

Underground Poetry and Poetry on the Underground

Robert Crawshaw

According to Andrew Thacker, reviewer of David Welsh's 2010 book *Underground Writing: the London Tube from George Gissing to Virginia Woolf*, "It is getting rather crowded down there in the field of what might be called 'subterranean cultural studies'" (Thacker 1). Thacker goes on to cite a plethora of texts which have explored the potential of The London Underground as a vehicle for cultural analysis. Known generically since 1868 as "The Tube" (Martin 99), The Underground has been the setting for a sub-genre of writings and films representing an imagined space culturally conflated with the "Underworld", with all that this implies in terms of classical mythology, darkness, criminality, and death (Pike 1-2). As Thacker puts it: "The Underground is something of a social unconscious of the city, operating as the site of fears and dreams about urban life, and many writers have taken the quotidian experience of subterranean travel as the setting or trope for understanding modernity itself" (Thacker 1). Surprisingly, despite this recent upsurge of interest in the subterranean and a number of poetic references in Welsh's book, one topic which has not been the object of close academic study has been the cultural position of poetry in The London Underground, notwithstanding the central contribution of creative writers such as Baudelaire, Blake, Apollinaire, Eliot, and other poetic voices to our current understanding of urban space.

In the light of the generally bleak vision of the city offered by canonical poets such as those above and what David Pike refers to as contemporary Western culture's "obsession with the underground" (Pike 1), it is difficult not to consider the role of poetry in the Tube as one inspired by radicalism and counter-culture. Pike, like many writers of fiction and 20th century film directors, directly associates the subterranean world with the detritus of progress which the "civilised" world strives daily to ignore: the sub-ground zero

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of a multi-storied vertical metropolis inhabited by the untouchables who populate waste dumps, kitchens, street-corners, and, as in Luc Besson's film of the same name, the subway itself. The association between The Underground and radicalism is reinforced by the metaphorical terminology employed by the British poetic voices of the 1960s and 70s. The tone was set by Al Alvarez in 1962 and then, more definitively, by Michael Horovitz's celebrated anthology of 1969: *Children of Albion*, sub-titled *Poetry of the Underground in Britain*, with its explicit emphasis on protest, aesthetic subversion, and political engagement. The association of ideas between "grass-roots agitprop" and "The Underground" has continued and now finds expression in the very public but no longer subterranean space of the internet. The earlier movement, galvanised by poets such as Ginsberg, Mitchell, and McGough, finds an echo today in the website *Deep Underground*, to which members of the public are invited to submit deliberately edgy, potentially provocative poems of their own. As it says in the blurb on the site, "We embrace our freedom to push boundaries, challenge ideas and engage in thought-provoking discussions." While most of the verses on the site lack the power of their forebears, the addition of the word "deep" suggests that the stand-alone term "underground" has lost its radical edge. It seems that the cultural significance of poems in the real-life setting of The London Underground demands a more qualified interpretation than its metaphorical connotations originally implied.

The best known example of poetry on The London Underground in recent times is the initiative by the writers Judith Chernaik, Gerard Benson, and Cicely Herbert. At the time of writing, the project is almost thirty years old and, despite the sad death of Gerard Benson in April 2014, it has attained the status of a cultural phenomenon. Entitled *Poems on the Underground*, it was launched in January 1986 at Aldwych Station to fulsome plaudits by the London Press and has continued to elicit the affectionate enthusiasm of Tube travellers ever since. At least ten editions of the poems have been produced: the first in 1991 and the most recent in 2012, "timed to coincide with celebrations of The Tube's 150th anniversary" (Benson et al. xxi). The 2012 edition's sharply etched, crystal-clear page layouts and Calibri font correspond to the equally elegant poster designs by Tom Davidson which have been propagated worldwide. The idea has been imitated in the public transport systems of cities across the world, including Paris, Barcelona, St. Petersburg, New York, Vienna, Stockholm, Shanghai, and Warsaw. In similar vein, the editors' introduction refers to "live events related to The Tube, displays, ... competitions and ... new English translations" of poems in a number of foreign languages (Benson et al. xx). The idea has done more than strike a chord. Its appeal has been global ("Judith Chernaik speaks").



