I am getting Dantean) from Lewisham or Brockley.

Lewisham? Brockley? Thought enough to inspire in the patrician Eliot a frisson of distaste! Paul Valery in 1930? Same bridge, same problem: "A little while I was walking across London Bridge.....This seemed to me no crowd of individual beings...rather I made of it...*a flux of identical particles*, equally sucked in by the same nameless void, their deaf, headlong current pattering monotonously over the bridge." (Beware of high-minded poets standing on bridges, one might conclude, since Eliot's and Valery's comments remind us of Wordsworth's Westminster Bridge. Wordsworth's distaste with common, urban man, expresses itself conveniently through a city seen so early that there were none of them about.)

John Carey (The Intellectuals and the Masses) describes the disdain that Bloomsbury held for the masses, the semi-educated modestly aspirational urban or suburban class, the clerks, as they were invariably typified: Pooter, Kipps, Leonard Bast (In Howards End) and others.

This tendency is important in the history of the city crowd; the city had always had its crowds; and yes this had caused concern; honest fear of the mob, real social concern at overcrowding etc. But the distaste that Carey

describes is different. The 'new' crowd was made up of the inhabitants of raw new suburbs, readers of Tit-bits magazine, consumers of tinned food. It was they who constituted the crowd, the new crowd.

And later again there was a *sociologists* crowd, and the fear of *anomie.* There was an irritating film in the eighties called Koyanisqaatsi; it included much speeded up footage of urban life under rapidly scudding clouds to a hypnotic soundtrack by Philip Glass, imagery that became very popular in TV commercials for cars . (Perhaps that was where it belonged in the first place?) The title is Hopi (what else?) for Life Out of Balance. In our automatic assumption that aboriginal cultures are better than our own we are obliged to conclude that our amazing modern world in *out of balance.* Why out of balance?

As I left my hotel in Tokyo in the mornings I found myself in the world of Koyanisqaatsi: the sole pedestrian at 8.45 walking *east* to Shinjuku station; bad idea; I did so with great difficulty for I did so abreast a massive and continuous army of office workers walking west. Two million commuters come through Shinjuku Station daily on their way to Tange's City Buildings 1 and 2 and other offices. I envied them their uniformity, their common purpose, their impeccable turnout, the discipline of the phalanxes released,

one after another by the pedestrian lights. There was something beautiful, dignified, moving, in their mass will. For who was I, poor tourist, map in hand, and with the leisure to loaf my way round their city? There used to be a scene in films, perhaps when Godzilla or the 50 Foot Woman were sowing mass panic in a city: gesticulating wildly a person would say "You're *all* going the wrong way!!!" I think the Koyanisquaatsi film liked to think it was saying that; but my respect was for the heroic tide of workers en route for the office rather than for hippy filmmakers telling them off for doing so.

Suspicion of the city crowd has pretty much remained constant throughout the twentieth century. As well as being dangerous, as well as being common the crowd represented alienation, another 'bad thing' of which the city is supposedly culpable. It is a prevailing modern idea that crowds are bad, oppressive, that one should wish to get away from them, to be by oneself. There is the feel that the city crowd creates a kind of anomie, that it is unnatural, artificial, robotic.

This idea sprang from early critiques of the new cities of the industrial age; they were socialistic in origin; above all they were German. Walter Benjamin quotes Engels on the London crowd: "They rush past one another as if they had nothing in common or were in no way associated with one another.

Their only agreement is a tacit one: that everyone should keep to the right of the pavement, so as not to impede the stream of people moving in the opposite direction. No one even bothers to spare a glance for the others." Benjamin points out that London must have been particularly shocking to a writer who came from " a Germany that was still provincial." Heine (as we saw earlier) was another such critic. These earnest provincial Germans hated the crowd of the new, mass cities, feeling probably that the individual could only be lost in it. But the *real* individual remains himself in the crowd; indeed the crowd defines him. (More sinsisterly the crowd is the medium into which we can be sucked..or deliberately allow ourselves to be sucked, like Hannibal Lekter in the closing scene of Silence of the Lambs)

The arch-pessimist E.M. Cioran, has a more dynamically dark picture of the crowd than the German provincials, Heine and Engels. His is a particularly Hobbesian view: "Whenever I happen to be in a city of any size, I marvel that riots do not break out every day: massacres, unspeakable carnage, a doomsday chaos. How can so many human beings coexist in a space so confined without destroying each other *to death*? As a matter of fact, the do hate each other, but they are not equal to their hatred. And it is this mediocrity, this impotence, that saves society." But there is too much evident relish here. Cioran thrills to his vision!

For me the crowd represents freedom, a source of energy; and, at the merely civic (rather than imaginative) manner it exemplifies that street-level Social Contract, by means of which we rub, *literally rub* along OK together; the free contract of the crowd, not the clinging contract of community. It is nice to move en masse, to obey and enjoy that unspoken consensus of movement; it gives me a feeling of camaraderie, of complicity with the person next to me, with the person I pass and will never speak to.

The crowd gives information. It is informative to feel the gradual thickening of density in certain streets of an unknown city, the direction of movement; you learn you are nearing some focal point: a market, a station. I am studying an aerial view of the New Year's Eve party in Rio; fireworks erupt from the Copacabana hotels that flank the ocean. In the photo the huge beaches have a curiously granulated texture that baffles me at first; until I realise that this granulation is *a million people*; it thrills me to know that one of these tiny pixels is myself, for I was *there.*

Notting Hill Carnival too, at dusk: smoke from the kebab stalls, starlings gathering in the skies, the thud of black loudspeakers stacked against the

empty, well-bolted, stuccoed villas of Ladbroke Grove. Frightening densities in those narrow streets.

Crowds in Oxford Street too. Oxford Street; was it ever genteel? As the thoroughfare that led to Tyburn gallows its respectability is dubious; Ackermann's Repository (1813) calls it "one of the finest streets in Europe"; But Ackermann's was a daylit, indeed sunlit and stucco-ey vision of London. De Quincey, who had a more nocturnal, proto-Victorian view of the city, and Oxford Street in particular writes: "Oxford Street, stony-hearted step mother....thou hast, since these days echoed to the groans of innumerable hearts".

George Scharf made a drawing in 1843 which shows a mobile sideshow parked in Oxford Street, punters queuing up, which contains, it is proclaimed on the side (complete with illustrations): "An enormous FAT WOMAN; the smallest man in the world; a boy born without arms and hands." That sounds like Oxford Street.

Oxford Street was recently and cleverly identified as "London High Street". It is generally abhorred. But it is absolutely honest. From Selfridges at one end to Mr Pound the Tottenham Court Road end ("Look around. It's Mr

Pound" intones a repetitive cassette tape), Mr Byrite in between, what you see is what you get. And furthermore the best thing that you get is Crowd.

Oxford Street on a hot Saturday afternoon simply heaves with the entire world; wave after wave of people. Through the crowd I swim, when the sun is low at the Marble Arch end, dazzled as I breast the silvery waves of oncoming silhouettes, silhouettes that resolve themselves a thousand different ways; here, breaking into three-dimensionality, a shoal of Brazilian girls in tiny dresses fit to break your heart; now a posse of black youths in snowy trainers, two Saudi women swathed in black, their faces hidden behind strange metallic beaks, incessant waves until I am overwhelmed by the profusion of faces, the beautiful, the coarse, the hostile, the vacant.

Once in one of the great filthy downtown thoroughfares of Cairo I had to lean against a wall not for the heat or the dust; just dazed with exposure to the crowd. But not for long. Indeed the crowd is cleansing; to shed for a period one's ego; surely this cannot be bad; indeed it might be positively therapeutic, as it was for Dickens who said: "I don't seem to be able to get rid of my spectres unless I can lose them in crowds."

But sometimes inconspicuousness is important. In London I am invisible. In Moscow I was gratified repeatedly to be asked directions, liking to think it was evidence of my quarter of Russian ancestry. In the swarming centre of Sao Paulo (Praca de Rebublica, Praca da Se, in baseball cap and dark glasses I stand long enough looking over a shirt stall while the owner has popped away, to be asked three times the price of 'my' shirts.

No dissimulation possible in Glodok, the Chinese ghetto of Jakarta; I am a foot taller than the crowd, washed to and fro along the pavements like a cumbersome piece of flotsam; or pressed in so tight by these smaller bodies that my immobility makes me more conspicuous still. (Glodok second visit: After the anti-Chinese riots and killings of the late 90s there is now new space: huge candy-coloured shopping centres; basically a commercial "fuck you too.....we *still* run business" to the non-Chinese population.

The crowd is a drug; sitting here I feel the lure of the streets. But it is an ambiguous thing. I am sometimes frightened to go out too, frightened to expose myself to the power of crowds. It means too much for me. Often when I am actually free to go out, when I have London's twenty four thousand thoroughfares at my disposal I am frightened at the sheer opportunity they afford, timid at the idea of drifting through them

inconsequentially, wondering what I am doing, feeling too obviously the flaneur.

It may, it is true, be a self-indulgence, this voyeuristic approach to the city, the city and its crowds as a circus. But the opposing view, the socially responsible, rational view often expresses sheer dislike of the city, the city and its mess, the city as a creation of that incorrigible species, the human race. Desire to rationalise the city, noble in itself, is actually born of impatience with *human behaviour*, in all its muddle and irrationality. Mumford cannot, wouldn't ever feel free to love cities as Dickens does; or I do. He is too rationalistic, too puritanical; and like all good puritans) has a lurid imagination. Never could he accept a New York which had become (in the words of O. Henry): Baghdad-on-the- Subway

Mumford writes:

"Wherever crowds gather in suffocation numbers... there the precedents of Roman building almost automatically revive, as they have come back today: the arena, the tall tenement, the mass contests and exhibitions, the football matches, the international beauty contests, the strip tease made ubiquitous by advertisement, the constant titillation of the senses by sex, liquor and violence-all in true Roman style. So, too, the multiplication of

bathrooms and the over-expenditure on broadly paved motor-roads, and above all, the massive collective concentration and glib ephemeralities, performed with supreme technical audacity. These are symptoms of the end:...when these signs multiply, Necropolis is near, though not a stone has yet crumbled. For the barbarian has already captured the city from within"

LOATHSOME CENTRES

There is something priggish about this passage: “striptease…sex, liquor..ephemeralities, signs”. This all sounds comfortingly human. Again, I warm rather to Lamb: “The endless succession of shops, where Fancy (miscalled folly) is supplied with perpetual new gauds and toys, excite in me no puritanical aversion. I gladly behold every appetite supplied with its proper food….”

(I prefer the Tokyo pornographer Nobuyoshi Araki who says: “Without obscenity our cities are dreary places and life is bleak.”).

Mumford’s description is just one of millions that denounce the city, though most denunciations are routine, lazy, unthought-through. The city is perennially seen as “a problem”, inherently problematical, necessarily in need of improvement.

But I simply cannot go along with these automatic assumptions of badness. I look around and I see the problems, of course. Gross inequality, bad drains, poor housing, poverty wretchedness, crime, massive pollution, traffic jams.

OK the city is full of problems. But we are talking about the *human race* here; concentrate millions of them together and *expect* to see human iniquity writ large. But don't blame the *city* for this.

These things are always seen in comparison to some halcyon past: The Magnificent Ambersons (in the film of that name) are first seen in a cute little town with Tom Sawyer-type palings and dinky horse-drawn streetcars. Thirty years into the film we walk, with the hero, through an increasingly alien city, filmed now at alarming expressionist angles, to this commentary: our protagonist walks through

"what seemed to be the strange streets of a strange city. The town was growing, changing. it was heaving up in the middle incredibly; it was spreading incredibly and as it heaved it befouled itself and darkened its sky."

This is the standard view, and in the film it is made quite clear that this is a fall from grace, from the simplicity of the town in the early minutes of the film.

James Stewart in It's a Wonderful Life finds himself in a lurid and corrupt parallel version of the Norman Rockwellish city of Bedford Falls. Hookers

flaunt themselves where dry goods merchants once traded; the Italians, sanitised and jolly in the real town, in the parallel one border on mafiosi. it is a very Mumford-ish film.

The history of the anti-city lament is interesting in itself, and as old as the the city and, since it is history changes through the ages. The city is immoral and corrupting while the country is inherently moral and salutary. Raymond Williams traces suspicion of the wickedness of the city from very early on in the history of literature. Specifically London is grumbled about as early as 1177, hardly a Sodom, more like a small market town; (estimated population at the time, 25.000): "whatever evil or malicious thing you will find in that city" (our provincial friend Richard of Devizes again.)

Thomas Jefferson considered very early New York to be a "cloacina of all the depravities of human nature"; and this at a time when Manhattan was a collection of modest residential homes flanking a bowling green.

Moralist indignation does not flag. Ruskin's diatribe is almost comically Old Testament:

"Loathsome centres of fornication and covertousness....the smoke of their sin going in to the face of heaven like the furnace of Sodom and the

pollution of it rotting and raging the bones and souls of the peasant people around them."

Now it is social reformers, hygienists, political radicals who condemn the city. With Marx and Engels' dark reports from the manufacturing towns, and later writers such as Booth and Beatrice Webb, the badness of the city became profoundly politicised; indeed the city could be seen as a summation of everything that was wrong with *capitalism*. Political change, for the utopian socialists anyway, rather than for the Marxist, could most dramatically be expressed in the dismantling of the city. In News from Nowhere the hero wakes up (after falling asleep in the horrors of late Victorian capital) to find that he is in a London that is "small and clean and green", a sort of Legoland London achieved after a socialist revolution triggered by a massacre in Trafalgar Square. A London "small and clean and green"? No thank you.

The city is so repeatedly deemed to be bad that it is good to have, in the most important recent book on the city (Peter Hall's Cities in Civilization) as firm a declaration of the qualities of the city as places for people who can stand the heat of the kitchen.messy places, sordid places sometimes …."

