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“Tunnel Visions”: Space, Transience and Escapism in Geoff Ryman’s 253

“A turbine grinding out human beings on all sides.”¹ This is how Stein Eiuler Rasmussen describes Piccadilly Circus tube station. The London Underground, in its size, history and complexity, does indeed, function like a machine. Taking the Underground during its early morning and afternoon peak times can be a demoralising and exhaustive experience. Rasmussen’s above quotation, while highly perceptive, inevitably focuses upon the London Underground when it is at its busiest, during the daily commute. Commuting, in the sense of an ordered, chronological movement of a large number of people around a city is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Baudelaire’s summation of modernity as being characterised by ‘the transient, the contingent and the fleeting,’² is embodied and performed by the behaviour of London’s commuters on a daily basis. Such behaviour invites poetic or filmic examination. Ezra Pound’s Imagist poem, ‘In a Station at the Metro,’³ (‘the apparition of these faces in the crowd / petals on a wet, black bough’) uses both the space of the New York metro and the figures ‘in the crowd’ upon the platform to capture a single moment, during which the subway travellers are temporarily at rest. Similarly, the London Underground’s history is laced with poetic praise, most notably in the language of John Betjeman. However, in the act of romanticising the presence of the system as a whole, such

writing often overlooks the theatricality and culture exhibited by its travellers: “Great was my joy with London at my feet – / All London mine, five shillings in my hand / And not expected back till after tea!”⁴ The Underground, like London itself, is not a homogenous entity, but a cluster of separate spaces which are helpfully demarcated by the coloured lines on Harry Beck’s famous map. My paper is not concerned then with the idyllic world of the Metropolitan line embodied in the verse quoted above, but centres around the magnetic spaces of the key train hubs in Central London: namely Victoria, Waterloo, Piccadilly, Euston and Kings Cross St. Pancras. The mythology of London’s spaces, as they appear on the tube map, gives way to a deeper series of mythologies played out within numerous stations across the capital. This paper is principally concerned with the physical act of commuting. It aims to bring alive the subjective and idiosyncratic nature of the average tube journey, and the ability of the individual to construct within their brief train ride, a narrative. I will do this through an examination of Geoff Ryman’s internet novel, *253*, by working from the premise that each of the characters Ryman presents to the reader exists within a spatial and temporal void, in the sense of being in a liminal state between home life and work life. This paper engages with the cerebral experience of riding on the tube, interrogating what Lefebvre calls ‘mental spaces’⁵ within the individual’s conceptualisation of the city around him or her. Such ‘mental spaces,’ are, I argue, bound up with all that is imaginative and playful within one’s thought processes, and are awoken within the physical confinement of the commute.

The London which emerges in the work of Iain Sinclair represents a city which transcends the iconoclastic image of London as the political and economic centre of Britain. Sinclair’s London reflects a multiplicity of spaces, which run into one another, and do not follow the linear movement of history. Similarly, one feels compelled to regard the London Underground as an extension of the London above ground which is sprawled across the pages

of the work of Sinclair, Ballard or Self. While the London Underground is frequently written into the history of Victorian London and the city's wartime and post-wartime culture, key questions regarding the contemporary cultural role of the Underground remain. One question I wish to engage with in this paper is the potential of the modern Underground to disorientate and estrange the crowds which pass through the network on a daily basis. In viewing the entrance to the tube stations (in Central London at least) as occupying a liminal space, between light and darkness; fresh air and dead air; openness and confinement; the process of estrangement can be deconstructed from an analysis of the crowd's passage through these liminal spaces. I argue that what characterises this process of disorientation lies within the recognition of the Underground journey as a spatial and temporal void. That is to say, the space of the commute exists *between* working, family and social life, enacted above the ground. Indeed, the disorientating quality of the tube ride is exacerbated by spatial disorder encoded within the mapping of the London Underground. The tube is essentially a mythic representation of London, reproduced through the distorted, but easy-to-follow sequence of spaces, which are colour-coded on the tube map. Cultural critic, Janin Hadlaw, posits the following analysis of Beck's reproduction of the London Underground's network of spaces:

