

Chapter One

Overture

London now is not so much an encyclopedia as a maniac's scrapbook, filled with colourful entries which have no relation to each other, no determining rational or economic scheme, merely a common drive to find an identity, a route, in an environment which is perceived as invincibly impersonal and alien. (Raban, *Soft City* 125)

Neil Gaiman's first novel *Neverwhere* (1996), an adaptation of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television series, is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). As Minneapolis Star Tribune comments (on the back cover of the novel), *Neverwhere* is "a dark contemporary 'Alice in Wonderland' . . . imaginative, well-crafted [and] highly visual." Although both novels are concerned with an imaginary world, Gaiman shifts the protagonist from a girl in Carroll's Wonderland to a male adult in *Neverwhere*, and the setting from Wonderland to contemporary London.

Neil Gaiman's London cityscape challenges the boundary between reality and imagination. In *Neverwhere*, truth and untruth, good and evil, past and present are interwoven in the depiction of two London cities (Above/Below), especially the underground which is invisible to those in London Above. London Below is not so much an imaginary world as a metaphor suggesting the marginalized groups in the society (like the homeless, the poor, etc.). The invisibility of London Below shows the cruel and indifferent side of the city. Because of this, *Neverwhere* not only involves the urban vision, but also reveals the writer's concern about society and humanity.

I. About Neil Gaiman and His Works

Neil Gaiman is “listed in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* as one of the top ten living post-modern writers.”¹ Some critic claims that “Neil Gaiman’s talent is so vast that any exploration of his work can only be described as a beginning,”² in part because Neil Gaiman is a prolific and versatile creator of fiction, children’s books, graphic novels, short stories, prose, journalism, poetry, film, comics, and drama. Gaiman’s novels combine the elements of science fiction, fantasy, ancient legend, biblical allusion, Gothic horror, mythology, and contemporary settings. His stories are concerned with “myths for the modern world, exploring with sophistication, complexity, and a postmodern sensibility the enduring power of dreams, storytelling, and the imagination in life at the turn of the millennium.”³

Best known for his graphic novel series *The Sandman* (1990-1997), which consists of seventy-five volumes, more than a million words of text, Neil Gaiman is, as Chris Dowd claims, “frequently tell[ing] stories about telling stories” in his realms of fiction (103). Neil Gaiman has won a myriad of literary prizes, including three Hugos, two Nebulas, one World Fantasy Award, four Bram Stoker Awards, six Locus Awards, two British SF Awards, one British Fantasy Award, three Geffens, one International Horror Guild Award and one Mythopoeic.⁴ Although his works are often classified as fantasy or horror literature, he denies that he is a fantasy or horror writer. As he replies in an interview:

Do I think of myself as a horror writer? No, I don’t, except that I love

¹ See *Neil Gaiman: Biography* available at <<http://www.neilgaiman.com/about/biography/>>.

² See the back cover of *The Neil Gaiman Reader*, edited by Darrell Schweitzer.

³ See “Neil (Richard) Gaiman” in the information database *Literature Resource Center*.

⁴ See *Neil Gaiman: Awards and Honors* available at <<http://www.neilgaiman.com/about/awards-andhonors/>>.

horror. I think of horror as a condiment rather than as a meal. I run into people who consider *Neverwhere* a horror novel. Obviously there are ways in which *American Gods* could be read as a horror novel. It has sequences [that] are viewed by horror people as proper horror. It gives them the buzz that they get from horror. Well, they gave it the award . . . [I]t's also nominated for [an award] for mythopoeic fantasy, and for a Hugo award for best sf novel. I love to put more, to put everything, in the pot. I cook rather like those nice people in New Orleans. You want the tastes *not* to mingle. (Olson 1949)

Gaiman's stories and styles are greatly influenced by Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. As Gaiman says in an interview, "*Alice* I read first when I was 5, maybe, and always kept around as default reading between the ages of 5 and 12, and occasionally picked up and reread since. There are things Lewis Carroll did in *Alice* that are etched onto my circuitry" (Olson 1949). As mentioned earlier, *Neverwhere* reminds readers of Carroll's *Alice*, and this novel also epitomizes the characterization of his later stories. His stories are frequently about an imaginary world which the protagonist enters by chance. The world that the protagonist faces is similar to his or her own world. After intruding into another world, the protagonist starts to embark on his or her journey there and then quests for the way home. For example, in *Stardust* (1999), so as to win the heart of beautiful Victoria, the protagonist Tristran Thorn enters the unexplored lands where any strangely marvelous things can happen. In *Coraline* (2002), by stepping through a door Coraline discovers in another house which is uncannily similar to hers, but after feeling that the other world restricts her freedom, she seeks to leave for her original home. In *Mirrormask* (2005) (a film and also published as a graphic novella) Helena has a dream in which

she accidentally breaks into another world where she reexamines her past self and searches for a new identity. On the whole, Gaiman is good at creating a mirror-like world, a reflection of the protagonist's life.

