



Thinking Out of the Box in Literary and Cultural Studies



Proceedings of the XXIX AIA Conference

edited by
Rocco Coronato, Marilena Parlati and Alessandra Petrina

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UP

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*'THE STREAM OF LIFE THAT WILL NOT STOP':
THE 'MEMORY OF PLACES' AND THE PALIMPSESTUOUS
STREETS OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CITY*

Greta Perletti

This chapter intends to 'think out of the box' by showing how the combination of different media can prove an especially apt means to investigate the cultural discourse on the return of the past in the present. If the Western imagination of memory has always shown a powerful connection to a diversity of media, this contribution will be focussed in particular on the representation of the streets of the nineteenth-century city as palimpsestuous, creatively blurring the boundaries separating the present from the past, and the visible from the invisible. In works as diverse as Geoffrey Fletcher's book *The London Nobody Knows* (1962), its film adaptation by Norman Cohen (1967) and Clare Strand's photographic series *Gone Astray* (2002-03), we find the belief that the streets of London may be recognized as a privileged site for the exploration of the transience and permanence of the Victorian past. While the palimpsest has proved an invaluable critical tool to investigate post-modernism, these works invite us to trace the palimpsest back to its nineteenth-century origins, when it functioned as a powerful metaphor deployed to make sense of the mysterious processes of the human mind. If the palimpsest was believed to be especially apt to describe the interplay of memory and imagination for creative work, it was also often associated with urban *flânerie* and with the encounter with the stratified diversity of the metropolitan space. Therefore, putting together a range of diverse and apparently heterogeneous texts, this chapter aims at investigating the hypothesis that at the core of the protean fascination with the city's palimpsestuous streets we may find their ability to offer themselves as a mental space, haunted by past images and words and in turn haunting any attempt to erase the ambivalent legacy of the past.

Nineteenth-century flânerie; Neo-Victorian London; Nineteenth-century Theories of Memory; Nineteenth-century Palimpsest; Gone Astray

In her influential monograph *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (2011), cultural historian Aleida Assmann begins the chapter devoted to 'Places' by focusing on the phrase 'the memory of places', or *memoria loci*. As Assman explains, the complexity of this phrase, and the fascination it has exerted on different authors and cultures, from classical antiquity to contemporary memory studies, relies on the fruitful ambiguity of its *genetivus*:

The expression ‘the memory of places’ is both convenient and evocative. It is convenient because it leaves open the question of whether this is *genetivus obiectivus*, meaning that we remember places, or a *genetivus subjectivus*, meaning that places retain memories. It is evocative because it suggests the possibility that places themselves may become the agents and bearers of memory, endowed with a mnemonic power that far exceeds that of humans.¹

The semantic indeterminacy of the possessive in the phrase grants unstable agency to the action of remembering; while we would expect ‘places’ to be a direct object of a human-driven action (*I* remember places), we cannot exclude the possibility that places here take up instead the grammar function of subject (*places* remember). The consequence is that, beside being remembered by humans, buildings, monuments and cities can actually remember in the first place; indeed, much of the academic field of memory studies is concerned with the importance (as well as with the challenge) of deciphering, understanding, and protecting the memory held by places.² As Assmann’s words implicitly make clear, however, there is also something uncanny and haunting in the figuration of places as ‘agents and bearers of memory’. Places, as she puts it, are ‘endowed with a mnemonic power’ that appears far superior to the one granted to humans; a mnemonic power that, we may add, may even baffle, elude or overwhelm human attempts to identify and control the memory of places.

In this essay I have chosen to ‘think out of the box’ by exploring the streets of the nineteenth-century city as a prime example of the *loci*’s propensity to haunt humans and to unsettle the agency we would expect to be at work in the mnemonic process. To do so, the essay will outline the connections between the city and mnemonic imagination, first by

¹ Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, trans. Aleida Assmann with David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 283.

² Pierre Nora remains the theorist most closely associated with the importance of memory places. The concept of *lieux de mémoire* inspired his monumental three-volume edited collection *The Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–98). The bibliography concerning sites of memory places are among the most hotly debated issues at the heart of the academic field known as ‘memory studies.’ See for example David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Andrew Charlesworth, ‘Contesting Places of Memory: The Case of Auschwitz,’ *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12 (1994): pp. 579–93; John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations, The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Astrid Erll, ‘Travelling Memory,’ *Parallax* 17, 4 (2011): pp. 4–18.

introducing the tradition of the art of memory in the classical and early modern age and then by emphasizing the changes this paradigm underwent in the nineteenth century, when the palimpsest began to be used as a metaphor for the human mind, transforming the encounter with the memory of places in the city in an experience entailing a possibly pathological process. In the final part, the essay will briefly explore two very different works like Geoffrey Fletcher's *The London Nobody Knows* (1962) and Clare Strand's photographic series *Gone Astray Portraits* (2002/3), showing the extent to which their fascination with the streets of London stems from the nineteenth-century palimpsest and in turn contributes to transform these texts into further palimpsests that play with the legible and illegible traces left by the Victorians. As we shall see, the figure that accompanies such 'thinking out of the box' is that of the *flâneur*, whose eccentric, intoxicated or playful nature invites us to step beyond conventional assumptions and disciplinary boundaries by mingling together different time frames as well as different media.