The misrepresentation of distance in Beck's map quite accurately represents modern capitalism's notions of time. The distances between stations are arranged in more or less uniform intervals, a strategy more typically employed in the representation of time than of space. Despite the pervasiveness of the idea that "time is money," we know that, in reality, not all time is valuable. Time spent working is valuable and is scrupulously accounted for by employer and worker alike. Leisure time is valuable to those who must rest from their labors and to the leisure industry which profits from the time spent pursuing entertainment of all kinds. But time that is used for neither work nor leisure, such as time spent commuting, is really time without value. As such, not recognizing its duration in representation is completely logical. More important was the speed with which the Underground transported individuals to sites of production and consumption. It permitted the rapid circulation of workers and consumers, and their transformation from one into the other. Lefebvre observes that "[t]ransportation grids exemplify productive consumption [...] because they serve to move people and things.⁶

Hadlaw positions the London Underground from the spatial perspective of a critic such as Lefebvre, who regards transport systems as a means through which capitalism transports ‘workers and consumers’ towards spaces of ‘production and consumption,’ respectively. He draws a distinction between the Underground as a means of facilitating work, and as a means of stimulating the pursuit of leisure, principally through the London Underground’s connection with the tourist industry. I argue that both of these desired ends – for production and consumption – are predicated upon an entirely separate space in time, where travelling *through* London becomes an end in itself. The representation of commuting as ‘time without value’ needs to be taken further. Precisely because the London Underground possesses such power over industry, during at least two sections of the day, raises the question of exactly how the Underground serves the desires of the commuter, and how it manipulates these desires.

This relationship between commuter and underground space is constructed around the irony that during the commute especially, the availability of physical space diminishes in contrast to the seemingly endless stream of passengers (250,000 people pass through Victoria alone everyday).⁷ To define this momentum as a ‘void’ within the working day may appear as a further irony, given its association with empty space. One may argue that it is precisely these ironies which make the act of commuting through the tube so fascinating: as space decreases, time becomes elastic and, as the individual progresses through the network of tunnels, he or she uses the time within this empty space in the day, to read, eavesdrop or simply indulge in idle reflection. During his description of ‘social space,’ Lefebvre argues thus:

We are confronted not by one social space but by many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or unaccountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as ‘social space’. And space disappears in the course of growth and development: *the worldwide does not abolish the local....social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another.*⁸

During the rush hour, the Underground is indeed the locus of an ‘unlimited multiplicity [and] unaccountable set of social space’. The ability of these spaces to ‘interpenetrate’ or ‘superimpose’ one another, is most visible during the opening and closing of the sliding doors, accompanied by the soundtrack of ‘mind the gap,’ as the availability of space momentarily increases then decreases, and different associations with space enter and leave the train accordingly in the form of commuters. Lying within the Lefebvre discourse concerning the interplay between different social spaces is the paradox that as the physical space within the train itself begins to contract during the morning and afternoon rush periods, what he calls ‘mental space’ becomes more apparent to the subject, as he or she feels compelled to escape into the novel they are carrying, or to ruminante upon the outcome of the day’s events, before and after the tube journey. Conrad Williams evokes this paradox by stating ‘The tube seems to warp London, make it less real. Less reliable than it already is. London shrinks on the Underground time becomes this vampire that attaches itself to the back of your neck, tapping you of energy and the ability to relate space to movement.’⁹ The unreliability of the tube, especially when it is busy, is perhaps the most infuriating aspect of underground travel. What his words suggest is that one’s heightened irritability exists beyond service-related issues within the network, and is in fact connected to the unreality of the tube itself, and its ability to ‘warp’ ones understanding of the external reality of London. He proposes that, ‘London shrinks...on the Underground’. The remainder of this paper, therefore, turns toward the effect of the perceived contraction of physical space and the extension of imaginative spaces in the mind, by evaluating the liminality of the London Underground through its ability to both confine and liberate those who travel within it.