A poster in the Underground proposes:

"A car-free London. Imagine Central London without cars". And I do imagine it and I think, no, I don't want a London without cars. It would feel wrong. And we know all too well what happens to streets that are pedestrianised. They are cutely recobbled, "street furniture" appears, and real shops yield to Crabtree and Evelyn and the English Teddy Bear Shop.Car free London? No thanks.

I love to see ribbons of traffic rippling to the horizon. I like the shunting and honking and expostulation of a slow moving line of traffic; I like the look of cars, the dazzle of sunlight on their windscreens, the sizzle of tyres in the rain at night as I lie awake in bed; I love to hunch in the back of a taxi (especially with a lover) with the pulse of music coming out of the rear loudspeaker in the thick of the traffic in the scary, unknown streets of one of the great cities of the world.

I love to stand (as I often did in Jakarta) on pedestrian overpasses overlooking twenty lanes of traffic, epic, moving, the mass complicity beautiful to behold. I loved to watch the advance guard of motorcyles that ease and nudge their way to the front of the cars at a red light...and

to watch them released, way in advance of the cars, fifty, sixty, seventy bikes sweeping down the width of the avenue, like a mongol horde, maurauders with pennants, scarved faces, attitude, tearing across the steppe, an advance guard sweeping clean the path for the greater and slower juggernauts.

"The screech and mechanical uproar of the big city turns the citified head, fills citified ears as the song of birds, or wind in the trees once filled his heart. He is sidewalk-happy" Frank Lloyd Wright The Living City 1958.

Together with crowds and traffic *noise* is the other thing we are meant to mind. Of course it depends what kind of noise. We think fondly of the supposed sounds of eighteenth century London (we probably have in mind one of those tablemats with engravings by Morland : The Cries of Old London perhaps; "Buy my Sweet Lavender"etc.) Or if we think of the London of Dickens or Conan Doyle then city noise, almost exclusively (if it is left to the TV costume drama producers) is limited to the clipclop of horses hooves and the rumble of wheels on cobble.

We probably like to think of the past, *any* past, as necessarily quieter than our own; city film from the sixties, even the seventies, is beginning to have a retro charm; traffic was sparser, quieter; (good God, we see *parking spaces*!) I remember seeing a sixties film in which the hero repeatedly parked his car just in front of South Kensington tube station, each time to greater laughter from the 1990s audience.) But it didn't seem quiet at the time then. OK so let's go right back, say, to the 1930s; surely London was more peaceful then? not according to DH Lawrence, writing in 1930:

"The traffic is too heavy! ....Twenty years ago London was to me thrilling, thrilling, thrilling, the vast and roaring heart of all adventure.....but now the adventure is crushed out of London....The traffic of London used to roar with the mystery of man's adventure on the seas of life, like a vast sea-shell, murmuring a thrilling, half-comprehensible story. Now it booms..." (sorry, there's a bit more; this is Lawrence after all) "like monotonous, far-off guns, in a monotony of crushing something, crushing the earth, crushing out life, crushing everything dead."

"Twenty years ago"; that takes us back to 1910; so let us rewind to then; only to find Symons complaining: about his present, wanting to go back to *his* past

“Noise and evil smells have filled the streets like tunnels in daylight; it is a pain to walk in the midst of these of these hurrying and clattering machines....London” (here comes the nostalgic bit) “that was vast and smoky and loud, now stinks and reverberates...”

And in the mid-nineteenth century? Walter Benjamin reminds us “it was only macadamization of the roadways (c. 1840) that made it possible, finally, to have a conversation on the terrace of a (Paris)café without shouting in the other person’s ear”

And so on. One generation’s cacophony is the next generation’s nostalgia. And what about those Morland table mats and the Calls of London? Surely that was acceptable to its contemporaries? Not exactly.

“A freeman of London has the privilege of disturbing a whole street for an hour together, with the twankling of a brass kettle, or a frying pan”. Addison in 1711.

Not given to nostalgia, being a Dickens or Hazlitt rather than a Symons or a Lawrence, I have to say that I *like* the noise, the noises of the city. I like

traffic, I like the sound of traffic, the squeal of tyres, police, ambulance, fire sirens doppler-distorted as they flounder mournfully down the street; the hysterical gulping of a halted police car (though Yehudi Menuhin has made a plea for more harmonious police sirens, recommending "alternating thirds" which, my newspaper explains is. "a more consonant and harmonious sound in classical music") I love the BMWs round Brixton with the tinted windows and doors palpitating to the volume of music penned up within.

In Seoul I admired roof-mounted speakers through which errant parkers are reproached by cops inside the prowl car. I love the drone of London buses, the eruption from the tunnel of an underground train, the lovely flubbery sound of an accelerating motorcycle. And yes, OK, I *like* the cries of London: "Spare us some change?"..."Big Issue".. "Wanna buy skunk" " 1 day Travelcard"...."Mind the Gap"...."for you are all sinners and you will roast in hell"..."Move down the Cars"...."Because of a person under a train at Seven Sisters, customers will experience delays".. . "Yo! yo! You want draw?" (This at 7.30 in the morning). To my astonishment I was recently accosted by a crone in a Soho street who said, who actually *said:* "Would you like a nice fresh young girl, darling?" (There's an eighteenth century 'cry').

The beauty of noise; I was walking down a street in Calcutta, noisy enough, but then overlaying, almost unifying, the horrendous concatenation of noise I heard the divinest multi-tintinnabulation behind me and turned to see a truckload of half a million empty bottles shimmering within a thousand metal crates, as the truck rocked and swayed along the pitted road. Marinetti and the Futurist composers would have been inspired!

But the beauty of urban noise is never as great in the morning, perhaps too early in the morning. Lying in bed and listening to the sizzle of tyres of the first cars on a wet road; the first bus going through; and then the distant thunder, at about four thirty, of the first permitted wave of planes stacking up along the flightpath into Heathrow; long-haul planes trailing behind them through the skies the distinctive lustres of their origin; from Bangkok, from Calcutta, from Vladivostok from Vancouver; as romantic to me as Masefield's vessels:

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine'
With a cargo of ivory,

And apes and peacocks,

Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine

Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus,

Dipping though the Tropics by the palm-green shores...

But the *best* sound of all is the one you hear only in the very heart of the night, so late that it is almost early; and that is the sound that remains when all single and identifiable sounds have vanished. Lie in bed, listen carefully; if you persevere you can detect a low, almost imperceptible growl, the incessant muted growl of the city.

Crowd, traffic, noise. It all adds up to that choice city word: stress.

Stress? I don't feel it; or rather I *feel* it but I thrive on it. It makes me feel alive, it makes me live intensely. It makes me feel intelligent; (perhaps it actually *makes* us intelligent; but a nervy city intelligence, not that contemplative wisdom we hope to find in the "country". Urban stress is most genially embodied in the figure of Woody Allen. But two recent films deal with something bigger than the neurotic, existential angst of Allen. Falling Down begins in a freeway jam; there is a gradual crescendo of stress-

inducing factors: the heat, a fly in Michael Douglas' car, the gross behaviour of the kids in the immobilised school bus next to his car; the noise, the rudeness; the Garfield toy in the windscreen of another car is made to appear almost diabolical. Finally Douglas gets out of his car and just…walks away, across a scrubby bit of wasteland to a Korean convenience store; there we learn more of his frustrations; a nostalgia for the America of the 50 cent soda. Indeed as the film progresses we realise that he is not a particularly viable Everyman; there is other baggage; and because this is Hollywood this means marital baggage and, yes post-Vietnam vet baggage. So I was disappointed in the film; but I suppose I must concede that urban stress as a topic *alone* is not enough to power a film through two hours.

Grand Canyon, as mentioned before, begins in classic yuppy nightmare mode; white man at night in the wrong part of LA, car won't start, carphone flat, prey to a black gang prowling the streets in a big white BMW lowrider. The tone is set; the city continues to deliver shocks. Everyone feels fear; fear is symbolised by the constant presence of helicopters, like exterminating angels, clattering overhead.

KRUNG THEP

Flower of Cities Alle (as Dunbar described London in the fifteenth century) is Krung Thep. This is one of the biggest cities in the world (8,000,000) has the tallest hotel in the world, is (after Jakarta) probably the cheapest major city in the world, has, by far, the raciest night life in the world, the most beautiful women, the best climate, the highest, most audacious Sky Train, the cheapest and best street food in the world. And as if this were too much it has street vendors *much too cool* and polite to shout 'hey mister, you wanna buy, you wanna buy Rolex?' It is a city, perhaps not for long, where a taxi driver can look puzzled at the 10% extra you have given him and tries to return it. Is this some fiction? Is this Quintzoy or Persepolis of Samarkand? Is it a fiction of Calvino or Borge? No. I was there last month and it is, of course, Bangkok.

So why the pretentiousness of my choice of name? Well, I love the name Krung Thep and it *is* the sole name used by its eight million inhabitants. So that is good enough for me.

The airport bus swishes eerily into a city known to be the most traffic-congested in the world. It turns out to be a holiday, indeed a holiday period, Songkran. The whole of this visit was to a mere ghost of the city, (as I found on my second visit). I get out at Silom, a stop I have chosen more or less at random as my downtown destination, stepping from the chill of the bus into the heat and dazzle of the street at the foot of a massive flyover.

Above me rears a vast condominium, a dizzying stack of neo-baroque balustraded balconies, from the first to the fiftieth storey; an opiate vision the stranger for the fact that it is unfinished. The bulk of the edifice gleams within a chaotic chrysalis of bamboo scaffolding and swathes of green netting wafting like giant sails in the hot breeze, caressing its marmoral flanks. I plod in the direction of what I hope will become my hotel, chosen from a street map. Fifteen minutes later I am installed in the Niagara Hotel where everything just about works: the air con noisy, the TV crackly; but it is all there.

After a nap and a shower out along Silom, now crowded; squirted with water by a trio of girls (the custom on this, the Songkran festival). I ate noodles in the street, painfully aware of my hyper-conspicuousness, feeling

unnecessarily big and ungainly; finally found a bar; for there is always that bar, the bar with the usual group of raddled expatriates: sex tourists, duckers and divers; oh yes, and the Explosives and Special Effects unit of the current Bond movie. (And there is *always* a Bond movie in the making. Thirty five years ago, *thirty-five year,s* I was hitchhiking up the MI in the car of a stunt man in the first James Bond film (as it was less racily known then.)

Service was sweet, with that special sweetness of the Thais. A young girl with lustrous hair jiggled herself up on to a barstool, flipped open her laptop and worked intently on the bar accounts for an hour. I switched into lad-mode and drank with my tattooed compatriots.

I spend my first day walking inadvisable distances in the heat, loving it all, from glossy corporate citadels to the epically chronic traffic, traffic which, when released from the immobility of the gridlock, circulates with a skittish virtuosity, (or so it did on this visit).

Down the Ratchadamri Road, and the length of Silom Road stalks a procession of mighty supports epic in their free-standing beauty, awaiting the Sky Train they are to carry; an abstract beauty, each unit beautifully

faceted, eloquent in the very limitations of its function. They are Assyrian in their utter massiveness.

When it comes to such modernity (in a destination that we wish to find venerable, ancient and spiritual) the Lonely Planet guide to Bangkok does better than most with a section (three quarters of a page no less) on modern architecture. For all this the guide doesn't really want to know; true a flyover is but a flyover and my enthusiasm may be excessive; but Bangkok is astonishing in the sheer profusion and exuberance of its new building. From the layman's point of view, that is. Minimalists and hi-tech theoreticians from Europe or the States might well think that the new Thai architecture derives from the worst and most gimcrack of eighties Post Modern. But I prefer something vulgar and sincere to something tasteful and ironic. To hell with irony and pastiche; out here you feel that Post Modern, while perhaps not absolutely the hippest thing, is at least done for brazen effect rather than the interests of "wit". The Thais like marble-look balustrades right up to the fiftieth floor and a cheeky pergola to boot to top it out at 400 feet, and good luck to them. Lots of glass, lots of mirrors; there is a tower the shape of a Transformer Robot in Sathon Thai Road. A dinghy lost in a sunlit sea, a maintainance cradle dangles high against the flank of dazzling glass, two little heads, the mariners inside. Another mirror-clad tower reflects the

clouds; they swim serenely across its flank, the whole building like a vast and restful screen saver.

Today after a torrid walk through the thick of the city, as a respite from the fumes, the heat, the dust, the glitter I was tempted into a cinema. I liked the look of the poster: Kung-Fu babes, dark glasses, swanky cars. I bought my ticket from a sweet woman in a little glass box where she sat fiddling with a bunch of coloured drinking straws. By the drapes leading into the auditorium stand two ushers, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, in red jackets, bow ties, each with a Chinese Flying Eagle chromium torch protruding from their breast pocket. I am ushered to a seat (not difficult because I am the only member of the audience) and then sit in the dark for twenty minutes: no film. No film because the projectionist hasn't turned up from his lunch. The lady in the booth smiles sweetly, giggles at the little packet of washing powder I happen to be carrying and shows me the intricate flower she has built from her drinking straws.

The projectionist arrives, the film begins. Tweedledum signals furiously and reconducts me to my seat. After an hour of people blowing each other away (or up) I leave the film to conclude itself to a sea of empty seats and sally, well-pleased, into the dazzle of the street. My pleasure is compounded

by the X rated snack I buy outside; an entire squid, sliced, roasted then reconstituted section by section, on a stick. I wield this Damien Hirst-ish snack like a lollipop as I saunter down the street, through the heaving crowds and the pungent markets in search of newer and bigger and more audacious modern building. Pure, the purest happiness

On my return to the hotel I find the usually impeccable Chinese receptionist, phone in hand, sweaty and anxious, as if in a trance, incapable of handing me my key. Are you alright? I ask. He sits transfixed; still no key. Are you sure you're OK. Finally he admits: No, I am broken hearted. My girlfriend says she wants to be only my friend.