It seems improbable at first that the poems featured in the collections of *Poems on the Underground* should be seen as “radical.” When set alongside the life work of writers like Ginsberg and Adrian Mitchell, there is little comparison, though poems by Mitchell and McGough are included in the widespread selection of poems, at least one of which, according to Judith Chernaik, is a favourite with the public (Chernaik, “Poems on the Underground: time to celebrate”). Overall, the collection is eclectic if not catholic in taste, but it is unlike standard anthologies in its deliberate range and diversity, both culturally and temporally. In the first collection, the objective was “to reach a general public with poetry that was revolutionary for its time” and to “bring pleasure” (Benson et al. xxi). There has also been a deliberate effort to reach out to schools (“Poems on the Underground”). Grouped thematically in universal categories, “headings embrace the great subjects of human existence” (Benson et al. xxii): “Love,” “War,” “Seasons,” “Exile and Loss,” “Humour” and so on, with a number focusing specifically on London and on poetry itself, while several poems are drawn from popular folk traditions. These sit easily beside classic verses by such well-known names as Keats, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Shelley, and, more recently, Seamus Heaney, Carol Ann Duffy, and Jackie Kay. In the words of the editors: “We’ve held all along to the same general principles: to support living poets, to pay tribute to the magnificent tradition of English poetry, and to include many less famous poets who have contributed to the richness and diversity of that tradition” (Benson et al. xxi).

The traditional appeal of the collection has not, however, safeguarded it from censorious comment. Right-minded moralisers absurdly objected to the inclusion of the medieval poem “I have a gentil cock,” while the London Transport censor even took the editors to task for Jo Shapcott’s use of the word

“bollocks” in one of the published poems!¹ At the very least, this serves as a reminder that while the Tube may be deemed a “public space”, it is one directly subject to official censorship and that, to the extent that *Poems on the Underground* was supported financially by *Transport for London*, *The Arts Council of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, *The Poetry Society*, and *The British Council*, the collection has broadly conformed to establishment principles. These sentiments are echoed by at least one petulant blogger who claims that “It feels like you’re scared of showing the public anything that might challenge or perturb them,” one of the few negative reactions to the collection from amongst the *twitterati*.²

And yet the editor initiators, who from the outset have retained tight control over the selection of poems to be exhibited, would certainly not regard themselves as conformist. Their position has rather been to regard poetry as qualitatively distinct from other forms of message. The sub-text of the editors’ introductions is that poetry is a genre apart and derives its special appeal from its unique, even privileged status. Certainly, from the project’s earliest days, the authors/editors of *Poems on the Underground* saw it as acting in counterpoint to its environment and hence as a form of inter-textual protest more emollient than the brutal confrontational spirit of the 1960s, but no less passionate. However, its starting point was qualitatively different. The description of the launch event in the editors’ introduction to the anthology of poems published in 1991 situates itself explicitly in the discursive domain of a linguistically sensitive, culturally educated readership. The members of the public who attended the launch of *Poems on the Underground* are fancifully compared to Orpheus in search of Eurydice (Benson et al. 13). According to the text of the 1991 editorial, the “Ordinary signs” of The Tube—“Exit here,” “way out,” “mind the gap,” etc.—are seen as transformed by the presence of “poets and their friends,” as if the latter belonged to an exotic, sibylline species, capable of illuminating the everyday by lending it higher symbolic value. As the editors put it themselves, “... poems seemed to take on new and surprising life when they were removed from books and set among the adverts” (Benson et al. 14). In a later article in *The Guardian*, Judith Chernaik³ describes two occasions on which she officially complained about quotations or layouts from *Poems on the Underground* “plagiarised” for publicity purposes by other organisations (*Nestlé* and *Greenpeace*). The poems may have been “among the adverts,” but the desire of the editors was clearly that they remain generically distinct from them.