Fictional Narratives of the London Underground frequently present commuting by tube through a contraction of physical space – a movement of crowds from an open space above ground, to an oppressive space onboard the train. Such writing also engages with the

disorientating nature of the tube ride, where time, in the tunnels at least, becomes ambiguous and fluid. Geoff Ryman's important book (first published in hypertext format online)¹⁰ 253, literally builds the structure of a narrative, into the experience of a single, 7 minute tube journey on the Bakerloo line, between Embankment and Elephant and Castle. The effect of this structure is through the omniscient narrator's negation, enabling the reader to enter the chronotope of the text, allowing them to move around the train, transferring their reading of the text from character to character, continually shifting their perspective on this particular train journey. What gives the reflections of each of the commuters in the narrative such intensity, is the author's use of prolepsis, revealing to the reader that the train will ultimately crash at the Elephant and Castle, prior to the story beginning:

On January 11 1995, a tube train left Embankment Station, In London, England, heading south on the Bakerloo Line towards a station called the Elephant and Castle...it was an ideally filled tube train. Every seat was occupied No one was left standing unless they wanted to. Because the universe is not held together by cause and effect alone, but by mysterious patterns, every one of those people reached an important point in their lives. Some made key decisions. Some attained enlightenment. All except for the driver. He fell asleep.¹¹

He continues:

The novel begins as the train doors close at Embankment Station. The journey under the River Thames to Waterloo Station takes roughly one and a half minutes. The train waits there for thirty seconds before leaving. Two minutes later, it arrives at Lambeth North and waits for a further thirty seconds, The final leg of the voyage takes three minutes to reach Elephant and Castle....In other words, the action of this novel lasts seven and a half minutes.

The 'illusion' that one becomes omniscient, is, indeed merely an illusion. For if the tube acts as a non-space, or a void *between* social spaces, it is important to understand that one does not simply descend into this 'void' by descending a staircase, elevator, or passing through the 'sliding doors' into an alternate reality. The 'void' acts as the stimulus through which the

imaginative processes of the commuters are activated. Ryman's novel acknowledges the paradox of the tube, recognising it as intrinsically antisocial, whilst representing it as a space for subjective contemplation on the limited exteriority of the train and platform spaces, or simply the passenger positioned beside us. Ryman informs us, 'nothing happens in this novel'. Incidentally, nothing very much happens on *any* tube ride. However, Ryman's narrative presents the tube as being a space which is at the intersection of 'mysterious patterns' which constitute the wide array of collective thoughts contained within an average morning tube ride by its passengers. Other than the fact that the train crashes, there is nothing unique about the act of 'making key decisions' on one's life while taking the tube, as it is, in fact, one of the few points in the day when an individual, living and working in London, may be left alone with their own thoughts.

Somewhat regrettably, the tube is frequently portrayed in two-dimensional terms. It is often regarded from a post-Thatcherite perspective of London as a homogenous, soulless amalgamation of spaces, which largely serves to dehumanise those who come into contact with it. In the movie *Sliding Doors*, John Hannah's character recognizes this point, stating: 'It is funny the way nobody talks on the tube isn't it?...Confined spaces, everybody shuts down – why is that? Perhaps we think everyone else on the tube is a potential psychopath so we close down and pretend to read a book or something...'¹² The notion that commuters, 'pretend to read,' reinforces the assumption that because the individual's physical space is extremely limited, the only logical response to such a situation, is to intellectually 'shut down,' while using books as implements with which to stave-off unwanted interruptions. Ryman's novel resists such portrayals of London life. 253 constructs an elaborate Jungian insight into London's inter-connectedness, where a plethora of social types are placed on display, and where the train carriage doubles up as a stage area, on which the passengers-cum-actors, begin to perform. Ryman dubs the novel 'tube theatre,' and theatricality is an important

aspect of his overall position on the London commute. The short physical space of track between Embankment and Elephant and Castle, and the train journey which is moving through this space in the frame of the text, does not in itself constitute the narrative, but rather the germ from which a multiplicity of different human stories emerge. Indeed, such stories frequently develop through observations of the social ‘other’ positioned opposite the subject. For example, Savi Gupta’s short monologue invites several questions concerning to what extent the proximity of physical interaction serves as stimuli for the imagination, prompting him to redefine what is taking place before him within his thoughts:

