

Chapter Five

Coda

Neverwhere is Gaiman's best novel so far. Its likable hero (whose surname evokes the historical Henry Mayhew, author of the classic nineteenth-century sociological study *London Labour and the London Poor*) is a vivid contemporary equivalent of the archetypal innocent youth who grows by fits and starts into his hero-hood; Croup and Vandemar make a splendid psychopathic vaudeville time (they resemble nothing so much as a bloodthirsty Laurel and Hardy); and the eerily detailed landscape of London below is etched with bravura nightmarish precision: it's a setting that might have been invented by a Kafka-influenced Dickens. (Allen 231)

Bruce Allen's comments on *Neverwhere* which serve as an epigraph in this concluding section best encapsulate the novel and echo my thesis, too. His review is insightful, especially when he points out that the setting of London Below has the flavor of "Kafka-influenced Dickens." Gaiman's concern about the city in some ways resembles Dickens's style, in terms of his depiction of urban spatiality, criticism of the urban society, and contradictory attitude toward the city, and choice of the persona.

Gaiman's cartography of London cannot be treated as a total rupture with the past, but as a reforged view of the city involving the juxtaposition of past and present, old and new, and evil and good. As argued in Chapter Three, Gaiman's London follows some traditional descriptions of the city, like fog and mazes, which are prevalently found in Dickens's works. In *Neverwhere*, these urban remains do not

disappear but become sediments deposited underneath London, so the urban spatiality is multilayered due to the promiscuity of the city. The city's rebuilding does not dispel its past which people in London Above attempt to forget by their indifferent attitude.

Although Gaiman's London spatiality in some ways resembles Dickens's style, his writing of London is quite different from Dickens's, because Dickens's London is more realistic while Gaiman's distinctly tends to be surreal. In *Neverwhere*, the description of two Londons (Above/Below) which blurs the line between the real and the imagined smacks of postmodern traits. As Silvia Mergenthal points out, one of the features of postmodern London fiction is to "show a marked degree of auto-reflectivity, focussing, not surprisingly, on the issue of representation, that is, on the relationship between a 'real' city and its—textual or pictorial, abstract or concrete—reconstructions" (124). The reconstructed image of London Above/Below in the novel is dream-like and mirror-like. Either side of London serves as the reflection of the other, so it is hard to distinguish which one is closer to the reality. As argued in Chapter Two, heterogeneous London spatiality which embodies Thirdspace proposed by Soja is open and porous, especially London Below. Gaiman reworks London's place names and endows them with multiple meanings. The site names (e.g. Blackfriars, Earl's Court, Angel, etc.) are personified as true figures. Moreover, figures and buildings of the Underside are Victorian-style, so the mixture of past and present, fiction and nonfiction, and true and false characterizes London as kaleidoscopic.

Like Dickens who shows his concern about the lower class and the sense of alienation between city people, Gaiman reveals his attack on urban dwellers' indifference to the marginalized groups by stressing that those in London Below (for instance, the homeless rat-girl, prostitute-like Lamia, the poor, etc.) are ignored by

those in London Above. London Below is not so much just an invented and imagined space as a metaphor, representing the wretched side of London which the society seeks to get rid of. The Upworlders see only the magnificence of the city, so their view of London is limited. By contrast, those living in the Underside can see both worlds; therefore, their view of the city is wider.

Gaiman's view of London, like Dickens, is contradictory because of the juxtaposition of good and evil in the city. Although Dickens exposes the dark side of London in his works, he still holds an opinion that the essence of humanity is basically fine and evil will be eventually overwhelmed by good.³⁰ Similarly, Gaiman also has an ambivalent view of London. In *Neverwhere*, the unfriendly surroundings of London Below suggest the monstrosity of London. Vicious power embedded underneath London is revealed through the figures in the Underside, like the Angel Islington, the Beast, Mr. Croup and Mr. Vandemar. However, at the near end of the novel the collapse of Islington and that of the Beast mean that good eventually defeats urban evil. Therefore, the implied recovered order of London spatiality shows that Gaiman's attitude toward the city is not completely negative; instead, for him the city is hopeful.

Similar to Dickens's choice of the persona, Gaiman in *Neverwhere* presents the complexity of urban spatiality through the eyes of the stroller embodied in the protagonist Richard. By strolling through London Above/Below, Richard realizes that London spaces are not stable, but changing all the time. As discussed in Chapter Three, Richard is at first a flâneur/detective who detects the city and seeks to decipher urban symbols. However, now that the other London spatiality is rhizomatic, Richard

³⁰ For instance, in Dickens's bildungsroman *Great Expectations* (1860), Pip receives better education in London so as to be a gentleman, but meanwhile he becomes a snobbish man under the influence of the urban indifference. Finally, Pip becomes mature and realizes that outer appearances cannot make him a real gentleman, so he gets rid of his pride.

who gets used to the more orderly structure of London Above is directionally challenged. That is, unlike the classical flâneur/detective who can decipher urban codes, the subject loses the ability to read physiognomy while confronting postmodern geographies.

The urban spatiality acts not as a passive role understood by urban dwellers, but as an active role to inscribe identities on citizens. Richard is not aware that his identity is closely related to the urban social context until he turns out to be a nobody in London Above. Because of the loss of his identity in London Above, Richard has the chance to reinscribe it in the other London, and triggers his later becoming-other. As argued in Chapter Four, Richard's encounter with the other (represented by the poor, the lower class, and the rats) initiates his nomadic subjectivity. Richard's becoming-other can be associated with Kafka's short story "The Metamorphosis." According to Islam, in Kafka's short story "The Metamorphosis" Samsa's transformation is in the act of "becoming-animal" (39). His body change crosses the border between people and animals and his transformation proffers an "escape" from his daily routine (42). After Richard becomes invisible in London Above, in a sense he undergoes the metamorphosis.

After readers read *Neverwhere*, they might no longer feel that their everyday life is secure if they identify with the protagonist. Richard at first is like most Upworlders who are circumscribed in their own world, stick to their "home," and refuse to face the evil, cruel, ugly, and indifferent side of the city. After traveling in the other London, Richard has a different definition of home. The home is endowed not so much with a geographical sense as with a symbolic sense. The home is the space that one is familiar with the most, so one's flight from home suggests one's experience of the process of defamiliarization. Richard's return is like Kafka-style

return. As Islam claims, “Home-coming always inspired dread in Kafka, because it returns one to the dreadful closure of belonging, and reminds one that one has not escaped the grinding stability of the inside” (41). Richard’s return (to London Above) is a non-return. He realizes that the home he needs is not a fixed home, but a “homeless home” (41). He is afraid of being subsumed into a rigid home, so he finally chooses not to stay in the same home (London Above). By doing so, he can keep vacillating between two worlds and practicing his nomadic travel.

On the surface the mapless spatiality makes the subject lose the sense of direction, but simultaneously it also leads to reformation of one’s identity. London spatiality is so multidimensional and capricious that the flâneurs/detectives easily lose the hold of their direction as well as themselves. Although Richard often gets lost in the protean spaces of London, he has an opportunity to deviate from his daily routes and to live a nomadic life later. After his journey to the Underground, London for Richard still remains mysterious and too huge to comprehend, but at least he has moved to the next level of understanding both toward the ineffable nature of London’s spatiality and toward the standing of his own subjectivity within that spatiality.