If this was radicalism it was at the soft end of the spectrum. Shock value was not high on the agenda. Few could gainsay the pleasure of an unexpected

¹ Chernaik <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/09/poems-on-the-underground/>>

² Stone <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/09/poems-on-the-underground/>>

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/09/poems-on-the-underground>

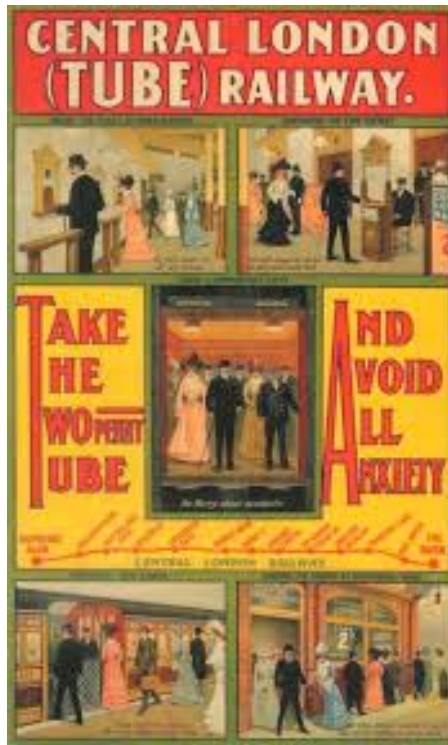
escape from reality linked to the appreciation of a text whose primary objective was to focus attention on “the message for its own sake” (Jakobson 372). The quotation is from Roman Jakobson’s seminal 1960 paper “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in which the great Central European linguist and pioneer of structuralism (1896-1982) sought to identify in a single model of communication the different functions of language. Few if any texts subscribed to one function only. Several, for example the emphasis on speaker/author expression (the “emotive” function) and on persuasion (the “conative” function), would normally be embedded in the same message. One function, however, would be “dominant.” What was special about the “poetic” function according to Jakobson was that structural form was the overarching defining feature of the text. Jakobson’s famous dictum was that poetry represented “the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination” (Jakobson 357), implying that individual words, phonological features, and syntactic structures were deliberately chosen to form patterns which echoed each other in an internally consistent, uniquely characteristic manner. Taken to its logical extreme, this principle could apply to any carefully prepared written text, but in poetry, claimed Jakobson, it was essential and lent poetic language a special status. In the context of *Poems on the Underground*, the poetic function, when dominant, stood for high culture in the raw, *sans commentaire*, a perfect antidote to corporate barbarism: a healthy reminder of aesthetic value and a spiritual distraction. This was certainly how it was seen by the editors: “The poems provided relief, caused smiles, offered refreshment to the soul—and all in a place where one would least expect to find anything poetic” (Benson et al. 14). At the same time, a real effort was made to offer an eclectic appeal to different tastes by selecting poets from different periods, including a number who were still very much alive, and from diverse cultural backgrounds. The three initiators were the proponents of a fundamentally humanistic tradition, representing values which aspired to rise above politics and ideology while retaining a strong sense of mission. The initiative has spawned other cultural events such as workshops and public competitions and, last but not least, a huge addition to the collection of posters which have always characterised the cultural life of The Tube (“Culture and Heritage”).

It is perhaps in relation to the traditional deployment of posters on The Tube and the recent web-based quality travel campaigns co-ordinated by *Transport for London* that the ambivalent cultural position of *Poems on the Underground* should best be understood. In setting themselves apart from the commercialism or practicalities of The Tube, *Poems on the Underground* was deliberately distancing itself from one of the main sources of creative energy which had lent The London Underground its unique cultural character. There has always been a tension between the grimy reality of Tube travel and the preoccupation to link its use to high-quality architecture and design and, by

extension, to an aesthetically pleasurable experience. In her lively analysis of The Underground, Emily Kearns reminds us that it was thanks to Albert Stanley (1874-1948), appointed general manager of the Underground Electric Railways Company of London (UERL) in 1907, and his designer Frank Pick (1878-1941), that a deliberate effort was made to associate underground travel with the idea of pleasure and thus effectively to save The Tube from closure (68). The satisfaction to be derived from a trip on The Tube was not limited to the destination or purpose of the journey, though this was its main focus. Arrival became a metonymy for the experience of travel itself.

