Introduction

This special issue of *EnterText* is the second edited collection to date of papers from the seventh annual Literary London conference, 'Liminal London: Country/City, Work/Leisure, Past/Future, and States Between', organised by Brycchan Carey, Nick Hubble, Lawrence Phillips and Philip Tew; hosted by the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW) and the Department of English at Brunel University from 2nd - 4th July 2008 with financial support from the British Academy.[1] A first collection, 'Intermodern London', was published as a special issue of the online journal *Literary London* in March 2009.[2] The conference fulfilled the organisers' aims of laying the groundwork for new approaches to studying London and these publications are part of an ongoing project to disseminate these findings. A third collection of papers addressing contemporary literary representations of London's liminality is in preparation.

In regarding the 'liminal' as a threshold, or a space between two separate states of being, Iain Sinclair's plenary paper on the first night of the conference, embraced the idea that London is continually being defined through its liminality; that it is, essentially, *always* undergoing a process of change. The diverse range of perspectives on London's liminality that emerged during the conference not only elaborated on the conjunctions listed in the conference title, but also extended their range to include, amongst others, traditional/multi-cultural, law and order/criminality, above/underground, darkness/light and fantasy/reality. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the liminal in London is the paradoxical relationship between what is real and what is imaginary, and whether or not these two principles can co-exist. London's

liminality is, in the simplest terms, representative of the fact that there is no single London in terms of geographical entity, population or idea. London and Londoners are heterogeneous in nature, and the literary record of the city, whether in the writing of Dickens or Sinclair, is predicated upon this understanding. For those *not* from London, London's greatest quality may be regarded as its transferability as an image or concept. This is in the sense that London, in terms of its size, ethnic diversity and historical importance transcends its physical boundaries. The fact that the conference featured 63 speakers from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Taiwan, the United States and across Britain, testifies to the universal fascination that London arouses. London is always both local and global. The essays introduced below actively produce and interrogate a discussion on the liminal, presenting London as a city of paradoxes, divided, yet multifarious.

Ivona Misterova's 'A Comparative Analysis of the First Depictions of London in Czech Literature' provides a fascinating account of the fifteenth century diplomatic mission of the Czech nobleman Leo of Rozmital and his retinue to the London court of Edward IV. We learn that London in 1466 was 'vigorous and busy', 'conducting trade with all lands' and full of 'beautiful women and expensive food'. As Misterova observes, this attractive public image was carefully fostered as can be seen from the Czech accounts of the public ceremonies and banquets they were invited to. Valuable insights are provided into how this proto-corporate hospitality functioned as a process of exchange in which the cordially-welcomed guests gave gifts in return to the women and maidens of London they encountered in their visit: 'when guests first arrive at an inn the hostess comes out with her whole family to receive them, and they have to kiss her and all the others'. This figure of the hostess at the threshold, who promises

welcome in return for tokens of love, may be seen as an historical female archetype of the city.

Susan Ash also investigates hospitality in her essay, 'Dr Barnardo and "The Queen's Shades": Liminal London, Hospitality and Victorian Child Rescue', which employs a Derridean reading 'to demonstrate how the force that makes Barnardo's power both benevolent and dreadful is related to conflicted authority associated with the rights of the "host" and the impossible obligations inherent in hospitality itself'. Ash analyses how Barnardo's fiction and autobiographical writing highlighted the dangerous liminal condition of London street children, fixed in the Victorian imagination as occupying an indeterminate status between animal and human, in order to present the need for those unique few such as himself who could contact such beings without risk to their own moral standing. At one level, therefore, Barnardo was himself playing host to this liminal zone for his respectable readership who were in return expected to participate in fundraising activities for his cause. However, Ash is also concerned to compare the hospitality Barnardo extended to the street children with the shelter offered by the Workhouse 'in such a way that only the most desperate would accept its terms' – an example of the violence which Derrida argues is always inherent in hospitality negotiations at the threshold. Despite Barnardo's stated policy of 'ever open doors', Ash concludes that his actual practice of 'philanthropic abduction' effectively deconstructed the difference between 'the "proper" and "improper" versions of hospitality' which he implicitly used to justify his approach. Her point is not to document another example of Victorian oppression, but to open up the liminal interface of hospitality beyond the inside/outside divide into wider corporeal, architectural, moral and narrative dimensions.

