

Mind the Gap: Writing Across London Spaces

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Abstract

“Mind the gap”: the phrase is familiar on the London Underground, as a warning to passengers boarding or leaving trains. The gap in question is between train and platform. The London Underground first used the phrase as a warning in 1968, earlier than any other mass transit system. As a London-specific reference to a boundary, it is germane to the theme of this essay, which will survey some of the crossings that have been made between spaces, or over thresholds, in the modern literature of London. Mundanely enough, the gap on the London Underground is such a threshold. To talk of a gap, though, might also be to emphasize the incommensurability of worlds, or the difficulty of climbing across from one to another. Gaps could be social as well as spatial distinctions.

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In London, or in any major city, some boundaries are clear in the way that the gap on the Underground is. Some are less so, as areas fade into one another. Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia, Holborn, Covent Garden, King’s Cross – they seem somewhat distinct, but we might not all carry precisely the same idea of where one ends and another begins. Cities, then, might be made up of nodes – clearly distinct like the dots that mark stations on the Underground map. Yet they are also made up of overlapping zones with blurred edges. The edges are blurred in part because they exist in the mind, and there are eight or nine million different minds involved.

This thought corresponds to a sense of London which has been quite pervasive in critical literature: that its real spaces are also unreal, that that which is concrete is also constantly a place in the mind. The same place, it seems, can be real and imaginary, existing in both material and ideal modalities. Thus Georg Simmel, in a classic account of city life from 1903, talked of examining the body of culture with reference to the soul (52), and proposed at length that urban existence was a matter of mental adjustments and habits as much as physical facts. Jonathan Raban’s *Soft City*, first published in 1974, is a sophisticated statement of this principle for what was becoming called an era of postmodernism. For Virginia

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Woolf too, the city was a hard place of stone buildings and a soft one of wayward thought; equally a place where undeniable inequality and exploitation coexisted with more fugitive experiences of feeling and connection. The city is a place materially constructed to facilitate human life, but such life is also a matter of daydreaming, creativity, fear, and fantasy, and so the structures that facilitate it facilitate them, and are quickly taken up and metamorphosed by them into a secondary, imaginative life.

Now, in ways unknown to Simmel or Woolf, we could even mirror this duality as not so much the real and the unreal as the immediate and the virtual: the city around us at any moment, as experienced through our eyes, ears, and other senses, and the other experience we might be having through a mobile electronic device. Many people's experience of London now is the experience of a given location and also simultaneously of a digital elsewhere, rendering the mind half-involved with the street or square. Virginia Woolf might have said that this was simply a technical confirmation of what she had shown all along about the absent-mindedness or otherworldliness constitutive of consciousness.

In her 1927 essay "Street Haunting," which has belatedly become a classic of London writing, Woolf posits this coexistence of real and unreal, of different modalities of existence together:

How beautiful a London street is then, with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness, and on one side of it perhaps some tree-sprinkled, grass-grown space where night is folding herself to sleep naturally and, as one passes the iron railing, one hears those little cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig which seem to suppose the silence of fields all round them, an owl hooting, and far away the rattle of a train in the valley. But this is London, we are reminded; high among the bare trees are hung oblong frames of reddish yellow light – windows; there are points of brilliance burning steadily like low stars – lamps; this empty ground, which holds the country in it and its peace, is only a London square
(71-72)

The Bloomsbury square is difficult to distinguish from a rural scene, surrounded by "the silence of fields." The brain "sleeps," Woolf proposes, allowing such confluences to occur. Woolf immediately goes on to describe what the urban square is really like:

set about by offices and houses where at this hour fierce lights burn over maps, over documents, over desks where clerks sit turning with wetted forefinger the files of endless correspondences; or more suffusedly the firelight wavers and the lamplight falls upon the privacy of some

drawing-room, its easy chairs, its papers, its china, its inlaid table, and the figure of a woman, accurately measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea which – She looks at the door as if she heard a ring downstairs and somebody asking, is she in? (72)

This is the real London, not the imagined world of the hooting owl and the train in the valley. But then, how real is it? The offices and houses are real enough; their “fierce lights,” maybe. Unmistakably, though, Woolf has no sooner reverted from the fanciful to the factual than she is fictionalizing again. The “clerks [who] sit turning with wetted forefinger the files of endless correspondences” are too closely imagined not to be fictional characters, near-descendants of Forster’s Leonard Bast. Likewise the room where “more suffusedly the firelight wavers and the lamplight falls upon the privacy of some drawing-room,” and where a woman is “measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea,” is the beginning of a domestic short story, in which actual drama begins to unfold with a ring at the doorbell, before Woolf cuts herself off and starts again.

