LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

The Visor Effect in Literary Geography: Reformation London in Zadie Smith and John Stow

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Two books, apparently quite different: John Stow's *Survey of London* (1598, a second edition in 1603) and Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012). The *Survey*: an exemplar of the early modern fad for chorographical works, in which Stow attempts, through walking and observation, 'the discouery of London, [his] natiue soyle and Countrey' (1908: I: iii). *NW*: a novel, characters in a city, modernist inheritances.

What kind of conversation takes place between them? Does Smith answer Stow? Might Stow – mind-bending temporalities – even answer Smith?

Like the *Survey*, *NW* is a book about London. It connects the lives of four childhood friends (Leah, Natalie, Felix and Nathan) in Willesden, North West London. The novel's structure – organized by landmarks, streets and places – insists on the city's shaping of both agency and time: while place names are ineffable, time and memory are fluid and mutable – a thematic choice most strikingly asserted with the handful of chapters numbered 37, each one collapsing, looping or replaying time, so that the force of memory in the novel acquires an almost mystical dimension.

The *Survey*, too, is a book about time, or being out of time, or time being out of joint. But the first thing that tips us off about a conversation between the two is that *NW* is itself a chorographical book, a survey, if you will. Large tranches of text are organized by directions – as though the text is urging the reader to follow the characters or repeat their journeys. They often travel on foot. Chapter 9 of the first section, 'Visitation,' for example, is composed entirely of directions from Yates Lane to Bartlett Avenue (Smith 2013: 38). Chapter 10 then fills in sense impressions, inhabiting Leah's perceptions as she walks the route, beginning 'Sweet stink of hookah, couscous, kebab, exhaust fumes of a bus deadlock' (2013: 39). All the chapter titles of the penultimate section, 'Crossing,' are either directions ('Shoot Up Hill to Fortune Green') or locations ('Corner of Hornsey Lane') (2013: 299-319). Like *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway*, novels *NW* deliberately draws from, the subjective experience of the characters is grounded in the city.

Something similar is true of Stow: it has become a truism in Stow scholarship that the *Survey* is less about the city's geography and more about the city as a kind of elaborate metaphor – a screen onto which is projected the secret, lamentful feelings of a person living through the Reformation in England and encoding those feelings in descriptions of a debased and ruined city (see for example Archer 1995, Collinson 2001). Stow's recording throughout the *Survey* of instances of iconoclasm and defaced tombs resembles a compulsion. At St Bride's in Faringdon, we learn that 'One wilful bodie began to spoyle and breake' the 'partition betwixt the olde worke and the new' (II: 45). At St Sepulchre's, the image of John Popham, who built the chapel, was 'defaced and beaten down' (II: 33), and the cloister at All Hallowes church, in Downgate ward, is 'foully defaced and ruinated' (I: 235). Similarly, the rood of St Margaret was (perhaps unwisely) left outside while the church was being refurbished, in 1538: 'about the 23. of May in the morning the sayde Roode was found to haue beene in the night preceding (by people vnknown) broken all to peeces, together with the Tabernacle, wherein it had been placed' (1: 209).

Stow, perhaps a crypto-Catholic 'denizen of the pages of Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars*' may have undergone a process of 'conversion by conformity' (Collinson 2001: 37, 46). But the *Survey* can be thought of as preserving certain prohibited Catholic rites – Lawrence Manley notes that the *Survey*'s topographies of wards can be thought of as re-enacting the Rogationtide ritual of the beating of the bounds (Manley 1995: 53). So like *NW*, in which the characters' streams of consciousness inhabit, animate and conjure the city, the *Survey* also acquires a hallucinatory quality, in which the past often seems more real and tangible than the present.

The trip Leah and Natalie make to the church of St Mary in Willesden – where Leah faints, and perhaps hallucinates an apostrophe from the Black Madonna whose shrine the church is – is certainly no rogationtide procession, nor a pilgrimage.[1] St Mary's is an Anglican church, frequented by Leah's mother Pauline (Pauline has come from Ireland, 'a rare Prod on the wing' (17)). But the church is the focal point of the novel's fascination with timelessness. The church is 'Out of time, out of place. A force field of serenity surrounds it' (69). Past and present collapse again as the text presents two epitaphs in the graveyard, partially worn away, followed by a third epitaph-like text which turns out to be instructieons given to Leah after her abortion the day before. The wearing away of the epitaphs recalls both the wiping out of

time by anaesthetic, described in an earlier chapter 37, and foreshadows Leah's fainting a few pages later. And then: the Black Madonna's apostrophe – which may be something Leah dreams or hallucinates in her faint, or it might not – pairs the modern with the ancient: 'Spirit of these beech woods and phone boxes, hedgerows and lamp posts, freshwater springs and tube stations, ancient yews and one-stop shops, grazing land and 3D multiplexes' (74).