Similar intentions underwrite Kevin McCarron's "'Memories of Old Sins": Opium Addiction in Narratives of Nineteenth-Century London', which constructs a moral problem around the question of addiction, before expanding this into a wider examination of the relationship between literature and the history of London life. His essay regards London itself as the locus of contradictions: 'Although the city is at "the heart of empire", opium dens are never at the centre of the city. Opium dens are never encountered easily, or in daylight; instead they are always associated with extreme distance, winding streets, and darkness…' McCarron cites a wide array of London writing from the nineteenth-century, including De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Dickens' *Bleak House* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in order to suggest that London is most identifiable not so much as 'the heart of empire' but as a centre of consumption. Naturally, this applies in a very wide sense, from the consumption of literature, in the serialized form of Dickens, to the consumption of opium and other substances. Drawing on critical sources, such as Julian Wolfreys's *Writing London*, McCarron parallels the consumption of the addict with the resultant sense of absence and renewed desire for the fix associated with alcohol or drugs. However, during his essay he takes great care to avoid adopting a moral stance on such addiction. Indeed, he contrasts the addictive personalities of De Quincey with those of Wordsworth's absorption of nature, as a means of producing literature.

This essay emphasizes the otherness and uncanny nature of the London streets, referencing De Quincey: 'Sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards, upon nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole star…I could have believed that I must be the first discoverer of some *terrae incognitae* and doubted whether they had been laid down in the modern charts'. Part of McCarron's argument prompts readers

of London writing to realize that it is not fully possible to incorporate the insights of

writers like De Quincey into conventional observations on the city, because his opium

addiction had opened up to him a '*terrae incognitae,*' which signified a London that

was not merely to be recorded, but which was to be reinvented in prose. A further

question which the essay subtly broaches, is to what extent London life becomes

liminal through the addict's inability to distinguish distortion from reality, and vice

versa. By posing such questions, McCarron challenges readers of this literature to

refrain from making moral assumptions about addiction, given the wider moral

vacuum surrounding living standards in nineteenth-century London life.

On one level, the most obviously liminal zones of London are the suburbs that

have spread out from its centre. As Nick Hubble explains in the introduction to the

'Intermodern London' issue of *Literary London*, the interwar expansion of the

London suburbs extended the unsettling intersubjectivity of the city rather than

providing an escape from it.[3] While much has been written on the Metroland to the

west of London, as featured in John Betjeman's poetry for example, there is decidedly

less literary research concerning the suburban offshoots to the east of London. David

Fulton's 'Heaven or Hell: Representations of Ilford in the Writings of Denise

Levertov and Kathleen Raine' makes a significant contribution in this respect. By

focusing on the work of these two poets connected with Ilford, Fulton illuminates the

dichotomous relationship that the suburbs have with the city of London. At the core of

his essay is a defence of the connection between the city and suburb, which draws

careful distinctions between the suburb and the countryside proper while highlighting

the reluctance of modern culture to fully embrace such a dynamic:

> These were the terms with which Modernism dismissed suburbia,
> privileging instead the metropolis as the site of everything the suburbs

> lacked: a rich diversity of architecture, class and ethnicity; a freedom of
> behaviour, holding out the prospect of sexual adventure, such as would
> interest a flâneur; a strange intermixture of the threatening and the safe,
> the sordid and the sublime, the unreal and the only too real; subtle
> networks of intellectuals; newspapers and magazines discussing the latest
> ideas; the general cultural ferment that would challenge the would-be
> artist to innovate, while simultaneously preserving the best of tradition.