Real and unreal London swiftly prove difficult to disentangle. In a sense that is her essay’s primary theme: the incorrigibility of the mind’s propensity for fiction – as in window-shopping, where “Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one’s will,” then “dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, and build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses” (75). The real world of the commodity and the unreal one of fantasy cannot easily be distinguished, as the former has been created and brought to market to foster the latter. More fancifully still, the sight of pearls in an antique shop leads Woolf to

imagine how, if we put them on, life would be changed. It becomes instantly between two and three in the morning; the lamps are burning very white in the deserted streets of Mayfair. Only motor-cars are abroad at this hour, and one has a sense of emptiness, of airiness, of secluded gaiety. Wearing pearls, wearing silk, one steps out on to a balcony which overlooks the gardens of sleeping Mayfair.

Then, once more, she snaps out of it:

But what could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter’s evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June?” (75-76).

This particular experience of the city is an illustration, for Woolf, of a profound multiplicity in the constitution of the human subject.

Few writers can have been more explicit and thoroughgoing than Woolf in

articulating the sense that the solid city incorrigibly generates a fluid one, in two modalities of reality that are hard to separate. But in the rest of this essay we shall consider how three other, more recent writers have depicted and imagined London spaces.

It is commonplace to say that a city can be a character in a story. Thus: “*Ulysses* centres on Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus – but its true protagonist is Dublin itself”; “Dickens’ greatest character was not David Copperfield or Mr Micawber, but his London” – and so on. This way of talking responds to the sense that in fiction, a place can be as powerful a force, or as vividly described, as a human character. Yet it seems imprecise. What the city is doing in a text is generally somewhat different from what a character is doing, even if it is actually more vivid and powerful. It has a different textual function and agency.

We could say that the city is background. Sometimes it is sketched in a few stray words or lines around a narrative that does not much refer to it. Yet this sense of city as background is surely less interesting than the idea that a city can become something else: foreground? Texture? Structure? Subject? Sometimes, it is true, the city can even be deliberately personified, addressed like an individual, as though to confirm the intuition that a city is a character. We shall now look at how the city comes to the fore in three quite recent writers, focusing especially on their treatment of spaces of transition and crossing.

The Human Congestion of the Street: *Money*

First, a writer very unlike Virginia Woolf: Martin Amis. One of the most expansive fictional treatments of London in the late twentieth century appears in his novel *Money* (1984). In this work, London and New York are posited as Eastern and Western poles between which the protagonist swings: alternating long chapters are set in each metropolis. Amis builds up a sense of London through a steady series of extended descriptions. Here is an example:

Tonguing my tooth and twisting my neck for taxis, I now stroll the length of the dental belt, through the stucco of the plaqued streets and carious squares, past railings, embossed porches, pricey clinics, tranquilized Arabs, groggy mouth-sufferers in their Sunday best, their women wearing fur coats and Harlem lacquer, their spruced kids either pained or happy – across the bus-torn slum of Oxford Street into Soho, the huddled land of sex and food and film, down narrowing alleys until I reached the glass preserve of Carburton, Linex & Self. (78)