It is this drive on the part of successive corporate managers of The Tube to combine advertising and aestheticism which makes the cultural position of *Poems on the underground* less dialectical than might at first be supposed. Architectural self-consciousness, text, and image have been integral components of The London Underground since its inception, to an extent which has given The Tube experience a cultural feel, despite its discomfort, one which is not captured in the *non-lieux* of most airport lounges or cleaner, more modern subways such as those of Copenhagen or Washington DC. It is true that London is not exceptional in this respect. The Paris "Art Nouveau" archways, the monumental chandeliers of St. Petersburg, the spacious girders of the U-Bahn, and the graffiti of the New York metro have become cultural markers of their respective environments. In the case of London, Victorian industrial flair and entrepreneurial competition led the way. From the very start, The Tube was seen as offering huge potential to advertisers. Hoardings crowded the facades of the newly-built stations, a flagrant reminder, if any were needed, that the early development of The London Underground was the outcome of private enterprise. No doubt poetry did feature on some of the hugely varied posters. However, there is little trace of it in the photographs of the period, unless one regards the assonances of "Pale Ale" and "Brown Stout" as "poetic." At one level of course they are.

Any apparent absence of poetry on The Tube was made good, however, as posters appeared extolling the virtues of Tube travel in order to promote its use, a development which increased in volume and aesthetic awareness as The Underground was extended to the suburbs in the 1920s and design became a priority. Already on the famous poster advertising the newly established Twopenny Tube, which opened in 1900 to run from Shepherds Bush to The Bank, there is a clear sense that poetic language, not untinged with irony, is a powerful feature of the message's obvious appeal. "Take The Twopenny Tube", it urges the viewer, "And Avoid All Anxiety"!



The captions to each of a series of images which tells the would-be traveller how to purchase and dispose of a Twopenny ticket is engagingly coherent and full of humour. In fact, if you put the captions together, their poetic resonance can hardly fail to raise a smile; “projection,” “verbal equivalence,” “selection,” and “combination” were clearly at the forefront of the scriptwriter's mind!

No worry about price
2d any distance
All tickets dropped into this box
No worry about losing them
No worry about accidents
Trains every two minutes
No worry about catching them
The whole distance covered so quickly
That there's nothing to worry about.
(qtd. in Ovenden 53)

More explicit still was the memorable poster designed by John Hassall in 1908, for which the rhyming slogan was the outcome of a public competition won by a young boy:

UNDERGROUND TO ANYWHERE
CHEAPEST WAY CHEAPEST FARE

The poster features a portly lady, flanked by a diminutive, browbeaten man, presumably her husband, asking for directions from a well-built, confidently smiling policeman whose thumb points silently upwards towards the map of the Tube behind. Below them, the caption reads “NO NEED TO ASK A P’LICEMAN!” Once again, the assonance is striking and it is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that there is a hint of a pun in the homophony of *p’lice* and *please* (“London Transport Poster Samples”).

Without engaging in psycho-social theory, it is difficult not to see these cultural artefacts as indices of wider cultural tendencies. In describing the posters from the dawn of the 20th century, Mark Ovenden tellingly remarks on the “child-like, magical fantasy world where nothing can ever go wrong” (Ovenden 100). In sharp contrast to the cautionary tales of the late Victorian period, popular mimsy was a regular feature of Edwardian illustrations in the decade immediately preceding the First World War, popularised by the whimsical belief in fairies and the nostalgic fantasies of writers such as James Barrie. The poem appended to the typically sentimental 1913 drawing by the famous illustrator of children’s books, Mabel Lucie Atwell, is a bowdlerised version of the “Jack and Jill” nursery rhyme, remarkable as much for its pedestrian vocabulary and lack of scansion as for its common cultural reference:

This is Parliament Hill
Said Jack to Jill
It’s a pleasant mound
Reached by Underground
Come up here and play
And go home the same way
(qtd. in Ovenden 101)

Similarly, though in a completely different mould, another poster from 1910 features an adapted version of the famous refrain from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem *The Brook* (1864), instantly recognisable to every educated traveller on the Tube:

FOR MEN MAY COME
AND MEN MAY GO.

BUT WE GO ON...
 FOR EVER.....
 (qtd. in Ovenden 103)

Apart from replacing the “I” of the original with “we” (... go on for ever), the poster engagingly plays with the icon of a circular clock face with little trains in groups of three arranged at even intervals around the perimeter of the circle.