1. *The city and the mnemonic power of places*

In the history of Western imagination, the city seems to be the site that most perfectly embodies the shift of agency from humans to places which Assmann identifies in the phrase 'the memory of places'. As Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben observe, 'one might even say that *cities remember* – and that we remember with and through them.'³ In the classical tradition of the 'art of memory', which was still influential in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, the act of remembering 'through the city' was actually inscribed in mnemonics itself. Following the legendary example of Simonides of Ceos – who, as Cicero recalls in his *De Oratore*, was able to grant proper burial to the disfigured bodies of his fellow-guests by remembering where they had been sitting before the building suddenly collapsed – the 'method of *loci*' relied on the imaginary placing of images corresponding to the things to be remembered in imaginary mental places that often included the buildings of a city.⁴

³ Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, 'Troping the Neo-Victorian City: Strategies of Reconsidering the Metropolis,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 7.

⁴ See Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Lina Bolzoni, *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

The method of *loci* was much more than a simple technique. Indeed, it was a real ‘art’, as defined in the title of Frances A. Yates’s influential monograph:

The word ‘mnemotechnics’ hardly conveys what the artificial memory of Cicero may have been like, as it moved among the buildings of ancient Rome, *seeing* the places, *seeing* the images stored on the places, with a piercing inner vision which immediately brought to his lip the thoughts and words of his speech. I prefer to use the expression ‘art of memory’ for this process.⁵

The relation with the city plays no marginal role in the perception of mnemotechnics as an art that enriches the mind of its practitioner. As Cicero walks down the real or imagined Rome, there is no doubt as to his agency in the remembering process: thanks to ‘a piercing inner vision’, the orator’s mind exerts full mastery over the memory images that have been stored in the various imaginary places and need to be retrieved for his speech to be complete. The city is here an instrument for the enhancement of the powers of human recollection: the ‘memory of places’, clearly a *genetivus objectivus*, is at the service of the orator’s ordered and well-regulated mental process.

The contemporary city, on the other hand, offers an altogether different memorial experience to its visitors, one in which places appear endowed with a mnemonic power of their own, not necessarily subjected to the mastery of the human minds that inhabit and visit them. We may understand this epistemological shift in the perception of the memory held by places by considering the metaphor of the palimpsest, which is today among the most widely used terms in theories and discussions of memory and/in the urban space.⁶ The palimpsest became especially popular in the course of the nineteenth century, when the application of new chemical reagents to parchment scrolls revealed earlier inscriptions that had been erased from the surface of the paper when there was need to make room for newer writing. What was striking about the palimpsest was that with the help of the chemical process the earlier inscriptions could become visible, and in some cases legible, again.

⁵ Yates, p. 4 (italics in the original).

⁶ See Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen (eds), *The City as Power: Urban Space, Place, and National Identity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

The palimpsest belongs to the group of memory metaphors that scholars like Assmann and Harald Weinrich classify as metaphors of writing (as opposed to metaphors of the storehouse or the archive and of space or landscape),⁷ the archetype of which is the wax tablet, deployed as early as in Plato's *Teaetetus* to describe the workings of memory. In Cicero's *De Oratore*, for example, the wax tablet is evoked to provide evidence of the reliability and effectiveness of the mental process that attributes memory images to the various places of the imaginary city: just as a wax tablet is inscribed with letters, each 'locality' is stored with images.⁸ In contrast to this view, Assmann explains that the introduction of the palimpsest to describe the act of remembering in the nineteenth century unsettled the neatness of the inscription process by foregrounding time alongside space. With the palimpsest metaphor, the perception of memory was considerably transformed: from a 'vast' power, memory became a faculty associated with the idea of unfathomable 'depths'.⁹

As a result, in the course of the nineteenth century also the relation between the city and memory underwent an important change in Western imagination. If in antiquity the mnemonic relevance of the city, as we have seen, relied on the carefully organized mental (re)visitation of the imaginary places in which the items that needed to be remembered had been stored, with the introduction of the palimpsest metaphor the city came to be imagined as a site retaining memories both visible and latent, and juxtaposing the past with the present.¹⁰ Rather than well-regulated recollection through the arrangement of the buildings and the images, the nineteenth-century city now invited excavation; whereas classical and early modern discourses on memory by no means questioned the anthropocentric agency of the mnemonic act, the modern city confronts humans with a process of retention that is often mysterious, unpredictable and uncontrollable.

⁷ See Harald Weinrich, *Lethé: The Art and Critique of Forgetting* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 4-5 and Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, pp. 137-50.

⁸ Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.86.354.

⁹ Aleida Assmann, 'Metafore, modelli e mediatori della memoria,' in *Memoria e saperi. Percorsi transdisciplinari*, ed. Elena Agazzi and Vita Fortunati (Roma: Meltemi, 2007), p. 520.