We notice how Amis uses types of people to populate the scene and add character: not realized individuals but generic categories, collectively sketched. We witness movement from one kind of urban space to another: here the genteel “dental

belt,” roughly meaning Marylebone, and the different world of Soho, sundered by Oxford Street’s “bus-torn slum,” make three different pieces of London in one sentence. That sentence comprises some highly wrought rhetoric. We notice the alliterative four t-sounds in the opening clause (suggesting the tongue’s repeated forays against the sensitive tooth), and one of Amis’s simplest and most persistent stylistic features: the carefully paired adjective and noun. Dental belt, plaqued streets, carious squares, embossed porches, Harlem lacquer, bus-torn slum, huddled land, glass preserve. Some of these might be straightforwardly descriptive, but often a literary effect is involved. “Plaqued” and “carious” are dental terms for the “dental belt,” but they are also words to describe city space: literally walls with multiple plaques, and squares decaying as teeth do. And the adjective “bus-torn” gives pause: it may never have appeared outside this sentence, and appears on reflection to be an elaboration of, say, “war-torn” – something you could say of a country or region – yet dialed down to the humdrum level at which it is merely public transport that does the tearing. Amis wanted a way to say that Oxford Street was crowded with buses, and his solution is instantly evocative, even if not immediately quite coherent. The buses are perhaps “tearing” one side of the street from the other.

Money is famously, and deliberately, a novel of the 1980s; an early signature work in the literature of Thatcherism. It is apocryphally thought that Margaret Thatcher once declared that anyone riding a bus after the age of thirty was a failure in life. That notion is curiously consolidated here by the fact that in four hundred pages of often intense motion, despite observing those buses tearing up the slum of Oxford Street, the protagonist never uses London’s public transport. His modes of locomotion are pointedly individual: walking in the streets, observing their strange new phenomena; and driving his car, which like all cars in this novel has a fanciful name – this one a Fiasco, vaguely redolent of the Ford Fiesta. The car’s failure to run is a running joke. And so:

I drove home in my Fiasco, which, apart from the faulty cooling system, the recurring malfunction with the brakes and power-steering, and a tendency to list violently to the left, seems to be running fairly reliably at present. At least it starts more often than not, on the whole. ... The ride from Pimlico to Portobello took well over ninety minutes and it was gone midnight when I beached the car on a double yellow line outside my sock. *Why* did it take well over ninety minutes? A rush-hour style traffic jam at 12 p.m. Something to do with the fucking Royal Wedding. For the best part of an hour I sat swearing in a blocked tunnel under Westway. The Fiasco was overheating. I was overheating. Each car was crammed with foreigners and grinning drunks. The tunnel’s throat

swelled like emphysema with fags and fumes and foul mouths. Then we edged into the blue nightmap of stars. Join the dots ... London has jet-lag. London has culture-shock. It's doing everything the wrong way round at the wrong time. (149-150)

Like the previous passage this one records motion across the city, but here the movement is automotive rather than pedestrian. The walk from Marylebone to Soho is now outstripped by the alliterative drive from Pimlico to Portobello, which turns out to be rendered almost inoperable by contemporary events: the Royal Wedding referred to here is that of Charles and Diana. In such touches, *Money* inserts itself into history, laying some claim to satirical purchase on an actual England. In terms of its primary content, what the passage describes is a failure of urban motion, a blocked transition, with the symptoms of organic and mechanical overheating.

Those last lines, though, lift us to a different register of direct, portentous declaration about the state of London itself, which is another of this novel's characteristic strands. The city is personified, anthropomorphized: only a person should be able to have jet-lag, but here a capital city can have it. The same applies in these instances:

In summer, London is an old man with bad breath. If you listen, you can hear the sob of weariness catching in his lungs. Unlovely London. Even the name holds heavy stress. (85)

Blasted, totalled, broken-winded, shot-faced London, doing time under sodden skies. (159)

Like most things in this novel, this motif has a deliberate excess: both in its sense of adherence to a literary tradition of such personification, and in the characteristic proliferation of adjectives – some of which, like “totalled” and “shot-faced,” almost need their own glosses; the first, at least, means “totally wrecked,” as in a car crash. Despite the sense of crash and the gridlock, the novel is peculiarly interested in the kind of scene of transit that we have already seen, in which the city seems a system in motion. The River Thames, says the narrator, “lassooed and pulsed like a human brain, sending signals, slipping veil after veil as if a heavier liquid had been sent to slide across its face of water, leaving no doubt that rivers are living things. They die, too” (167). Traffic is a field of force:

To me in those days traffic was only traffic, anonymous, indifferent – traffic, mere traffic. Now I know a little more about the movements behind my back. The cars are specific, with force fields, meek, hostile or aloof. I see a car's face and a car's eyes and a car's clamped sneer, a car

covering or bristling or not caring either way. And when I look into the crowd, into the human congestion of the street, I don't see traffic but human force fields, rattletraps, dropheads, hardtops, hotrods, the human saloons singling me out with the stare of their lights. (241)

In this virtuoso rhetorical performance, first cars are pictured as people – the “clamped sneer” suggesting the unchanging front of a car, while also carrying the trace of a car being clamped for a traffic violation – and then people as cars: hotrods, “human saloons.” If people can be envisaged as machines – as a Wyndham Lewis might have done – they can also, quite differently, be refigured as narratives; for, in the streets, the narrator observes, “London is full of short stories walking round hand in hand. ... London is full of short stories, long stories, epics, farces, sit-coms, sagas, soaps and squibs, walking round hand in hand” (257).

Any Day in Any City: *The Colour of Memory*

Amis at his peak developed a signature style of London writing: elegant yet wildly excessive, poetic yet gross, turning the city from backdrop into agent and back again. Yet there have been other visions of London in the novel too, since that singular achievement. One came from Geoff Dyer, a decade younger. His debut novel *The Colour of Memory* (1989) counts down through sixty numbered chapters, each of which amounts to a vignette from the lives of the anonymous narrator and his friends and neighbors in Brixton. One chapter makes explicit the book's method through an analogy with photography. The narrator describes his exit from the London Underground – that threshold again – then notes: “By the time we get to the ticket barrier, like a photographer whose finger presses the shutter by reflex, I have already drafted these words” (181). The book, he elaborates, “is like an album of snaps”:

In any snaps strangers intrude; the prints preserve an intimacy that lasted only for a fraction of a second as someone, unnoticed at the time, strayed unintentionally into the picture frame. Hidden among the familiar, laughing faces of friends are the glimpsed shapes of strangers; and in the distant homes of tourists there *you* are, at the edge of the frame, slightly out of focus, in the midst of other people's memories. We stray into each others' lives. In the course of any day in any city it happens thousands of times and every now and again it is caught on film. That is what is happening here. (181)

This was published in 1989. We can reflect that the number of images captured in a city now is hundreds of times greater, partly because of the prevalence of digital photography and its distribution; partly because of the spread of CCTV.

Leaving aside that historical intensification, the theoretical wellspring of Dyer's aesthetic is Roland Barthes, especially the Barthes of *Camera Lucida* (1980). For Barthes in this late work the photograph captured contingencies for posterity, and its marginal details, under the name of the *punctum*, often proved more perversely fascinating than the primary subject matter, the *studium*. Dyer could hardly be more explicit about this, writing that what happens at the edges of a picture – “the apparently irrelevant detail” – is often its greatest point of interest:

These details absorb and transform – and are themselves absorbed and transformed by – the principal action; the main subjects become saturated by the accidental inflections of attendant details. The distinction between foreground and background collapses; the subject is usurped by his surroundings, by the momentary pattern of clouds, by other faces in the street; his shadow is lost in a blur of others – the shadows cast by accidental gestures. (182)

This passage remains unusual as an attempt to bring theoretical thinking into British fiction, and to embed it profoundly in the work's aesthetic. For our purposes here it is also an interesting answer to the question of how the space of the city gets into fiction. On this model, the city would not be just unnoticed background, nor need it be personified as a character in its own right. Its texture might drift to the forefront, proving more interesting than a given individual, just as Dyer declares that “The distinction between foreground and background collapses” (182). He also seems to imply that once you start to represent a character in the city, you will find yourself representing the city anyway – because it will be captured on your figurative photographic prints, what seems like an insignificant background turning out to be what is of most interest to a later observer. A novel about London in 1909, 1959 or 1989 might tell later readers things about London that it barely knew it was saying.

One other chapter of Dyer's book merits our attention for its treatment of the experience of different kinds of urban space. Late at night the main characters walk through Westminster, and experience it as qualitatively different from the Brixton that is their habitual environment:

We walked through Whitehall, through all the empty architecture of power with its austere ornamentation and inscrutable attractiveness. Wide streets, discreet trees. ... Suddenly we were tourists. There was no one else around.

