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STREET OF DREAMS

Paul Buck

London. Charing Cross Road. I must have walked up and down that road two or three thousand times. Perhaps ten thousand. Who knows? How to calculate a figure with any form of accuracy when it traces back forty years to my early teens? Can't I make a stab in the dark, perhaps like Simenon when he purported to have had sex with ten thousand women since the age of thirteen and a half in his "need to communicate"? A figure later reduced to around one thousand two hundred by his second wife.

Whatever the number, this dynamic road plays a major part in my life, a spine to my life, as it is to Central London. Or, alternatively, the aorta, the main artery of the body. What image to find to equate its importance in my life? Its vitalness. My life would have been very different if this street hadn't been there to support and launch me in directions, like ribs from the spine, or vital organs within its sphere. Walking up the Charing Cross Road, to the left are connections to Leicester Square, Chinatown, Soho, Oxford Street. Walking up, to the right, connections to Covent Garden, Holborn, Bloomsbury.

Walking *up*. That word suggests the bottom is at the Trafalgar Square end. But that is only because I come into the great metropolis from the south, arrive at Charing Cross station, the closest station of all the main ones to the centre of London. Thus I begin my walk from the bottom as I know it, behind the north side of Trafalgar Square, behind the National Gallery. That is my base, my foot for my feet to start from. That means my head is at the top end, Oxford Street, Tottenham Court Road, Centre Point… that monstrous edifice to capitalism and redundancy, that blot on the landscape. If I lived in North London and came in from Hampstead, or Highgate, let's say, then when I went *up* the Charing Cross Road, the worst thoughts of consumerism and capitalism would be as my base (to trample upon) and the National Gallery as my head, somewhere in which to dream. Now that feels better.

Perhaps spine and artery are clichéd images. Would it be better to liken it to a tree, even though the buildings along this road scarcely allow any tree, or plant life, unusual when all of Central London has its fair share of squares, gardens, parks… and trees? Of course, a few days later when walking up the road, I notice a number on checking, isolated plane trees set in the pavement, some pretty large ones too.

A tree with its branches and roots will not feed me here. Perhaps a tree within is what I'm pursuing. "The tree which impales my throat has sprouted and pushed from my stomach," Bernard Noël impresses in one of his earlier poems. "It climbs right into my nostrils."

Certainly I should stick with culture, because it's culture that has been my lifeblood, that this street represents as my lifeline. Something more modern would be the idea of a collage. Let's relate Charing Cross Road and its environs as a collage, an assemblage. Perhaps Robert Rauschenberg will suffice as a reference. His life's work has wound in and out of all forms of collage, much of it categorized as "combine paintings." For Rauschenberg this road itself would probably have provided enough for a collage, finding things underfoot to make into his work. "Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look," is how John Cage wrote on his friend's work. Nothing was ugly. Strangely, along this street I rarely notice anything underfoot as I'm too preoccupied with all else. Fortunately it's a street where few dogs are taken for strolls, and thus no need to keep an eye directed downwards. In his Retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York in the late 90s, Rauschenberg unveiled the first complete showing of his major work, *The 1/4 mile or 2 furlong piece* (1981-1997), conceived as the longest art work in the world, a length which is not strictly accurate in terms of its title, impossible to measure as sculptural pieces are incorporated, though it must equate somewhat with the Charing Cross Road in length, and indeed in its very nature as collage and experience as a journey.

Like Rauschenberg's work, the Charing Cross Road has never seemed to be a jumble, it always seems to fall into place, have a compositional form. And while he, as artist, might not like to exert his influence on his work, to personalize it, Rauschenberg knows there is no other way. "I know that the artist can't help exercising his control to a degree and that he makes all the decisions finally. But if I can just throw enough obstacles in the way of my own personal taste, then maybe it won't be all-controlling, and maybe the picture will turn out to be more interesting as a result."

As a young child my grandma used to take me to Trafalgar Square to feed the pigeons, followed by afternoon tea in Lyons Corner House nearby. At least the photographs, reinforced by family stories, tell me that's what we did, as I have absolutely no memory of those events aside from the images and their impositions as memory. Did we only go that far? What else did we do? Didn't we set foot in the Charing Cross Road? I could ask my sister, she's a wealth of information on childhood memories. But I won't. I don't need to remember the forgotten. How bourgeois to take a trip to London to visit Trafalgar Square, have tea and cakes, or scones, and then return home. I don't believe that was the case. Surely we would have gone to the zoo, probably by bus… or even taxi, that would have been my grandma's sense of style.

Walk, not ride. Walk. Always that pleasure. Even now. One can take a bus, or a taxi, or go down into the Underground and bypass this road, hurtle its length beneath the street. But I have never done that when my intention was to go somewhere within easy walking distance. I have always made it a point to venture up this road, to feel its life, to relate to its book culture, or even to aspects that don't necessarily interest me. The need is to feel the vibrancy of its life. Another street will just not do, or, if chosen, it's for the exotic nature of the detour, not to experience the pulse of my life. This street has become an addiction, I need it as if a fix. Since I was fourteen, or thirteen and a half (let's say), I've needed this street "to communicate" with myself, to make me understand the complexities and confusions of my life, though I cannot say that I realized that point until I was around nineteen, the end of my teens. Perhaps not even that early. I had chosen a college in Chelsea for the start of my "further education," because of its image, a sense of "bohemia" I guess – the Chelsea Set, with their Chelsea boots, those Cuban-heeled wonders bought from Anello & Davide, the theatrical footwear shop that once served a few years residence too in the Charing Cross Road, though I was its customer earlier when it was not far away in Covent Garden's Drury Lane. I had also chosen Soho as another fixed point for its sense of risk and sexuality – enhanced by its Italian delicatessens, (my mother came from south of Roma), though probably a ruse to cover for my sexual awakenings and leanings.

Like many writers I can only write at home, at my table. Not in the living room. Not in the bedroom. Only in my workroom. At my table. It's as if I'm only switched on there. Charing Cross Road is much the same. Not any other street. Just this one

particular road that I can walk up, oblivious to the noise, to anything but what I want to see, hear, or smell. This street is the writing table at home that "fortifies this whole need for identity," as Morton Feldman suggested in a public conversation with Cage.

My first recollections of the Charing Cross Road start in my early teens, when I went to buy a clarinet, and a year or so later when I exchanged it for an alto saxophone. Where I went specifically I can't recall, there are still shops selling instruments along the road and various roads off. Boosey & Hawkes used to have their shop a step or two away in Shaftesbury Avenue, I recall it well. The windows were always a lure. Today I still pause before window displays to look at those gleaming instruments, particularly saxophones, amazed at their prices, wondering how I must have saved for mine in my teens, as they would have been as high in comparison even then.

Charing Cross Road is like a jazz solo too. I think of Johnny Dyani, his authoritative bass on the album *Fruits* with Leo Smith and Phillip Wilson always a pleasure to hear, sending tingles up and down my spine, setting my body alive, woozing my head into worlds of desire. Why that album rather than another by Cannonball Adderley or John Coltrane, both early influences and sources for inspiration? Coltrane's *Tunji* plays in my head even now, at the flick of a memory. Those albums are still downstairs in the bulging collection of vinyl, never to be replaced, even though CDs fill the new shelving. It was in Charing Cross Road too that I used to come to buy my jazz albums, in Dobell's at number 77, the whole block erased today and replaced with a modern arcade. Or not to buy, more particularly to leaf through the covers, read the sleeve notes, and dream of having enough money to purchase them. My list would be drawn from the jazz magazines or the foreign radio stations (usually French) I tuned into through the fields of static. I used to hang around those wooden racks, listening to the jazz played in the shop, listening to people talking knowledgeably on the music, eavesdropping and feeling part of "the happening scene." That shop has long gone, moved some years ago to another street, then vanished. But at least Ray's in Shaftesbury Avenue is only a quick blow, a stone's throw away, a shop that still has an earthy feel. (*It too has moved, into Charing Cross Road, in-house at the new-look Foyle's.*) If one wants slickness and absence of passion, one goes along Oxford Street, to Virgin, HMV or others, the big megastores that supply everything, or so they say. Better to go the opposite way into Covent Garden and find the cellar store, Rough Trade, with its highly selective choice of the ignored and avant-garde. Better to support independent ventures in the face of the corporate monsters. (*Rough Trade too has moved, much further east, to the trendiness of the Brick Lane area.*)

A street of music, a jazz solo winding through all that I stand for, the pivot on improvisation in all the arts. Did I aspire to become a musician? I don't think so. I knew I would never achieve that. Nothing to do with feel, more to do with support I suspect. Unlike any apprenticeship at writing, a silent pursuit in a corner, or beneath the bed sheets, learning to play a musical instrument is a noisy affair that can attract the wrath and discouragement of others: family or neighbours. Today I see a different support system in this house, watching our girls progress on their journey with flute and violin, visibly encouraged to learn and enjoy.