There is another level to this, though. Earlier, when Leah walks through the graveyard at St Mary's, she runs her hand over 'the top of the taller monuments, a broken stone urn, a crumbling cross' (70). Easy enough to connect this moment with the novel's modernist aesthetics, weaving together subjectivity, time and the city. But we can read this through Stow, as well, and find an intention behind a broken urn, or a crumbling cross. A broken monument in a graveyard may be a metaphor for the way a self passes in and out of reality in modernist aesthetics; or it may be a reminder of an earlier age's iconoclasm.

Reading like this could be thought of as a version of interspatiality (Hones 2022) – being alert to the feedback loops between texts and places, so that reading Smith evokes a place that evokes Stow evoking a place – and with it the realization that reading Smith evokes a certain Stow-tinged imaging of a place. (We must imagine, too, what Stow might have written about St Mary's church – Willesden at that time was in Middlesex, and not London – beyond the *Survey*'s reach).

One way of elaborating this reading of interspatiality is via Derrida's concept of the visor effect. Derrida broaches this idea in *Spectres of Marx*, where he introduces the idea of a spectre that sees without being seen (Derrida 1994: 6-7). The idea is further developed in *Archive Fever*, where he perceives a spectral relationship between Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and Freud. In this case, it is Yerushalmi, writing on – and interrogating – Freud's public statements on Judaism, who – for Derrida – is unable to see the way this spectral relation to Freud structures the interrogation itself. Freud, like Hamlet's father in Spectres of Marx, sees without being seen because he is already present in Yerushalmi's text, already conditioning it and structuring its possibility. For Derrida, it means that Yerushalmi, though he interrogates Freud, writes in ways that give assent to psychoanalytic theory – even while questioning Freud he acts out a kind of 'deferred obedience.' The spectre is present without being seen.

What kind of conversation between Smith and Stow might the visor effect make possible?

We have already seen how the Black Madonna's speech pairs ancient and modern entities. She also encodes this pairing, being a reproduction of a statue destroyed during the Reformation. The beginning of the apostrophe insists that Leah – or the reader – or the text itself – should be aware, perpetually, of the timelessness she evokes. 'How have you lived your whole life in these streets and never known me?' she demands. 'How long did you think you could avoid me? What made you think you were exempt? Don't you know that I have been here as long as people cried out for help?' (74).

She opposes herself to other representations of the Madonna: 'I am not like those mealy-mouthed pale Madonnas, those simpering virgins! I am older than this place! Older even than the faih that takes my name in vain!'

This could not sound more different to Stow, whose descriptions of vandalized Madonnas are touched with pity, for example the image of Mary at Cheapside Cross:

> The Image of the blessed virgin at that time [i.e. 21st June, 1581] robbed of her son, and her arms broken by which shee staid him on her knees, her whole bodie also was strained with ropes so as it was readie to fall … (II: 254).

But something else is happening here. The interspatial nexus of text, time, history and London becomes more complex. The Black Madonna's insistence on being outside of time – and hence, outside religion, and what is sometimes, in early modern studies, called confessionalised identity – is of a piece with other images of religion in *NW*. Leah, guilty and confused in the wake of her abortion wishes 'we had confession' (47) – but this is idle, and she does not herself go to the Anglican services with her mother. Natalie and Frank fret over taking their children to church, but only because they need places at the academically sound church school. Religious iconography is mobilized by the novel to evoke various kinds of timelessness – timescales of the city, timescales greater than human lifespans, the uncanny feeling of places existing in multiple times.

But there is an answer to the question 'How have you … never known me?' It is because the novel's scalar play is mobilized by the extraction of the Black Madonna from the history of the Reformation. Making her speak as an entity outside of time desacralizes her – and therefore repeats the precise moment the original Black Madonna was cast into the fire by Cromwell's commissioners. Leah has 'never known' her because the evocation of timelessness is made possible by the text's repetition of this historical incident. This is the memory of Stow behind *NW*, a phantom who sees without being seen: recording, in his regretful, bitter, often coded way the destruction of tombs, momunents, religious buildings, images.

Two texts, then, and two conversations. The visor effect makes possible a certain conversational interspatiality connecting Stow and Smith. But we also see the beginning of a conversation between the visor effect and other literary-geographical concepts. The visor effect is one that can make literary-geographical reading richer, and extend its conceptual range.

Notes

[1] Apostrophe, in Barbara Johnson's fine description: 'the direct address of an absent, dead or inanimate being by a first person narrator' (2014). The Black Madonna's apostrophe complicates or expands the apostrophe in the traditional sense because it is inderminable who is being addressed. Its placement in the narrative sequence might encourage us to think that Leah is the addressee; but if the apostrophe is dreamed, then both Leah and the Black Madonna are in different senses absent. Moreover, the fact that the apostrophe forms one of the '37' chapters gives it an irruptive force: it breaks upon the narrative and the reader's consciousness. We can easily take the reader to be the addressee: in that curious, absent-present state of reading.

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