I visit Patpong, the trio of streets of bars, clubs, girls etc. It feels pretty sexy too but quiet in this holiday period; still the air is thick with sexual mischief. I am contented with sitting with my Singha beer and cigarette at the bar, or rather the stage where the girls in stockings and thongs and high heels strut and pout and wriggle against each other to unforgivably fusty music: Staying Alive, Brown Sugar. Cute girls too, lithe bodies, skins like satin; facts that jostle uncomfortably in the mind with stories of bonded and underage sex workers; but it is still sexy. How to deal with the discrepancy between social fact and sexual response? In the traditional way, by recourse to pity

and sentimentality, (the pathos of cheap stilettos, new but already scuffed already wobbly; the inexpertly painted toenails a few inches from my eyes, the child's face under the makeup.) Back to the hotel in an ambiguous state of mind; better Gladstone who, at least, after his descent into lowlife, strode purposefully home to self-flagellation.

Another evening, another club visit; I am clearly too early. For half an hour I sit alone, just me and 20 strutting pole dancers. I mean, even *the other way round* it would still be value for money.

Crossing the bridges of Bangkok I had looked down and seen narrow high powered ferries rearing at speed through the narrow canals, young hotheads at the outboard motors. Wanting a go I slip down into the canalside market and after a deliciously fragrant bowl of noodles found myself standing on a little jetty together with a Betty Boop-like cutie clutching a large transparent bag of fresh flower petals. She has only a little English as we start talking. She is going to scatter the petals on her grandfather's grave. Jumping into the boat (since it merely slows down at each stop,) we lurch through the city atop the filthy canal, the peaks of skyscrapers flashing intermittently like blades above the ragged roofs of the canalside houses.

As in Indonesia there is the illusion of an inexhaustible number of beautiful women; this is a bit of a poser, particularly to the anglo-saxon mind; for surely beauty, must (must it not?) be rare. And yet one finds oneself in Bangkok on day one in the street thinking "Oh, wow, ther's a beautiful woman...and hey there's another and hang on, here come another twenty" until at last you realise that if you are going to operate at all in this city you must be a little more measured. Gradually you realise that you are *not always looking at beauty*; it is simply that that there is a dramatic recurrence of features, of striking juxtapositions (dark hair, honey-coloured skin, dark eyes etc. all, in the anglo-saxon canon, features of a certain syntax of beauty; but actually you are, most of the time in the presence of mere prettiness; but at first,yes, there appears to be an improbable, intolerable abundance of pulchritude.

The same feeling too of infinite abundance in the markets in Bangkok: the extraordinary profusion of objects and choice: one shop is devoted to hairgrips: not just fifty types of hairgrip but, at a guess, 1000 types; another outlet deals in pearl buttons, several hundred types; beadshops glittering in profusion, laptops stacked up randomly with the same insouciance with which we now treat the humble cellphone. The glitter and plenitude of

every shop, the stacks and stacks of CD players gleaming in shrink wrap, a lustrous overall dazzle under the strip lighting.

One the way to the airport: the expressway rockets you there in 25 minutes by taxi, sizzling above the great bulk of Bangkok; below the silvery granulation of the city heaving and festering in the heat-white morning, a fabric punctured in each direction by the eery refrigerated towers of who knows what agencies, their shimmering glass dispassionately reflecting the chaos of the uncorporate world. As we approach the airport I look back down the Expressway and see the shimmer of pollution and the dark bulks and improbable profiles of the 50 story towers that punch the skyline. We streak past one shimmering silver tower which has, set into its centre, a display panel the size of a cinema screen, rippling from left to right with an uninterrupted ribbon of the exquisite Thai script; the little golden pixels dance

and glitter across the glossy black; so beautiful, so eery.

"Fabric it seemed of diamond and of gold,

With alabaster domes and silver spires,

And blazing terrace upon terrace, high

Uplifted; here serene pavilions bright,

In avenues disposed; there towers begirt

With battlements that on their restless fronts

Bore stars-illumination of all gems"

Back to Krung Thep in 2000 and again in 2002; the audacious Sky Train is finished, the sidewalks seething; I am (willingly) coopted by a local colleague first into a tuk-tuk then into an intensely lubricious Patpong club. Drunk I allow my credit card to be removed from me and sign whatever slip comes my way. Back in London I dread the arrival of my credit card statement. How much will I have been ripped off? But even here Krung Thep remains benign: it could have been much, much worse: for this is the (albeit embarrassing) entry on my statement: "Superqueen Bangkok £35.00"

SEX CITY

Futurism, an excitable, swaggering, largely optimistic aesthetic concerned with kinetics, size, noise etc. Above all it was about the mass rather than the individual. But time again for more attention to the individual.

London in particular was seen to embody the mechanisation of modern urban life, certainly from the viewpoint of other, smaller and gayer capitals of Europe. "Send no poets to London!" Heine warned in the middle of the nineteenth century... "there is such a bleak seriousness about everything, such as colossal uniformity, such machine like motion, such tetchiness about joy itself. This London of extremes crushes the fancy and tears at the heart."

London was scary and the crowd was the scariest thing for many writers. The new crowd was a sociological phenomenon. It was the inchoate mass out of which the individual emerged, into which the individual sank again. This relationship of individual to crowd is verbosely and inconclusively dwelt on by Poe in his story The Man of the Crowd;

"as the darkness came on, the throng monetarily increased and by the time the lights were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door"

Our observer chooses one passer by, trailing him in order to ascertain his individuality and motivations, but resigns himself to conclude: "this old man refuses to be alone. *He is the Man of the Crowd."*

But by many, of course, the individual was seen as a victim of the city; the city was made up of unconnected individuals. But the idea of the individual is not, of course, always a negative one; the city was the medium in which the individual made his mark, progressed. The crowd of individuals is the medium in which the individual can make his way and out of which he can rise. From Dick Whittington to the likely lads and lasses of eighteenth century fact and fiction (Boswell, Moll Flanders) to Billy Liar and beyond this is an old familiar theme, the provincial in the city; Pip in Great Expecations, Alfredo Germont in La Traviata, Eugene de Rastignac in Pere Goriot. As Jacques Brel sings: "A dix-huit ans j'ai quitte la province"... (But not everyone gets to quit the provinces, of course: Billy Liar failed to get on that train.)

Once the provincial arrives the city is to be 'taken on' and conquered. ("If you can make it there you'll make it anywhere"). Balzac's hero Eugene de Rastignac surveys Paris from the Pere Lachaise cemetery:

"Il vit Paris tortueusement couche le long des deux rives de la Seine ou commencaient a briller less lumieres..Ses yeux s'attacherent presque avidement entre la colonne de la place Vendome et le dome des Invalides. La ou vivait ce beau monde dans lequel il avait voulu penetrer…his contemplation famously concludes: "A nous deux maintenant."

In War and Peace Napoleon looks over Moscow:

"The view of the strange city with its peculiar architecture....filled Napoleon with the rather envious and uneasy curiosity men feel when they see an alien form of life that has no knowledge of them....Napoleon from the Poklonny Hill perceived the throb of life in the town and felt, as it were, the breathing of that great and beautiful body...in the clean morning light he gazed now at the city and now at the plan".

(That last detail is *stupendous.* How often have I gazed, *with equal hunger* "now at the city and now at the plan"!)

But the occupational hazard of the young provincial on the make, especially given the security and certainties of his 'vie de province', is anomie; that special loneliness of the city; not that of the hermit; rather the cruel loneliness of the solitary figure surrounded by and taunted by conviviality .

The lone man in the city: In Dickens the figure in the room has a strange hallucinatory presence:

"...The housetops stretching far away...steeples towers belfries, shining vanes and masts of ships: a very forest. Gables, housetops, garret windows, wilderness upon wilderness. Smoke and noise enough for all the world at one. The man who was mending a pen at an upper window over the way, became of paramount importance in the scene and made a blank in it, ridiculously disproportionate in its extent, when he retired" (Martin Chuzzlewit). Inexplicably effective those last eight words.

This absence is not just a visual one; for some reason it gives me a frisson. Dickens makes both the presence and the absence of the man in the window eerie with an eeriness that only he is capable of. This window in

Victorian London could, in spirit, be a window in a painting by Hopper, in which figures are immanent with the same strangeness, but in their transitoriness (the hotel room, the "bagage mince") threaten as eloquent an absence as Dickens' figure.

A similar feeling comes from a more lyrical description by Osbert Sitwell:

"from the train...approaching London in the evening you would note a lighted window in a row of shuttered houses and a single figure standing, with a curious, pleading solitariness, outlined in the glow".

No. In modern times the figure alone in his room is by no means a symbol of serenity and spiritual health; he (for it is always a man who opts for what Kundera calls this "cocquettish solitude") is an emblem of urban angst, be he Tony Hancock, fumbling autodidactically through the Introduction to Bertrand Russell's History of Western Philosophy; or Robert de Niro assembling an assault rifle in Taxi Driver; or Leonard Cohen in his days of bedsitter angst (or his latter days of duplex angst). Man alone in his room is the emblematic modern man, a bit of a poseur, Gallic posturing of an existential kind; the heroes of de Montherlant, the hero of La Nausee, of Camus. The figure of

the man alone is a typically modern one; it is the room or the streets: as Gautier writes

Par l'ennui chasse de ma chambre

J'errais le long du boulevard"

or Balzac:

"only one passion could ever drag me from my studious routine....I used to go out in order to observe life in the faubourg"...

or Lamb:

"often have I rushed out into the Strand and fed my humour, till tears have wetted my cheek"

or Dickens:

"I can't explain how much I want these (streets).

Or Baudelaire who describes a man who "plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy"; (though it would be difficult to imagine

Baudelaire himself, dressed all in black save for his rose-pink gloves, of doing anything as uncool as *plunging*.)

The sole figure of a man in the street is the modern emblem, much to the disapproval of Marx who (according to Walter Benjamin) reproached Eugene Sue's Mysteres de Paris as portraying merely a man in the street rather than the masses, the proletariat, united in intent. And of course Marx is right, because clearly the flaneur exists only in contradistinction to the crowd. His revolutionary potential is nil.

The flaneur may pride himself on his detachment; but he will never attain the purest detachment, the utter dandyisme of the real eccentric. Their utter attention to detail is a defining characteristic: Stanley Green, the Protein Man walked the length of Oxford Street for years with his meticulously painted placard: LESS PASSION FROM LESS PROTEIN: MEAT, FISH, BIRD: EGG CHEESE, PEAS, BEANS: NUTS. AND SITTING. Passing him once I noted the neat little brass hooks from which, as an afterthought, dangled a subsidiary notice, the price of his booklet (which presumably he changed over the years.) Detail! For a sure sigh of the real eccentric is attention to detail. We are talking about the foresightfulness of Snakeman in providing himself with a spare snake. Or the care of the promising new street

eccentric I have sighted several times along Piccadilly: he wears a full-face motorcycle crash helmet and manoevres along the pavement a tall pram-like object decorated with a floral shower curtain. On the front of this structure he has *with the utmost care* mounted a self-portrait of Rembrandt.

But the most meticulous precisian of the streets was the man with the world map who had his pitch on the corner of Via Roma and Via Santa Brigida in Naples. From here, each day he exposed the Ultimate Conspiracy Theory. The Pope, the Queen of England, the Sendero Luminoso, the Yakuza, the Masons, Opus Dei, the CIA, (yes, possibly even the Quakers) are all in league. Little flags sprout from the face of the globe and (sweetest of all) meticulously colour-coded threads span oceans to reveal the universality of this collusion.

But often, and sometimes with almost allegorical significance individuals emerge from the crowd, and lay claim to you. I am sitting in a little café in Rio. An old old woman comes in and points to a bubbling pot of goggling eyes and says to me "Buy me a fish head". Nothing else; no please, no thankyou. I do. She sucks every bit of sustenance, eyes and all, out of this object and shuffles out.

Individuals emerge out of the city crowd as portentously as Wordsworth's Leech Gatherer. In Clapham Common Station an old man possibly in his eighties sways on the steps. I catch him and attach his hands to the banister. Are you OK? I ask. He replies: "I've just come from the hospice. My son's dying in there." You might have thought that at eighty you would at least not have to watch the slow death of your son.

At two o clock at night I walk quite lost through a massive rainstorm in Jakarta looking for my flat (in Jalan Komando 3.) Out of the shadows steps my saviour: Iceman. Naked to the waist, a turban round his head, on his shoulder he bears a great dripping girder of ice wrapped in sacking. With an eloquent free hand he points in silence the way I must go and disappears into the storm.

And then there are the encounters with the very, very famous; indeed the most famous woman in the world and the most famous man in the world.

I take my son across Green Park to show him Buckingham Palace. We are surprisingly alone there. A car rolls out. The Queen is inside. She waves to my

son. My son waves back. She hums off up the Mall. " See?! you've seen the Queen!" "OK Dad; but she could have been wearing her crown."

I find a corner of Leicester Square seething with people, policemen, bodyguards, photographers. In their midst, like a circus bear, lost but foursquare, stands Mohamed Ali.

Strange encounters that actually serve to intensify your own (self-imposed) solitude. You find yourself alone in the heart of a city. You lie on your bed and think of the dizzying tissue of events and opportunities that lie at the very threshold of your room, taunted by the opportunities that are, in theory, to hand; reproaching yourself for doing nothing about them. How much better to be a hermit in a cave than an urban hermit, and yet how much more hermitic in fact is the urban hermit who actually has the facilities for corruption on his doorstep. Sometimes it is a nightmare to be alone, unknown to anyone, knowing no-one, in a hotel room in the middle of a city. Worse still to walk those streets alone, an outsider to the complicity that seems to unite the crowd.