Music is a pleasure. It is at the heart of all I do. It is my blood flow, the glow at the core of my existence ever since I reached my teens and, with a couple of others, formed a jazz club at school to while away our lunch breaks in ecstasy, or as near as one could get to paradise in a Catholic grammar school.

Jazz is the root of my music interests. Whether I detour into rock or classical, free form or ethnic, it's jazz that lies behind it. So what do I mean by jazz? Do I mean jazz? Or do I mean improvisation? I know that improvisation is found in other musics – Indian, baroque, church organ, and more – but it was with jazz that it came into my world and where it still holds its strength. Improvisation is the form that fits all my interests in the arts, that guides my way, whether working with chords, chromatic scales, acrostics, chopsticks or pieces of eight. Always that notion to weave from a source, to flow, to give 100% at the moment of creation, placing the material in the furnace and, like the alchemist, producing gold, or at least the aspiration to do just that.

It seems no mistake, or slip of the tongue, that Dyani flowed first from my pen. If I was ever to pursue a course in music I'm sure somewhere along the process I would have taken the bass line, would have wanted to be a bass player, albeit an inventive bass player, like Dyani, or Jimmy Garrison, or Charlie Mingus, of course. Or, on the rock platform, someone like John Paul Jones (Led Zeppelin), or Tony Levin (King Crimson). A few examples only, good ones though. Inventive would be the condition. Or if it was to remain around the saxophone, that aspect to be found with the bass clarinet as played by Eric Dolphy, or even the baritone sax as first heard by Gerry Mulligan. Those bass sounds have always resounded deep within me, have always pulsed irredeemably, still do. And now I know why I kept away from them, standing before the musical instruments on display, looking at the prohibitive prices, knowing they are out of my reach, always were, always would have been… dreaming aside.

Great Newport Street first came to my attention as a jazz home for Ken Colyer's Studio 51. Not that I favoured that form of New Orleans "Trad Jazz," but I was aware, each time I walked past, a few yards away in Charing Cross Road, that jazz was played there. I did get to visit it later when a friend of mine, the poet Pete Brown, formed a band, one of many, that included the then session musician who went on to greater heights, Johnny McLaughlin. The string of guitarists who moved through the guitar spot, Chris Spedding, Jim Mullen… has to be compared with the *blues breaker* bands of John Mayall and his appetite and breeding ground for a profusion of today's celebrated rock blues guitarists.

Studio 51 was to catch my eye a few years ago when I came across Patrice Chaplin's book, *Albany Park*, (the side of Sidcup that borders on where we live) and discovered that she grew up a couple of streets from where I'm now sitting at my desk. Her story plots the course of an escape from the suburbs to the wider world, via early trips to London to visit Studio 51 and other nearby jazz haunts and all-night cafés around Soho. Later she was to venture to America, to the West Coast, and marry – into the famous film family whose surname she now bears.

More in keeping with my mood was Ronnie Scott's, at that time in a basement in Gerrard Street, just behind the Charing Cross Road, off to the left. Again I was too young to visit the club, and the knowledge that it was in Chinatown didn't help. Any image of Soho, no matter how sordid, I have always felt comfortable with, but all images of Chinatown always spooked me in those days, perhaps still do to some degree. When Ronnie Scott moved his club a few hundred yards north across Shaftesbury Avenue into Soho itself, and when I was older, then it seems it was possible to pay a visit – though as it grew and became famous, even distinguished, my tastes in jazz went more towards the avant-garde, the breed of modern jazz musicians they wouldn't feature – or even into a "free music" that didn't qualify as jazz in many eyes. Or even within its own eyes.

I don't think I really did aspire to or dream of a life in music. Though I must have had some presence or sense of interest, for once I had left home and was working in the area, I used to regularly bump into Tommie Connor, a songwriter of the old school, one of those famous for penning early "popular songs" like *Never Do A Tango With An Eskimo*, or *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*. His son was at school with me, we shared similar jazz interests. Yet over all the years I almost never saw his father at home, only at Mass on Sunday mornings taking the plate around for the collection. It wasn't until those years later, when I was in the area daily that I

used to bump into him going to and fro to Denmark Street, the original Tin Pan Alley, directly off Charing Cross Road, just short of Oxford Street. Even when "pop music" was not long under way, like the early days of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, to name the obvious, it used to be along that street that the music business thrived. Mr Connor worked in Denmark Street, one of those who had an office where he would sit at the piano and write songs. He was under contract to a music publisher, the street was full of them. In the basements were small recording studios where they would demo the songs. Or even make records. The Rolling Stones famously recorded *Not Fade Away* in the basement at Number 4 with Phil Spector and Gene Pitney in attendance. Today most aspects of the business have gone, though shops selling instruments or sheet music survive, and even the only music bookshop in London, Helter Skelter, has taken fairly solid roots there it would seem. (*Again, another casualty, no longer a retail outlet, but a publishing venture.*)

"Hello son," I can hear Tommie saying, or Mr Connor as I always called him with respect. And I can also hear his repeated words of advice, as he knew or sensed the arts were becoming my ground, perhaps my livelihood, not to go into the music world. Not that he had been unsuccessful. The nicest father figure I've ever met. Someone special to me. Still fresh in my mind. That kindly little man who always treated me too with respect, always offered a smile and warmth of greeting, followed by a routine of polite questions before we spoke on other matters, never omitting the warning that I should avoid the music business. I understood.

Charing Cross Road has always been a street where people in the music business could be seen walking, whether to Denmark Street, or elsewhere. Even today, though what business they have can only be guessed at. But through the Sixties and Seventies heads always turned when someone like Hendrix in his multi-coloured clothes would pass along, en route for somewhere. One famous occasion, in June 1967, at the Saville Theatre, now a cinema complex, just round the corner in Shaftesbury Avenue, is fixed in music mythology, for Hendrix opened his Sunday night set with the title track of *Sergeant Pepper*, to everyone's amazement, including the Beatles, also in the audience. The album had only been released the previous Thursday. Where had he heard it? Pre-release copies then were not prevalent or such a hype-ridden strategy manoeuvre as now. Most didn't hear an album until release date, even those in the business. Perhaps Hendrix had heard it at UFO, the famous underground club, just off the top end of the road, the hippy club where all the great rock musicians used to pass through Friday nights, and where the album would have been played on the sound system between live sets. Not *would have been*, but *was*, I was there. Like many a major album it was played

straight through. Hendrix only needed to hear something once to absorb it for future use.

Or Frank Zappa, who could pass by unnoticed to most of the population, at least as an unrecognizable face, though as most of our generation looked so different in those days from the general flow of people, heads would have turned regardless. Talking about our generation.

Today there are other venues in and around the street, mainly clubs and bars, but the Astoria at the top end is the only rock venue of any size. It's still known as The Jam Factory, after its initial site as a preserves factory more than a century ago. Litchfield Street, further south, has suffered a more recent loss. The famous folk cellar, Bunjies, where many a folk artist carved out their career, cramped in that grimy place, has gone. Now there is little reason to pass along this short street, unless to reach The Ivy, the fashionable restaurant at its far end where the glitterati of rock, film and media dine, marked by the paparazzi who hang around outside day and night with their cameras dangling. It's more important these days to be famous, to be a celebrity, than to be a master of your art. Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame reduced to five, at best.

Earlier, before I worked in the street, when I was at college, I found myself attached to it as another world of dreams opened. One that was an expediency for me, financial remunerations, rather than a reality or long-term course. I had been approached by a woman who looked incredibly like Sophia Loren. She wanted me to model for her agency, the Marjorie Jones agency, which had its office just off to the right at the end of Charing Cross Road, along William IV Street. At college I had not been aware of many, or perhaps any, gay men, but now I was faced by a room occupied by gay male models. My preference was always female and I tended to veer into their room when I was passing through. I started my part-time occupation at the same time as another who was there briefly before moving on, one who came to fame on the silver screen: Charlotte Rampling. Neither of our destinies tallied with notions to be models. In my short stay I was offered free hairdressing, and used to go along to one of the best, Robert James, who had a little salon upstairs in an alleyway opposite Studio 51, on the other side of Charing Cross Road, an alleyway that led to Chinatown. But having one's hair cut too frequently seemed to remove it faster than it grew. It became short, too short for my liking. I felt a draught and decided enough was enough, I wanted my hair back, so I held on to it fast. From that day I've never stepped inside a hairdresser, though for many years I saw photos of myself extracted from a hairdressing magazine and stuck in

their windows.

I did meet one of the models years later, on the arm of a rock musician I knew. But it wasn't long before I became confused and lost track of names to know if some of those who graced the magazine pages were girls I had seen undressing before me in that room at the agency. I guess I can't remember their faces, my eyes filled with other distractions.

