H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cynthia Wall. *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xviii + 277 pp. $64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-63013-9.

Reviewed by Mark Goldie (Churchill College, University of Cambridge)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2001)

London is currently a boom city. The historiography of London is booming too. In recent years we have seen several large-scale Rome-to-Dome general histories, as well as specialist studies in urban microhistory. Cynthia Wall's book originated in a doctoral thesis on literary space in the works of Daniel Defoe and its relationship to London's rebuilding after the Great Fire of 1666. The book hinges upon the psychological, cultural, and imaginative impacts of the Fire, and, although Defoe's name has disappeared from the title, the narrative uses of space in *Robinson Crusoe*, *Roxana*, *The Complete Tradesmen*, and the *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* provide the culmination of her analysis. Wall's closing suggestion is that the "changing cultural perceptions of space in London after the Fire contributed to the production and power of the novel as a genre that visualizes and actively inhabits space" (p. 212). In pursuit of this claim, she discusses practically every kind of contemporary written response to the Fire. The texts in review include poetry, sermons, diaries, plays, novellas, official utterances in the *London Gazette*, and projected schemes for the City's rebuilding. Topographically prolific sources like Ned Ward's *London Spy* have special place, as do the new, cartographically exact, street maps produced by John Ogilby.

The Fire devastated the City. Londoners were disorientated and traumatized by their loss. But the City was rebuilt, and Londoners physically and mentally reclaimed the streets. This is Wall's theme. But it is not her vocabulary. Her story is cast in terms of contemporary reactions to an "unbearable ...semiotic confusion," in which "many ...cartographic and literary efforts ...were designed to reattach signs to signifieds" (p. 121). By "writing the streets" Restoration authors ensured that "London streets would become the semiotic structure redefining London, reinvested with social, political, and commercial meaning in a cross-cultural and profound attempt to reattach the street signs to their signified spatiality – to make *lived* space once again *known* space" (p. 38).

This book is the work of a literary scholar, which, if informed by early modern historiography, is more forcibly informed by poststructural criticism and postmodern geography. Space is the abiding category. But the term which is most relentlessly present is "meaning." The incinerated City was "emptied of meaning" (p. 3), then "reinvested with meaning" (p. 115); the cultural drive was to "repossess ...meanings" (p. 121); medieval buildings "house[d] social meanings" (p. 98); Hyde Park was "resonant with social meaning" (p. 163); Ned Ward was "affirming spatial meaning" (p. 138). Just *what* meaning these spaces represent Wall does not seem to broach. In the wide open texture of postmodernity, meaning is contentless: it only matters that it is psychically satisfying and makes disoriented people feel at home in a confusing world.

I found the interpretative vocabulary of this book cloying. The phoenix-from-the-ashes theme that lies at its core provokes from the author a spate of repetitious prefixes. "Rebuilt," "re-covered," "re-membered," "renamed," "reperceived," "redefined," "resignified," "recontiguating," "renarrativizing," "rehierarchizing." The book strikes me – I write as an historian – as containing a good many overblown readings of some naively practical and literal texts. A shopkeeper cannot announce in the *Gazette* that he has now resumed trading in Ivy Lane but he must be corralled into a discussion headed

"The public[iz]ation of spatial reperception" (p. 63). A cartographer cannot publish a street map but he must engage in "discourses of cultural self-spatialization" (p. 89). Such elaboration makes for prose that reminds one of a gothic building whose spires have too many finials and crockets. It is prose that verges on the metaphysical, in which everything is read as a text (material objects as well as things written), so that everything in the phenomenal world is transfigured into something else in the noumenal world of the postmodern mind. Hence, for example, Londoners' homes were the "most profoundly meaningful of individual texts" (p. 30). Or: "streets – the spaces between houses – are in some ways by definition and in contrast to houses unstructured, fluid, something to be moved through, transitional, transformational" (p. 144). Because the literal can never be left alone, variations on the phrase "figuratively as well as literally" occur repeatedly, as in the remark that the new two-dimensional street plan "literally as well as figuratively represents blank space, emptiness, the inexpressible" (p. 84).

Postmodern dress often decks out old arguments in new fashions. Certain assumptions seem to lurk liminally throughout this book. One is an overdrawn thesis about modernization: the ultimately unhistorical notion that there was a great "before" and "after," a pre- and postlapsarian condition of the world. This transformation, this birth of the modern, is made to hinge upon the Fire. Space was, apparently, transformed from being fixed, stable, and static, into being dynamic, fluid, in motion. John Stow's Elizabethan London had a fixity, but Defoe's is an "estranging modern space" (p. 96). Another presence is Foucault – "most genres of Fire narratives generally construct some sort of Foucauldian heterotopias" (p. 16) – while behind Foucault lies the shade of Marx. Urban patterns shifted "from civic community to bourgeois privacy" (here quoting Lawrence Manley), a privacy marked by "individualism and subjectivity as well as the experiences of aloneness and loneliness, of isolation and strangeness" (p. 213). (Was nobody lonely before modernity?) Defoe is made to bear the burden of the imaginative transition to modernity, as he has so often in English literary critical canons. In him, "modern space" is understood ambivalently, "as much the possibility for movement, expansion, profit, freedom, and power, as the threat of entrapment, misdirection, confinement, or exposure" (p. 218).

Cynthia Wall has written an erudite book, one that is open to what one discipline can learn from another. It is replete in its recovery and patient reading of a considerable range of Fire narratives, and it carries us from London's first A-to-Zs to Crusoe's hut and Roxana's "sexual space." But it is a book which I suspect practising historians will not find satisfying, and one which I felt to be imaginatively imprisoned within a prevailing school of interpretative conventions.

Citation: Mark Goldie. Review of Wall, Cynthia, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2001.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4849