As a veteran of hotel rooms around the world I know all too well how solitary it can be to be alone and in a hotel in the middle of a strange city. Once in Cairo, I stayed one night in a very seedy downtown hotel, a room of a nightmarish kitsch. A Louis Farouk bed, a vast sofa, prototype, perhaps, for Dali's sofa based on the lips of Mae West; a fitful overhead light like a flying saucer, crackling audibly with electric current. The noise of the traffic in the street, the TV in the next room, the voices outside, the heat; I spent a horrible dream-haunted night, dreams with a cast of thousand, congested plots, weird sexual special effects. For so much of it comes down to *sex,* of course!

Jean Moreas writes of

"Les fins parfums de la jupe qui froufroute
Le long du trottoir blanc....

Rustling skirts along the sidewalk....yes; and we find it in literature as early as the seventeenth century, this particular conjunction of of silk and sidewalk:

"Now when each narrow lane, each nook and cave,
Signposts, and shop doors, pimp for ev'ry knave,

When riotous sinful plush and tell-tale spurs

Walk Fleet Street and the Strand, when the soft stirs

Of bawdy, ruffled silks turn night to day;"

The great seventeenth century topographer of London, Hollar, in some of his views revealed an unexpected eroticism. In an allegorical Winter scene a gorgeously furred, tippeted and becaped beauty in a black domino, the lace border of her skirt trailing almost in the mire, stands against a utilitarian depiction of High Holborn, mid-Winter, smoke curling from a hundred chimney pots.

For me sex is implicitly urban. The city, the city streets may superficially have all sorts of adventureful reverberations; man on the prowl, man as free as it is possible to get, existentially, geographically, sexually. In fact the idea of infinite opportunity is largely a myth; travel of my sort is not at all as it might seem. The adventures that supposedly appertain to lone travelling, well they don't generally happen to me. But I say generally, because, come to think of it, sometimes they do)

Whatever; of all the equations in my head the most entrenched is the "city equals sex". This for me is axiomatic.

"It was a very good year
For city girls
Who lived up the stair
With all that perfumed hair
And it came undone
When I was twenty one"

As Sinatra sings: mysterious, deeply erotic lines; the very syntax is strangely dreamy: with all *that* (?) perfumed hair..and (why *and?)* it came undone... beautifully suggestive; they evoke the heat outside, a glimpse of a rusting firestair through the window, a bed with rumpled sheets; pure Hopper again.

The city is the theatre of modern sexuality; it is the fact of, theoretically at least, the vast sexual opportunity it affords. The city is sexually a restless and tormenting place. There are days when I hardly venture out, so hard is it to be tantalised by quite so much sexual stimulus. Henry Miller enters a Times Square dance hall:

“I felt like a farmer come to town. Immediately I was dazzled, dazzled by the sea of faces, by the fetid warmth radiating from hundreds of overexcited bodies....everyone was keyed to fever pitch. Everyone looked intent and alert, intensely intent, intensely alert. The air crackled with this electric desire, this all consuming concentration. A thousand different perfumes clashed with one another....”

It is all opportunity, opportunity that we like cavalierly to assume we can take or leave at choice. Baudelaire writes in A Une Passante:

“La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait,
longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa.....

Un eclair...puis la nuit! -fugitive beaute
Dont le regard m’a fait soudainment renaitre
ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’etermnite?

O toi que j’eusse aimee, o toi qui le savais!”

Aragon watches "women walk by. There are great patches of radiance, flashes of light not yet stripped of their furs, of brilliant, restless mysteries... ...sometimes I have returned home late at night, after passing an infinity of these desirable shimmerings without having attempted to take possession of a single one of these lives left rashly within my reach."

(There is hardly need to point out the presumption in both passages: "toi que j'eusee aime"..."without having attempted to take possession....left rashly within my reach..".

Like most men, presumably most women too, I am on constant alert in the street. It may be a relaxed alert, automatic pilot almost; but yes, I check women out. I can hardly venture home without falling in love, seriously or idly fancying one or other of my fellow pedestrians, The truth is, of course that almost always we find ourselves, like Baudelaire or Aragon back at home, alone, muttering "toi que j'eusse aime, or more vernacularly Hmmm...I could have *had* her!"

But such rear guard swagger is pathetic. What matters is what you do then and there; and sometimes I do, in the street, in a museum, take that risk and

I feel good, because I have impacted into ten seconds that 'getting to know you' routine that should take much longer. And sometimes it pays off.

To do this, to pick up a woman, (to try!), is ultimately all to do with city. It is the ultimate city act. And given all the variables, all the odds of the city it often fails; and yet even then there is a thrill in returning alone to your hotel room of your flat, defeated by the city streets, your lust exacerbated but unfulfilled by the heat and dust, still drunk on the proximity of beautiful women in the streets. But there is pathos too; and it hurts; and masturbation is a poor consolation.

Sex is human, not animal; it is in the head. It is precisely in the city, with its plenitude (theoretical) of opportunities that there is the greatest gap between opportunity and success. So wide is the gap that sexually the city streets become very abstract. There is dense palpable sexuality in the very rhythm and thrum of the streets. The city is heady with the essence of sex.

In Cairo one of my Egyptian students has been eyeing me significantly, so it seems, for some time; that a middle class Egyptian woman (albeit with big hair, serious lipstick, high heels and ankle chain) should do so is practically unthinkable and I assume it is my imagination; until a little note is handed

me: “Meet me at the Roxy cinema this afternoon at 5. The driver will take us to a flat. We will be in there alown.” (sic)

I conclude that she is a high-class hooker. Feeling foolish I go to my appointment with a wallet full of the rank-smelling, worn banknotes of Egypt. There is the car, there is the driver, there is Scheherezade. OK, I say to myself, this guy is her pimp; as you expected. Don’t back out now. We drive through the whole abominable chaos of Cairo to a street heaving with vegetable sellers, donkeys, motorcycles. The man lets us into a little apartment on the ground floor. We drink tea; the man leaves. No money exchanges hands.

Scheherezade and I go to bed. The room is not dark. Blades of sunlight through the shutters like lasers striping the tiled floor. People shout outside, donkeys yawl grotesquely as we make love. For all the mayhem outside, I hear a scratching sound at the bedroom wall. Oh it’s nothing she says. OK. Afterwards I go, on my own, leaving her there. Only later, much late, do I realise what may have been happening; or what *of two things* had been happening; either: she had been paid by a voyeur who had not gone but been in the next room. Other possibility……well let’s hope it was only Betamax.

Sometimes in a huge city, in the great cavernous delapidated streets of Cairo, ill-lit in a wan yellow dusk, or the seething markets of Bangkok, where every lane disemburdens whole shoals of pretty women. Or summertime London, heaving with women from the world over, when I have sometimes almost wept at the intensity of an abstract, almost unsexual desire.

Now, in middleage I anticipate, almost with relish, the invisibility old age confers on you in the sexual and city worlds. There is real charm, true pathos, in the twilight world of city sex; a real assertion of the human , the fallible, and, OK a fallibility that is largely male. In the eighties in Warsaw I visited the Peoples Palace of Culture, a great Stalinst edifice donated by the great man himelf to his grateful satellite, Poland. In the great empty marble halls there was nothing to see save a few monitors relaying Madonna poncing around in a corset. OK, so out again only to happen on a little market of rudimentary proto-capitalist stalls, one with lurid, winking lights....and there in drab Warsaw was a sex aid shop with the rubberiest and sheeniest artefacts that Taiwan could deliver. A little spot of joy and audacity!

I remember the pathos of the pedlar In the backstreets of Little India in Singapore, (where prostitutes sit half dressed in dim red interiors open to the

street) I watch this old man anointing a wooden phallus which he cradles, optimistically erect, in his shrunken lap; a knot of gawpers stand round him apparently ready to disemburse for this Elisir d'Amore, listening to his patter: "You are putting this on your private part and you can go twenty...thirty minutes...I am selling this from twenty years" etc etc

In Chinatown, Krung Thep I watch two Buudhist monks in saffron robes rooting around at a stall devoted to karaoke mikes and vibrators.

In Tokyo, outside a dubious looking shack with flashing lights in Shibuya, hopefully entitled: JOYFUL ADULT SHOP hovers nervously an elderly highly respectable, suited man with an umbrella. I feel the utmost tenderness towards him; for I too will become just another sexual unperson, a wraith weaving unseen through phalanxes of passionate youth in whatever Byzantium ("no country for old men, the young in one another's arms, birds in the trees,...") end my days.

FUTURIST

London throughout the nineteenth century crackled with energy. It was World City; it was proto-Futurist.

The famous Rhinebeck view of 1810, mentioned earlier, looks at first glance a serene and comprehensive panorama: of London at first glance it looks a serene document, a grand but placid view of the Regency city; but all is not as it seems; look closely and suddenly you find, now here, now there amidst these stuccoed streets fire, insurrection, detonation. Fleeing crowds escape

obscure disasters, just as they do in some of Boccioni's painings exactly one hundred years later. (Walter Benjamin writes of "the more secret, more deeply embedded figures of the city: murders and rebellions, the bloody knots in the network of the streets, lairs of love, and conflagrations"). It is, in its colour and light and movement, almost a futurist view of the city. Other proto-futurist documents are paintings of fire popular at the time, particularly the fire at Covent Garden in 1803 recorded with much kinetic excitement in a print.

(Indeed, it was only when there was a fire that Turner seemed to discover interest in London, especially in the Burning of the Houses of Parliament paintings 0f 1834. In fact it was Monet who did for London (in his paintings c. 1900) what Turner could have done sixty years earlier, but chose not to.

London was futurist 100 years avant la lettre. Light, Speed, Industry, Machinery Evocations abound through the century:

"The dome of St. Paul's was visible in the night, with a lurid zone of red lights across it; and from the top of the Monument a stream of electric flame shot across the sky before us." A.J. Munby: Diaries.

The luminosity of the city makes even Mayhew (for all the social earnestness of his writings) futuristically lyrical:

"Though the stars be shining in the heavens here is another firmament spread out below with its millions of bright lights glittering at the feet. Line after line sparkles like the trails left by meteors....over the whole, too, there hangs a lurid cloud, bright as if the monster city were in flames, and looking from afar like the sea at dusk, made phosphorescent by the million creatures dwelling within it." Mayhew: Labour and the Poor. 1849.

"Hung in long, sepulchral arches of stone, the black, besmoked bridge seemed a huge scarf of crepe, festooning the river across..." Melville: Israel Potter 1855.

A beautiful image, Imagist in its power and strangeness.

"the remote stars, the high sombre trees, the vast dazzling interiors of clubs, the sinuous flickering lines of traffic ..." Arnold Bennett A Man from the North 1898

"Great masses of smoke from chimneys drift across the sunset and hang heavy in the still air; the west deepens to purple, then to grey shadow; a million fairy lights enkindle in the mazes of the lamp-lit streets.." Masterman: From The Abyss 1902

"The Strand and St Martin's Lane open out like rivers of fire, the fog billows and glows like a solar flare...."

writes Frosterus in London Rhapsody 1903. He goes on to describe the underground:

"A slow rumbling, an indeterminate reddish gleam adds colour to the dark rat-hole, which gapes blackly in the back wall of the station. And the next moment there stops at the platform a strange, coiled steel monster with staring insects eyes, behind which, like the brain, the train driver hides"

"the glint of straws blown from horses' feeds, the shimmer of wheel-marks on the wood pavement, the shine of bits of harness, the blaze of gold lettering along the house fronts, the slight quiver of the nerves after a momentarily dangerous crossing,...." Hueffer: The Soul of London. 1905

Conrad describes his perception of a van and horses thus:

" a square-backed black monster blocking half the street, with sudden iron-shod stampings, fierce jingles, and heavy, blowing sighs." The Secret Agent 1907

(All these come from The Moving Pageant edited by R. Allen).)

But the same was being expressed, again before the Futurists themselves, all over Europe: Verhaeren writes in 1893:

"ou les chemins vont vers la ville...
La-bas ce sont des ponts tresses en fer
Jetes, par bonds, a travers l'air;
Ce sont des blocs et des colonnes
Que dominent des faces de gorgonnes;
Ce sont des tours sur des faubourgs,
Ce sont des toits et des pignons,
En vol pliees, sur les maisons;
C'est la ville tentaculaire"

There follows a pungent, kinetic and powerful description of the modern city, traffic, stations, docks etc. While the poem affects a degree of repulsion from these circumstances the overall feeling is one of excitement, as so often in the nineteenth century.

Two years later in a volume actually entitled Les Villes Tentaculaires Verhaeren soars into abstract reflections of the city:

Quel ocean, ses coeurs! quel orage, ses nerfs!

Quels noeuds de volonte serres en son mystere!

...

Toujours, en son triomphe ou ses defaites,

Elle apparait geante, et son cri sonne et son nom luit,

Et la clarte que font ses feux dans la nuit

Rayonne au loin, jusqu'aux planetes!"

In the US Hart Crane was writing The Bridge (about Brooklyn Bridge, the same structure that inspired Mayakovsky:)

"Down wall, from girder onto street noon leaks

A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene

All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn....

The cables breathe the North Atlantic still."

Of course not everyone was celebrating the dynamism of the modern. In 1909 Arthur Symonds wrote:

"London as it is now is the wreck and moral of civilization. It is the machines more than anything else...the creatures we see now in the machine are hardly to be called human beings, so they are disfigured out of all recognition...Does anyone any longer walk? If I walk I meet no-one walking, and I cannot wonder at it, for what I meet is an uproar, and a whizz, and a leap past me, and a blinding cloud of dust, and a machine upon which scarecrows perch is disappearing at the end of the road"...

(But look! Even Symons is in vogue despite himself, for what a wonderfully futurist image this is!)

But he goes on to say of the wretched Londoner that he has:

"infinitely less sense of the mere abstract human significance of life than the facchino..on the Zattere at Venice, or the girl who carries water from the

well in an earthern pitcher, balancing it on her head, in any Spanish street." (This is the same kind of idolization of instinctual peasant life that is one of the most irritating features of D.H. Lawrence.) How long, you wonder, would Symons have lasted as a Venetian porter? how many pitchers of water would he have wished to carry at the age of ten? Symonds was writing in the same year as the Manifesto of Futurism. It is not hard to imagine what Marinetti would have thought of Symonds comments on the automobile, or to gauge his irritation at this slack, "dolce far niente" peasanty vision of Italy, his own country.