¹⁰ See Luigi Cazzato, 'From Physical to Mental Space: Palimpsest-Cities in the 19th and 20th Centuries,' in *CityScapes: Islands of the Self: Literary and Cultural Studies. Proceedings of the 22nd AIA Conference, Cagliari 15-17 September 2005*, ed. Francesco Marroni et al. (Cagliari: Cooperativa Universitaria Editrice Cagliariaritana, 2007), pp. 195-204.

2. *The nineteenth-century palimpsest: the all-remembering brain and its ailments*

Thomas De Quincey is usually credited with first deploying the metaphor of the palimpsest to describe the human mind. In his 'Suspiria de Profundis' (1845) he describes the peculiar retention of the brain with a strongly suggestive imagery:

Yes, reader, countless are the mysterious hand-writings of grief or joy which have inscribed themselves successively upon the palimpsest of your brain; and, like the annual leaves of aboriginal forests, or the undissolving snows on the Himalaya, or light falling upon light, the endless strata have covered up each other in forgetfulness. But by the hour of death, but by fever, but by the searchings of opium, all these can revive in strength. They are not dead, but sleeping.¹¹

De Quincey's extract is intensely visual, evoking the images of exotic and sublime places to account for the different layers that have constituted the human brain over the course of time. Although scholars have shown that some palimpsest imagery was circulating within discussions of memory even before 1845,¹² De Quincey's model brought about an important revision of the wax tablet metaphor by highlighting the permanence as well as the instability of the inscriptions: traces are retained, but they are not always available or retrievable.

As is well known, the palimpsest has enjoyed renewed popularity within post-structuralist and postmodernist criticism. Gerard Genette's exploration of transtextuality in his book *Palimpsests*, Linda Hutcheon's belief that adaptations are 'inherently "palimpsestuous" works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts' and Sarah Dillon's fine and extensive study of the palimpsest in post-modern theory have all shown the extent to which the palimpsest operates as an invaluable critical tool to demystify fixed meanings, disciplinary boundaries and historical linearity.¹³

¹¹ Thomas De Quincey, 'Suspiria De Profundis,' in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, Suspiria de Profundis and the English Mail-Coach* (London: MacDonal, 1956), p. 512.

¹² Roger Douglas-Fairhurst, for example, argues that Coleridge had already deployed the term 'palimpsest' to talk about his memory in 1828: Roger Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 149. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell suggest that Thomas Carlyle's essay 'On History' (1830) predates De Quincey's use of the palimpsest as a metaphor of the human mind: Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'Introduction: Reading the Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Palimpsest,' in *Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, ed. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), p. 8.

¹³ Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Clau-

Recently, Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell have called attention to the fact that even in the nineteenth century the palimpsest proved a powerful instrument for radical and critical thinking. Deployed as a metaphor to make sense of 'abstract notions of time, memory, selfhood',¹⁴ the nineteenth-century palimpsest called for an intrinsic intermediality, evoking both the visual (the recognition of earlier traces) and the textual (the legibility or illegibility of such traces). As also De Quincey's extract implicitly suggests with its richly visual imagery, the palimpsest unsettles rigid demarcations between image and text, because it speaks to 'the combined visuality and textuality – the complex over layering of words, images, and texts – that the Victorians themselves developed through their illustrated books and periodicals and cartoons'.¹⁵ In line with this view, Tania Agathocleous has shown that the popular genre of the nineteenth-century urban sketch, combining the literary and the visual, is a fascinating if neglected component of literary realism.¹⁶ As we shall see, a similar intermediality is a consistent trait of the works interested in the palimpsestuous¹⁷ nature of the streets of London.

While showing affinities with the model of the mind as a blank slate presented in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), De Quincey's palimpsest significantly revises that model by introducing two aspects that will be extremely important for nineteenth-century representations of the mental processes of memory. The first is the extreme retentiveness of the brain: already in 1817 Coleridge had argued, in his *Biographia Literaria*, that 'in the very nature of a living spirit, it may be more possible that heaven and earth should pass away, than that

de Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 6; Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007).

¹⁴ Jones and Mitchell, p. 8.

¹⁵ Jones and Mitchell, p. 8.

¹⁶ Tanya Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination: Visible City, Invisible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ In my usage of the adjective 'palimpsestuous', I follow Dillon's distinction between 'palimpsestic' (which reads the relation between past and present as the vertical movement of archaeological excavation) and 'palimpsestuous'. The latter follows the practice of Foucauldian genealogy and focuses on the surface over which the traces of earlier inscriptions manifest themselves. A 'palimpsestuous reading' is interested in unexpected connections between the past and the present and is 'an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none'; Sarah Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies,' *Textual Practice* 19, 3 (2005), p. 254. In her later monograph, Dillon further elaborates on her choice, arguing that "'palimpsestuous" suggests a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation'; Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 3.

a single act, a single thought, should be loosened or lost',¹⁸ emphasizing the ability of the mind to obscurely store memories of important as well as marginal past occurrences. The second aspect that De Quincey introduces is the important role attributed to altered mental states for the retrieval of the apparently invisible traces left on the brain as palimpsest: in the extract above, De Quincey mentions phenomena involving an alteration of consciousness, like proximity to death, fever and intoxication from opium, as the conditions that make memories that were hitherto unavailable come up again to the surface.

