

Underground Poetry and Poetry on the Underground

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This project focuses on the function and impact of poetry in public spaces - in this case *The London Underground* - and on the cultural insights which can be drawn from that relationship. It therefore has a comparative dimension which potentially draws on the domains of the metropolitan transport systems of large cities in Europe or elsewhere in the world. These are culturally specific sites in which the interface between poetry, performance, audience, and other forms of cultural expression may be found to be particularly significant.

Ever since its inception in 1857, *The London Underground*, or 'Tube' as it is affectionately known in Britain, has been the locus of posters and poems designed to promote underground travel and sell commodities. In 1986, however, a more serious attempt by three friends and fellow poets: Judith Chernaik, Gerard Benson and Ciceley Herbert was made to use poetry for more spiritually elevated purposes. Launched under the title *Poems on the Underground*, the series has run for nearly 30 years to the acclaim of Tube travellers whose expressions of pleasure continue to feature on the Internet despite regret at the series' public demise. To date, printed anthologies of the series have run to more than 10 editions accompanied by best-selling posters of individual poems which are available on the web and in *The London Transport Museum* in Covent Garden.

The present project, which arose out of a workshop on *Poetry in Public Space* held at Lancaster in May 2013, addresses the question why, given the connotations which have always attached to The Underground: a place of dark subversion, the ultimate destination of the damned and the criminal as well as an asylum from the ills of the world above... Why this space, celebrated in literature and film from Homer and Virgil, through Dante to Hugo, Gissing, Graham Greene, Andrzej Wajda, Wim Wenders and Luc Besson amongst so many others, should not, in the modern world, sustain its reputation as a site of protest and marginalisation. The collection of poems published in 1969 by Michael Horowitz under the title *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground* was emblematic of radicalism and counter-culture, an overtly political and aesthetic statement of revolt against the establishment which reflected its time.

Poems on The Underground was not of this ilk. It is a more catholic, canonical, even Georgian collection covering universal themes such as love, war, death, ageing, the natural landscape, and so on. Its mission was – as the editors put it – 'to offer refreshment to the soul' in the heyday of enterprise culture. As an expression of liberal minded aesthetically informed values, it was a resounding success. Its day, however, has now passed to be replaced by a corporately managed fusion of art, large-scale digital publicity and public instruction. Poetry has become part of 'the cultural economy'. *Transport for London*, under the aegis of *The Mayor's Office* uses art and poetry to promote policy on the grounds that 'culture is everywhere'.

Sadly, for the daily traveller on the Tube, it isn't, except in a semiotically all-inclusive sense. The walls of The London Underground are festooned with large-scale, digitally fabricated images, doubtless representing a large dollop of dollars to The Mayor's Office from international corporations. This allows Transport for London to support a public outreach campaign based on the artist Mark Wallinger's prize-winning concept of the Tube as a labyrinth, and a jokey, instructional series of poems and images telling passengers how to behave.

The problem is that the use of poetry and art, whether aesthetic or functional, is now much more present on the Web than as a component of the travel experience itself. The locus of its impact has shifted from the real to the virtual. As in so many domains of public communication, it has become a simulacrum. Amy McAllister can no longer be seen live in performance at Angel Tube Station. Like her fellow poets, she has migrated to the ether, leaving the space of The London Underground to the depredations of corporate carnivores.

The question is: how, and to what extent has the same thing happened in continental Europe?