We should be grateful to the Futurists. For what artists first come to mind when we think Modern Art. Matisse, Picasso. And here is the question: where are the machines? Did Picasso...oh so modern....ever paint a car, a factory?. Were not these artists (so innovative in *form*) thoroughly reactionary in content...same old nudes, same old bottles, same old guitars...what? This was *modern* art? Where was the twentieth century? OK the Italian Futurists were a dodgy bunch artistically, politically, in terms of sheer organic form not innovative; but at least they *did modern art*.

By the time we come to Futurism itself we find a really specific commitment to the modern, to the mechanical. The urban. The poet Paolo Buzzi had written in 1908 , in a poem dedicated to Boccioni:

"Raise the massive constructions of the future city,
Raise them into the free open sky of the aviator"

Marinetti in 1909 has no room for the indolent waterside porters described by Symonds:

"We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure and by riot; we will sing of the multicoloured polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung from clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts; flashing in the sun with the glitter of knives; adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks" etc etc..

Today this sort of thing sounds like totalitarian bluster, to say nothing of ecological suicide. But my God, it must have been fun to be a Futurist, to

have blasted and bombadiered, to have been utterly convinced of the present and the future! Today we are so cravenly uncertain about both. A voice in yesterday's Evening Standard gives hope; that of an American designer, who when asked about the Millennium Wheel said "I'm a traditionalist. But this is the twentyfirst century, so let's get on with it." I*like* that. It is reassuring precisely *because* he is a traditionalist.

At the heart of Futurism lay the city. Boccioni's great paintings; The city Rises, Riot in the Galleria, Raid, The Forces of the Street (all 1910, 1911); Severini's paintings were responses to the modern city; but because Futurism had a political agenda it also had plans for the city, Sant'Elia in his manifesto of futurist architecture declares "We are men of the great hotels, the railway stations, the immense street, colossal ports, covered markets, luminous arcades, straight roads and beneficial demolitions." (One beneficial demolition proposed by Marinetti was that of the entirely of Venice.)

Why did futurism occur in Italy? Because Italy had too much past. It was a country that had, for Marinetti, become a museum; In the US where the real cities of the future were being made there was not futurism, there was the Future. American cities are not represented in a manner that dramatizes their futuristic poential.way. Georgia O'Keeffe concerns herself with the

lyrical and the static, she finds quiet and serenity in the skyscraper as she does in the lily. She was not a 'Futurist'; (though I very much like the fact she and her companion, the photographer Stieglitz, moved into an apartment on the 28th floor of the Shelton Building, the moment it was finished!) She had none of the frenzied mannerism of the Italian futurists or later the Expressionists. Likewise there is a lyrical calm to the city paintings of Hopper, or later Sheeler, the precisionist; or by Richard Estes, proponent of photorealism (whose paintings are curiously almost devoid of people). Of course there was a more energetic, kinetic and expressionist version of the big American cities with paintings such as Duluth, Stella, Marin, and particularly immigrant or visiting painters such as Grosz or Kokoshka represented New York in an energetically modern expressionistic manner that a European thinks appropriate to the city. Continuing European excitement in the big cities of the new world can be seen in the vast canvases that the German painter Anselm Kiefer produced of Sao Paulo in Brazil.)

London's Futurism as manifested in the work of Nevinson and others is a rather moderate version of a mainland European art movement though the *title* of one of his Fleet Street pinintgs is wonderfully Futurist: Among the Nerves of the World. But then British Art was never into movements. It was

too original, too studded with lone and inspired figures. True, Constable and Turner, (two of our most radical figures, figures who were being emulated by the French as early as the first two decades of the nineteenth century) disappoint when it comes to London; but Constable, in his Opening of Waterloo Bridge gets it right: it may be that London, with its epic untidiness, its variable weather, its dirty unpredictable skies lends itself to something grittier, more painterly, less precisionist; Constable's picture leads on to Turner's paintings of London (but why so few?!) Girtin responds to Londononly in his Eidometropolis Panorama. But London did find its match: in the paintings of John Bratby, Timothy Hayman, Oliver Bevan, Leon Kossoff. All these painters have, in their very paintwork, managed to reflect the ragged, unplanned, windblown untidiness of London. Perhaps the grey, scumbled paintings of Kossoff have been the last and last possible *painterly* response to the uncomfortable raggedness of London?

Painting was never really the medium for the modern city. It needed photographers, film makers to record its developments (and that includes demolitions; it is interesting that one of the earliest comprehensive commissioned set of city photographs was as much devoted to demolition as to building: Marville's photographs for Haussmann in the early 1860s).

From the beginning of the twentieth century it was as if the city was in urgent need of that medium that could cope with it: the cinema.

In fact the nineteenth century is full of proto-cinema. As well as Girtin's Eidometrolpolis there were Panoramas, Dioramas, Cycloramas, Poeciloramas, Typoramas, Diaphanic Panopticons in London etc. Many of these depicted cities: "Paris by Moonlight" or: "a Balloon Voyage above a Great City"

The very earliest films were instinctively futuristic, attention paid to traffic, to trains; Fire Engines leaving the Firestation, Workers Leaving a Factory were done again and again; and why? Because the very protagonists were the ones who would pay, that very evening even, to see themselves coming out of the factory. (Has the public's relationship with film ever been more sophisticated than it was in 1900, when the audience and the actors were one and the same, and *on the same day*?!) The twentieth century brought city and film together in it its first year and the two have been indivisible ever since.

(My mother first went to the cinema in a Yorkshire town in 1919, at the age of six. She remembers the title still: Baby Betty, the Darling of New York. One imagines a proto-Shirley Temple, or Orphan Annie, and wobbly, vertiginous

shots of radical new skyscrapers such as the Woolworth Building).

HONG KONG

June 1997: the very worst time to find oneself writing about Hong Kong; the city was the focus of a journalistic feeding frenzy; so it had to be; and besides it is, at the level of idle journalism, such an *easy* topic:

so emblematic, so easily evoked photographically: that panorama, that audacious airport, the Daimler, the governor's daughters, the tattered Union Jack. And what poor journalism so much of the time. One has to know so little about a topic for the paltry shifts of journalism to show; but my poor four days there? Yes even they qualified me to see the inadequacy of the Hong Kong article. And not least in the foreign press. For the Corriere della Sera it just *had to be* a Rolls Royce that left the Governor's mansion for the last time (it was a Daimler) PJ O'Rourke *has to have it "as* both an American and a mick to boot" (his words) that the Chinese in HK hated the Brits; that, after all, is what Americans like to say about the Brits; indeed the only thing they have to say about the Brits, such is their relief at having retained, in a climate of craven political correctness, *one* nation they can slander all they wish. So its "HKers hate the Brits" Er, except the ones that wept when Patten left; or the ones

that mobbed Blair; but hey, this is journalism, so don't worry overmuch about facts.

The tiresome Theroux (also American and also, no doubt, claimant to some cute ancillary nationality) has published a carefully scheduled novel called Kowloon Tong in which (of course...how could it be otherwise?) he has exerted himself no further than to represent the pre-handover British as hopelessly lost and still calling the Chinese "chinky chonks".

I am in conversation with a friend, the head of Brazilian Globo TV in London. I tell him that many patriotic British people are delighted to see Hong Kong go. This is the first time he has heard this; to give him his due he revises his Rio-destined wrap up of the handover to incorporate this astonishing fact.

So it is in a state of Hong Kong article fatigue that I have to carve out and define my own, modest experience. I am here in Hong Kong because it is a city and I do cities; I have therefore to be there at least once in my life. So it was in this frame of mind, a state of febrile expectation that on arrival I hit the ground running. I have had it all in my head for years, a composite of films, postcards, dreams. On the bus from the airport, caught in a tremendous jam, it was with familiarity that I looked up the streets in the dreary yellow light

through the drizzle and felt sick with emotion at the sight of the tenements, the great raddled, fretted facades lining the streets, blocks barely even old, thirty or forty years at least but so pitted and scarred in this brief time, punctured at random by aircon units, bolt on balconies, lean-tos festooned with neon. The epic mournfulness of these great mansions brought tears to my eyes as I was decanted out at Nathan Road, profoundly moved, sticky and hotel-less, ending up in a rather pleasantly dank room in the overpriced International Hotel, a sludge green deco-ish wedge in Cameron Road. My first evening I walked five kilometres of Nathan Road through crowds so thick that in a couple of hours I could have passed the population of a large town. I returned to my hotel in a state of visceral imbalance; I have been to bigger cities by far, wickeder ones, ones with taller buildings, more marvellous architecture, more beautiful people, more dangerous streets, more splendid shops; but this was something apart because of the intense drama of its very existence, the improbability of its origin and growth, the absolute and undissimulated nakedness of its principles, the breathtakingly indecent self-exposure of its cash obsessions.

In Wardour Street London there is a restaurant famous for its astonishing rudeness. Woe betide he who makes tracks for his own little table in the corner for he will be abruptly removed to a twenty seater, with complete strangers.

Woe betide that out-of-town relative you take to this restaurant ("Such fun") when she turns sweetly to the waiter and says "Ah, no 45, that sounds nice. What is Tae Cheun Noodle exactly?"

For Hong Kong is this restaurant. That is why you are simply asking for insolence if you go into a shop and ask in your linguistically over-upholstered European way "Er, I was wondering if...?" Count yourself very privileged if you get just "No" or it could be a peremptory "No money. No talk."

Guidebooks to most destinations generally 'do the right thing'. when it comes to the subject of hospitality: "the people from X are noted for their hospitality" we invariably learn. No writer about HK would even waste time *pretending* this was true. Indeed the anxious to please Lonely Planet guide specifically says: "HK is best known for the rudeness of its people." Yes, it goes on gallantly to demur but doesn't bother too much. And how does it feel? After one day you get into it, this "Fuck you" attitude. It is liberating.

The armoured security vans have the faceted profile of a Stealth bomber; teams of men, one to carry the box, one to carry the gun. How strange that in this world of almost chimerical financial dealings, transport of money must still be done by a man with a box and a man with a gun.

In the markets great flocks of cheap alarm clocks twitter together like starlings. I add to my watch collection: an Omega here, a Cartier there; oh the jackdaw glitter of the South East Asian watch stall; how I love the very worst , the most perfunctory of forgeries; how I treasured my now lost Cartier imiation...so far removed from its original that it had shed an I and become more prasaic: CARTER

There is a transparency about Hong Kong; the rudeness is part of it; you know where you are. But there is a tolerance also (a sort of don't give a toss, can't be bothered to do anything about it sort of tolerance; the best sort of tolerance, that is.) Beneath the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank on Sundays about 4000 Filipina maids on their afternoon off picnic (indeed, practically cook meals), do each other's hair, listen to music. Nobody seems to find this an inappropriate use of the ground level atrium of the most famous building in HK, the one actually on the banknotes. Whether they will be there on the Sundays after July 1998 I don't know enough to say. Somehow you can't imagine the new landlords operating with the same laissez faire. The HK and Shanghai Bank has an imposing hi-tech sobriety but (whatever it may say about my architectural tastes) I like as much the twin towers of the adjacent Lippo building, rather sexy in name; sexy anyhow in the ceaseless procession of office

girls clicking through the fountain-lulled atria on their way from one part of Central to another. For it is possible here to walk great distances alternating between a subway here, an overpass there; into the welcome air-conditioned embrace of one block, through and past the fountains of the next, while the buses and trams snarl outside in the heat.

In Times Square leech-like silver pods slide in grooves to the summit of the mall and down again. I de-pod at ground level and find myself in a piazza of distraught faces tilted towards a forty foot screen relaying the live news of a kidnapping. The words of the anguished father issue crystal-clear from loudspeakers concealed in beds of white lilies.

In the underground, on the up escalator a woman in a super-short skirt and attitude to spare, clicks out into the street ahead of me but six steps down Cameron Street to scissor adroitly into the cream leather upholstery of a jade Porsche. Into this aerodynamic sarcophagus an unseen hand seals her with a click.

I am loitering on a street corner. I hear a growing roar, look up at the space that was the sky, above the tangle of neon, the street signs, the washing. For three seconds the sky falls dark with the massive bulk of a 747. Then it is light

again. This is one of the most moving things I have ever experienced, the most deeply visceral. The beauty, the massive aerodynamism of the plane above the mottled decrepitude of a tenament building; the shocking closeness of one to the other, a juxtaposition we are so unused to with our judiciously sited out-of-town airports. During the next two days, like the adherent of a cargo cult, I move in a steady line through the streets beneath the flight path, ever closer to the airport, to sit on a bench at the crossing of Shep Rip Mei street and Berwick Street eating noodles and watching the airliners flounder in preposterously over the rooftops, landing gear fatly bunched, descending improbably, to greet the tarmac with a smoky little kiss.

The music of Hong Kong; the bass of the pile driver, the rattle of pneumatic drills, the curiously suggestive tak-tak-tak of the traffic lights as I stand in the street, eyes closed and press my hot cheek against the cool marble flank of an office building.

I am moved by the beauty of neon, the veil of acid greens and electric blues and candy pinks pulsing over the dark surface of the city. Clubnames in neon: Club Crystal, the Silver Club, Lipstick Club, Hotlips Club.