In Victorian culture, both the aspects presented by De Quincey's conception of the brain as palimpsest pose obvious problems, which contribute to construe the palimpsest – and the model of memory it implies – as an ambivalent source of wonder and anxiety. On the one hand, the discovery that early events and situations leave a trace on the brain that is only seemingly erased brings attention to the fact that an excess of memory may impair the legibility of the traces from the past. In his 1833 essay 'On History Again', Thomas Carlyle writes that 'oblivion is the dark page, whereon Memory writes her light-beam characters, and makes them legible: were it all light, nothing could be read there, any more than if it were all darkness.'¹⁹ As an endlessly inscribed mental space, the all-remembering brain is haunted by the return of traces that appear illegible. On the other hand, the fact that the retrieval of memories is dependent on an altered mental state implies the inability to account rationally for the recovery of the traces and foregrounds a condition that is morally controversial, since a person undergoing an alteration of consciousness is, to use Locke's words, '*not himself*, or is *beside himself*'.²⁰ As a result, the palimpsest appears a problematic metaphor in Victorian culture, emphasizing the 'excessive' nature of human memory, its automatic activity and its ability to elude rational control. While the unaccountable availability of the traces of the past has the potential to inspire creative artistic work, the return of unbidden memories also appears to the Victorians as the prelude to mental derangement and pathology.²¹

¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*, vol. 1 (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), p. 114.

¹⁹ Thomas Carlyle, 'On History Again,' in *Historical Essays* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2002), p. 20.

²⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 342 (italics in the original).

²¹ On the representation of 'excessive' memory as dangerous in the nineteenth century see

3. *The flâneur and the city*

The nineteenth-century city offers itself as a particularly apt place to experience the ambivalently creative and pathological potential of memory. As Julian Wolfreys puts it, memory is embedded in the experience of living the city, as 'the city is a place of layers, erasures, disappearances and losses, as much as it is a site of architectural and monumental persistence.'²² Represented spatially as a chaotic maze,²³ the Victorian urban space appears dominated in its temporal dimension by the 'traces' that are symbolic of the mnemonic excess of the brain as palimpsest.

Key to understanding this aspect is the figure of the *flâneur*, a man (less frequently, a woman)²⁴ who receives energy as well as creative inspiration from the plunge into the bustling life of the city's streets. While the *flâneur* is most typically associated with Paris, London has had a long tradition of famous strollers, like Daniel Defoe, William Blake, Thomas De Quincey, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Arthur Machen, Virginia Woolf and George Orwell. Today, the tradition of London *flânerie* survives in contemporary authors and psychogeographers like Peter Ackroyd, Iain Sinclair and 'The Gentle Author', who runs the blog *spital-fieldslife.com*. For the *flâneur*, the encounter with the streets and the past life imbuing them results in a heightened vision: in the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin approvingly quotes Ferdinand Lion, who argues that 'whosoever sets foot in a city feels caught up as in a web of dreams, where the most remote past is linked to the events of today'.²⁵

The *flâneur's* creative encounter with the city streets in the act of strolling is arguably understood as a palimpsestuous experience. This encounter is at its most creative when the physical space of the city nourishes the *flâneur's* mind while at the same time subjecting him to the

Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Greta Perletti, *Le ferite della memoria. Il ritorno dei ricordi nella cultura vittoriana* (Bergamo: Bergamo University Press, 2008).

²² Julian Wolfreys, "'Part Barrier, Part Entrance to a Parallel Dimension": London and the Modernity of Urban Perception,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 134.

²³ Linda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000).

²⁴ Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,' *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2, 3 (1985): pp. 37-48. For a reassessment of Wolff's view see Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, pp. 68-9.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 435.

return of the traces that were inscribed on his mind but were not previously available to consciousness. In 'A Painter of Modern Life' (1863), Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur* receives energy as well as images for his mind while among the street crowds: 'a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness' during the day, he creates art at night, when 'all the materials, stored higgledy-piggledy by memory' come back to him as he is fixing his 'steady gaze' on the sheet of paper.²⁶

The encounter with the palimpsestuous city streets can also entail a kind of memory disorder, as the mnemonic excess inscribed in the traces of the city's past life reverberates on the mind of the viewer. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) we find an example of this process when Dorothea Brooke is confronted, during her honeymoon, with 'the weight of unintelligible Rome'.²⁷ The traces of Rome's past weigh on Dorothea's mind, as if the city were an immense and all-remembering brain, whose extreme retentiveness, like Carlyle's perpetual day-light, prevented the inscriptions from being meaningful. Dorothea's gaze recognizes the presence of different temporal stratifications and of confusing contrasts between the glory of the past and the degradation of the present, but the memory held by places has the power to deprive Dorothea of mastery over the experience of perception:

Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present [...]; the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her.²⁸

The vision of the traces emerging from Rome's past does more than simply confusing Dorothea's mind: it undermines her agency as a perceiving self, the traces 'urging' themselves on her and causing her organism to be turned into a passive spectator. Shortly after the reported extract, the narrator identifies Dorothea's strange experience as a kind of mnemonic dysfunction, as the ghosts of these remembered images return unbidden to haunt her: 'forms both pale and glowing fixed themselves on

²⁶ Charles Baudelaire, 'A Painter of Modern Life,' in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 401, 402.