II. A Critical Summary of *Neverwhere*

Neverwhere which delineates Richard Mayhew's journey to London Below can be summarized as three stages. In the first stage, Richard is a young good-hearted businessman whose ordinary life is changed on the day he saves a stranger, named Door, from bleeding to death in a London street. After Door leaves, a series of mishaps happen to Richard. At first, he becomes invisible to everyone, including his co-workers and ex-girlfriend. Then his landlord rents his apartment out to other people. Moreover, his bank card becomes invalid. Richard appears to be an invisible man in the city. In a state of despondency, Richard decides to look for Door to figure out why nobody can see him.

In the second stage, which takes up the most portion of the novel, Richard accidentally enters London Below to ask for Door, and starts his journey throughout the Underground. During the journey, while seeking to find the way home (London Above), Richard, together with the marquis de Carabas and Hunter, helps Door to discover who has killed her family. The journey subverts Richard's original understanding of London. London Below, as Jenifer D'Elia comments, is a place "of the disorder and lack of unity" (34). He gradually realizes that London is not orderly as it appears, but promiscuous underneath, after seeing the other London which is murky, cryptic, and erratic.

In the third stage, Richard returns to his life in London Above. Owing to his experience of the journey, he becomes more aware of people around him. For instance,

when he takes the tube, he observes passengers and speculates about if they come from the other London. Although he retrieves his previous life and even has a better life (e.g., promotion), he is not happy. The novel ends with his entering London Below.

Throughout *Neverwhere*, London Above and London Below coexist, but there is always a gap between these two worlds. London Above represents a secure, stable, comfortable and predictable life while London Below serves as the opposite. Whereas those in London Above ignore the Underground and are satisfied with their life and status quo, those in London Below “are aware of both worlds, and perhaps even more keenly aware of the loss of London Above, the loss of normality, expectancy, and dependability” (D’Elia 30). When Hunter warns Richard to “Mind the Gap” between the train and the platform, the gap here suggests two things (*Neverwhere* 141). On a level, the gap reveals the evil side of London. The gap is incarnated as “diaphanous, dreamlike, a ghost-thing, the color of black smoke” (141). When Richard stands on the side of the platform, the gap holds Richard’s ankle and pulls him toward the edge of the platform. The gap embodies evil power attacking those outsiders who are unfamiliar with the Underside, like Richard. On a more symbolic level, the gap represents a danger which makes people fall (into London Below). As Marilyn Mattie Brahen comments, “A gap indeed; people well-versed in proper reality would rather not be dragged down” (141).

III. *Neverwhere* and London Literature

Gaiman’s cartography of London not only follows the urban images as embodied in nineteenth-century London writers’ works, but also keeps up with his

contemporary London novels.⁵ The character of nineteenth-century London is “paradoxical,” as described by Lynda Nead as “a Victorian Babylon” (3). On the one hand, London played the role of the commercial center to control the world, and also stood for “the most magnificent imperial city of the ancient world” (3). However, London, on the other hand, was “brought down by luxury, sensuality and an excessive indulgence in and worship of the commodity” (3). The coexistence of past and present, glory and downfall, and renovation and remains characterizes London as contradictory. In the nineteenth century, people’s view of the city was “always ambivalent: the image of the straight new thoroughfare was permeated with the presence of the meandering alley” (3). Such an elusive character of nineteenth-century London is reflected in the works of London writers, among whom Charles Dickens can serve as a representative.

Like Dickens’s London, Gaiman’s imagination of the city is maze-like and foggy. In Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843) London cityscape cannot be figured out from the view of Todgers’s roof. That is, an observer “fail[s] to master the labyrinth at ground level, far from being alleviated by an optics of overview . . .” (Joseph 48). Elevated in a higher position, the observer still can not obtain a panoramic view of the city and even feels “vertiginous” while viewing “random order” of the city (48). Similarly, Gaiman’s London is like a maze, especially the Underground, a mapless place in which strollers get lost easily. Moreover, in his novels Dickens also employs the image of fog to strengthen the enigmatic character of London. As Julian Wolfreys comments, “Dickens seems to deploy the fog in order to hide the city . . .” (*Trace* 160). For instance, in the opening scene of *Bleak House* (1852), it describes: “Fog

⁵ London cityscape has been a fascinating theme for writers, such as William Blake, Thomas De Quincey, William Wordsworth, and Charles Dickens. For more details about these writers’ imagination of London, see Julian Wolfreys’s *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake to Dickens* (1998), and *Writing London: Materiality, Memory, Spectrality* (2004).

everywhere. Fog up the river . . . fog down the river . . . Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards . . . fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats . . .” (Dickens 1). Ubiquitous fog highlights the opaqueness and ineffability of London and challenges those who try to see through the city as well. Likewise, in *Neverwhere* the appearance of London fog not only blurs the vision of the city but also underscores the aura of disorientation in the labyrinthine city.

