PART I
DESCRIBING LONDON

CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT FIRE AND RHETORICS OF LOSS

> [T]he vast yron Chaines of the Cittie streetes . . . were many of them mealted, & reduc'd to cinders by the vehement heats: nor was I yet able to passe through any of the narrower streets, but kept the widest . . . The bielanes & narrower streetes were quite fill'd up with rubbish, nor could one have possibly knowne where he was, but by the ruine of some church, or hall, that had some remarkable towre or pinacle remaining. John Evelyn, *Diary*, September 7, 1666[1]

> *Entring* the *City* once *exactly known,*
> *Thalia* found her *marks* were *gone*. [Simon Ford], *Londons Remains*, 1667[2]

> Tis changd, without a Metaphor, I may say
> From *Terr' del foego* to *Incognita*.
> Elkanah Settle, *An Elegie On the late Fire And Ruines of London*, 1667[3]

From his walk through the hot ruins of London, John Evelyn marked in his diary the conditions of fundamental change, of terrifying difference: the ancient, familiar, topographically stable city had become inaccessible and unknowable within the space of four days. The streets were filled with rubbish but emptied of meaning; the city once exactly known was signless. The intricate, irregular webbing of narrow medieval streets had always had at least the epistemological advantage of historically denotative place names, as Stow had patiently pointed out in 1598:[4] "Iuie lane, so called of Iuie growing on the walles of the Prebend almes houses" (*Survey*, 277); "Loue lane, so called of wantons" (*Survey*, 236); the Fire began in the place "from *empty'd Tripes* call'd *Pudding-Lane*" (Ford, *Londons Remains*, 10). J. Hillis Miller has recently explored the power of topography in the psychological and cultural coextension of place name with place meaning: "Place names seem to be intrinsic to the places they name. The names are motivated. By a species of Cratylism they tell what the places are like. The place is carried into the name and becomes available to us there. You can get to the place by way of its name."[5] But in medieval London, "seeming" *was* being: place names were functionally intrinsic to – not just traditionally associated with – the places they named.[6] What happens to a city, to a culture, when its oldest, most reliable signs suddenly and completely lose their referents? When the defensive chains of the streets are quite literally as well as figuratively melted, when alien new space

must be navigated by deformed spatial referents, by architectural ruins, by the dreadful contingency of a *piece* of public edifice remaining, and remaining identifiable?

The answer is, in part, a cultural reconception of space. What had been taken for granted, as obvious everyday background both private and public, social and commercial – as more or less static, assumed, phenomenologically *given* – was suddenly foregrounded, its impact in shaping daily life made apparent by absence, its power by loss. Merleau-Ponty defines space not as "the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible."[7] The aftermath of the Fire produced a shift in the cultural perception of space from that of setting to that of enabling context; when the city was destroyed, its whole abstract network of associative meaning disappeared and a new relational context for living had to be constructed. Edward Soja, among others,[8] has argued for a necessarily dialectical relationship between physical and experiential space, between where we live and how we live in it. Both material and ideational space are socially produced, and conversely, spatiality can never fully be separated from physical and psychological spaces; "Social life is never entirely free of such restrictive impingements or the physical friction of distance."[9] The rhetorics of loss generated by the Fire, in official narratives, sermons, diaries, and poems, all share to some degree a heightened spatial consciousness in imagery and expression, an awareness of a new kind of conceptual emptiness in the ruined physical spaces, of boundaries previously invisible and now transgressed, of structures previously assumed and now collapsed, of spaces once fixed and stable, now shifting and treacherous.

Perspective is everything, of course; to the Elizabethans, London was already growing too fast for fancy, too unwieldy for commerce or aesthetics, and laws were passed repeatedly and unsuccessfully to keep boundaries fixed and populations stable. Spiro Kostof notes that any city, "however perfect its initial shape, is never complete, never at rest. Thousands of witting and unwitting acts every day alter its lines in ways that are perceptible only over a certain stretch of time. City walls are pulled down and filled in; once rational grids are slowly obscured; a slashing diagonal is run through close-grained residential neighborhoods."[10] But: perspective is everything. London, though never topographically rational and no more than others at rest, had seemed – at least in nostalgic retrospect to post-Fire writers – by virtue of its age, size, history, and even its idiosyncratic configurations, in some sense known, open, available, part of the psychological and cultural horizon. The narratives of the Fire and the rebuilding generically and conceptually grope for new ways to express loss, to define emptiness, to articulate need, to recover and define an old London in the process of defining and constructing a new one – to find "the means whereby the position of things

becomes [once again] possible" – and the possibility whereby the position of things becomes meaningful.