²⁷ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 177.

²⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 177.

her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years'.²⁹

Another aspect that reveals the affinities between the *flâneur's* experience of the city as a palimpsest and the mnemonic imagination of the brain as palimpsest is the fact that the traces of the city's past lives can be best re-activated while in an altered mental space. In Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), the protagonist Lucy Snowe becomes a *flâneuse* after being given an opiate: the altered mental state caused by the intoxication allows the reserved and respectable English teacher to find the confidence of walking alone in the night, this one time looking at people rather than being looked at. One thing that strikes Lucy as she looks back to this episode is the strange route she pursued in her walk: 'I knew my route, yet it seemed as if I was hindered from pursuing it direct: now a sight, and now a sound, called me aside, luring me down this alley and that'.³⁰ What Lucy is describing here is the condition of walking aimlessly or 'drifting', with no direction, a well-known movement typical of *flânerie*. However, rather than being the consequence of an alteration of consciousness as it is in Brontë's novel, drifting in the city streets, following no pre-arranged plan but only chance associations, may be arguably understood as *producing* (as opposed to simply *mirroring*) a peculiar state of consciousness, one that allows the *flâneur* to be immersed in city life and to perceptively grasp what goes unnoticed by other inhabitants of the city.

Today, the idea of 'drifting' is associated with *flânerie* especially in Surrealist and Situationist practices, where it identifies a playful but meaningful way of remapping cities according to affective or surprising routes, aiming at renovating the enjoyment of the city. Guy Debord, the theorist of the concept known as *dérive*, is also the founder of psychogeography, a practice which ideally combines psychology and geography. As Merlin Coverley observes,

like the skilled chemist, the psychogeographer is able both to identify and to distil the varied ambiances of urban environment. Emotional zones that cannot be determined simply by architectural or economic conditions must be determined by following the aimless stroll (*dérive*), the results of which may then form the basis of a new cartography.³¹

²⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 177.

³⁰ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 454.

³¹ Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (London: Pocket Essentials, 2010), p. 59.

Dérive is intended as a way to elicit a peculiar mental state that, as Debord explains, should include not only ‘letting go’, but also ‘knowledge and calculation’.³² In this state of perceptive alertness, the *flâneur* becomes alive to the city’s ‘psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones’.³³

Although *dérive* is a typically postmodern concept, it is important to remark that ‘drifting’ was a very important trope also for Victorian culture. Starting in the 1850s, many important studies on mental physiology focused on theories of human consciousness based on a system of channels or streams, some manifest and some latent.³⁴ In George Eliot’s narrative, for example, consciousness is imagined as a place for ‘meeting streams’,³⁵ and drifting on water indicates that the character is surrendering to his or her unconscious mental life.³⁶ This is most visible in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Romola* (1862-63), where the two young protagonists Maggie and Romola are tempted to give way to their obscure and illicit desires – the attraction to her cousin’s suitor for Maggie, death for Romola – while gliding on a boat.³⁷ While unconscious mental processes in Victorian culture are often viewed as degrading and inferior to conscious mental activity, Eliot’s examples show that this is not necessarily the case with drifting. The aimless movement on the water and the peculiar absent-minded mental states it symbolizes are actually conducive to (if not productive of) the highly moral resolutions the young women will make shortly after these scenes: Maggie gives up Stephen, while Romola’s ‘drifting away’ is the prelude to her subsequent ‘waking’, when she realizes that the boat has become ‘the gently lulling cradle of a new life’.³⁸

Also in the urban context drifting is productive of insights that be-

³² Guy Debord, ‘Theory of the Dérive,’ in *Visual Culture: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, *Spaces of Visual Culture*, ed. Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 77.

³³ Debord, p. 77.

³⁴ See Vanessa L. Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

³⁵ ‘Meeting Streams’ is the title of Book 2 of George Eliot’s last novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

³⁶ On the importance of psychological and physiological research in Eliot’s work see Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), especially pp. 142-200; Michael Davis, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

³⁷ The scenes occur respectively in Chapter 13 (‘Borne Along by the Tide’) of *The Mill on the Floss* and Chapter 61 (‘Drifting Away’) of *Romola*.