Dreams of music, dreams of modelling. No. Just things that came along. Though I've been lucky to have found involvement in the music world throughout my life.

My real introduction to the Charing Cross Road as a daily occurrence came when I took an early job in an office in Leicester Square, each lunchtime escaping around the corner to the Charing Cross Road to browse in its bookshops, and often to eat in a small Italian place that served an abundance of *bolognese*, right on the slip road, Moor Street, that was part of Cambridge Circus. As it was so filling, sometimes I elected to skip lunch, and just go browsing, grab a sandwich instead.

Going a step further I soon determined I would much prefer to work in a bookshop, and, as far as the Charing Cross Road was concerned, that meant Better Books, which was more like an Arts Centre, given that there were benches for people to sit and read, a coffee machine, the start of the swish coffee bar fad that has now become a regular and obvious addition for some of today's chain bookstores. Way back in 1967 a drinks facility was more of a primitive affair. But they were good times. My fellow workers were all poets: Bob Cobbing, Lee Harwood, Anthony Barnett, Paul Selby…Our visitors, as much visitors as customers, were poets, writers, artists, and all manner of celebrities, or as they were then called: famous people. The shop was more than a shop. During my period there, downstairs, in a fairly squalid and damp cellar, theatre events occurred. Or, more precisely, Jeff Nuttall's People Show more or less started its long and illustrious history right there. The People Show was the most extreme form of fringe theatre, what many might term Performance Art. Or perhaps better described as sculptural happenings, a collage of juxtapositions set off by a box of verbal fireworks. It was certainly true underground theatre. There I witnessed shows that were a total assault on all the senses. There I saw Laura Gilbert hanging upside down from a meat hook, suspended next to the whole side of a cow that had been strung up for a few days, left to fester and rot and smell unbearably, perhaps even to achieve a maggoty state by the end of the few days the show would last. *A Nice Quiet Night* was its title. Laura was hanging from the rafters, distraught, wracked with tears, baited

by Mark Long and John Darling, until a member of the audience tried to intercede and confront the pair, insisting they take her down as her terror was for real, nothing to do with acting. Mark and John turned on this man, a well-known psychiatrist, and berated him for interfering. Who said this was about acting? This group tested those grounds between theatre and art activities, performers as creators, improvisers. Or another show entitled *Golden Slumbers* with Laura walking around naked, except for black fishnet stockings and a rose taped high on her navel, besieging Syd Palmer, who lay in a bed, self-obsessed, playing with himself beneath the sheet, desirous to join him, while Mark and John stuck their heads through a backdrop and added comments. Memories, images, that have never left me. The words might have gone, but the visuals remain clear before my eyes, whether wide open, or closed shut. Today Nuttall's visible presence is clear for all to see, larger than life, acting in films like Peter Greenaway's *The Baby of Macon… (even though Jeff himself has more recently left this mortal coil*.)

Or poetry readings in the shop, where we drew curtains across the shelves to prevent excessive stealing. Stealing was rife from the professionals. No matter how hard we watched them during the day they always managed to secrete the books, art books particularly, under their coats as they turned and made for the front door. We couldn't challenge them unless we had proof. Occasionally one of us would walk round to the door if we suspected a professional at work and stand there in an attempt to discourage them, to let them know we were wise to their activity, the gauntlet thrown down for them to take the risk of being confronted. Many still accomplished their task. Checking the shelves after their departure one could not believe a book could still be missing despite close scrutiny. The poets were the most incompetent book thieves, or "borrowers" as one told me some years later. We watched them clumsily sticking books away in a bag, or beneath their jackets. If only they had asked, they would have received a good deal. Many another poet or artist, David Medalla for example, would spend their day seated on a bench, or even find a space at a table in one of the rooms, reading and making notes as if in a regular library, and then appear with a volume and ask if we had a less expensive shop-soiled copy of the same. For some reason we used to find just such a copy on the floor at our feet with a slight mark as if a foot had been placed on it. Not worth its price, now. Sold. Or Heathcote Williams who used to appear periodically a few minutes before closing, whisk around the shelves collecting together a pile of books, place them high on the counter, fifteen minutes after closing time. Bob would glance at the pile, then at his watch, no time left to work out the true total and nominate a rough estimate – with an atrociously bad sense of addition – and Heathcote would leave to devour another trove of earthly de-

lights. Arts patronage at its best.

We stayed open later than others. 6.30 if no evening event. Opened later in the morning, 10.30. Other shops were strictly 9 to 5. On Friday nights I worked at UFO, the club at the top of the street, along Tottenham Court Road. We strove to stay open most of the night, pushing on until everyone was dead on their feet. I used to depart around 5 on Saturday morning, observing the remains of the audience collapsed in corners until the public transport started. For me it was a matter of walking down the road and, keys in hand, entering Better Books to stretch out on a bench and snooze until the others arrived just before 10.30. Fairly often I'd be woken by a policeman tapping on the window to ascertain why I was asleep on a bench at 7 or 8 in the morning.

Other memories of the shop come and go. Customers like the actor James Coburn, who was wary that we should know our stock instead of crossing to check the shelves for *50 poems* by e.e.cummings. Or Belmondo, wary that we recognized him at all. Or Burroughs who announced himself: "I'm William Burroughs," before asking, "have you…" Or Francis Bacon, never prepared to look for himself, always asking us to search and fetch.

There I first met the French poet Claude Royet-Journoud. I can still see him leaning across the counter, smiling and introducing himself. With Anne-Marie Albiach beside him, and her abundance of black hair, buoyant and flowing, a fine "sumptuous" head of hair that weaves into her texts, that she later talked about with regard to her family's view of being shamed by her hair.

Or the American poet Jerome Rothenberg bringing in copies of *Some/thing* magazine, or early David Antin books, and placing them as little piles on the centre table. No sooner had he left than we determined we each needed our own copy, and another for someone else… and before we knew it the pile had disappeared, so that an hour later when a customer arrived in search of copies that Jerome had *just* told him had been left there, we had to inform him that we were already sold out. Today's hot item. Those were the days. Copies of rare books brought in from abroad, Warhol catalogues, and so many small press editions… countless put aside for staff or friends. A day off risked missing out on what would later become a treasure. That's the delight of having a literary staff in the shop. Always a pleasure, as last week, to find an assistant in a bookshop with some knowledge that enables an informed conversation on a book or author. All is not lost today, even if it seems so quite frequently.

When our wing of the shop was closing down, the cream being folded back into the more traditional sections of the shop next door, I bought up or removed some of the remaining copies of magazines like *Kulchur*, bringing a borrowed car in one Sunday to take away a handful of boxes. I was instructed to do that, otherwise loads of rare items would just be junked. As I understood it, the owners, Collins the publishers, were closing us down because we were losing money, or not making enough profit (their role as unwitting arts patrons was obviously not appreciated), though they hinged their decision on a contentious point by stating they disliked the prominence given to Burroughs or his *Naked Lunch.* They did not want his conspicuous promotion. It offended their religious convictions. Of course, once they had disposed of the thriving but nasty avant-garde aspect to their shop, they sold Burroughs' books like any other. Why turn away sales? The shop that remained under the illusion that it was Better Books never recovered, even though it limped on in one form or another for some years. All the loyal customers transferred their allegiance to Barry Miles' Indica not far away in Southampton Row, and later northwards to Compendium in what was at that time a peripheral area of London called Camden Town.

From Better Books one would take walks through Soho, directly opposite, along Old Compton Street, where the prostitutes either stood in doorways or switched on the red lights in their windows. A little further and one reached Brewer Street, climbed the stairs behind the Italian deli, and entered John Calder's offices to collect books. One time I went to buy Beckett's *More Pricks Than Kicks*, three of the 100 copies directed my way, one for myself, two for friends, Beckett having been persuaded initially to allow a mimeographed re-edition for scholars.

Soho is not the same any longer. A haven of gay bars, a profusion of cafés that pour onto the sidewalk, Continental style. There is also an abundance of rubber and leather shops, suitable for all persuasions, such that the prostitutes who do still seem to ply their trade conspicuously now appear as the milder side of sleaze. What is sleazier is found right on the Charing Cross Road itself, as indeed elsewhere in central London where telephone boxes are plastered with "calling cards" for all manner of prostitutes, transvestites and transsexuals. No sooner does a council official clear a booth of the "infestation" than the young men return with their blue tack and cards, relining the walls and windows with the array of flesh on offer. Taken individually the images seem lurid but innocuous, though when one is confronted by a bank of a hundred or more on all sides it's not so easy to hold a conversation with one's dear old aunt, or discuss any amount of delicate matters with

anyone but an intimate friend.