"Londoners," of course, is a problematic term. On a very basic level I do mean virtually all the inhabitants of London, regardless of class or trade or gender; one of the central interests of this study is precisely the common conceptual and rhetorical ground that is immediately and then selectively shared by widely different genres and even disciplines. But I will take care not to oversimplify, and to distinguish social difference when it becomes relevant. The different genres often speak to different audiences, of course; a broadside ballad describing the Fire spells things out differently from a Latin poem, and a surveying manual and a topographic guide address widely different needs. But the Fire was perhaps distinctive in its levelling properties, at least for crucial moments – experiential and rhetorical.

The Fire literally and figuratively levelled London at a crucially important historical and cultural moment in the mid-seventeenth century. England, lagging behind the Continent, had been poised on the edge of political, economic, social, aesthetic, and urban change: the monarchy had been restored and Charles II was encouraging new forms of arts and sciences; trading power and therefore merchants' power was increasing; Inigo Jones had earlier begun to open up his baroque piazzas in the west and to open up or at least prepare popular as well as aristocratic appreciation for architectural change; and London was becoming what Kostof defines as an industrial rather than pre-industrial city, with urban ownership divorced from urban land use, and that land use increasingly specialized and segregated, both commercially and socially.[11] By destroying four-fifths of the historical, commercial, topographic, and imaginative center of London within four days, the Fire threw existing and potential changes into calcined relief, bringing to a culturally universal level the history and meaning and shape of London to Londoners.

But the Fire also specifically heightened a larger sense of cultural, religious, and political insecurity. Many writers of London before the Fire had already remarked on the changes or depredations to the urban landscape made by the Commonwealth, such as the pulling down of the Cross in Cheapside in 1644. The Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 seemed to promise vast social and cultural changes for the City, not the least of which would be a tense return of the Church of England as the state religion, battling and then persecuting the Dissenters on the one hand, and the Roman Catholics on the other. England was also fighting the Dutch for trade supremacy, and in the spring of 1665 the Dutch ships sailed into the Thames (as Neander and his friends watch in Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesy*) – to be defeated, but with the price of the *sense* of invasion. And then the plague: over 97,000 killed, and all the city dislocated as people

attempted to escape from or hide in their houses. The whole context of city life in London in the years immediately before the Fire was mined with anxiety, disruption, instability, indeterminacy. The Fire completed the job with a devastating literalness, laying bare the psychological as well as the physical structures that needed to be rebuilt.

The shape and structure of the old City will emerge cumulatively and comparatively throughout this study. This work will be archaeological to some extent in Foucault's sense, concerned with "discourse in its own volume" and attempting "to define discourses in their specificity,"[12] sifting through contemporary and synchronic responses to the Fire and reconstructing the London of the past through the eyes of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The mass of published and private narratives of the Fire records a moment of widespread spatial and cultural self-analysis, re-articulations of urban self-definition, not only by courtiers and administrators, but also by gentlemen and clergy, Anglicans and Nonconformists, poets "high" and "low," and, through various legal and civic documents, by those often silenced by or in literary texts. J. G. A. Pocock has defined as one of the jobs of the historian to "study the processes by which humans acquire new means of verbalization and new ways of using those they already possess."[13] He argues that "the perception of the new is carried out over time, and in the form of a debate about time; the historical animal deals with experience by discussing old ways of perceiving it, as a necessary preliminary to erecting new ways, which then serve as means of perceiving both the new experience and the old modes of perception" (*Virtue, Commerce, History*, 29). The Great Fire, according to the nineteenth-century Laureate Robert Southey, "inspired more bad poetry than was happily destroyed by it"[14] – but another way of putting it, perhaps, is that the Great Fire reworked old and generated new rhetorics and vocabularies of loss, and in the demands of the rebuilding, produced yet another level of conceptualizing and shaping space, and of articulating spatial discourse within the contexts of political, economic, social, religious, and aesthetic assumptions, expectations, and changes.

For Londoners in 1666, the perception of the new was indeed carried out over time, but that "new" and those "perceptions" were historically and psychologically gargantuan, far too uncontainable in their first instances for either individual or institution. Too many distinctions seemed to collapse: the streets were closed, emptied of buildings and refilled with rubble, their defensive chains melted; the privacy of houses, the sanctuaries of churches, the institutionalized spaces of the Company Halls, all alike were blown open and lost; rich and poor spilled homeless into Moorfields; the very fabric of urban and social meaning was undone into topographic incoherence.