On my last day I happen into an art exhibition held in some corporate palace in Central. The custodians of the exhibition are straight from New Bond Street: a Fiona with an Alice band and a bright hard smile; a couple of Nigels with crinkly hair, waisted suits and big-boy shoes. And what was on the menu, that it should be so grand? Guercino silverpoints? Not quite. Clausen drawings? Not even. Rather a collection of landscapes of Hong Kong from the 1840s, mostly painted for the European tourist by Chinese artists, or in most cases daubers. Because these were, in fact, postcards, badly painted, mass-produced canvases. The level was Antiques Roadshow. So here was an irony, (yes *another* irony that could be worked into *another* Hong Kong article.) For here were the grandsons and granddaughters of Empire flogging back to the Chinese (and they would be a surefire investment) at risibly high prices, picture postcards of the actual territory they themselves were about to lose.

But my heart isn't in irony. Fin de siecle irony will very soon look embarrassingly old fashioned. In the new millennium we will find ourselves able to speak again (frof irony, free, at last, of air quotes) of Honour, Glory, Courage.

That is why I liked these little pictures. They made me think of these noble abstractions: the milky blue skies, the caramely clouds of the amateur landscape painter, the sunlight playing on the fresh stucco of the Governor's

mansion, a bright Union flag fluttering prettily from a staff, the tiny cuneiform brushstrokes indicating the tents of the new garrison, the Puginesque little church just completed. Since so many other are wringing their hands at the undoubted iniquity of the Opium Wars, etc. I will let myself at least, say that, on looking at these daubs I felt proud and moved by the audacity of Empire

NIGHTMARES DREAMS

In 1852 the exile Victo Hugo came to London for the first time:

"London Bridge. –night. Mist. No sky. A ceiling of rain and darkness. Black vanishing planes lost in smoke; spiky silhouettes, misshapen domes. A big red circle glows on top of something which resembles a steeple or a giant: the eye of a Cyclops or possibly a clockface.....in the darkness, four stars-two red, two blue- pierce the gloom and form a square. Suddenly they start to move. The blue stars rise, the red descend. Then a fifth star, or burning embers, comes into view and rushes across the intervening space.A terrifying noise. It seems to be passing over a terrible bridge. Large trucks go lumbering after it in the sky. Underneath pallid clouds drop and disperse, A ghost, a woman, bare-breasted in an icy wind, passes close by me; she smiles and offers her cheek for a kiss.

Is it Hell?

No. it is London."

The City of course had always been seen as evil. As the nineteenth century progressed this critique became increasingly specific and statistical, by social reformers such as Mayhew or Octavia Hill or Charles Booth; by nostalgic socialists such as William Morris; by Marx and Engels (for the modern industrial

city was seen to represent capitalism itself, the industrial cities of the Midlands and the North seen as particularly culpable).

During the same period it embodied more modern concepts: Anomie. Angst etc. James Thomson wrote The City of Dreadful Night in 1874; it is a good example of late-Victorian gloom; the same kind of spirit to be found in Dover Beach, obsessively concerned with doubt, with faith. In tone it is attitudinising, excessive; in style it is ornate, ostentatiously sonorous, (bordering on kitsch). The best line, and it is an excellent one, is the title itself: City of Dreadful Night. While there is built (or rather dilapidating) environment in the poem the city is largely a state of mind. There are few features of commercial or social life though we do, memorably visit a bar, where we find ourselves:

"drinking fiery poison in a den
crowded with tawdry girls and squalid men,
Who hoarsely laugh and curse and brawl and fight;"

"Drinking fiery poison in a den." Sounds quite fun to me. The line gives the indoor intellectual a frisson of pleasure. But of course when you have *actual* urban dereliction actually on your doorstep it is not fun. This very evening I

am reminded of the real thing. My son returns from his New Year's eve night out. He has been robbed with a knife at his throat. He and his friends have had money and their club tickets stolen. Undeterred, and with very little money between them they go, nonetheless, to an illegal party in a King's Cross warehouse. (I *like* that Baden-Powell spirit.) He has written this for me:

"The party was in a derelict office building I don't know how many rooms there were but you could go anywhere. The people ranged in age from 15 to 40 and the whole spectrum of drugs was available ("Has anyone seen the mushroom man?" shouts a foreign crusty.) There is a bar with a makeshift sign torn from a cardboard box which reads WHISKY WATER KETAMINE Ketamine is a horse anaesthetic which seems popular with the older crowd. They snort it and hallucinate. The anaesthetic properties mean they fall over and smash their face on the rubble, yet they feel no pain. At eight in the morningwe try to leave but can't find the way we came in fjust a maze of tunnels. Eventually we find a room with a broken window in the front wall. We jump out, one by one, into the path of a family on an early morning stroll. The party could go on another 24 hours. That's what £5 can buy you in 1999. "

Strange but now encapsulated in words even this episode is beginning to acquire some fascination for me, a certain glamour.

Poison again in the City of Dreadful Night:

The City's atmosphere is dark and dense,
Although not many exiles wander there,
With many a potent evil influence,
Each adding poison to the poisoned air;
Infections of unutterable sadness,
Infections of incalculable madness,
Infections of incurable despair."

I love the atmosphere and visual intensity of The City of Dreadful Night. True, for the poet the city reflects loss of faith, madness, angst; but one can't help feeling that there is for all the intensity of the writing a self regarding attitudinising in these feverish lines, that borders on relish.

One of the most intense and nightmarish visions of London is found in Huysmans' A Rebours. His aesthete hero des Esseintes, on his way to la Gare

du Nord en route for London, decides it is no longer necessary for him to go, so intense is his vision of the city:

"Up above trains raced by at full speed; and down in the underground sewers, others rumbled along, occasionally emitting ghastly screams or vomiting floods of smoke through the gaping mouths of airshafts. And meanwhile. Along every street, big or small, in an eternal twilight relieved only by the infamies of modern advertising, there flowed an endless stream of traffic, between two columns of earnest, silent Londoners, marching along with eyes fixed ahead and elbows glued to their sides."

This is a fabulous, almost cinematographic evocation of London, an anticipation of images in films such as Metropolis. Another great vision of London fourteen years earlier had been that of Dore. His city is hellish indeed, lurid, nightmarish and claustrophobic.

Jack London is another writer who describes the hell of London. In People of the Abyss he is somewhat histrionically appalled at the London he found in 1903, particularly the East End:

“We rolled along through miles of bricks and squalor, and from each cross street and alley flashed long vistas of bricks and masonry. Here and there lurched a drunken man or woman and the air was obscene with sounds of jangling and squabbling. At a market tottery old men and women were searching in the garbage thrown into the mud for rotten potatoes....while little children clustered like flies around a festering mass of fruit thrusting their arms to the shoulders into the liquid corruption.”

There is always generalised trauma in the city of course; demonstations, crime; but these in themselves arenot always really alarming. As my 90 year old mother said about shootings opposite my flat: “What does it matter if someone ‘pops’ someone else as long as they keep it amongst themselves?”...(A propos...how come my mother is talking like Tarantino? ‘*Pops*’?)

Scarier are the sudden *vignettes* . The drug addict outside Termini Station in Rome stripped to the waist with a length of rubber tubing sewn into his chest. Or signs, simple signs, that suddenly appear alarmingly ominous. A few hundred yards from my flat there recently appeared a police sign asking for witnesses to some late night violence. It said that the man sought was (and I quote exactly, capital letters):

CARRYING A BURNING NEWSPAPER.

SHOUTING RACIAL ABUSE.

Visions, too, of epic destruction. In 1831 Freidrich von Raumer looked down from the tower of Notre Dame…"I was able to take in this gigantic city. Who built the first house, and when will the last one collapse? When will the ground of Paris look like that of Thebes or Babylon?"

There is a compulsion in the nineteenth century to flirt with the idea of urban devastation. In Poe's tale Mellonta Tauta (1848) he describes a balloon journey in the year 2048 over a New York, now long laid waste:

"The disastrous earthquake…of the year 2050…totally uprooted and overwhelmed the town…..the entire area…was, about eight hundred years ago, densely packed with houses, some of them twenty storeys high…"

Of all Dore's London engravings the least reproduced is an odd evocation of a ruined London of the future. It echoes Macaulay's vision of a London shattered like Greece and Rome, "when some traveller from New Zealand

shall, in the midst of vast solitude, take a stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's".

Throughout the nineteenth century there was a tradition of ruined cities, devastated cities, submerged cities, satanic cities, cities aflame. Keats writes of Hyperion that it...

"Glared a blood red through all its thousand courts'
Arches and domes and fiery galleries"

The master of this genre was John Martin. He painted: The Fall of Babylon; The Destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii; The Seventh Plague of Egypt; The Fall of Nineveh; The Destruction of Tyre. And, above all, The Great Day of His Wrath, in which (as a mere background detail) an entire city has been wrathfully tossed into the air and actually hangs upside down. Where, psychoanalytically speaking, this attraction for mass destruction came from in this slightly prim man from Newcastle is a mystery. But his appetite for it is clear; he even spots potential disaster in London, which, sunk as it is into its clay bed, one would not imagine was ripe for Biblical cataclysm:

"If this river were rendered unnavigable London would soon become a heap of ruins like Nineveh or Babylon."

Martin was a bad painter, but didn't seem to know it. This is a good thing because he went on, with panache, painting these wonderfully absurd extravaganzas. In fact a revisit of the Great Day of his Wrath makes me think again. I had not noticed a cute little upturned nude in the bottom left hand corner, (she too swept up into the apocalyptic maelstrom) who might have been painted by Boucher himself.) Martin's instinct for disaster matches up curiously with his earnest concerns with sewage projects and general urban tidy-mindedness. His work did actually feedback into architecture itself. These visions of Nineveh or Babylon are supposedly about the past but could actually be said to be visions of possible futures. Their architectural features echoed (or even influenced) warehouses in Manchester and the Midlands. One writer believes that paintings such as Belshazzar's Feast... "helped suggest appropriate styling for the railway cuttings, bridges and stations on the Liverpool to Manchester railway." Brunel's intensely grandiose and passionate engineering could easily have been influenced by Martin. All those fires and jets of pestilential plague and upheaval of the urban fabric supposedly so biblical, belong clearly to the Industrial Revolution.

While Martin's fantasies actually seemed remote, fantastic, improbable Martin left it to his fanatical brotherJonathan to depict (not ineptly) the ruin of London itself. London's Overthrow (1832) shows an Apocalypse of biblical literalness. A strange leonine beast hovers above the City. St Paul's is in flames. Clouds churn above Westminster. Snakes writhe at the feet of rampant devils.

In Poe's City in the Sea

"...light from out the lurid sea
Streams up the turrets silently
Gleams up the pinnacles far and free
Up domes -up spires -up kingly walls
Up fanes -up Babylon-like walls"

Leo Claretie in 1886 describes the Ruins of Paris in his 'Paris depuis ses origines jusqu'en l'an 3000.'

Indeed this seems to be a perennial theme, as old as the city itself. The demise of major cities is a common Biblical theme. In the latter part of this

century we have the tradition of disaster movies, such as Earthquake (with Sensurround, let us not forget!) and the depradations of Godzilla. The Godzilla tradition remains curiously potent, for all the absurdity of a man in a rubber lizard suit jumping waist high through the balsawood debris of devastated Tokyo. If there is a film which echoes the elegaic post-piece of Dore's London it is Escape from New York by John Carpenter. The conceit here is that Manhattan has become so irretrievably lawless that it has simply been ringed by a massive wall and turned, in its entirety, into a huge penitentiary. Fires flicker in the devastated streets; we hear in the distance the crunch of tyres on broken glass and a curious tinkling as the limousine of the Lord of New York approaches. The huge car rocks slowly towards us, the chandeliers welded to its hood jingle menacingly.

New York was of course always the site of imagined urban apocalypses. In Planet of the Apes we are on a beach; as we round a headland ahead of us, half buried in the sands, like Ozymandias, is the Statue of Liberty.

In real life too we have premonitions of urban apocalypse. In Bombay I stood at mid afternoon in a terrible heat on the promenade of the great Chaupathi Marine Drive and thought, I have been here *before*; the same great curve of the bay, fringed , mile after mile by palms; to my right an

ocean immobilised by pollution; to my left, six lanes of traffic glittering away into the sun-whitened distance; on the farside of the parade dilapidated condominiums; and I suddenly realised; yes, like Copacabana! like the Avenida Atlantica! but *post-nuclear holocaust.* I was alone except for the woman who mixed me a lemon drink.

Flirtation with the aesthetics of urban apocalypse (distasteful already post-Dresden, Hiroshima) has, after 9/11, become definitively unfeasible.

The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 left a Byzantine commentator almost inarticulate with grief:

"O City, chief City of all Cities, City centre of all parts of the World. O City….second Paradise…"

Nothing could be sadder than a simple diary entry of John Evelyn for 10th September 1666, after the Fire of London:

"I went again to the ruins, for it was now no longer a City."

We can deeply mourn buildings. The space occupied by the World Trade Center Towers disturbs me very much. But it had all been anricipated. One of the shocking things on that day was how closely urban assault conformed to the comic book/disaster movie scenes repeatedly rehearsed through the sixties, seventies, eighties. The most standardised feature of all these was the crowd running towards the camera arms raised in horror. Stockhausen's comment "the greatest work of art in the Universe" was hateful but true. The aesthetics of this event are inescapable. In purely Burkean terms we have never seen an event so 'sublime'. I never look at those pictures. I am ashamed of the aesthetic fisson they incite in me.

Dying cities, wounded cities; and cities of the past. Many are the evocations of cities in the past, usually a mythological or at best archaeological past. These come into their own in the second half of the seventeenth century with the growth of 'vedute' or views that were not specifically topographical; rather imaginary, fantastic. Clearly the imagery is profoundly classical; that is Hellenic and Roman; but the tone is often extravagant and capricious; indeed capricious is the right word because many of these painting are can be described as Capricci.

The late seventeenth, early eighteenth century artists of the capriccio were Claude (his magical seaports) Panini, Ricci and later Piranesi.

Piranesi distanced himself at times completely from topography, opting rather for outlandish inflations of his subject, for improbable architectural projects, city-like accumulations of masonry, audacious architectural conjectures (His massive inhabited bridge for Rome of 1780 is interesting to compare with Ferriss' Inhabited Bridge for New York in 1929.)