I was fortunate to find my feet in London, to find a bookshop to work in that gave me that first step into the world I wanted to enter. And even for that step to be on the Charing Cross Road. One of those who lead me into this world was Colin Wilson. In my teens I had discovered his book, *Adrift in Soho*, in the local library. It was that title with that salacious word, "Soho," with its implications and propositions, that had made me pluck it from the shelf. Reading again a copy that I later acquired, I note the pub opposite Better Books, Molly Moggs, on the corner of Old Compton Street was one of the first places at which Wilson's hero stopped, when he descended on the great metropolis in the Fifties, in search of another world, a more cultured and intelligent world. Dispirited and annoyed at his lack of contact with others in what he thought would be some form of instant acceptability of himself as another outsider welcomed into the ranks, he adds: "The whole city was a part of the great unconscious conspiracy of matter to make you feel non-existent." But Colin Wilson had a presence in my life. That novel led me to *The Outsider*, and the pursuit of his various references, through Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, etc, each leading me to further paths, avenues, alleyways, fields, vistas, opening up a world map itself, a personal labyrinth, a paradise to my imagination. His books had a considerable part to play in determining my direction in life, no matter what I might have subsequently thought or determined about any of his books. At that point they were crucial as catalysts.

Always other bookshops to go into, then as now. Today there are some of the big bookchains like Borders and Waterstones asserting themselves in the street, while others like Foyle's and the second-hand shops seem to survive, some under different owners, alongside the bookshops where the reviewers' copies and the remaindered excess from publishers are off-loaded – with their bargains for the discerning buyer among the best-sellers which didn't happen. Other favoured shops like Henry Pordes remain with memories of treasures discovered there, particularly art books. Beuys drawings spring to mind. Or various Tàpies volumes. And close at hand the women's bookshop, Silver Moon, where once one felt positively discouraged from entering, but now where they seem desperate for customers, the flash mega-bookshops like Borders and Waterstones draining away all business. And yet Zwemmer, the art bookshop, somehow manages to survive miraculously. (*Also to note, Silver Moon's recent absorption into the Foyle's emporium and Zwemmer's renewal in the form of a Koënig wonderland*.)

When I ask others, not only writers, what street they would be drawn to in London,

or cite as their major thoroughfare, they invariably say Charing Cross Road. Perhaps they see their own stories along it. But I wonder how many see it as a street of dreams, a street of hopes and aspirations, like me? All are people who have a sense of culture, obviously, as this is nothing if not a street of culture. It helps too if they are people who still read, not those who used to read in their youth, and who now have little time, as they would see it, their families and jobs having swallowed their days whole. Thus, while some show signs of nostalgia as a result and can still venture along this road, albeit not so frequently, others seem cloaked with jealousy for those who can, or who have benefited from familiarization with it.

Literary memories. Taking my friend Mitsou Ronat, on a brief trip to London, around for the day. After visiting art galleries, walking the length of this road en route to eat near Cecil Court, a passageway off, crammed with second-hand and rare editions bookshops, including Watkins, the occult specialists, famous for steering clear of Crowley (who was catered for in Atlantis Bookshop near the British Museum). Pausing with Mitsou before the window of a shop of theatrical nostalgia, laughing before the displayed original poster for the film, *Trapeze*, one of her favourites, triple somersaults across the mind's arena, and other gymnastic manoeuvres. Hard to walk that passage today without a flood of fond memories for my friend killed so tragically. I try to switch the subject, focus on the variety of other windows, including an Italian bookshop, one of the very few languages to have its own London outlet, rather than the more general foreign bookshops that exist, countable on one hand.

Another memory, a more recent one, when Pierre Guyotat came to London to promote the English-language edition of *Eden Eden Eden*, shaped as a double-handed event with one strand as an exhibition of his books and manuscripts at number 142, a building my neighbour tells me had seen better, or other, days when he had worked as an architect on the top floor, with an escort agency below, a cover term for other activities, and a drinking club on the first floor, a home to less savoury characters, the haunt of gangsters and other known "faces," the Kray Brothers included he suggested. It must have been on that floor, abandoned to decay, then reclaimed for use as an artist's studio, that Guyotat exhibited his texts and books. The other part of the event took place a few doors further away, where Guyotat staged a reading before a packed and standing hip audience in another abandoned and decaying space dominated by a splendid wooden staircase. A memorable night, not only for his vocalization of a recent text, but for the office hand from the publishers who, in a drunken stupor, clambered onto the platform and halted the proceedings, insisting Guyotat remove himself from the stage and the

translator step up to read from the just-published book in English. At the back it was impossible to ascertain what was happening. Why those at the front didn't halt the debacle I've never really known. Guyotat was probably too shocked to refuse to move or to know how to handle the situation. That unpleasant outcome features as one of the most shameful literary moments I've ever witnessed.

Foyle's was famous for its accumulation of stock, no clearance sales, back stock that became lost among its shelves, no stock taking, where you could find volumes long out of print at the original prices. Also a dream outlet for small and independent publishers who could always send in a rep to top up on stock, deliver them in the afternoon with a bill to be paid a few days later, as I knew only too well when I worked for Fulcrum Press directly after Better Books. Foyle's has saved many a cash flow problem. But now I gather it's changing, heading to join, or perhaps combat, the fold peddling the latest "products" for a quick turn over.

Foyle's has always suggested an old world of quaintness, dominated by its owner, an old lady who refused to bring it up to date with modern practices and technology. That might have been true, but with its chaotic organization, and perhaps because of its low pay practices, members of staff had other ways to provide a more clandestine reputation, a reputation of enjoyment. Stories have abounded of drunken lunch-hours or after-hours sprees for some years. In the early Nineties when I was friendly with various members of staff, I would drop in on passing and hear about the sexual activities that occurred in darkened corners, in cupboards, or under the stairs, let alone in the toilets. On more than one occasion I walked smack into couples half-perched on the edge of their pleasures. While these escapades might have been unseen by the late owner, other long-serving female members of her higher echelon were adept at turning a blind eye, remarking that it was just young people having fun, no different from in their youth. Lines of cocaine along the counter probably didn't strike home.

Foyle's helped to brand Charing Cross Road as a bookshop road. Another was number 84, where Marks & Co once resided, the shop to which Helene Hanff commenced writing her letters in 1949, the correspondence becoming the basis of her book, *84 Charing Cross Road*. My sister-in-law loans me her copy when I find it on her shelves. I browse and become charmed like anyone would at the story unfolding. This edition is a double book, the sequel, *The Duchess of Bloomsbury Street*, added, in which Helene comes to London in 1971 to realize her dream, including a visit to the now closed 84, "black and empty," and upstairs "another floor of empty, haunted rooms." Her memories unroll mine. To open the door they call at

86, the bookshop next door: Poole's. I had all but forgotten it myself, indeed thinking, without thinking, that they were one and the same. They were not. Poole's. Next door to the original Better Books. A shop where I made other friends in the following years, the late 70s, one of whom I saw only yesterday, working further down the road in Zwemmer. Memories pile over one another as they crash through my head. All can be aligned. Books, magazines, those friends own involvements and writings all enmeshed in this house, all here to be untangled: if and when.

All the bookshops have risen and fallen over the years I've been walking back and forth along the road. At different times I have frequented one more than another, either because of interest changes on my part, or because ownership and management changes on their part have varied the stock and attitudes. But this road has always been a road that one cannot keep away from. Any break of a few months and one notices the absence through its changes.

Browsing in these shops, edging one's way down shaky wooden stairs into musty basements, one is always prepared to find a fellow scribe in the corner enjoying its pleasures. More than once I've caught that chronicler and celebrant of London, Iain Sinclair, between the pages of a book. Besides creating a different picture of London in his own books, painting an alternative aesthetic of the metropolis that brings together rare connections between people and places, facts and ideas, for years Sinclair has had an occupation, and preoccupation, with buying and selling books, maintained via a catalogue. And like the best catalogues it's not just an alphabetical listing of delights, but a carefully detailized and informed work in itself. A dealer who knows and cares about the books. A dealer who has rescued books from discarded corners and brought them into the light, offering them for the reader and collector who has an equal passion for rescuing books. I'll refrain from reiterating Walter Benjamin's famous essay on collecting with regard to such matters. For the book collector the Charing Cross Road is an extension of his own bookshelves, where each volume is cared for, where each tome is treated with the love and attention the poet gives to each word during writing.

Today, for me, each bookshop is like a bookcase when I'm standing outside it. Each offers memories, interests and obsessions. Even reading up the building is like casting one's eye up a bookcase, looking for something on the top shelf, cornices or balustrades, a twist like a turn of phase.

The regular fare of most book catalogues, cryptically-listed catalogues that drop through the letterbox, are often akin to the modern bookshop. They will always

hold delights, but rarely a sense of adventure. Catalogues, like Sinclair's, are sumptuous, are like the old bookshop where one knows instinctively as one opens the door whether it is likely to offer something sought after, or worth seeking, something to take one off in a different direction, a little detour, an added bonus.