As Fulton's essay suggests, though, Ilford embodies two divergent realities, a metaphorical 'heaven' and 'hell' in the work of these writers. While Raine's writing on Ilford presents to the readers a place of marginality and tedium; Levertov challenges this interpretation by romanticizing Ilford in terms of the escape it provides from the more oppressive reality of London life. Fulton carefully analyses the motivations underlying these respective perspectives by contrasting the Romantic accentuation of the pastoral against the Modernist preference for the metropolitan. However, he also acknowledges the paradoxes inherent within the distinction both of these movements make between the city and the country; citing, for example, the complex Wordsworthian view of both spaces. Ilford, as with other towns situated on London's boundaries, emerges from this paper as a symbol of spatial paradox, which is most visible in the town's continued reinvention and rediscovery as exemplified in the work of Levertov. Perhaps there is a tendency when discussing London's liminality to look inward towards the centre and to assess the relationship of the city's periphery only as it relates to London. Fulton's essay questions the logic of such an approach and, as with Levertov's 'paradisal' view of Ilford, instructs us to look outwards from the city and to consider whether the liminal spaces around London are symbols of a utopian or idealized version of London life as opposed to a distant and lesser representation of it.

Hubble also investigates the suburbs as a utopian space in his essay, 'The Liminal Persistence of Interwar Suburbs in the Twenty-First Century'. Drawing on

the work of Paul Oliver, Ian Davis and Ian Bentley in *Dunroamin*, he identifies the suburbs built around London between the wars as being the product of a desire to move beyond the rigid class stratifications of the Victorian order: 'The utopian promise of a golden classless future just around the corner was encapsulated by the sunray motif of the garden gate and the stained-glass galleon on the front door.' Hubble discusses how the political shift in British society that occurred during the Second World War prevented this golden future from ever coming to pass. Nevertheless, 'the memory of that suburban utopia lingered culturally in the residual traces of middlebrow culture', such as R.F. Delderfield's *The Avenue Goes to War*, and eventually became culturally important to New Labour's policy in the 1990s of appealing to the 'forgotten suburbs'. It is within this context that Hubble considers whether the suburban utopian impulse has regained cultural and political valency in the twenty-first century.

By focusing on the 1940s House in the suburb of West Wickham in the London Borough of Bromley, subject of the popular Channel 4 reality television series of 2001, and its replica which has been on permanent display at the Imperial War Museum for over a decade, Hubble identifies a number of faultlines running through suburban culture at the turn of the millennium. He argues that the net effect of the series was to suggest that contemporary Britishness is merely a continual process of re-enactment subject to diminishing returns and that London's suburbs now represent nothing more than 'the liminal persistence of a housing form and lifestyle, which survived its infancy but never managed to reach maturity'. He concludes that while the memorialisation of the 1940s House reminds us that ours was not altogether a bad age to live in, it is time to stop attempting to resurrect twentieth-century futures for a twenty-first century condition.

West Wickham, home of the 1940s House, is directly bisected by the Longitudinal Meridian as it plumbs its line southwards from Greenwich to the South Coast at Peacehaven. Peter Coles and Gesche Würfel's striking photo-essay, 'London-Luton: A Photographic Exploration of the Lea Valley' traverses the Meridian north of the Thames, a route which runs through the site of the 2012 London Olympics. The sense of the Meridian underlying the lines of sight in their photographs, adds a temporal dimension to the otherwise linear perspectives. The Lea Valley is shown as a 'green corridor' penetrating urban space and imperial past alike even as Olympic construction work disrupts the 'established relationships between residents and their natural and built environment, mainly through the three meter high blue fence that creates a boundary between the "old" outside world and a new dream world being created by the IOC and its selected architects, inside'. The pictures, therefore, combine documentary function, recording a threatened landscape, with personal vision and in the process suggest a 'way of seeing' these liminal spaces as intensely valuable in their own right.