³⁸ George Eliot, *Romola* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 548.

speak of the fruitful if dangerous interaction between conscious and unconscious mental life, especially in the writings of Charles Dickens, the author that appears most emblematic of London *flânerie*.³⁹ Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* quotes Chesterton's remark that as a child Dickens 'had no other resource but drifting, and he drifted over half London'.⁴⁰ This is actually the subject of 'Gone Astray', a short tale Dickens published on *Household Words* in 1853, which focuses on the one-night adventure of a young child lost in London and aimlessly moving from one bizarre scene to the next across the slum neighbourhood of St Giles, in an atmosphere that appears suspended between hallucination and comedy.⁴¹ Dickens writes in a letter that '[the streets of London] suppl[y] something to my brain, which it cannot bear, when busy, to lose': they are like a 'magic lantern', whose light nourishes his creativity but at the same time gives birth to unpredictably spectral images.⁴²

Drifting among the city's past life produces in Dickens the hallucinated state that mingles external perceptions and inner projections, past and present, death and life. Thus, in the article 'Night Walks' (1860), the sleepless and houseless narrator has a vision of the dead of London rising from the churchyard and depriving the living of vital space.⁴³ Similarly, Dickens's novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840) opens with the reflections of a *flâneur* narrator evoking the image of a convalescent who is overwhelmed by 'the hum and noise' of the city, and by 'the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie dead but conscious in a noisy churchyard'.⁴⁴ Dickens offers abundant examples of what Benjamin calls the 'anamnesic intoxication in which the *flâneur* goes about in the city':⁴⁵ a form of altered mental state that, springing from embodied memory (as implicit in the adjective 'anamnesic'), allows for deeper insights and a keener gaze.

³⁹ The bibliography on Dickens and London is extensive. See in particular John Rignall, *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator* (London: Routledge, 1992); Jeremy Tambling, *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009); Julian Wolfreys, *Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ Benjamin, p. 438.

⁴¹ Charles Dickens, 'Gone Astray', in *Night Walks* (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 14-29.

⁴² Benjamin, p. 426.

⁴³ Charles Dickens, 'Night Walks', in *Night Walks*, p. 9. Dickens's article and nightwalking habits are discussed also in Matthew Beaumont's recent book *The Walker: On Finding and Losing Yourself in the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2020), pp. 45-49.

⁴⁴ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, p. 417.

The liminality between pathology and creativity in Dickens is noticed also by Victorian physiologist William Carpenter, who mentions Dickens when dealing with the peculiar mental state which, following some intense concentration of thought, allows the ‘ideal creations’ of imagination to be ‘reproduced with the force of actual experience’, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish among recollected and imagined faces and events.⁴⁶ The proverbially hypertrophic Dickensian vision is at the core of what Benjamin labels ‘[t]he psychology of the *flâneur*’,⁴⁷ a form of mnemonic dysfunction that is productive of the art of the *flâneur* as well as of a disturbing confusion between outer and inner, city and brain. While Orwell argued that Dickens’s imagination ‘overwhelms everything, like a kind of weed’,⁴⁸ for Chesterton ‘Dickens did not stamp these places on his mind; he stamped his mind on these places’.⁴⁹ In one passage of ‘Night Walks’, the narrator reflects on the contiguity between sanity and insanity during sleep, and reports a short conversation with an asylum inmate:

Said an afflicted man to me, when I was last in a hospital like this, ‘Sir, I can frequently fly.’ I was half ashamed to reflect that so could I – by night.⁵⁰

Dickens’s imagination is inseparable from the strange altered mental state that feeds on the streets of London and mingles individual memories with the memory held by places; like the narrator of his tale, Dickens knows that going astray in London might bring about pathology – but on the other hand, he also knows that drifting can make him fly.

4. *The palimpsestuous streets of London*

The keener gaze of the observer of the city and the *flâneur*’s alertness to the palimpsestuous nature of the streets is crucial for the exploration of some works that, following Wolfreys’s phrasing, we may define para-Victorian, as ‘they take up the language of the place, and with that, become shaped [...] by the other that is the constellated tracery of the

⁴⁶ William B. Carpenter, *Principles of Mental Physiology* (London: Kegan, Trench, Trübner, 1896), p. 456.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, p. 438.

⁴⁸ George Orwell, ‘Charles Dickens,’ in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Gollancz, 1940), p. 308.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, p. 438.

⁵⁰ Dickens, ‘Night Walks,’ p. 8.

city.⁵¹ The Victorian palimpsest, I would argue, is the trace that shapes Geoffrey Fletcher's book *The London Nobody Knows* (1962) and Clare Strand's photographic series *Gone Astray* (2002/3). Despite the obvious differences between these works, what they have in common is, first, the desire to explore the resurfacing of the past traces in contemporary London through the literary and the visual text; secondly, both Fletcher and Strand rely on the figure of the *flâneur* for the exploration of palimpsest imagery. Finally, and most intriguingly, by engaging playfully as well as self-consciously with the traces of the Victorian past (and, most notably, with Dickens's voice), Fletcher's and Strand's texts may be recognized as themselves palimpsestuous, because they add a further layer to the experience of walking down (or looking at) the streets of London.