Even when accompanied by our children today we still find reason to walk up the Charing Cross Road rather than take other routes if our destination is close at hand. The girls might not yet have the habit to browse at length in bookshops, though they are not averse to entering them and acquiring more books, a pile growing in our arms in a short space of time, but the idea is planted that this road is the centre of the universe, or virtually. The idea is established that the physicality of looking at and feeling books is more important than any computer screen versions. Or indeed that the smell of slightly musty books is the smell that all good homes are perfumed with, as well as the best bookshops.

The girls must notice how acceptable it is to part with hard-earned money to buy books when reluctance settles in with regard to other goods. One day, some years ago, we leave the Charing Cross Road and cross through Soho to reach that mock Tudor façade that is Liberty's, an expensive department shop, famous for its own brand of prints, fabrics, silks and scarves. Always worth a browse during the "sales" periods. For fun, or to dream, Catherine looks in the "designer" fashion section, browsing the Vivienne Westwoods, Nicole Farhis, and others, until Elise, the elder, notices a price tag, albeit a reduced sales price. And then another. She asks me to equate its price to other things. I compare it to a video recorder, food for more than two months, a tower of children's books and other such practical realities. Edging close to her mother she whispers that it's time to move on. Why? She wants to move to another department, or preferably another shop. Why? "You're just looking," she stresses. "Just looking." Now it's a joke every time we plan a trip into the centre of London. "Just looking," we are reminded if a whiff of Liberty's is caught on the wind, or our breath. There are other things to spend such a sum of money on, of course. Books. Records. For a start.

In the new strip where Dobell's once resided, and where the rents must be high, against all the odds, I would have thought, a bookshop, Murder One, has managed to find its feet. *(To add that it has now crossed the road into more reasonable premises.*) Murder One is the main specialist in crime fiction in the country, a venue where many a writer would be pleased to do a signing or hold a book launch. A few years ago I was passing and popped in to see friends. It should have been closed, but it was the night for the launch of Walter Mosley's first book. He

was already acclaimed in America, but had not yet caught on here. Bill Clinton had not proclaimed him his favourite writer at that point. There was no one there, even though it was past the prescribed time. Not even the publisher's entourage in attendance. Just Mosley and myself. We talked for what seemed a good hour, until we were dry. Literally, for I don't think there was any drink at that point. Finally the publishers arrived, and one or two friends of friends appeared. How different a year or two later. Not that a celebrated name necessarily means a packed shop.

When Robin Cook (aka Derek Raymond) had returned from France in the early 90s, his own view on London crime finally finding its audience in his homeland, he was always to be located just behind the Charing Cross Road, in Soho, frequenting the two haunts that have long been watering holes for writers: the French House and the Coach & Horses. The Coach & Horses is almost on the Charing Cross Road, the French House, often called The French, a few steps further. The latter has a reputation, being the bar where General de Gaulle, Maurice Chevalier and other French people used to drink during the war days. Unlike comparable French establishments, you are more likely to be crammed in, standing room only, not seated at tables. This isn't Paris. These are the two regular bars one retreats to with anyone you meet in the street. Or if alcohol is not the menu, then two equally cramped pâtisserie homes have been in existence for years, one called Pâtisserie Valerie, the other, Maison Bertaux. Both have illustrious reputations for morning or afternoon coffees and delicious cakes.

How sad to bump into a friend coming from Maison Bertaux recently, bouncing with joy, a wide smile. "Good news," I asked, thinking perhaps he had found a publisher for his book. "No," he responded. "I've just had the most exquisite cake. It was so good, it was better than sex."

Little drinking clubs, often exclusive, or where one can bluff one's way in if one looks the part, whether the Groucho Club, or basement bars hidden behind solid wooden doors whose bell one rings to enter. Or places to eat, so many places, of all types, spilling here in Soho or off all the roads these days. And indeed on the Charing Cross Road. Many are run of the mill, parts of chains, but there are still some that have existed for ever, such as the little Greek place in the southern part of the road, near Cecil Court, that was always a reasonable place for a bite many years ago before today's profusion came into being. Today too, in shops like Borders, after browsing the books, one can drink a coffee of one's choosing, a proper cup of coffee, not the "instant" variety in white plastic cups still trafficked in many

other quarters.

Philip Corner, when talking about playing some of John Cage's "prepared piano pieces," notes that while one could follow the instructions of the precise dimensions of the bolts and the exact positions to place them, the sound that was supposed to be produced wasn't always so, suggesting that one had to choose between "the specificity of the position or try to get the sound," because, at the time they were written, most of the performers of the pieces were practicing and experimenting on "beat up" pianos at home and working on different ones in concert. I think of that in terms of walking up and down the street, trying to say what one will see, what I saw, what I felt, as if trying to make a game plan for others. As if a score to be performed by others. Is that what we do? I think of this now because out of the blue I hear from Philip Corner after twenty or more years, today relocated from New York to Northern Italy, pleased to rediscover me via a friend, hoping that we can meet if it works out that he comes to London in the near future. Now that I'm living within the encompass of London once more I know we can meet this time. I think it'll be in the Charing Cross Road. It usually is employed as a base for my meetings with others. But where? The coffee bar at Borders is the favoured place these days, allowing one to browse in books or records to give flexibility to the meeting time. Or should I chose somewhere else, something more representative of our relationship? Record shops, bookshops, the National Gallery slide through my mind. Nothing sticks. Before I would have come up with something suitable. Now it's not so easy. Anything credible is probably out of the way and liable to cause some confusion locating.

Among all these bookshops is a cigar shop, G. Smith & Sons, at number 74, that sells not only cigars, but pipes and all manner of cigarettes. It has been there since 1869 it proclaims outside. It looks something like one of Joseph Cornell's boxes, being the only one in the neighbourhood to retain some of its former look. I've been inside a few times when guests from abroad have sought their favourite cigarettes and I've seen that as a possible source, successfully as it has turned out.

The history of the street is not extensive as far as I can gather. It is not the old heart of London, the City of London. For many years it was slums, living space for the poor. Wanting to drive other roads through the district to connect one area to another, Charing Cross Road was one that developed and benefited, gradually taking on a mantle of its own, particularly as regards a book culture. Driving through. At the top end, at St. Giles, at the foot of the tower that is Centre Point, where gallows once stood until the fifteenth century – fittingly one could imagine – it was

the stopping point on Mondays for a "jug of ale" for those malefactors going west, en route to the Tyburn tree, at the far end of Oxford Street, to be hanged.

I realize these perambulations, this browsing and basking in the ruminations of the road and through its bookshops has been a solo affair. Has it always been so for others? And further, is it mainly a male preoccupation? An exception immediately springs to mind: Jeanette Winterson. She has written notably on her days living and breathing in bookshops. Though all my former partners have been involved in the arts, whether literature, art or music, none has been my partner on these jaunts. Of course we have walked the street, even stopped in the street, but none has lived for hours in and out the shops, all not being browsers. It's seems as if browsing in bookshops, and record shops too, is a male preserve. Women are not collectors in that same way. They might collect clothes, or other accessories, or crockery, or jewellery, or other adornments, but not books. As I've heard it said so many times. And while Catherine might agree to some degree, not so interested in searching out a particularly volume by a writer, or the missing book by another writer to gain the "complete set," that hasn't dissuaded her from spending time with me in and out the bookshops. Her appetite to read further, to pursue her interests and to expand them is not necessarily the usual approach. She can happily browse for hours without a query. Indeed, I'm often ready to move on before her. It stems from her upbringing, her formative years in the library in Liège, as well as listening to music with her father, and, I would posit, a better cultural awareness in an European environment than generally occurs here. These days we can go as one, we can live as one in the Charing Cross Road.

The street as a series of Joseph Cornell's boxes, whether as shop windows themselves or complete building façades. An image that comes to mind as Catherine's room has a wall of glass cupboards and shelves within which a treasure trove of memories and dream statements have blossomed, a collection of jars, bottles and boxes, cardboard theatres, marionettes, photos and paintings, tarot cards and card games, doll's house furniture, incense boxes, memories of past-times, though earlier than her own, more Victorian, objects and lures and shells, always shells, that note childhood, and travels she has made to French Polynesia and elsewhere, and dreams of countries not visited, the Far East or South America, garish and lurid colours colliding with an aesthetic appeal, a hotchpotch with style. And moving out from behind the glass, books and shelves lined with other objects, jars and jugs, mementos gathered from anywhere and everywhere. Objects on the fold-out leaf, papers and specially-bound notebooks filling the bureau, dried flower bunches hanging from the curtain rails, angels spinning from the ceiling... It's a way of life,

not a concern to make art. A "cabinet of curiosities" that is forever evolving, not fixed and closed like Cornell's. Always a future, always a growth that keeps her world open to further possibilities, explorations into the real world. This spills into the rest of the house, surfaces and wall spaces filled with objects that tickle the senses as one's eye catches them, the rooms with their books far from chronological or easily classified, often grouped by associations, juxtapositions of ideas and relationships, a collage of refined directions and redirections.