In contrast, Magda Wosinska's 'Liminal Spaces and States in Jerzy Peterkiewcz's *Inner Circle*' is the first of two papers in this collection which uses the London Underground to exemplify the liminal in London writing. Focussing on Peterkiewicz's metaphorical novel, she extends the question of the liminal as a 'threshold' by inviting comparisons between native Londoners and immigrant Londoners who arrived in London following the outbreak of the Second World War. She makes reference in her paper to the fact that Peterkiewicz 'did not fully assimilate into English tradition, as he is rather a "European deeply rooted in Polishness". Like the protagonist from *Inner Circle*, Patrick, one gets the sense that Peterkiewicz's position within the wider canon of London writing is partly defined through

recognition of his cultural difference, coupled with the painful reasons behind his departure from his native Poland to take up residence in the UK, something which he coveys through Patrick as someone who is 'neither here nor there'. Wosinska's paper structures the London Underground in terms of the paradox that this transport network simultaneously defines and divides the city of London, and frequently problematises, rather than resolves, questions surrounding the city's boundaries. Wosinska refers frequently to the liminal in Peterkiewicz's work as a 'betweenness', using the 'betweenness' of moving through the London Undergrounds space, which we 'inhabit but do not live within,' to underline the predicament of the protagonist's life in London. This essay raises an important (but often overlooked question) concerning how London as a multi-cultural and ethnically diverse city is to be reconciled with the fact that many immigrants who come to live in London frequently remain as outsiders. Wosinska's paper acknowledges the distinctiveness of London life from the Polish origins of Peterkiewicz, but uses the liminality and 'betweenness' at work within his novel as a way of combining these separate spaces, and, most fundamentally, identifying such a process as continuous: by which London remains a space that is forever changing and being changed by those who inhabit the city.

Michael O'Brien's '"Tunnel Visions": Space, Transience and Escapism in Geoff Ryman's *253*' begins by deconstructing the Modernist association between travel and the movement of crowds, epitomised in Baudelaire's definition of the modern as the 'fleeting, contingent, transitory...' By examining the playfulness of Geoff Ryman's textual form in *253* (initially published in hypertext format online) he asks if there is a similar playfulness at the heart of the commuting experience: considering whether the mind of the traveller becomes attuned to new ways of looking at the world, either through the experience of reading on the tube, or, as is frequently

the case in this text, inventing narratives and fantasies about fellow tube travellers. Within this essay, O'Brien analyses how prose characterises the experience of commuting on the tube as a void, a physical and temporal space between different points in our lives, while examining Ryman's subversion of London life within the tube, where it is characterised as a space for reading, mischief and day-dreaming. He concludes that in contrast to the idealised world of Metroland, epitomised in John Betjeman's poetry, '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'.

Finally, Roshni Mooneeram's **'**The Chinese Flâneuse Negotiating the Metropolis: Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers'* not only extends scholarship concerning the figure of the flâneur into the twenty-first century but also shifts attention on to the emergent figure of the flâneuse. Mooneeram focuses on the twenty year old protagonist of Guo's novel, who has arrived in London straight from a rural Chinese background for the purpose of learning English: 'Driving herself out of the safe, familiar, private home of a Chinese family in London and projecting herself into the public, she shares with the original flâneur the sense that an engagement with the metropolitan spectacle will allow her to come to terms with her (new) existence.' Drawing on de Certeau's comparison of the acts of walking and speaking, Mooneeram analyses the Chinese flanêuse's 'rhetoric of walking' which opens up the city to her from the greasy cafés to the peepshows: 'The association of the walking woman with the figure of the prostitute, a seller who is also a commodity and object of desire, is turned on its head in this case as the flâneuse focuses on her own desiring female gaze.' As a result, the reader is challenged to consider whether

the existing discourses of flânerie and psychogeography privilege a male view point, which hinders the discovery of more complex connections between the multilayered geographical, linguistic, archetypal and commodified spaces of London.

It is hoped that these essays will inspire further work on London that continues this trend of presenting liminality not as the product of social and cultural fragmentation but as a pre-existing attribute of the city; a feature of London's essential heterogeneity.

Notes:

[1] The original cfp, conference programme and other details may still be accessed via the BCCW website: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sa/artresearch/bccw

[2] Nick Hubble, ed., 'Intermodern London', special issue, *Literary London*, 7:1 (March 2009): http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2009/index.html

[3] Hubble, 'Introduction: Intermodern London' in Hubble, 5: http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2009/intro.html