The image of London as obscure, complex, and heterogeneous has been extended to contemporary London novels. Contemporary London gothic novelists seek to explore the repressed or traumatized past of London and to expose the dark side of the city, such as Iain Sinclair, Christopher Fowler, Peter Ackroyd, etc.⁶ The coexistence of the present and the past makes London’s urban spatiality more complex than it appears. As Roger Luckhurst comments, “[T]raumatic memory is recovered on the ground of the city’s buried history” (528). Embedded underneath the magnificent, orderly appearances of London are the evil and haunted past.

The contemporary London writers emphasize the meandering, haunted, and evil side of London in their works, so as to satirize the Thatcherite Conservative government which in the 1980s stimulated foreign capital by erasing the maze-like past of London. As Eva Yin-I Chen claims, “A new wave of London literature has recently emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, partly as a response to a flurry of urban regeneration efforts in London in the 1980s by the Thatcher government that seeks to rebuild a conservative sense of British national identity through special revitalization” (226). These writers think that the Conservative government obliterates the past of London and masks the true picture of the city; London, in their view, is full of “subterranean, meandering spatial images” (Chen 226). Opposing official inscription

⁶ For more details, see Roger Luckhurst’s article “The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the ‘Spectral Turn.’”

on the London landscape, their works “often [juxtapose] the present with the past” and “[uncover] a plurality of fluid traces” (226), for example, Iain Sinclair’s *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* (1987) and *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), and Peter Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography* (2000).⁷ Similarly, in *Neverwhere* Gaiman also sets the past of London (embedded in the Underground) side by side with the present (represented by London Above). As one character in *Neverwhere* explains, “There’s a lot of time in London, and it has to go somewhere—it doesn’t all get used up at once” (228). As a contemporary London novel, *Neverwhere* lays bare the multiple urban spaces and the vicious side of London.

IV. Theoretical Framework

There is little critical criticism of Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*. Jenifer D’Elia’s close reading of *Neverwhere* might be the first paper specifically dealing with this novel.⁸ I study Gaiman’s first novel *Neverwhere*, not only because the novel characterizes Gaiman’s writing features which also appear in his later novels (that is, to juxtapose one world with the other reflected one), but also because the novel refracts postmodern cityspace through the prism of London that previous critics do not notice. Therefore, I purport to provide a spatial reading of *Neverwhere*, so as to examine the relation between urban space and the subject.

Like the protagonist in *Alice in Wonderland*, Richard travels to a place beyond his imagination in which he is frequently disoriented. For Richard who gets used to the order of London Above, London Below is dark, mysterious and chaotic. In one

⁷ Chen argues that the past and the present are juxtaposed in Sinclair’s depiction of spatiality of London’s East End (See her article “Stalking the East End”). For more discussion of Ackroyd’s geographies, see Jean-Michel Ganteau’s “*London: The Biography*, or, Peter Ackroyd’s Sublime Geographies.”

⁸ See Jenifer D’Elia’s article “Sometimes There Is Nothing You Can Do: A Critical Summary of Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*.”

sense, London Below smacks of a dystopia, the negative counterpart to a utopia. Now that London Below is not an ideal place, why does Richard intend to go back to London Below at the end of the novel, even if he finally obtains what he wants in the life of London Above, such as promotion, etc.? I respond to this question by arguing that under the influence of porous, intertwined, and complicated spatiality of the other London, Richard renews his view of the city and simultaneously gains nomadic subjectivity, so in the end he resists remaining in London Above. Accordingly, my thesis explores the following three issues. One issue is concerned with the reconfigured spatiality of London; another deals with how subjectivity negotiates multilayered urban spaces; a final issue treats the nomadic nature of Richard's subjectivity in the spaces of the other. I seek to conclude that unmappable, fluid, and prismatic cityspace which challenges one's desire to map the city can affect the subject and trigger the possible change of one's subjectivity.