The windows in the buildings did not look like windows. They shared the same texture as the walls and were not there to be looked in to or out of. What impressed most about the walls was the suggestion of discreet

thickness. There was only one impulse behind these buildings: they were built to last – and to last it was necessary not only to be impregnable but also to impress. Vandalism was not even an issue. These buildings created their own time. They did not defy time, they consolidated it. ... The buildings had turned the symbolic power invested in them into an active, brooding patience that rendered surveillance superfluous. ... Even the pavement felt more permanent here. We had entered museum time. (117-8)

Briefly, the novel here takes on a kind of architectural imagination, forming itself around a description of built space. That is because within this novel, that space is unfamiliar. Though Whitehall and Westminster are as well known around the world as anywhere in London, within this novel the center is rendered oddly marginal: only visited once in 250 pages. Railton Road, Coldharbour Lane, Electric Avenue, are the center of the London experience. Of course Westminster, while in this sense marginalized, is also described with an awareness of its actual political centrality. As such, it takes a place in a duality of hegemony and dissidence, Parliament and dole queue.

Quicker to Walk: *NW*

So much for the 1980s. We shall lastly look at London space in one more novel: Zadie Smith's fourth novel *NW*, published in 2012. The novel consists of distinct named parts, whose titles include *visitation*, *guest*, *host*, *crossing*. The distinct parts focus on different characters from the same piece of Willesden, an area spanning the London postcodes NW10 and NW2. Moreover, they are not only thematically but formally distinct, differently textured and structured.

How exactly does this carefully wrought novel process London space? First, with its fascination with the delicate portrayal of consciousness, it may be viewed as one of recent fiction's attempts to reactivate some of the strategies of the era of modernism. It thus recalls us to Virginia Woolf, and shares, in a different key, her sense of a real and unreal city as intertwined. The city of *NW* is concrete in every sense, yet also a place of memory and mental association.

Second, this is a novel very interested in the *gaps* with which we began: the divisions between different social spheres in London which also, in numerous cases, map on to geographical spaces. Much reference is made to a piece of social housing called Garvey House, mainly occupied by Britons of Caribbean descent; much is also made to the Caldwell Estate, where the next generation – the book's primary protagonists – grew up and met each other. The power of such a place in a character's life is strong, as in the protagonist of the first section, Leah Hanwell (a white woman of London-Irish background) who has been away to study

philosophy at Edinburgh and appears to have various middle-class pursuits and views, yet repeatedly reflects that she has ended up living back on the edge of the same council estate where she grew up. Small social gradations around Leah's rented flat are telling. Zadie Smith writes with a sense that the relation between place and socio-economic status is finely calibrated, a matter of local knowledge and what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*.

Bound up with place, socio-economic status is also closely entangled with ethnicity. Leah's friend Natalie Blake, the novel's other major character, is a black woman who has renamed herself in making her upward journey from a socially marginal member of an evangelical church to a suave, successful barrister. She now lives with a banker in a Victorian house with a long garden, but still geographically close to where she began. Transitions in social status may map on to moves in physical space, but these moves may only need to be quantitatively small to achieve the desired qualitative difference.

NW envisages the city:

A great hill straddles NW, rising in Hampstead, West Hampstead, Kilburn, Willesden, Brondesbury, Cricklewood. It is no stranger to the world of letters. The Woman in White walks up one side to meet the highwayman Jack Sheppard on the other. ... Once this was all farm and field, with country villas nodding at each other along the ridge of this hill. Train stations have replaced them, at half-mile intervals. (54)

Here Smith's view is panoptic, seeing as if from a distance the scale of the hill and how many discrete areas it unites. She also briskly sketches a historical sense of place. The displacement of villas by railway stations proposes a certain democratization. Elsewhere, the brief chapters 9 and 10 form a textual set-piece that suggests different ways of conceiving travel from NW8 to NW6. The page-long Chapter 9 simply consists of instructions for walking this route as though from a journey planner (supplied perhaps by Transport for London or Google), listing precise distances and estimated timings, and concluding:

These directions are for planning purposes only. You may find that construction projects, traffic, weather, or other events may cause conditions to differ from the map results, and you should plan your route accordingly. You must obey all signs or notices regarding your route. (38)

