

LONDON IN LITERATURE: VISIONARY MAPPINGS OF THE METROPOLIS.

Susana Onega and John A. Stotesbury (eds.)

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Because London is an ever-potent muse and writers ceaselessly endeavour to capture her on paper, it appears regularly necessary to reassess the literary treatment of the metropolis. This volume takes stock of London writing up to the very end of the twentieth century; it comprises both diachronic approaches showing the evolution of London as a literary phenomenon and synchronic analyses highlighting the multi-layered nature of the transhistorical cosmopolis. The undeniable assets of this collection of academic papers are its unity and its diversity.

The city as a promise and a threat, a longed-for paradise and a potential inferno, a locus of human aspiration to perfection and a place of alienation, the epitome of civilisation and the embodiment of ruthlessness, the centre of cultural exchanges and the site of miscommunication: this tension between a utopian and dystopian representation of London lies at the heart of all the papers. Interestingly, certain literary movements (and hence certain papers studying these movements) privilege one polarity over the other; romanticism and modernism thus seem to present disenchanted visions of the metropolis, even if the nineteenth-century poems insist on a sense of loss and nostalgia, whereas the early twentieth-century novels dwell on the contemporary alienation of the individual. Just as interestingly, the studies of the postmodern depictions of the metropolis clearly demonstrate that the problematic tension between utopia and dystopia is not to be solved but is a fundamental aspect of the contradictory nature of the pluralistic urban tissue.

Another unifying device of the papers in this volume is the treatment of “space as a modality of time” (as Jean-Michel Ganteau puts it). The spatial dimension of the city inevitably reveals a temporal dimension whereby the traces of history are made visible. London then appears as a place of permanence, a place of intercourse between the past and the present, the living and the dead, tradition and modernity. To quote Patrick Parrinder’s perspicacious oxymoron, London is a city of “living phantoms”, in other words a city where temporalities are mixed and combined, where time is synchronic —and not successive. Naturally, the idea of a temporal synchronism —just like the tension between utopia and dystopia— is not specific to London but applies to the metropolis in general. This remark is not intended deprecatingly, on the contrary it wishes to draw attention on the wide scope of this volume: any scholar interested in the structuring metaphors of the city (the city as labyrinth, palimpsest, auditorium, living body, spiritual being, archaeological site, or geological field) will find rich food for thought in these papers. This does not mean that the specificity of London is not taken into account: John Stotesbury analyses London as a trope of the crisis of the British empire in Graham Greene’s fiction and Susana Onega tackles the Englishness of the visionary mappings of London through the intertextual study of the dialogue between Peter Ackroyd and William Blake.

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The diversity of the papers is not only historical (covering the literatures from the sixteenth to the late twentieth centuries), but is also generic since poetry, fiction, biography and autobiography are all carefully construed. It may perhaps be regretted that Peter Ackroyd and Ian Sinclair should so often be taken as key examples when so many other postmodern London writers could have provided fascinating objects of study, notably Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Martin Amis and Graham Swift. But a collection of eleven papers can hardly be expected to deal with all of one’s favourite authors and rather than finishing on a note of regret I would like to conclude by praising the structure of the volume. The chronological disposition of the papers allows the reader to very well perceive the evolution in the characterisation of London in the various literary movements, and sometimes even within the same tradition —I am thinking here of the changing representations of London within modernism. This panorama through time and genre is aptly framed by an introduction which presents the contents, scope and purpose of the following contributions and by a penetrating final paper which proposes a critical synthesis of London literature and suggests that, if the myth of London has fostered much literature, it is equally valid to state that it is literature that has created the much profitable myth of London.