A different world from some of the dominant trends in contemporary art to produce displays of the detritus of society, a rag bag of jumble, oddments and scraps, trash as art, rooms filled with unselected scoops from raided skips, an "installation art" whose mess is to be justified with its parallels in society, though at times it seems little more than laziness, a reluctance to create any stimulus, solely to hold up the mirror to what we all can and do see in the streets, or on our televisions. Direct social reflection preferred to a reflection of dreams or aspirations, or any other flights of imagination or thought.

When one walks along the Charing Cross Road, refocusing and perceiving the windows as a series of boxes, or a series of compositions, looking into these vitreous fronts, it's not unusual for the glass surfaces to offer additional mirrored perspective leading to different ideas. The reflection of self or passers-by inserted into the displays. Or a series of distorted reflections in the gleaming metal of shining saxophones. Or, on one occasion, an angled mirror in the display that reflected what was coming along the road behind me and placed it in the context of a reflection of what was coming towards me. A collision of what's behind with what's before. The past cut into the future, the present as a conditional. Conflicts. Tenses and tensions.

A road with recollections of its art involvements, even if I don't often reflect or catch sight of something to instigate the reflection. The façade to the art school, St Martin's, for example, is too dull to attract attention. Despite its fame as an art school since the last World War, it's an establishment that has often disappointed whenever I've stepped inside to view the yearly output at its Degree shows. A school that seems to miss being a major engine of contemporary art alongside others such as Goldsmiths or the Royal College, *I write one year, only to understand the opposite, as I revise today, is now the current opinion*.

Overlooking the front of St Martin's, on the other side of the street, Derek Jarman had his flat for many years. Among the memories that tumble forth, one particu-

lar moment at a photo shoot, a gathering of artists invited to contribute to a festival around Georges Bataille that I co-produced in 1984. That moment when a flurry of egos fought to fill the frame, an early warning missed of the selfishness and clamour for glory of a couple that would maim the event itself and wreck the potential for the spirit of the celebration. The desire prevails to overlay more pleasant repercussions, involvements with John Maybury and Cerith Wyn Evans, both artists who moved through the art schools into film, then back and forth through the different mediums as they explored their territories.

Behind Jarman's block runs Flitcroft Street, a small road that transforms into an alleyway where Elms Lesters Painting Rooms are to be found. Behind the green wooden doors lies the former world of a painting studio where theatre backdrops can be hung in all their glory through the hole in the floor, allowing various hands to work above and below simultaneously. Its pulling power is its faded romance, a location to film a bygone age runs as time-stops through my head, paint dripping as from a tap, as blood into a tray. Akin to the sawdust tray beneath the wooden operating tables in the first hospitals, one still in existence in a garret near St. Thomas's not that many miles from the spot, where poets now strut their stuff as surgeons at the text.

With buildings regularly left vacant for years, sometimes while plans for modernization are sought, abandoned, and then sought anew, ever expanding colonies of artists have grown in London since the Sixties who have taken over the sites for extended periods through artist organizations like ACME, set up for just such purposes. An office block becomes a series of studios, sometimes with temporary separations, other times with more solid partition walls. In smaller places an artist might take over the whole space to live and work for a while. Gavin Turk had just such a place on the Charing Cross Road when he was trying to make his mark in the early Nineties. A further part of the strategy that has triggered the current BritArt phenomenon stems from Damien Hirst and friends who side-stepped the traditional gallery system and used empty office, factory or warehouse areas to serve as temporary exhibition spaces. Gavin Turk's determining move occurred when he did likewise in a building, temporarily vacant, in Denmark Street. What had once been a music publisher became an art gallery for the week during which Gavin exhibited his work on all five floors, often responding to the spaces themselves to make fresh works. Included was the waxwork model of Gavin himself portrayed as punk Sid Vicious in a Presley pose, that Saatchi acquired and which helped to lift Gavin into the echelons of the famed young artists, though these days he doesn't see himself so closely aligned with his contemporaries.

Today it is not fashionable with the latest batch of artists to be associated with any part of the West End of London, whether the traditional gallery areas, or just the connection with the "West End" tag. Today all the young artists, Gavin included, have moved into the East End of London, gentrifying the homes and workspaces, making themselves an extended Art Centre both for living, working and exhibiting. Earlier dreams to go "up West" fall on deaf ears.

Previous to the current stratum of artists, for many years, starting in the Seventies, one of the famous alternative spaces for studio and exhibition in the centre of London was the AIR building, sited virtually on the corner of Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road. There the studios had artists like Susan Hiller and Paul Neagu working upstairs, while down in the former showroom, which was transformed into an exhibition space, another cutting-edge art form, Performance Art, was regularly staged. There I remember performing as part of the London Calling ensemble, one of the few performances I made that I felt succeeded in my terms and in its response from the audience. David Medalla's warmth and positivity afterwards at our reunion after those Better Books years helped to strengthen the course along which I was feeling through my body. The AIR Gallery too was the place where I saw Brian Catling's archeological exposition, a form of pyramid burial chamber, but one that encapsulated the whole of history from earliest civilisation right up to that point in 1977, a distillation of the essence of man's presence, a warp through our urban despair that had a tangible energy intensity on entrance. I always felt that Catling, a close friend of Iain Sinclair, had tapped a spot that was suitable for Sinclair to draw into his famed re-mappings of London.

This idea struck home for, on the upper floors, Susan Hiller was steadily working away in her studio at her own archaeological and anthropological structurings and classifications, like her work *Fragments*, which analysed the sherds of painted Pueblo pots and became the linchpin to establishing her position within contemporary art.

From her studio one day Susan took me on a tour of the local automatic photomat machines, particularly the series of booths along the Charing Cross Road, down in the Leicester Square tube foyer, a favourite spot of hers, where we tested out the various machines, collecting strips of four that she later made into one of her *Photomat Portrait* series. That day the machines were well behaved, didn't have temperamental fits to miscolour or distort the portraits, or offer a different range of abilities in their performance. A long-time friend, Susan captured my wilder look

of the period, today a mask that seems to conceal my real portrait, the one of subversive artist who has worked away steadily despite the inherent controlling procedures of the system and its agencies.

At the top of the road towering over every building in sight is Centre Point, a building that has never been occupied fully since it was built. In the Sixties it was more profitable to keep it empty than to have it occupied, with local tax concessions manipulated to the full. Today there is partial residence. Various stories abound of its history, one being that to fill it with workers and office equipment would collapse the land beneath, as it was badly located over part of the Underground system. Empty or full it is a landmark that central London has not been proud of for almost half a century, though once it must have been someone's idea of a dream. Today it seems to have placed a blight on the street from an architectural point of view. Unlike other streets where some inspired modernisation or new buildings have been constructed, Charing Cross Road has little to recommend it in its current strategies. Though casting one's eyes high, there are ornamentations and details from former eras that catch the eye, giving fleeting pangs of romanticism, frilled edgings to one's dreams.

Lower down the road, a decade ago, I was looking up the façade of one building, checking to see if I had the right number, as I had to deliver a package to a friend of a friend who would take it across to Germany, when I recalled that I had visited that block of apartments many years before, a block which I must have passed time and again and entirely forgotten. Not that the young woman in question had slipped my mind, or the events of our relationship, often extremely humorous. I still do not think I have seen such an enormous bed, one that unfurled from an equally enormous sofa. It gave a new meaning to the words: bedroom gymnastics. Unfortunately it wasn't her own apartment, but one she was looking after for a few weeks while the wealthy owners were abroad.

The thought recurred recently when I read a note that T.S.Eliot used to have a flat there, or the use of one, as a secret retreat when he wanted to escape from his wife. Or perhaps it was not there, but nearby. Do I check it out exactly? I wonder whether his memories were as pleasant as mine.

Do I pursue the "attack" of a note, check the detail and all its implications for a trip down a road in my memory? Or do I leave it to "decay." Decay is a major factor in the thinking and composing of Morton Feldman. "Decay, departing landscape, this expresses where the sound exists in our hearing – leaving us rather than coming to-

wards us." Decay as an aspect of memory, as a key to forgetting is my interest. Do we always wish to have our memories refreshed? The nuisance of photographs is that they create revivals of our memories, not always just single notes, sometimes complex chord impositions, opening out vast arrays that perhaps we never really wanted to revisit. The photograph of my grandma in Trafalgar Square, of me with her in Trafalgar Square as a child has always been an early remembrance. At that time family photographs were a rarity, thus we all still cling to those we have in our possession. There is a photo of my mother in Trafalgar Square too, feeding the pigeons, taken at the same outing, that my sister has framed on display in her home. These days I try to re-impose that image in preference to the one of my grandma that has been lodged in my head for far too long, particularly since I discovered a few years ago, after my mother's death, of the abominable way in which my grandma treated my mother, starting from the very day of her arrival in this country to join her husband, ignoring the telegram and leaving her stranded on the doorstep until my father returned from work. I cannot forgive my grandma, already teetering on the edge of the abyss in my esteem, countless excuses offered to justify her persistent disagreeable behaviour, a thorn in the side to every branch of the family tree. It seems so unfair that the reward for her approach to life should be longevity, and that she should not only see her husband into an early grave, but should outlive her son, my father, too.