Most exciting are his city fantasies; extraordinary extrapolations from the ruins that surrounded him together with febrile architectural imaginings, astonishing in their complexity; great masses of building piles of terraces, fabulous stacked-up fantasies of façade and column. Essentially urban are the 'Carceri' or prison fantasies (admired by de Quincey) in which the fact of incarceration is made nightmaringly taunting: for there ever appears to be a level, an arch…and yet another level, yet another. But we are looking here at more than a penitentiary (however stylised); rather at an evocation of City.

The spirit of Piranesi persists right though the nineteenth century. Gautier writes in Madamemoiselle de Maupin of:

"Une architecture feeique...des entassements de colonnes, des arcades superposees, une vapeur splendide, pleine de bruit et de vertige—un luxe tout assyrien."

These models all prefigure the architectural fantasists of a century later, Hood, Ferriss, to the makers of Metropolis, of Bladerunner. (Clearly there is direct and declared influence; but I like to imagine that we are looking here at an imaginative and recurrent eruption of a Jungian archetype, not a mere transmission of urban iconography.)

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Predictions for the city of the future: another whole history here!

First there is the earnest planning ofrational future cities, the kind of thing done by Filarete in the fifteenth century (Sforzinda); in the sixteenth century by Bacon (New Atlantis); by Campanella, in the seventeenth century (La Citta del Sole); Ledoux in the eighteenth century (Chaux).

These utopian visions are all based on the assumption that the city is a potential embodiment of reason. These optimistic projections constitute a noble tradition and often give us images of great beauty. Tony Garnier in the first two decades of the twentieth century provided one of the most plausible of utopian visions. Garnier's drawings are incredibly beautiful, the industrial zones indeed make you want to *work* there; the residential zones make you want to *live* there. The whole project inspires you to submit to the subtle coercion of a community based on reason, seriousness, social virtues; you truly wish to come home in grime-ennobled dungarees, to bathe publicly, to dress and to go to an improving balletic entertainment or rational political debate and then to retire to your modest rent-controlled Deco-ish home in a trafficless piazza. There is certainly a temptation here; but it is too tidy too rational, ultimately far removed from the wickedness and selfishness of real human nature. It is, essentially a vision that could be feasible only if implemented by totalitarian means (or the most enormous act of philanthropy).

But of course the most interesting predicted cities are not the reasonable ones. Rather the ones that (reassuringly) reflect the irrationality, ostentation, vanity of the human spirit! For Mumford this was a dark picture. Basing his

predictions on those of Geddes he predicted: Urban Devastation-Standardised Chaos-Palaeotechnic Inferno-Congestion Unlimited-Shapeless Gigantism…

But at the beginning of the century there had developed a tradition of frivolous prediction that may actually have been truer to the real future than than Mumford's lugubrious forecasts. There was a particular spate of prognostication around the year 1900. In the old prison building in Cape Town, now a museum, I hit on a meticulous painting made in around 1899 of a future Cape Town: piers, dirigibles, a tunnel through Table Mountain…a Garnier-style Opera House, aerial velocipedes, all the frou-frou of Belle Epoque Futurism. Elsewhere in the same musum, Capetown as a 30s artist somehow envisages it would be in 2000; thrilling silver towers, like a palisade, circling the mightier Table Mountain.

Given the fact that we are now in the third millenium it is interesting that we have had few predictions of the same perky audacity of these. One of the most thrilling, though dark visions was that of New York in the year 1999 published in the New York World Dec 31st 1900. It shows a prediction for Manhattan which was really an extrapolation from the architectural

tendencies already at work there. It shows an immense *heaping up* of hyper-babylonian ziggurats rendered in nightmarish detail. During the century there was a proliferation of megalomaniac visions that are absolutely thrilling.

Pictures of this can be found in Harry M. Petit's The Cosmopolis of the Future (1908) or the visions of Harvey Wiley Corbett from 1923: the usual images: stacked up buildings, skyhigh overpasses, moth-light aircraft negotiating the summits of skyscapers.

The classic of this dark but not dystopian vision is the volume of drawings done by Hugh Ferris in 1929: The Metropolis of Tomorrow. This book is somewhat vague in its declared aims; it begins with a review of the major skyscrapers at the date of publication. There are some serious considerations of the future of architecture and the future for young architects; but its vagueness becomes (as it proceeds) downright contradictory.

"To the draughtsman who approaches his subject from a pictorial point of view, this (the race for altitude) presents fascinating possibilities. One can easily fancy himself perched up somewhere on the hundredth floor; one looks down, at a dizzy angle, along the flanks of adjoining precipices; one is

tempted to imagine the scene at night, with geometrical lights flaring in the abyss."

Ferriss repeatedly affects anxiety about the tendencies of the vertical city; he talks of his own drawings as being far from an inspiration, that they may serve rather as a warning. "it may look like this if nothing is done about it."

But we are not convinced; he is fascinated, as I am, at the vision he has evoked. As the book progresses he abandons these affected qualms with the utmost ease. Check out the excitement here!:

"One could drive at will across the facades of buildings at the fifth, tenth, fifteenth or twentieth storey. Automobiles below one, automobiles above one. A paradise perhaps for the automobile manufacturer!" (he remembers to say in time)... But for the office worker..."

But we don't believe that he gives a toss for the office worker! For on a rising wave of enthusiasm he continues:

"Furthermore there will be the aeroplanes. The drawing suggests tower hangars in whose shelves they will—why not?--land neatly!"

He reins himself in at points but in Part Three (An Imaginary Metropolis) reveals very clearly the implications of his city aesthetic. His tidy-mindedness and authoritarian impulses produce a city that is *zoned.* "The city is divided into a Business zone, an Art zone and a Science zone...."

But of course compared to these visions, real cities are infinitely more ad hoc, more diffuse; Ferriss was unhappy about this. Do we not traverse, in our daily walks, districts which are stupid and miscellaneous rather than logical and serene—and move, day long, through an absence of viewpoint, vista, axis, relation or plan?"

Yes indeed; he is describing here the sort of randomness that was enjoyed so much by Estes. Looking again at Ferriss' pictures they look quite enviable; but the uniformity of urban design that appealed to Ferris and to Garnier for that matter was a uniformity that could only have been implemented by the politics of Speer or Ceaucescu. The democratic city is NY as it is, not "NY as it 'will' be" in the visions of such as Ferriss. The totalitarian look is very seductive; but real cities, the cities we most want to live in, are the ones that William Morris or Ebenezer Howard or Garnier or Mumford or le Corbusier want to pull down.

(Ferriss' drawings seem to provide a link between two films. perhaps the two major films of predictive cities: Metropolis (1927) and Bladerunner (1982). Clearly Ferriss work was inspired by the first and very specifically inspired the second: his particular interest in what he calls "the ancient Assyrian ziggurat" appears in his engravings and in the epic opening shots of Bladerunner.

Quite this audacity was never reached, even in New York. Where the opportunity arose they never quite happened. Gaudi's project for a stalagmite like Grand Hotel, 1908) is but one project that didn't get built.

(The optimism of the twenties, the implicit belief in the virtues of the most modern ideas is enviable. In 1926 London underground issued a poster of the city in the year 2026. What I admire about this is first of all its accuracy (not a virtue of most urban prognostications; true, we have the much cherished ideas of aircraft flitting about on the rooftops of the city but by and large it is not wrong. What is admirable is the profile of St Paul's still there, still distinguishable as is Tower Bridge; but our artist has had no compunctions in crowding it around with modern buildings that dwarf it. What a loss of confidence has taken place since then, such that now we are all more or

less convinced that a building that threatens to put a shadow over St Paul's is somehow a usurper. The interesting thing about the London Underground forecast, for all its playfulness, is that St Paul's actually *gains* in dignity by the smallness of its recognisable shape, a possibility that lies way beyond the ken of such as Prince Charles.

This vision of London precedes by a few years the great and definitive future vision of the 1930s. In Brave New World Huxley writes:

"He put his forward propellor into gear and headed the machine towards London. Behind them, in the west, the crimson and orange were almost faded; a dark bank of cloud had crept into the zenith.....landing on the roof of Henry's forty-story apartment house in Westminster they went straight down to the dining hall.....At twenty past nine they walked across the street to the Westminster Abbey Cabaret...they entered....On the domed ceiling of the hall the colour-organ had momentarily painted a tropical sunset..."

This is deliciously thirties. Just as Orwell's London of 1984 is inherently forties:

"A kilometre away the Ministry of Truth, his place of work, towered vast and white above the grimy landscape."

Of course nothing dates like predictions of the future; one might almost say that it is precisely in predictions of the future that we have a kind of synthesis of all those design features, attitudes, aspirations, preoccupations of any one age. Both these extracts, from Huxley and Orwell, arouse extraordinary...well, extraordinary *what* ...?

Anticipation? Hardly, because we are already there and we know it is generally, aesthetically wrong; like most predictions.

Nostalgia? for a dated and erroneous vision of the future. So what can we call it? Pathos perhaps? I feel a sort of *pathos* in these antiquated predictions, in the wrongness of them in the whole doomed business of futurology. Doomed not least because of the retrospective stylishness of these supposed dystopias, a stylishness that alas seriously compromises their dystopic power. Style wise the worlds evoked by Huxley or by Orwell are *to die for*. In 1984 a film was made of Orwell's book and its dystopia had, rather dishonestly, been recast as *style heaven*; those chic short haircuts, those stark utilitarian overalls, those clunky black shoes; and the architecture! heavenly visions of the brickwork of Gilbert Scott. Battersea Power Station!

I know of no prediction of the future city that does not fill me with a poignant longing for alternative future; or pasts as they would be now.

But these projections of the future all pale beside the actual future; for now was the time that it actually seemed that the future was not chronologically obliged to be ahead of you. It could be now. And nowhere more so than New York. New York stole a march on chronology and rocketed forward into the future: and people were aware of it too. There was awe at the eruption of building early on in the twentieth century William wrote to Henry James in 1907:

"The courage, the heaven scaling audacity if it all and the lightness withal, as if there was nothing that was not easy.."
(And the Woolworth Building was still to come!)

"our civilization is progressing wonderfully" says Theodore Starrett. "In New York-by that I mean Manhattan Island-we must keep building and we must build upward. step by step we have advanced from the wooden hut to the 30 storey skyscraper...now we must develop something bigger, something larger..."

Indeed New York overtook and in a sense controverted the predictions. Skyscrapers were piecemeal, sticking out here and there; they did not have the logic, regularity, inexorability of the predictions of Ferris. But one thing they did is upstage the mere paper fantasies of Le Corbusier. On his visit to New York he said, (well he had to didn't he?) "They are too small". Barely planned coordinated Corb might very well be pissed off by the fact that the Americans in their unpurist, curiously ad hoc, even homely way had set a benchmark greater than he Corb had ever set. OK the detail could also be cheesy.

The pride in New York peaked in The New York World Fair of 1939. A vast model of the city was on display, encapsulating in 24 minutes the 24 hours of its day. It showed Wallace Harrison, its creator wrote:

"New York as it actually exists—not just a mass of lifeless masonry and steel—but a living, breathing city with a network of iron and copper arteries and veins under the surface to supply vital heat and energy—a city with electrical nerves to control its movements and transmit its thoughts."

For all the extremes of city prognostication in reality, cities go their own way; yes planning intervenes; sometimes it can actually prevail; but it prevails best where its input, though thorough is limited. One of her great triumphs of the nineteenth century was the gridded street plan; true not a novelty then by any means but it really established itself then and was an inspiring and yet controlling guide to the development of the city; in fact it had no inherent agenda for the actual appearance of the city; but it imposed an order at least on two dimensions, an order which may not be visible from a distance. Look at a map of Manhattan and it looks wonderfully logical. Look at a view of Manhattan and it looks a muddle; Ferris and his contemporaries may have wished to rationalise the development of the skyscraper city; certainly Ferriss's Metropolis of the future is fantastically regularised and monolithic. The real thing, Manhattan as it is very ad hoc; a real muddle for all the uniformity of its plan. it is uneven, random, even, astonishingly given its reputation somewhat low rise in much of its texture.

But the city fantasists have never given up. While there have been many earnest predictions and projects there is, in fact another tradition, and that is the city as 'playful', the city almost as a funfair.

Indeed there was a variety of city-type manifestations throughout the twentieth century, city surrogates that almost didn't bother to pretend that they were other than this. The funfair was one model provided in New York precisely a kind of playful mini city, or alternative city, a city unconstrained by practicalities of weight and mobility, Coney Island is a kind of surrogate city where fantasies not actually practicable in the city itself found expression. Another city-type manifestation is the university campus, specifically the residential Cite Universitaire in Paris from the 1930s with its pastiche of international styles.

Other common city-like projects of the twentieth century were the Great Exhibitions. The Exposition Universelle in Paris in the 1930's, The British Empire Exhibition in London (1924-5); The New York World Fair in 1939 etc. Today perhaps our city-like entities are airports.

Otherwise city fantasies remained unanchored to reality; and thoroughly enjoyed their state. We have Malevitch's Cosmic City, Krutikov's Flying City W.D. Hay's City of the Sea of 1881 (from Three Hundred Years Hence) etc. Kikutake's Ocean City, Isozaki's City in the sky; Kurokawa's grid city suspended from towers a story above the ground to allow freedom for agricultural use below.

And more plausible but actually very far fetched projects such as Raymond Hood's bridges design for New York. Improbably even Norman Mailer joined in. There was Archigram's Plug in City, Ron Herron's Walking City. There is the current computer game Sim City.

This wasn't just a modern preoccupation. Indeed the further you go back the less these fantasies were constrained by what was technologically possible: Henry-Jules Borie project for Aerodomes, glassed in galleries thousands of fee long; Paxtons proposal for the Great Victorian Way, Mery's Paris Port de Mer, Leo Claretie's Paris prediction (in 1886) of a project to be realised in 1987: "a crystal canopy that would slide over the city in case of rain." All partly or completely implausible!