Savi is amusing himself by imagining what the other passengers would look like if they had been born as the opposite sex. Passenger 50 transforms into a much prettier person, petite...nose, the kind of bad girl that produces a naughty trickle. Passenger 51 becomes a nasty customer, the kind of male relative Mr Gupta most hates dealing with: obdurate, religious. Passenger 52 turns into a heavy-cheeked labourer, with broad features and bigger hands wearing two layers of clothes and reading the Sun instead of a letter. Passenger 53 becomes a neat, prim, disappointed man with a lined face. Passenger 54 is much improved for being male. Her pink-cheeked jollity would suit an athletic, boyish frame. She would still wear an AIDS ribbon. And the policeman, well, he becomes a frumpy housewife in pastel clothes that are meant to make her look more feminine.¹³

Mr. Gupta’s exploration of the potential transformation which would occur to his fellow passengers following a sex-change is an expression of the elasticity of time and space in the London Underground, in terms of how human forms change and London itself becomes distorted when viewed from a subterranean perspective. The male construction of sexual fantasies about other passengers on the tube is hardly a revelation, but the form which this particular fantasy takes, warrants more attention. The transformation of the policeman for example into a ‘frumpy housewife’ is a jocular, but subtly subversive form of irony, on what happens to one’s perceptions of social norms and recognition of social hierarchy, when one moves literally *beneath* society. It is useful to distinguish between society as a fixed construct

above ground, and the transitory form society takes during its movement through the tube network, where it becomes more fluid and interchangeable. Ryman's book vacillates between the poignant and the whimsical, making his insights into the psyche of the average Londoner as apposite as they possibly can be. However, in 253 there is a subtext which appears to combine the socially cohesive function of the tube, with its historical (but understated) importance as a means of transportation in London. The chronotope of this novel is framed around a synchronic view of time, given credence by the fact that these 7 minutes are essentially the last few moments of many passenger's lives. Very often though, the narrative adopts a diachronic view of time, where the history of the Underground mirrors the wider social history of modern London. Tony Manochi's short tube journey on this morning, for instance, leads him to measure the forward motion of his own life against the history of his past, which he recollects through memories of travelling on the tube:

He is meditating on how everything is replaced, most especially people. There was a time when he would make this same journey and know half the face – customers, vendors from the market on Lower Marsh or the train station, or just people on the train. He can close his eyes and see 1964. The brylcreamed hair, the haze of tobacco, a certain kind of hatchet English face that has gone.¹⁴

Manochi's recollection of his past is directly connected to the space which surrounds him: the trains, stations, and most importantly, passenger's faces and expressions. The gesture of closing his eyes underlines the impact that the sounds and smells of the underground exert upon him, transferring him through his imagination back to 1964. The ephemeral nature of the past signified through his memories of 'brylcreamed hair [and] the haze of tobacco,' is nicely juxtaposed in 253 with the insights of other figures, such as Harold Potluck, who recalls his own life at work on the Underground: 'Working on the tubes, Harold has witnessed two suicides, one busking quick change drag artist, and one successfully completed

sexual act.¹⁵ It may be argued that most of the characters – Mannochi and Potluck for instance – use the tube as a way of defining their own relationship with London. The tube is particularly helpful in this respect given that it effectively *reproduces* modern London in space and time, physically connected to the actual city, but also intellectually distinct from it. Others identify in the physical structure of the tracks, dividing lines, which cut across the city space, separating individuals from one another. Deirdre Hidderley uses her space in the narrative to convey her memory of the 1989 London Underground strike:

Everyone walked to work. It was summer and London was suddenly a festival of people. The streets, instead of being deserted, bustled. Even the evenings were better: the shadows long, the sun golden. People said what the hell and went to the pub. They walked in chains with hands on each other's necks...you saw faces everywhere, and the message of those faces over time was this: we are for the most part hard-working, decent, pleasant people.¹⁶