This is not autobiography. These are just moments used as threads to hold together the fabrics that form my image of the road. There is no continuity as such, which is necessary for autobiography. Walter Benjamin noted: "Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. (…) For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life." The shards of memory that arise in the process of narration are the tappings (and trappings) brought to mind as I work to evoke the place, and which I discover I would like to bury or transform. At least as far as one particular memory that has become an unwelcome visitor on this excursion.

Feldman's closest friend, the artist Philip Guston, posed a teaser when he wrote: "Painting is a clock that sees each end of the street as the edge of the world." A statement rich for use with regard to Charing Cross Road, with its northern end blunted by its high point of twentieth century capitalism, Centre Point, and its southern tip a mark of the former days of glory and wealth, among other issues, with the National Gallery and its treasures. There to ponder the splendours of Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage*, Holbein's *Ambassadors*, Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*, and Vermeer's *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal,* to name just four that come

to mind, these works offering thoughts to do with perspectives I note as soon as I see them written down on paper.

The back of the National, effectively the starting point to the Charing Cross Road, is home to the National Portrait Gallery, another regular place to roam. A space that last welcomed me with Paula Rego's portrait of Germaine Greer, Germaine taking an unusual pose, but then she has always done that, right from an earlier provocation in *Suck* magazine, a pornographic shot to shock. Paula normally works with Verdi as musical accompaniment in her studio, but for these sittings she noted that Greer brought Wagner's *Ring* with her to set the mood as they worked.

While this road cuts through and is part of the West End as regards theatre, and musical theatre, its pivot, the Palace, in its middle at Cambridge Circus, today with *Les Misérables*, represents the type of popular theatre that has never been part of my life. Any theatre that has attracted me has always been on the fringes, elsewhere, away from the pressure of commercial dictates.

Until a few years back there was only a trace of cinema in the street, with the Jacey chain having one of its sleazy outlets. I can barely remember occupying a seat, except to sit and watch Yoko Ono's *Bottoms* film, which had a short season, its billboard viewable from Better Books. I went to see if I could recognize the characteristics of my own posterior on the big screen, wobbling along, shot one night in the early hours after a session at UFO, taken back to the studio in a Mayfair flat. Today there are only the passing faces of those in the film trade, their editing rooms and offices in the area. Walking along this road two decades ago with an Italian director who was thinking of employing the street as a location, more for the faces of the people than any architectural lure or sense of setting, he seemed more intent on determining the occupations of the women who stepped, or perhaps swayed or sashayed are better words, from Soho, coming out of Old Compton Street. Always intriguing to note how films can change the location when they adapt a novel to give more pictorial splendour than the setting in the book. Watching *Russia House* recently in connection with Lisbon, its panoramic shots across the Alfama offering a sunnier and more acceptable disposition than the more subdued, but piquant, setting of the original novel. Charing Cross Road would serve well for its characters, though too low-key for anything the Hollywood types would want to extract for glamorous ends.

Off the top of the street there's the plethora of hifi shops along Tottenham Court Road, a thoroughfare that has never grabbed me despite the facility for walking

it often enough when going through to Bloomsbury, the British Museum and other locations to the right, or into Fitzrovia to the left. Both areas are rife with strong connections to literary and artistic history, whether of Virginia Woolf and her friends from the Bloomsbury Group, or the contrasting bunch of George Orwell and his companions like Dylan Thomas, Rayner Heppenstall, Augustus John and Gerald Wilde.

Young BritArt, like music and other parts of today's popular culture, appears to be geared around fame. Perhaps this is more prevalent as celebritiness is part of the fabric of contemporary art itself. Does one aim to be famous, or wealthy? Or does one do what one has to do as an artist? Or indeed as a writer? Does one have to be part of the pack to survive? What part does fame itself play in art for these people to become famous, to become celebrities? And is one jealous because they have gained it rather than oneself? Did they have something extra, or was their goal to be famous? Did I sidetrack it, shoot myself in the foot, or have bad luck, being in the wrong place at the wrong time as we used to say?

Along Oxford Street, in the first months of 2001, Michael Landy destroyed (or *deconstructed*, his term) all his worldly possessions in an abandoned department store that he had taken over for the event. It was a comment on possessions, material wealth, reducing all in a grinder, like bones in a crematorium before being presented to the surviving relatives. Though, in this case, the artist has not destroyed himself but only his possessions. Or perhaps that is himself, as an artist? I hesitate to say "his work" as a matter of course. For the work is the very act itself. And, interestingly, the deconstruction includes the destruction of the work of others, most given to him in good faith by his fellow artists, others who as part of the BritArt movement have acquired fame. Some are concerned about the concepts behind the destruction of their work, which has its own monetary and artistic values. Some seem less than pleased. Tracy Emin visits him on site, accompanied by her pal Vivienne Westwood, and asks for her work to be returned. Too late. Forewarned of her critical attitude, Landy lists her piece high on his priority list to destroy in order to prevent any attempt to reclaim it, and the possibility of not achieving 100% satisfaction in his aims. But who is to know whether Tracy, in particular, or indeed some others, are there in protest at the concept or because their appearance will gain more publicity for themselves? Gary Hume arrives and asks for his piece ear-marked for destruction to be replaced by another, a better piece. An echo here undoubtedly, from half a century ago, of Willem de Kooning who, when asked by Rauschenberg if he could have a piece to destroy (the ethical question of asking permission to destroy the work, unlike above), was confronted by a de Kooning

who didn't give him a reject or lesser piece, but who went in search of a good work, one that would take some effort to erase. In fact, though a small work it comprised charcoal, oil paint, pencil and crayon, and took Rauschenberg a good month's worth of hard rubbing in 1953. It's now known as the *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Rauschenberg's intention, though initially seen, or confused, as an act of vandalism, an attack on Abstract Expressionism, and indeed its master, was in fact trying to figure out a way "to bring drawing into the all-whites" as he says, (a reference to his period of white paintings), and after singularly failing to satisfy his intentions by erasing his own drawings thought that he would need to start from an acknowledged work of art. Thus he approached de Kooning, the artist whose drawings he most admired, de Kooning, who, in his turn, became a willing accomplice in the young turk's research.

How to erase that image of my grandma, that image of me with my grandma feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square? I seek the photo. It isn't here, I must have already taken that decision some years ago to exclude it from my collection. Perhaps my sister has it among the family collections. Forget it. Don't enquire. But I can't erase it from my memory. Or exorcize it. How I would have wished, in the same way as Rauchenberg, to wipe that photo from my memory. But memory erasure is not so straightforward, or necessarily possible. Not that Rauschenberg exactly erased the de Kooning in its entirety, original markings are still in evidence, and its very existence as a piece, and in its title, bears witness as a momento. Neither can I pretend the photo doesn't exist. Not to write on it doesn't mean it doesn't exist, just that I refuse to face it. I should accept the fact that life is not only the pleasant images. Each street, each part that we peruse, has aspects that might be unsavoury, or creates unsavoury memories. That I wish to exclude my grandma from my memory, for all her nastiness, not only to myself, but to the rest of my family, and particularly towards my mother, and indeed towards her son, my father, from way back has become paramount. It has crept up on me without warning. It fills my head like a bulging burden. And so, instead of writing about a street in only the pleasant terms, touching on the happy memories, the hopes and aspirations, I find that lingering aftertaste of my grandma traced on the screen, canvas, page… ground. And despite my efforts to grind her into the ground, I find her memory becoming more dominant. It seems to be growing beneath my feet, as if a dehydrated image that has been watered, swelling up out of all proportion. To become a monster. I even discuss her, not the photos, with my sister as we drive to the supermarket on one of our regular shopping trips. A street of dreams becoming a nest of vipers. Don't exaggerate. One viper.

The more I think on that image and its repercussions, the harder it is for the image to decay, to fade. That comes as no surprise.

When I was a teenager I was taught a method to accomplish feats of memory, to recall numbers, objects and names in order, having been presented with them in a jumble. Though it was directed at me as a way to improve memory, I was eventually called upon to treat it as a party piece once I'd acquired the art, or should I say "knack." I think the book my father offered me was called *The Art of Memory*. No, I don't think so. I think it was something more salacious, something like *How to Improve your Memory*, or words to that effect, with a garish yellow cover. My father probably acquired it from an advert, I seem to remember seeing it in the newspapers for years. Not that I think I had a bad memory. In fact I think it's good, just unfortunate as regards the case I'm pinpointing.