The ludic or entirely imaginary city became a kind of art form, a sort of poetry, even a protest at the regrettable untidiness, lack of harmony, irregularity of the real city. In the 1939 New York Exhibition, as well as the celebration of New York described in the last few pages there was Democracity-a Metropolis viewed as if from 7000 feet (a useful ploy that, no irregularity or untidiness at that height; as we know from flying height is a great city planner!); but this city enshrines a totalitarian ideal:

"the lights in the Perisphere slowly dim, stars appear in the dome above and the city's lights go on....Night has fallen...far in the distance a chorus of a thousand voices is heard singing. From ten equidistant points in the sky come groups of marching persons, farmers, miners, factory workers, educators..." This is pure totalitarian iconography, of course. Middle classes theoreticians just *love* the masses to march (rather than slob out in cosy living rooms with a six pack and the TV). No they have to march. Diego Rivera required them to do so too:

"Joyous singing masses of men and women of the city marching all day long" (*all day long*? Won't they get tired?) "and far into the night (as *well*?) through the great square".

This was written in Moscow in 1927. The twentieth century has probably had enough joyous marching to last it, well, throughout the twentyfirst.

NEW SUBLIME

We have built monumental, dense, vertical cities, cities implicitly and perennially modern. What happens to them? What is happening to the great and heroic works of the twentieth century as we hustle ourselves into

the twentyfirst? Now we are post-modern, truly post-modern; not in the fashionable sense; simply that we realise that 'the modern' (which we might have liked to believe was somehow definitive, immune from age) is *old fashioned.* The future is getting old, looking old; not fashionably retro; just plain old and scruffy.

Even on a humble, domestic level this is true. In Bombay or Cairo one has the initial impression of old, old buildings, so fusty and variegated, so much a palimpsest, are their facades; but once one has visually stripped them of their festooned neon, tattered posters, aircon units, dangling cables, tacky fascias, lean-tos (all of which can be teased out, deconstructed semiologically by a sympathetic eye), you are almost shocked to discover merely a façade from the 1970's! And it all looked so immemorial, so antique! This is the Picturesque, new version. We should learn to love the tawdry clutter of urban surfaces, of Desker Road in Singapore, of Streatham HighStreet, London, just as the eighteenth century Picturesque traveller loved the crumbling patina of castle and cottage.

Already new buildings are beginning to look semi organic (like the urban fantasies of Max Ernst in La Ville Entiere). And how much better they look, how much more interesting they are than the stark original visions of their

architects. In Beijing the Southern West East axis of avenues (Qianmen Xidajie-Xuanwumen Dongdajie etc) are lined with quite exemplary Corbusian housing, miles of it. But they aren't clean and white, not any more; the are pock-marked, lived in, added to; and they stretch big distances and they are epically.... Picturesque? No, here we need the grander eighteenth century aesthetic category: the Sublime!

In Bombay I anxiously eye one of the few tall modern buildings, built no doubt too fast, too cheaply and for all its recentness I spy signs of its fate. The great flank of the building at a certain angle in the merciless sun is frankly uneven, stained. This is a shocking thing, for twentieth century architecture implicitly denies the aging process; its hubris is astonishing; for everything will turn old; and in our lifetime we will see old, even tumbledown skyscrapers. We will see, have already seen, demolition of skyscrapers and they will surpass in sheer sublime any of the visions of John Martin; and will furthermore, be real! On television there are programmes devoted to the demolition of large structures. Speer, when contemplating pictures or maquettes of the New Germania used to point out to Hitler the 'Ruinenwert' or 'ruin-potential' of mighty buildings, the Ruinenlust that would respond, once that the thousand year Reich had run its course.

In LA itself this is already the case. Here we have 'Ruinenwert'. For there is a downtown in LA. There is Broadway, the great stretch of buildings of the forties to the sixties; also more recent buildings made, in a last bid for the centrality of a "downtown", in the seventies and eighties. Broadway itself has been taken over largely by the Hispanic communities and very raffish and vibrant it is too, but the twentyfirst century Los Angles residents would not choose to go there. Guide books more concerned with Homes of the Stars and Disneyland give it short shrift. Walking down it we are looking at the high street of one of those western ghost towns, but this is monumental; we are looking at monumental dilapidation, epic dilapidation. The same shock can be found in Detroit. I find myself at the coach station in Detroit with an hour between buses for I am travelling from Toronto to Chicago. I sit uneasily in the neon lit waiting room. At one end huddles a bunch of black boys in puffa jackets. At the other end another huddle of Men in Black: Amish people. I walk out of the coach station and gingerly go for a walk round downtown Detroit at dawn. And I find myself looking up at derelict skyscrapers, boarded up to the tenth or fifteenth floors and there is a feeling of massive abandonment. The photographer Camilo Jose Vergara is hoping to preserve parts of downtown Detroit 'as an American Acropolis—that is, to allow the present skyscraper graveyard to become a park of ripe ruins'. What will be the fate of the sinking airport Kansai? Walking through

Bangkok along Phahonyothin Road away from the Chatuchak Market I see, a mile ahead, a crystalline, multifaceted skyscraper; twenty minutes later I am beneath it. 800 feet high and empty, its sheer glass flanks dusty and unloved; not even a guard on duty.

In Jakarta, at the top of Jalan Hayam Wuruk, before you hit Kota, a trio of apartment blocks, fifty storeys high, their construction interrupted (or immobilised for good after the 1999 riots?): an abandoned building yes; but the *sublimity* of a never-finished project of such size! My Jakarta contact insists the towers will be completed. I'll believe if when I see it. At present they stand as one of the great follies of the world.

I walk up a London street at dusk. That familiar old racket above: and yes! Out of the cloud, landing gear lumpily at the ready, drops a 747, a lattice of vapour and light playing about its great indistinct bulk. Oh, Sublime!

We need, we especially need, an aesthetic to cater for the great human creations of the modern world: the towers, space stations, radiomasts, oil platforms, airports, underground systems, superhighways; the great airliners, spacecraft, bullet trains, articulated trucks.

Most of all we need an aesthetic for the very big city itself.

And we have it already. For can we improve on the Sublime? Everything we need in order to codify the aesthetics of the city is there, in Kant, in Burke:

Obscurity, Power, Darkness, Solitude, Vastness, Infinity, Succession, Uniformity.

And… 'Agitation'! Burke was right. After walking miles in a city I cannot placatemy agitation. My brain seethes with a thousant streets.

DICKENS IN LA

But first San Francisco:

An uncomfortable city; absurdly steep streets, like techtonic plates buckled up against each other, from recent seismic upheaval. A spiky, jagged uneven urban fabric; A keen wind; not the sybaritic atmosphere I am anticipating.

And then there is this wretched wholesomeness. As I realised when I went into my first bar; this was a Fu Manchu like den with rich tattered hangings, dark wall and contained about 50 chinamen (and I use that advisedly and no doubt in contravention of politically correct designations because that is what the place felt like) yes Chinamen drinking beer; and yet, wait, what was wrong here? *not one of them was smoking*.

Yes of course I knew about the new smoking regulations applying in California; but this was positively shocking because I could never actually believe in the truth of such legislation. But here was evidence enough; because if you can stop the *Chinese* smoking then you have one hell of a law.

I knew therefore that whatever other place of refreshment I sought it would be the same story. Resigned to a smokeless evening, a beer unaccompanied by smoke! I set out and of course then realised that there was another hurdle to cross; finding a not too gay bar. I ended up in a bar that had women in it; but it was gay; so I found myself discussing Buhle furniture and the Bonnard Exhibition in London with my refined new friends. In gay joints I find it useful to mention my son, en passant; my interlocutor starts and says

"Oh you mean you're not gay....(pause, and he puts his hand up to my brow) "and you have such pretty *hair"*

Curiously enough I do get to smoke in this bar, at about midnight, locked in with the barman and a couple of his regulars and we smoke dope.

I am now in the Sunset Suite, Hotel Cadillac, Venice Beach, Los Angeles. The Sunset suite is not grand in any way; sitting room, bedroom, bathroom. with a fabulous view over the dazzling white beach and the glittering pacific. Ten miles down the coast I see planes peel away from LAX, curiously in twos, mounting into the hazy blue sky side by side and then veering subtly

into their respective trajectories, London on one hand, perhaps, Beijing on the other.

Along Venice Beach I visit Muscle Beach. I see an elderly woman in an alarmingly small sagging bikini, a Venetian carnival mask with Cyrano nose playing an acoustic guitar and singing beneath an umbrella held in the crook of her arm. I pass a dog hat stall and a booth where you have your photo taken with lifesize (whatever lifesize may be) aliens.

Breakfast the next day in the restaurant opposite the Hotel Cadillac. I am transfixed by the following conversation:

Jack Nicholson-type comes in and addresses the man fixing breakfasts behind the counter:

JN type: How are you?

Man fixing breakfasts: No, how are *you*?

JN type: I'm.....good. (Long pause.) See you've got yourself all....uh...shaved *up.*

Or transcribed:

Man fixing breakfasts: Fuck you.

JN type: Fuck you too.

(But I am naïve. it probably *was* JN)

In Los Angeles there is no downtown. In Los Angeles you have to have a car.

After waiting for a bus for 10 minutes I step onto an air conditioned 33 bearing the legend DOWNTOWN.

OK, so it took me an hour and a half but it was all worth it. OK I had to share the bus with the carless which in LA is tantamount to travelling with the decamisados. After about ten miles I am Downtown, although I have for most of the journey been haunted by glimpses of the knot of skyscrapers that belatedly, in its history, became Downtown.

And in doing this I experienced really for the first time the immense horizontality of the city of the future; what Sujic calls the 100 Mile City. Of course I have known this theoretically; but here was the horizontal experience. Ten miles of uninterrupted building none of it much more than

three stories high; this really does challenge the vertically aspirational city. But my journey persuades me; this is the city of the future, (unless it is rather Singapore or Jakarta); but it takes me time to concede (so much do I espouse the European model of concentration and crowdedness that I am used to) that this is indeed "city". Until you realise that these modest structures amount to exactly the same components of the vertical city; they are just laid out in attenuated form. If I am tempted to think of the city configuration as essentially suburban, my bus pulls up (with a sigh) at a bus stop outside two adjacent one storey houses. Side by side they stand, with the following signs on them:

HOLISTIC DOG CARE BRAZILIAN DANCING

Clearly this was not the suburbs.

But I find downtown and, more to the point I find Broadway.

This was the centre of Los Angeles if it ever had a centre. And is lined with great deco palaces and tenaments, daubed with graffiti to an alarming height. The whole of Broadway is a thrill, a latino Oxford Street (and I mean that with no bathos; for like Broadway Oxford Street is the Real Thing.) But

some claim that Broadway, the old downtown is not to be incorporated within the new downtown; it is near it but has been sort of cauterised off from it. The street pulses with the musics of the latino world from a thousand loudspeakers; the Mexican, Mariachi; Colombian Salsa, Cumbia, Gaita, the Dominican Republic (Merengue); big ornate old cinemas showing Latino films, some put to other uses; one great old barn advertises EVANGELIZACION. I remember pausing in a big echoey Gallery packed with stalls, the sun filtering in though the iron pillars that supported it, listening to a sweet shuffly cumbia and feeling so good.

OK in my two days (and what are two days?) I did not see Disneyland or Homes of the Stars. And of course I am hip enough to know that these are the real Los Angeles. But no, I won't be amused by these things on any crappy postmodern or ironic pretext). Especially, fuck Disneyland; a "cultural Chernobyl" as one French critic called it. (Is that *rude* enough? Let me try myself: I hate Disney because it takes rich, potent European myths and turns them into cultural *slurry*.)

I'm a European and I have to be allowed to seek my own archaic idea of authenticity, of the properly metropolitan, of the Dickensian in this city that is quite otherwise. But I have lost Dickens; somewhere between San

Francisco and Los Angeles my copy of Great Expectations has gone adrift. I am Dickensless and in a state of acute liber interruptus.

I imagine Dickens in LAX airport in 1998, barely escaping notice with his lopsided beard and his fusty dark clothes and bad teeth (and yet he'd look like any elderly beat on Venice Beach) imagine him lurking at the foot of one of the pilotis of this great gleaming air terminal, open mouthed as he searched the soaring arches of this palace, the acres of glossy flooring and the slithering pixels of the departures board and the great stratocruisers destined for exotic cities rearing off the tarmac.

But his eye, as always, would have settled finally on the thing he loved best: the Crowd. And he might have picked me out. What would he have thought if he knew that this anxious little figure scuttling between the three bookstores, glancing worriedly at his watch, was desperately in search of *Great Expectations, Chapter thirtynine*, tormented at the prospect of being without this old, old book in the sunlit and hallucinatory City of the Angels in the late, the very late twentieth century.

At the muffled 'ping' I undo my seatbelt, order up my Bloody Marys and crack open my crisp new Great Expectations, right in the middle. As we

mount into the empyrean I go nose down into the plight of Pip about to discover the true origin of his expectations. Outside, there is the dazzle of the stratosphere, the silvery vapour-waves chasing the airleons, the exalted, celestial perspectives, the glittering ocean a mile below, as we climb as if towards the sun. All to no avail; for I am in Lincoln's Inn in winter in 1860:

"I saw that the lamps in the court were blown out, and that the lamps on the bridges and the shore were shuddering, and that the coal fires in barges on the river were being carried away before the wind like red-hot splashes in the rain....I read with my watch upon the table, purposing to close my book at eleven o'clock. As I shut it, Saint Paul's, and all the many church clocks in the city-some leading, some accompanying, some following-struck that hour. The sound was curiously flawed by the wind; and I was listening, and thinking how the wind assailed and tore it, when I heard a footstep on the stair."

THE END