From her perspective, the tube embodies a negative aspect of London life, driving millions of commuters below ground each day, depriving them of any direct contact with the streets of London in the areas beyond the immediate locales of work and home. An irony which one may draw from the above rhetoric lies in the fact that she uses the temporal space afforded to her by the tube ride to arrive at such realizations about London life and her place within it. Deirdre's discovery that 'for the most part [Londoners are] hard-working, decent, pleasant-people,' is reinforced by Ryman's recognition of what the tube does to Londoners, serving to make them more aware of one another. In these narratives then, the act of commuting becomes ritualized around memories and impulses connecting individuals to a society which lives its life through the tube. 253 does not overlook the inevitable banality of sitting in an over-crowded tube train on the way to work. Indeed, it embraces this very banality, transforming the quotidian experience of sitting silently parallel a darkened window pane, as an opportunity for reflection and insight into the behavior of London and Londoners which

can be observed most nakedly through movement. At the core of this narrative, is an examination of the tube through the space of the human imagination, looking objectively at the tube through a sequence of subjective insights. Through certain characters within 253, Ryman unravels the various imaginative layers within one's experience of being on the tube, analyzing in particular the association between the tube ride and time spent reading. His novel's identification with the tube as a moving library: a finite space of time in the working day when Londoners can indulge their imagination has not gone unnoticed by the London Underground itself. The tube has begun producing its own magazine of short stories, entitled *Litro*, which is regularly given away free to travelers on the tube. Mike Fell, the magazine's editor, endorses the use of the tube as a space for both the production and consumption of reading material, explaining that this magazine contains:

[stories] not too long or too abstract, not too outwardly horrific or gratuitous, but which at the same time is not just a bland extension of your morning television, and which takes you to places you normally don't think about visiting when travelling on the Underground.¹⁷

Beyond the consumption of avowedly literary writing, inevitably, reading matter on the tube is tremendously subjective and diverse, ranging from a sample copy of the *Metro* newspaper, to the latest Dan Brown novel. The fictional tube readers in Ryman's narrative are particularly inventive, in this respect:

[Ms. Susan When] sits upright, avidly reading the bestseller about female weightlifters, *Clean and Jerk*. She shakes her head in delight...she has not read *Clean and Jerk*, in case it interferes with her own performance. Instead, Susan focuses with professional rigor on communicating different kinds of reading experience: rapt attention; shock at plot turnaround; being overcome with emotion, tears filling her eyes. Sometimes, she manages to say to someone convincingly: 'this is such a wonderful book.'¹⁸

In another part of the book, he examines the reading experience of a woman named Maryan: Maryan is studying The Knowledge. To be a taxi driver you have to pass a test to prove you know the streets of London. So, with Charlie's help, she is memorizing

London. She spends weekends driving up and down roads, learning what they look like from all angles. She has to know every no-left-turning sign or one-way street. She can feel her brain becoming colonised. Sections of it feel weighed down as if lead were being poured into a filigree mould. At night, as she goes over the names, the streets spread in her mind like frost. Maryan will be one of the few people who know what London really looks like. She will never again stumble on anything new by accident.¹⁹

These two perspectives on reading time during the commute display different uses of the tube. Maryan regards the tube as a space for study. There is a clever irony in the fact that she chooses to use her time travelling to work to study for the Knowledge, given that she is physically passing through many of the streets in her book, but not witnessing them as she does so. Her experience of reading appears a little oppressive, as she can ‘feel her brain being colonised’ by the material she is consuming. What is significant though is the extent to which she is able to use literature to transcend the obvious limitations of her physical surroundings, and the tube itself appears to be little more than a backdrop to her own frenetic thought processes. In contrast, Susan uses the tube as a means of indulging her own rather idiosyncratic pleasure of reading about female weightlifters. Ryman is generally rather reticent concerning his position on these characters, but in his description of this character, his attention to detail regarding the numerous physical sensations and palpitations that Susan undergoes through reading on the tube, from being shocked (‘overcome with emotion’)²⁰ to the act of recommending the book to one of her fellow travellers, suggests that he identifies the tube as a unique space within London life, where one can read almost anything, with complete focus and without interruption. It is important to identify in such figures the fact that contrary to what one may expect, the tube journey does not inhibit the experience of reading and escapism, but largely facilitates and produces such an experience. The reader’s knowledge of the cataclysmic conclusion to the narrative appears somewhat anomalous when positioned next to the more probing discussion throughout the book concerning the freedom

the individual has to escape into their own thoughts for the length of the short journey. This novel problematises the boundaries between reality and fiction. Firstly, by introducing the act of reading into the narrative itself; and secondly, by producing through a stream-of-consciousness approach, into subjective readings of one's companions on board a tube train, the separate but often inter-related narratives which are produced by these subjects.