The statement that contingencies may make reality differ from a map carries a hint of the kind of distinction that writers and theorists like to make: Michel de Certeau's distinction between a world mapped from above and experienced

from the street, or Jorge Luis Borges' much-cited meditations on the relation between map and territory. Smith plays this out more fully by immediately following those directions with Chapter 10, "From A to B Redux," a page and a half describing the experience of walking this route. Here is a sample:

Sweet stink of the hookah, couscous, kebab, exhaust fumes of a bus deadlock. 98, 16, 32, standing room only – quicker to walk! ... Polish paper, Turkish paper, Arabic, Irish, French, Russian, Spanish, *News of the World*. Unlock your (stolen) phone, buy a battery pack, a lighter pack, a perfume pack, sunglasses, three for a fiver, a life-size porcelain tiger, gold taps. ... TV screens in the TV shop. TV cable, computer cable, audiovisual cables, I give you good price, good price. Leaflets, call abroad 4 less, learn English, eyebrow wax, Falun Gong, have you accepted Jesus as your personal call plan? Everybody loves fried chicken. Everybody. Bank of Iraq, Bank of Egypt, Bank of Libya. Empty cabs on account of the sunshine. Boomboxes just because. Lone Italian, loafers, lost, looking for Mayfair. ... Security lights, security gates, security walls, security trees, Tudor, Modernist, post-war, pre-war, stone pineapples, stone lions, stone eagles. Face east and dream of Regent's Park, of St John's Wood. (39-40)

This is, roughly, a piece of stream of consciousness writing, with its clipped formulations, pieces of thoughts in response to stimuli. The same sense of sensory bombardment, indeed, was one of the things that Georg Simmel thought made a city dweller's mentality different from others': we can venture that the rate of stimuli here is in excess of what Simmel had in mind. As in Geoff Dyer, we notice the architectural dimension, which here amounts to a list of styles and of features. And one of the most evident aspects of the passage is the sense of a London space occupied by people from different ethnic backgrounds: the Turkish and Mediterranean couscous and kebab; the newspapers catering to different immigrant communities; the slightly broken English selling technical goods; the banks representing different countries of the Middle East. Despite the chapter's title, this space of transition – literally the whole paragraph describes a journey – is not really experienced as one between two different locations, A to B: rather as a journey through multiple traditions and traces that confront the traveler so fast as to be almost simultaneous.

Here is one last instance from *NW*. Another character, Felix, is travelling on the London Underground:

Mind the gap. Felix stepped in the second carriage from the end and looked at a tube map like a tourist, taking a moment to convince himself

of details no life-long Londoner should need to check: Kilburn to Baker Street (Jubilee); Baker Street to Oxford Circus (Bakerloo). (117)

Smith shows us the theme of local knowledge, almost in the taxi driver's sense of that noun: the mental map that the Londoner should supposedly have, but, as this character confirms, might well not in fact securely possess. The scene in fact comes to depict Felix's experience of watching a passenger on the tube train beside his, until "Her train pulled ahead, then his did" (118). Two journeys briefly, contingently converge, then permanently diverge again.

Conclusion

And Zadie Smith, of course, frames her Underground scene with the phrase with which we started: "Mind the gap." It signals imminent movement in the city, of a very literal kind. In this essay we have considered how a small number of writers have found words for such experiences of transition in urban space, while also suggesting that such crossings are often not merely physical but come freighted with social, economic, ethnic, or just psychological dimensions. Virginia Woolf in the 1920s showed how far the city of stone and brick is also a malleable place in the mind. In the 1980s, Martin Amis developed an elaborate literary rhetoric that brought baroque extremity to the depiction of movement around a battered London, whether on foot or by car. Geoff Dyer, writing in Amis's wake, also drew on the thought of Roland Barthes to emphasize urban space as a scene of accidental encounters and contingent juxtapositions. In the twenty-first century, Zadie Smith deploys a range of literary styles to represent her quarter of the metropolis, showing how different modes of writing disclose different conceptions of crossing the city. We arrive at a sense that London contains many dimensions: its 270 tube stations, thirty-two boroughs, eight million people, all in turn finding a different parallel existence on the pages of so many writers.

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