In accord with the sequence of the three issues (spatiality, the interaction between the subject and spatiality, and the subject), I mainly resort to three theorists' ideas: Edward W. Soja's conception of Thirdspace, Walter Benjamin's discussion of the flâneur/detective, and Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of becoming. Exploring changeable London spatiality revealed in *Neverwhere*, I mainly utilize Soja's Thirdspace which proposes real-and-imagined places. I also resort to other theorists' notions which are related to the conception of Thirdspace, such as Jonathan Raban's soft city, Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, and Deleuze and Guattari's becoming. The former two can be treated as the antecedents of Thirdspace (I will explicate this point in Chapter Two). Deleuzian becoming is used as a kind of spatial strategy, for it echoes Soja's Thirdspace in some ways. Firstly, both attack dualisms. Soja refuses to accept spatial dichotomies (e.g. the real and the imagined) by asserting Thirdspace, a

third possibility (e.g. the real-and-imagined) which suggests spaces of flows. Likewise, Deleuze and Guattari's becoming opposes binary thinking by emphasizing the in-betweenness which can be taken as the third, instead of one or two or the relation between the two. Secondly, both oppose the established structure. One of Deleuzian concepts related to the philosophy of becoming is the rhizome. When the concept of the rhizome is applied to that of spatiality, it suggests a space which is directionless, centerless, and meandering. Therefore, a rhizomatic space is similar to Soja's Thirdspace, for both embody porous spatiality.

As to the interaction between the subject and urban spatiality, Benjamin's treatment of the flâneur/detective is enlightening. Space lacks meanings until the subject gets involved with it. The relation between space and the subject is bilateral rather than unidirectional. For Benjamin, the rising of the figure of the flâneur/detective is closely related to that of the city. The maze-like city in which criminals take advantage of to hide their identities challenges city strollers' ability to read people and to detect city space. The urban text is not transparent but opaque, as if it was coded. Because of this, the subject who strolls in the city gets easily lost while encountering amorphous, rhizomatic, and labyrinthine urban space.

When it comes to the study of the protagonist's subjectivity, I employ Deleuze and Guattari's nomadology to explicate his nomadic subject. Because the subject (Richard) loses direction in the spaces of the other, he has a chance to deviate from his daily fixed routes, then to flee from his everyday life, and thus to initiate a line of flight. As mentioned previously, the subject and space are interactive; therefore, after strolling porous spatiality, the subject is no longer totalized. That is, Thirdspace or becoming space makes the subject undergo becoming. The subject in Thirdspace might get rid of his original identity and experiences a kind of metamorphosis.

Consequently, the subject becomes nomadic and is not bound to enclosed space.

If there is a general thread that runs through this thesis, it is a critical spatial perspective. In short, the thesis begins with the discussion of London's complex spatiality which serves as the axis throughout the paper and elicits the later discussion of how the stroller negotiates with the complicated urban space, and of how the subject turns out to be nomadic after strolling the spaces of the other. In Chapter Two, I argue that the London cityscape in *Neverwhere* embodies postmodern geographies by resorting to spatial conception, which begins with Raban's soft city, then Lefebvre's spatial triad and Soja's Thirdspace. Raban's proposal of the soft city puts emphasis on the imagined side of the city, and thus anticipates postmodern mapping. Henri Lefebvre criticizes the traditional view to treat space as dualistic by his theory of the spatial triad. Soja further develops Lefebvre's spatial conception and practices it via his example of Los Angeles. These three spatial theorists' conception of space can help to analyze Gaiman's protean cartography of London.

Chapter Three deals with the interaction between the subject and urban space via Benjamin's discussion of the flâneur/detective. I propose that the stroller acts as the detective in the novel. Following the issue of the postmodern cityscape illustrated in the previous chapter, I assert that the multifarious layers of London spaces force the flâneur/detective who strolls London to lose the panoramic view of the city, so the flâneur/detective fails to read the city or have legible physiognomy. However, although *London Below* is full of chaos, at the end of the novel the orderly space of the Underground seems to be regained by women. On the one hand, the retrieved orderly space which contradicts the postmodern aura of the novel regresses into a dualistic view of spatiality; on the other hand, the regained order promoted by women subverts the dichotomy of gendered space.

Chapter Four shifts the focus from the relationship between the subject and space to the subject only. As to the reason why Richard becomes unsatisfied with his life in London Above after his journey, I argue that Richard's encounter with the spaces of the other leads to the formation of his nomadic subject, so eventually he is unwilling to be bound by the rigid life in the Upworld. In this chapter, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of lines to help explain the protagonist's final choice of life, and their proposal of becoming-other to illustrate the change of his subjectivity.