Perhaps what is really niggling away inside me is that particular photo of my grandma, not all photos of her. Not all seem as offensive as this one. Why this one? Because the set of two photos are taken from the same outing, only a few years after my mother had arrived from Italy. It is obviously taken by a street photographer. It looks very professional. Very glamorous. My mother is dressed up for a day out, as they did in those days, just after the War. My mother is feeding the pigeons in the same way as my grandma in her shot, except my grandma has me with her. I have seen various other photos taken through the years of my grandma, but in this one I am with my grandma, not my mother. She might have rejected my mother, but she had not rejected me. She was probably paying for the day out and she wanted me alone to be her possession in her photo. That is obviously what is upsetting. A rare "proper" photo, as they say, rather than the usual informal family snaps. A posed image that would undoubtedly survive the years because it looked crisp and professional unlike the regular amateurish ones the family processed through Boots, and I have to be fixed in a smile with my grandma. That's the sore point, the real issue to come to terms with.

Why do the visual arts regularly weave themselves into my thinking, into the way I view the street. At various times during my writing life I've seen steps to move forward into the film world, to draw together my interests across various art forms into that one form called film-making, but always the vagaries of financial controls have tempered my involvements. Unlike film-making, writing and the visual arts can be aside from outside control, at least in the creative process. Writing at root requires little more than a pen and paper to physically accomplish the act. Likewise, the joy of being an artist can come down to the use of a marking imple-

ment, pen, pencil, paintbrush and paint, and a surface on which to make the mark, paper, canvas etc. These are the basic ingredients. And yet I have rarely trod that path, my painting and drawing efforts mainly private, mainly discarded. Yet still I see the street in continual references to the visual arts.

Lurking somewhere is that dream to be a painter, undoubtedly. I watch Jacques Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse*. I write about the film, more than once. It revolves around the making of a painting, but it is also about the notions of artistic creation itself.

Likewise that fascination with Francis Bacon whom I regularly saw around the Charing Cross Road, mainly because he spent a considerable time in a nearby drinking club, the Colony Room Club in Dean Street. I shouldn't suggest any denigration in that idea, for Bacon was a prime influence, his *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* at the Tate resonating within me at a time when I was at that crucial point of switching my supposed course, a career in geology, for a life in the Arts, where my gut feelings and intuitions were directing me.

I wonder if my interest in stationery, an array of pencils, pens and other writing implements on my desk, a pile of paper and notebooks, from stylish handmade paper delights through to supermarket *cahiers* in my cupboard, is more reminiscent of the painter with his pot of brushes and resources. Indeed the artists' materials shop at the bottom of Charing Cross Road, as with others dotted around the streets either way, always catches my attention and draws me in periodically, sometimes to browse, other times to purchase. Yet today most writing is done either on the typewriter, or the computer, little more than a glorified typewriter that makes corrections and re-printing so much easier. And still I sidetrack into shops with stationery, whether the lure of bargains, or expensive displays. And still I draft write with pencils, rarely pens, a whole pot of thirty or more maintained on my desk, regularly added to when I come across a pencil I take a fancy to.

One time in Susan Hiller's studio she drew the aura around my right hand, as seen through a blue-tinted sheet of glass, its intensity located between my first finger and thumb, the sign of someone who channels his creative energies through holding an implement, the pencil of the writer, or indeed the paintbrush of the artist.

I also venture along that alleyway where I had my hair trimmed to oblivion to touch the fringes of Chinatown and pop downstairs into a shop to bask in, if not always buy, Chinese paper, for it is too thin to write upon, and any intentions to paint on remain mainly as dreams. Tottenham Court Road also carries the burden

of another seduction, for not so long ago Paperchase opened a major branch there, with its fine handmade papers, creating a regular haunt for us, me to dream, Catherine to purchase in order to make cards and unusual personal stationery to send to her friends.

Not that my activities in the "poetry reading" world didn't overlap with Performance Art. Just like Kathy Acker, another who traversed writing and art, who was as much a part and product of the New York art scene, whose readings were performances and whose writing techniques were as much inspired by the visual arts as by literature. Though we met in Amsterdam in the late Seventies, then Paris a few weeks later, before pursuing a correspondence for a time before she moved to London, it was rare to see her around town once here, our paths diverging more than crossing. The last time we met was in the Charing Cross Road. We were both on our way to other appointments, and promised to make contact again to have an extended conversation. It never happened, her illness and death intervened. Kathy was a writer who painted with words. Also to remember that Beckett said it was the shape of the sentence that was more important than the meaning. The visual aspect of writing, whether sentence or paragraph – aside from typographical considerations – has often been part of writing, and more so now that computers allow instant lay out and manipulations.

So while I maintain the line of writer, is it the dream to be the artist that has always remained for me, that perhaps still resides, or has it deflected enough to enable me to take aspects of its activity into my writing and my approach to writing?

When I did paint in my late teens, the smell was not welcomed in the house, the smell of oils. Perhaps I should have been more circumspect, not created such a discernible olfactory attraction. But then perhaps any art form pursued would have been vilified. I remember the manner in which I had to divorce myself from family and start afresh in a new world to make any strides. Perhaps it is the suburbs. Hanif Kureishi, who comes from the neighbouring suburban town of Bromley, notes: "Culture is rather sneered upon in the suburbs. You're considered to be getting above yourself or it's seen as pretentious or financially not viable." Only later when you have established yourself, not necessarily in the arts world, but within yourself, once you know what you are about, is it viable to live again in the suburbs, where you can work in peace, making pleasurable sorties to the centre… and to the Charing Cross Road.

My memory is incorrect. Studio 51 was not a haunt of Patrice Chaplin, as I appre-

ciate when I browse the book again. Other Central London clubs and coffee bars are noted, but not that particular one that I felt sure was included. But does it matter in this case? Other memories have surfaced and played a role in shaping this walk along the road.

Can one only truly do one art form? Although I might want to paint above all else, I know that it is not possible to do it without full commitment, otherwise it would become a dabbling, which is ultimately unsatisfactory, leads to an emptiness, a hole that would widen, would become an abyss that would become despair. The choice is to keep writing, to pursue what I've been trying to pursue, because at least one is walking on the edge, there is still that chance to find something more. Having said that, if I wanted to paint it would not be to start again, because the mental side, the *being* side is already there. Only the technique of the art, the abilities to handle paint, brush, canvas etc, and perhaps, to some degree, the use of the eye is not there. By the time I would start to reach a point of technical accomplishment, it might be too late. Does that mean one has to live with that sense of failure, that sense of what could have been?

As Feldman points out in his writings, others probably see one more clearly than oneself. One only understands oneself after much of the work is done "and reminiscence begins to saturate your life." He cites examples with Proust and Flaubert.

Maple syrup. Out of the blue I think: maple syrup. Perhaps Proust's madeleines triggered it. When we went to Lyons Corner House it wasn't to have afternoon tea, or cakes or scones, but to have waffles with maple syrup, something I never had anywhere else but there until I was much older, away from home. That was our childhood treat there. No wonder I've lost the taste for waffles over the years.

I could have perhaps chosen other locations to explore as a course, but each would have had a different emphasis, each would have turned up different reminiscences, even if each would not have been at the heart of the matter like the Charing Cross Road. Others, if asked, might not have chosen such a central road or place, not such a glamorous environment in which to explore their thoughts. But at least I chose to make my archeological dig in a place that I enjoyed, "to say this is a good site to dig", a quote that I find in my notebook, but which I cannot trace to its source – wondering if it is Benjamin as I seem to think.

When I began along this road a few weeks ago I had Peggy Lee's *Street of Dreams* in mind, a song I had not heard for some while, words I only vaguely remembered.

I've resisted relistening to them until now, to see if the sentiments matched up to the proposal I pursued. Like all memories, nothing overlays reality precisely. And though the road might well be similar to the dreams of others, or, as she sings, "and you'll be met there / by others like you / brothers as blue / smiling, on the street of dreams," the quoting is a misquoting, an alignment chosen for my own ends. Only her song's conclusion can be turned to match: "no one is poor, long as love is sure on the street of dreams." While my course in life has been driven by this street, as I've shown, today the dream is found in love, which makes me perhaps luckier that many others, for in my companion, Catherine, I've found all that I have ever wanted in a companion, and that is like a dream come true.

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A substantial extract, suitably adapted, was published in Iain Sinclair's *London: City of Disappearances* (Hamish Hamilton, 2006; Penguin, 2007)

Paul Buck's recent writings include: *Lisbon* (Signal Books, 2002) see www.signalbooks.co.uk, *Spread Wide* (Dis Voir, 2004) see www.disvoir.com, Frozen Tears, 1, 2 & 3 see www.frozentears.co.uk