This essay began by citing Ezra Pound's poem, 'In a Station at the Metro'. This short poem presents an image of the New York subway as it is perceived within a single moment in time. Pound's connection between the commuters and 'petals' suggest that within the transients space of a subway system, these nameless figures in the crowd are to be swept along by the trains and each other, emotionally disconnected and unaware of one another. The overall tone of this piece, I argue, is decidedly negative, where the 'apparitions' are simply that: lifeless forms carried along with the crowd, but not distinguishable as individuals. In Pound's vision of the subway, underground rail networks dehumanise the human society that they profess to serve. During my paper I have tried to present the experience of commuting in London as characterised by a void – an empty space of time – within which, the individual is required to use their imagination, whether playfully or dubiously, as a means of extending their own spatial perspective and transcending the literal confinement of their surroundings. What writing on the underground achieves is the ability to destabilise and interrogate fixed notions of space and time, as they relate to London. Indeed, London as a homogenous city-space is systematically deconstructed, both in Ryman's work and in reality, given the imposed fragmentation of the city space into colour-coded zones and key positions in the city defined through station names, many of which signify elaborate and culturally symbolic aspects of London life, past and present. Ryman's character Tony Mannochi conveys a sense of this through his painstaking study of the area around Lambeth North, for example, recalling through in his own memory, this area with the 'vendors from

Lower Marsh Market'. Writing such as this constructs a paradox around the high Modernist ideals of the city as envisaged by Pound and Baudelaire. Such writing engages with the 'fleeting' and 'transitory' movements of crowds through cities, by presenting the crowd as little more than a mass gathering of individuals, each containing his or her own narrative. Encoded within such narratives, is a powerful resistance to the homogeneity of the crowd and its association with the London Underground. Further, Lefebvre's writing on social spaces, proposes that there is no such thing as a 'social space,' but rather a 'multiplicity' of spaces. What texts such as 253 suggest is that the 'multiplicity' of physical geographical areas in London, such as Waterloo or Lambeth, are mirrored by a 'multiplicity' of ideas which individual Londoners inscribe upon such places, in the mere act of travelling through them each day. Inevitably, one must set such writing apart from the idealised world of Metroland, epitomised in John Betjeman's poetry. There is not room here to fully investigate the question of liminality between suburban and urban writing on the London Underground, or to identify areas in such writing which overlap. This is partly because, the work of figures such as Ryman, Tobias Hill and Conrad Williams, evoke a London from underground which is fractured, not solely across geographical boundaries, but most evidently through the disparate readings of London which are exhibited through their characters' attitudes, memories and fears.

Notes:

¹ Steen Eiuler Rasmussen, *London: The Unique City* (London: Pelican, 1960)

² Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* ed. Vassiliki Kolokotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) p. 107

³ Ezra Pound, 'In a Station at the Metro,' in Francis Otto Mathieson ed. *The Oxford Book of American Verse* Michigan: Oxford University Press, 1950) p. 713

⁴ John Betjeman, 'Summoned by Bells,' in George Watson ed. *The new Cambridge bibliography of English literature: 1800-1900, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960) p. 821

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991) p. 3

⁶ Janin Hadlaw, 'Design Issues: Volume 19, Number 1 Winter 2003 p. 34

⁷ This statistic is taken directly from *London Underground*

⁸ Lefebvre (1991) p. 86

⁹ Conrad Williams, *London Revenant* (London: Night Shade Books, 2005) p. 19

¹⁰ The book was originally published as an online novel, still accessible via www.ryman-novel.com

¹¹ Geoff Ryman, 253 (London: Flamingo, 1998) p. 2

¹² Peter Howitt (dir.), (Intermedia Films, 1998)

¹³ Ryman (1998) p. 84

¹⁴ Ryman (1998) p. 37

¹⁵ Ryman (1998) p. 339

¹⁶ Ryman (1998) p. 296

¹⁷ Mike Fell, Litro Magazine, http://londonist.com/2006/04/litro_original.php, accessed 10 May 2008

¹⁸ Ryman (1998). 237

¹⁹ Ryman (1998) p. 278

²⁰ Such rhetoric closely mimics William Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,' alluding to the paradoxical reality of urban travel within London, which represents a world that is simultaneously mechanistic and sublime.