The London Nobody Knows is the best-known work by Fletcher, who has been a writer, illustrator, art critic and columnist of *The Daily Telegraph* for more than 30 years. The peculiarity of this book lies in the association of texts with sketches by Fletcher himself, complementing each other and focusing on hidden or little-known spots of London. As a narrator, Fletcher appears *flâneur*-like, leading readers across a journey that is highly idiosyncratic, unpredictable and bizarre: sometimes his chapters focus on districts of London, sometimes on single architectural details or styles; in addition, the illustrations and the corresponding text are sometimes distanced by several pages, thus making the experience of reading the text and looking at its visual counterpart discontinuous and disjointed.

The narrator is particularly intrigued by the juxtaposition of past with present in the London streets: in an illustration of a street lamp in Islington, for example, a horse trough and a Georgian building co-exist with a birth-control shop.⁵² While the corresponding text makes only a passing remark on the Georgian building hosting a 'wonderful enamel advertisement for female pills',⁵³ the sketch confronts the viewer with a palimpsestuous surface, in which the traces from the past can be grasped by an attentive, discerning eye.

Although the tone of the narrator is at times overtly nostalgic, 'his mode of representation', as Isabelle Cases argues, 'seems less intent on sentimental yearning or mourning than on self-consciously discompos-

⁵¹ Wolfreys, "Part Barrier, Part Entrance," p. 140.

⁵² Geoffrey Fletcher, *The London Nobody Knows* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 65.

⁵³ Fletcher, p. 51.

ing our everyday apperception of the city'.⁵⁴ This, as we have seen, is consistent with the playful and demystifying *dérive* of psychogeographical *flâneurs*; but I would argue that in Fletcher we can also find some aspects that evoke the Victorian drifting, with its intermingling of conscious and unconscious mental activity. The narrator's *flânerie* allows him to plunge into a dreamy atmosphere, especially when he is confronted with the emergence of the city's past life on the palimpsestuous streets. In the extract below, for example, the narrating voice superimposes the past over the present Sidney Street, theatre of the anarchist riots:

Whenever I go, in spite of modern changes [...], I seem to see the top-hatted figure of Winston Churchill peering round a doorway during the gun battle, and policemen with walrus moustaches stare out of the past, along with loungers in greasy cloth caps.⁵⁵

The extract is strongly Dickensian in the way the encounter with the city as palimpsest triggers the altered mental state of the *flâneur*, blending vision with imagination, and the present with the past: haunted by the trace, the perceiving subject is confronted with the power of the memory of places to conjure spectral illusions. In another Dickensian extract, Fletcher describes the Kensal Green Cemetery with gasometers in the background and this juxtaposition of past and present life prompts him to imagine, like the narrators of Dickens's 'Night Walks' and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the return of the 'dead but conscious' past inhabitants of London: 'among the leafy avenues, accompanied by the smell of gas, [the dead] are awaiting the general resurrection. I imagine them breaking open the costly sarcophagi'.⁵⁶

Fletcher's sentimental nostalgia for the disappearing past has been read as reactionary, as in Dan Cruickshank's 'Foreword' to the 2011 edition of the book, where Fletcher is described as 'looking, appreciating, recording – but not participating, not actively battling to save those things he loved'.⁵⁷ This would also set Fletcher in tension with the playful, unsettling and irreverent modes of psychogeographical *dérive*. And yet, as

⁵⁴ Isabelle Cases, 'Re-Imagining the Victorian *flâneur* in the 1960s: *The London Nobody Knows* by Geoffrey Fletcher and Norman Cohen,' in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 117.

⁵⁵ Fletcher, p. 94.

⁵⁶ Fletcher, p. 26.

⁵⁷ Dan Cruickshank, 'Foreword,' in Geoffrey Fletcher, *The London Nobody Knows* (London: The History Press, 2011), not paginated, par. 6.

Kate Mitchell argues, the contrast between 'a conservative, even naïve, nostalgia' and postmodernism's 'somehow more authentic, because critical, attitude towards the past' appears unproductive for cultural memory.⁵⁸ Written before the Victorian heritage became fashionable, Fletcher's book may arguably have entrusted the *flâneur*-like journey created in its pages with a sort of revelatory power: in other words, Fletcher may have designed his book with the purpose to help us adopt a gaze that recognizes the memory held by places. Building on palimpsest imagery, Fletcher stimulates readers to re-activate the traces that were illegible because of the unpoetic overwriting by modernity and postwar economic boom. Fletcher's lesson survives today most clearly in the activism of The Gentle Author, who is committed to look at the changes affecting the East End through his daily blog *Spitalfields Life*, in an attempt to save what is left before gentrification sweeps it away. With an intermedial approach that brings together the textual and the visual (especially photography), The Gentle Author appears especially attentive to palimpsest imagery and gives space to photographers like Adam Tuck and C.A. Mathew, who experiment with making visible in their work the re-emergence of past traces in contemporary London.⁵⁹

It is not surprising that photography should play an important role in palimpsestuous imagination. De Quincey's essay on the palimpsest famously includes the description of the vision related by a woman who was rescued from drowning: in this experience, as the previously unavailable traces were reactivated by the altered mental state provided by proximity to death, the past incidents appeared as a visible picture. The Victorians elaborated on this, as the recent discoveries about the photographic technology provided a powerful metaphor to describe memory. William Carpenter, for example, used the comparison between the mind and photographic paper to account for phenomena involving the unbidden return of memories that were not available to ordinary consciousness:

any 'trace' [...] although remaining so long outside 'the sphere of consciousness' as to have seemed non-existent, may be revived again in full vividness

⁵⁸ Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 5.