The same insight into the tastes of the period applies to the finely drafted rural posters of the 1930s by the artist Edward McKnight Kauffer. Many of these appealed directly to the post-Georgian aspirations of the upwardly mobile to rediscover nature by moving to the newly developed green outer suburbs of “Metroland.” As with the Tennyson example, quotations extolling the countryside are drawn from famous writers and poets, in this case Walton and Milton respectively. The extracts are directly related to the images without there being any reference to the Tube at all. It is left to the reader/viewer members of the travelling public to make the connection between mode of transport and destination, the deictic function (“Look!”, “that”; “this”) of the prose deliberately giving the impression that the image corresponds to a real place to which the commuter could have access:

Look! under that broad birch tree I
 sat down when I was last this way
 (Walton, qtd. in Ovenden 161)

Similarly, the post-war renaissance of the late 1950s finds expression in the inventive imitations of Edward Lear, which appeared in *The Tube* in 1956-7. What is so appealing about these examples is the dialogic interplay between the limerick with its intrinsic overtones of scabrous subversion and the suggestive message to the Tube traveller. The poem’s last line is omitted to be replaced by a quirky, often handwritten continuation text in prose, informing the traveller of the advantages offered by a particular branch of the transport system (Glendening):

A professional poet from Sarratt
 Wooed his muse in a frost-bitten garrett
 When his scansion broke down
 She would rush up to town
*To revive her enthusiasm among the bright lights
 And warm gaiety of the West End. Be inspired yourself! The
 Underground runs
 until after midnight on weekdays.*
 (Glendening, qtd. in Ovenden 225)

The satirical, witty tone of this series is reminiscent of the very middle-class *Punch* magazine and has elements of the spirit which, at the dawn of the explosion of satire in the early 1960s, informed the long-running revue *Beyond the Fringe* (1960-67) and later *Private Eye*, the celebrated satirical magazine, launched in 1961 by Peter Cook and Richard Ingram.

The awareness of design and the identification of The Tube first with progress, then with shelter and solidarity during two World Wars, and finally with post-war recovery stand in marked contrast to the reality of Tube travel for the majority of London commuters in the 1960s and 70s, notwithstanding the efforts by London Transport to upgrade and extend the system (Martin 240). The humour which, as has been seen, periodically characterised the use of poetry on The Tube during its early development, gave way in the 1980s and 90s to the delivery of corporate messages. Modern commentators and historians of The Tube such as Andrew Martin and David Welsh acknowledge that the period between 1970 and the 1990s were the nadir of The London Underground as a mode of urban transport, despite its extension first to Heathrow, then to Docklands, and the refits of certain stations. According to Martin, "The seventies was a bleak decade for The Underground" (Martin 240). Its chief characteristics throughout that period were grime, unreliability, vulnerability to strike action, and lack of investment promoted by the obsession with the motor car during the Thatcher era.

The posters of the period lost their former artistic quality; they were much less imaginative, being more directly inspired by Magritte-derived visual quotation and direct instructional slogans which relied heavily on puns: "A ticket every day is money down the tubes," "A Cheap Day Tube Return saves getting the car out," "London Transport presents a new line in stations," and so on. The same directness is found in the posters of the early 1990s, mostly to do with the long overdue investments in The Underground which were finally taking place: "Its brightening up down under"; "We didn't want to keep on giving you the same old Northern Line," "Meet your new Waterloo," "Spruce new Euston," etc. A hint of the old flair re-emerges in a small series in which fine original painting and assonant puns are artfully brought together to provide a sense of place: "A new view by Tube"; "The new Kew by Tube"; "The flamingoes by Tube"; "To keep The Underground clean, we're making sweeping changes"; "The end of the line for litter" (qtd. in Ovenden 234-58). The key word is "new." Yet somehow, despite the humour, the poetic function of the late 1980s and 90s lacked the spice and satirical bite of the pre-war period and the late 1950s. Novelty in the 90s, in line with the postmodern ethos, meant references to the past: "Going up at Southgate: 1930s style"; "London's Grandest Corner Shop opens its doors" (the shop being the site of the new St James's Park Underground Station, a vast art-deco style condominium containing

“Twenty shops and three smart continental coffee bars. Open now” [qtd. in Ovenden 261]). Shopping evidently took precedence over poetry.

It is against this neo-liberal, triumphalist background, paradoxically at odds with the physical reality of Tube travel, that the immediate success of *Poems on the Underground* should be set. While the movement could hardly be described as protest in the Ginsbergian sense, its initiators did see poetry as a counter-discourse. Even if *Poems on the Underground* could be qualified on one level as culturally escapist, the same could be said of the postmodern simulacra of the capitalist-led, consumerist culture against which it was reacting, propagated as it was by the profusion of explicitly commercial advertisements and the poetry of persuasion which had previously marked the posters promoting Tube travel. Poetry was effectively serving three masters: material wellbeing, instructions to passengers, and cultural utopianism. Interestingly, the simultaneous presence of all three genres is a fascinating marker of the uneasy alliance between cultural capital, art, and collective behaviour, which are in practice all parts of the same socioeconomic system. The difference between “then”—the late 1980s and 90s—and “now”—2014—is that, at the time of the launch of *Poems on the Underground* in 1986, “high culture” saw itself as standing in opposition to the prevailing materialism of the time, whereas today, art, culture, and commodification are all integral components of what is currently dubbed “the creative economy.”

At the time of writing this paper in mid-2014, the early impact of *Poems on the Underground* seems to have been displaced as its influence has expanded. As with the more populist, self-styled radicalism of its cousin *deepundergroundpoetry.com*, it has migrated to major sales outlets such as *The London Transport Museum* and the on-line marketplace. My own personal experience and the comments of at least one tweeter suggest that its presence on the Tube itself is less tangible than in the past. As s/he (the tweeter) notes, “I just wish there were more of them. These days they seem very hard to spot” (Chernaik, “Poems on the Underground: copycats,” Watty145, 9 Jan. 2013, 10:37am), eliciting the response “Yep, I’d like to second this. I seldom see the poems these days. Are they less widely distributed than before?” (OhNoNotagain, 9 Jan. 2013, 1:25pm). It is paradoxical that this should have happened at a time when there has been a conscious effort on the part of *Transport for London* to revive the integration of art, utility, culture, comment, and commercialism which characterised the great days of The Tube. Ovenden draws attention to the resurgence of poster design sponsored by the *Platform for Art* programme launched in 2000 and since retitled *Art on the Underground* (Ovenden 270). Original works of art have recently been commissioned as posters and have sold in huge numbers via the *London Transport Museum* and the web. As has already been pointed out, much is made of this renewal on a variety of websites sponsored by Transport for London. *Art on the Underground*, epitomised by the recent competition won by the artist Mark Wallinger with his idea of the

“Labyrinth,” generates enthusiastic responses from bloggers, as do installations and recitals in selected open spaces of the passageways. If the Transport for London websites and the claims of current government policy in 2014 are to be believed, art should be “everywhere” (Taylor).

Yet for the everyday traveller, these cultural manifestations are conspicuous by their absence on The Underground itself. Instead, garish commercialism seems more dominant than ever. As The Tube’s facilities are improved, poetry, art, and culture seem to have migrated upwards into the more celestial marketplace of the ether. A space remains between the cultural image of The Tube propagated virtually and the reality of The Underground as a mode of transport which, despite the huge contemporary surge in its fabric and architecture, continues to struggle to keep pace with the increase in London’s population. Together with busking, licensed since 2003 and now restricted to 37 designated pitches in 25 stations (Myers 1), explicit cultural expression on the London Underground is, despite the notable exceptions cited below, officially mediated rather than subversively spontaneous. Paradoxically, The London Underground is a controlled public space which allows limited scope for unmediated popular voices to make themselves heard or seen. In this, it is—perhaps obviously—quite distinct from certain quarters of Belfast, Mexico City, New York, or even London itself, where the visual language of murals delivers uncompromising messages of resistance against different forms of oppression. Ironically perhaps, The “Underground”—if it ever was that in the context of The London Tube—has moved overground, and even there it confronts the depredations of the marketplace, as the notoriety of the now world-famous radical muralist Banksy bears out: <<http://www.artnet.com/artists/banksy/>>.