⁵⁹ 'A Walk Through Time in Spitalfields' (12 February 2020), <https://spitalfieldslife.com/2020/02/12/a-walk-through-time-in-spitalfields-x/> (accessed 15 February 2020); 'Upon the Subject of C.A. Mathew's Pictures' (6 March 2014), <http://spitalfieldslife.com/2014/03/06/upon-the-subject-of-ca-mathew%E2%80%99s-pictures/> (accessed 15 February 2020)

under certain special conditions – just as the invisible impression left upon the sensitive paper of the Photographer, is developed into a Picture by the application of chemical re-agents.⁶⁰

The photograph and the palimpsest are understood in Victorian culture as implying an extremely similar model of memory, one that emphasizes the automatic nature of recollection and its propensity to elude conscious activity.

The photographer Clare Strands plays with the intertwinings between the palimpsest, photography, and the return of the traces of the past in the present. The palimpsestuous surface of Strand's series works on both the literary and the visual level: the title of her photographic series of portraits *Gone Astray* (2002/3) is an explicit reference to Dickens's 1853 tale about the child lost at night amidst the London streets, while the use of pastoral painted backdrops for the portraits is reminiscent of the studio settings of nineteenth-century portraitists, most notably recognisable in the illustrations that accompany Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). As David Chandler argues, the juxtaposition of people taken from the contemporary London streets with the nineteenth-century backdrop confers to the portraits 'an air of pastiche'.⁶¹ Indeed, Strand argues in an interview that she likes 'to operate with opposites – the extraordinary versus the ordinary, the factual as opposed to the unreal and the comedic offset by the serious,'⁶² and here she uses palimpsest-like images to question people's tendency to stick to 'types'. In particular, the theatricality of the nineteenth-century streets, popularized by Dickens's writing and by Victorian photography in the representation of the working-class inhabitants of the East End are here super-imposed over the portraits of contemporary London 'types'. As a result, Strand's series forces us, Kate Flint argues, to question our tendency to make 'assumptions based on typology',⁶³ drawing our gaze to the incongruous detail that makes the picture crack: the torn stocking, the running mascara, the split lip, the vulnerable pose.

⁶⁰ Carpenter, p. 436.

⁶¹ David Chandler, 'Clare Strand: Vanity Fair,' in *Clare Strands: A Photoworks Monograph* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), p. 9.

⁶² Clare Strand in conversation with Chris Mullen, 'Interview,' in *Clare Strands: A Photoworks Monograph*, p. 93.

⁶³ Kate Flint, 'Afterword: Photography, Palimpsests, and the Neo-Victorian,' in *Drawing on the Victorians: The Palimpsest of Victorian and Neo-Victorian Graphic Texts*, ed. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), p. 8.

In Strand's work, too, the *flâneur* is a key figure, not only second-hand, via the reference to famous strollers like Dickens and Mayhew, but also because the idea came to Strand as she was living in London with a year's fellowship at the London College of Printing, and as she everyday walked down the streets of the metropolis. While drifting is embedded in the very title of this work, Strand reports that the idea of the project came to her as she developed a sort of sudden awareness of the invisible and intangible dimension of London: 'it alerted me to what was happening underneath the hum of the pavement, the tunnels and the channels – what is there and what is not there? I followed ideas of magic and the supernatural in the City'.⁶⁴ As a *flâneuse*, Strand partakes in the hallucinated mental state that blurs the real and the unreal, the actual and the imagined person, contemporary photograph and the remembered image. Strand's portraits may arguably raise issues with what Benjamin terms 'the phantasmagoria of the *flâneur*: to read from faces the profession, the ancestry, the character'.⁶⁵ While the term 'phantasmagoria' points to the fact that the images-traces are the haunting memories held by the streets, Strand's evocation of the Victorian past invites us to go beyond the stable and reassuring dichotomies upon which nineteenth-century *flânerie* inevitably relies.

5. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to 'think out of the box' by showing the extent to which the Victorian palimpsest can be recognized as inspiring fruitful, productive and intermedial ways of imagining the relations between memory and the city. In contrast to the earlier tradition of the art of memory, the introduction of the palimpsest as a metaphor for memory admitted the possibility that 'the memory of places' may elude human agency in unpredictable, pathological and creative ways. The city becomes a mental space that offers the *flâneur* (and the *flâneuse*) the spectacle of an all-remembering brain, whose traces can be re-activated by his or her drifting away. Suspended between hallucination and creativity, the mnemonic power of the nineteenth-century city streets will continue to inspire artists and writers to engage with the metaphor of the palimpsest, whose fascinating and at the same time disturbing nature the Victorians taught us to appreciate.

⁶⁴ Clare Strand in conversation with Chris Mullen, p. 95.

⁶⁵ Benjamin, p. 429.

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