The re-imagining of The Tube through publications, posters, and the internet as a London legacy is part of the flurry of interest in The London Underground as a focus for cultural, and economic, regeneration. Televised histories such as *The Tube: an Underground History* and *Going Underground: a Culture Show Special* have been accompanied by entrepreneurial interest in developing new shopping malls, clubs, restaurants, and even market gardens in the space once used by senior politicians and civil servants as a shelter during World War II. The resulting implication is that art, culture and commodification have been conveniently facilitated by The Tube. This is partly a by-product of the need to justify further investment in the network at a time of acute economic stringency as well as a reminder of the network’s 150th anniversary. It marks yet another step in the effort to boost the image of London as a global metropolis as property prices soar and public housing suffers another crisis as the city expands yet again. Looking at the history of The London Underground, it seems that it was ever thus. The Tube is now, as it always has been, a barometer of metropolitan culture, reflecting the changing patterns of history since the mid-19th century, a complex urban space in which daily discomfort, social disparity, human

encounter, technological innovation, commodification, art, music, design, authorial creativity, heritage history, and above all politics and economics are uniquely combined.

If a more immediate relationship is sought between the travelling public and poetic text, it is to be found in the latest Transport for London-sponsored, poster-led instructions to passengers, whose poetry seems to have recaptured the raw, jocular tone of their 1908 precursors. Moreover, as in 1908, the texts are put out to public tender and are written by young aspirant poets: a different form of poetry on The Underground whose impact is more immediate in 2014 than its more elevated precursor currently appears to be. What is impressive about this initiative, suitably named *Travel Better London*, is that, despite its corporate origins, it has created space for sparky, sharp-edged social comment such as that by the young Irish poet Amy Mcallister, which is powerfully at one with its context. The shock value of Mcallister's performance poems leaves the viewer/listener with little doubt as to their uncompromising message for the traveller: a direct, in-your-face plea for humanity and consideration entirely grounded in the reality of Tube travel and completely devoid of commercial content. Equally unmistakable is the poetic quality of Mcallister's verse: the mesmeric irregular rhymes and rhythms and surreal metaphors which are the hallmark of poetic brilliance in performance.

The *Poems on the Underground* project was never designed to be politically challenging and rarely if ever is. Protest is absorbed, if not muffled, by a cultural aesthetic in which quality is the determining factor, combined with the moral and emotional appeal intrinsic to many of the poems. The popular voice of today's minorities does not ring through the collection, though it is there in muted form if you look for it. Nor does original art leap off the walls of The Tube itself, despite vociferous internet protestations to the contrary. Humour, function, and verse, however, still do, though less and less prominently in the face of the dominating force of digital imagery. At one level, in the best tradition of The London Underground, poster poetry is deployed tongue in cheek to instruct passengers on how to behave and where to go, a throwback to the limericks of the 1950s and the ads for the Twopenny Tube. It serves as a practical reminder that commercialism, humour, architecture, design, dirt, human encounter, and social control remain London Underground's most enduring legacies – but only just.

At another level, the most recent initiatives by Transport for London have mobilised young poetic protagonists of the highest order. Their iconoclastic voices made public through performance and web-based recordings represent a hybrid poetic genre which is both functional and polemical: an underground message of immediate contemporary relevance delivered *in situ* and then projected virtually to the world. As a social comment, Amy Mcallister's message is an angry, surreal cocktail of humour, morality, and collective critique. Its

drawback in terms of impact is that its living embodiment is sadly only occasional. Live poetry on The Underground has emigrated Overground; Orpheus's nemesis has escaped to a more ubiquitous but less tangible space. You-Tube has not yet re-migrated to The U-Tube, its subterranean and rightful place of origin. Let us hope that, if and when it does, Transport for London will have the cultural courage to dispense with brain-dead, budget-led, digital *Kitsch* and give the critical voice of self-deprecating social protest the same public presence as London Transport and The Arts Council offered to *Poems on the Underground* back in 1986.



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