This chapter will look at the earliest accounts of the Fire – in newspapers,

proclamations, sermons, and poems – and explore how these different genres combine to produce a common ground of rhetorical response in narrative structure, descriptive vocabulary, and imagery. Although I will note relevant generic differences in the various narratives of the Fire, I am more concerned in part I to set out cultural and rhetorical similarities, leaving more explicit generic examinations for part II. I will look first at the different genres of loss – official narratives in the *London Gazette*, royal proclamations, sermons, and poems, analyzing their rhetorical patterns as they represent the city first as a whole collapsed and then as fragments to be interpreted. In place etymologies, in lists, and in literalized metaphors, the stories of the Fire find ways to recover and reassert boundaries, to reinvest traditional imagery with local relevance, to lay foundations for refamiliarization – common images of loss become common narratives of loss. I will then look at three spatial categories of loss – public space, private space, and their mediators, the streets – to set up the cultural and conceptual contexts for the literary rebuilding of the city explored in part II. Like the newspapers, proclamations, and sermons, the poems, plays, and novels of the Restoration will often focus intensely on defining what was lost; yet in the very process of recovering the old, the rhetorics of loss (and later, rebuilding) found themselves in new spaces of their own making.

Genres of loss: official narratives, sermons, and poems

The history of the Fire includes all the narratives of itself; all its retellings by definition reshape the events.[15] I want to emphasize the literalness of that "reshaping." The "official" narratives – the account of the Fire in the *London Gazette*, the structures of response in the royal proclamations, and the local voices captured in the court proceedings – set up formal and conceptual patterns of spatial emphasis that will come to be repeated and refined throughout other genres in terms of the loss and reconfiguration of public spaces, private spaces, and those peculiar intermediaries, the streets. The different forms and demands of various genres shaped their common conceptual ground of spatial anxiety, variously voicing and imaging an apocalypse of division, of shattering, of dismembering, of a city seen suddenly in parts, and simultaneously articulating the human struggle to deal with the new, to make things conceptually, physically, linguistically whole.

Official accounts of the Fire emerge both from the *London Gazette* of that week (Number 85, September 3–10, 1666), and from Charles's assorted proclamations to deal with the Fire. The *London Gazette*, the earliest regular "newspaper" in England, was at that time one of only two news sheets permitted to be published since Cromwell had suppressed all newspapers in 1655, and was basically the mouthpiece of the government.[16] The *Gazette* offers a "factual" account in the

sense of the day, which includes a gesture to God for theoretical considerations (determining whether the Fire was an "unhappy chance" or "the heavy hand of God upon us for our sins") and to the King for practical ones ("His Majesties care was most signal in this occasion"). But the *Gazette* also gives a succinct and conceptually telling account that moves in and out of impersonal documentary prose about the temporal and spatial progress of the Fire.

The *Gazette*'s narrative begins with an interruption: "The ordinary course of this Paper having been interrupted by a sad and lamentable accident of Fire lately hapned in the City of *London*." That sense of narrative as well as experiential interruption underlies various forms of perceived physical, social, and spatial disruption. I will quote extensively from the account because it sets up what will become three dominant rhetorical emphases in narrative accounts of the Fire in (1) assigning spatial significance (2) locating spatial consequences, and (3) fastening on spatial boundaries:

> On the second instant at one of the clock in the Morning there hapned to break out a sad deplorable Fire, in *Pudding-lane*, neer *New Fishstreet*, which falling out at that hour of the night, and in a quarter of the town so close built with wooden pitched houses, spread itself so far before day, and with such distraction to the inhabitants and Neighbours, that . . . this lamentable Fire in a short time became too big to be mastred by any Engines or working neer it . . . spreading it self up to *Grace-church street*, and downwards from *Cannon-street* to the Water-side as far as the *Three Cranes* in the *Vintrey*.
>
> The people in all parts about it distracted by the vastness of it, and their particular care to carry away their Goods, many attempts were made to prevent the spreading of it by pulling down Houses, and making great Intervals, but all in vain, the Fire seising upon the Timber and Rubbish and so continuing itself, even through those spaces, and raging in a bright flame all Monday and Tuesday . . . By the favour of God the Wind slackned a little on Tuesday night & the Flames meeting with Brick-buildings at the Temple, by little and little it was observed to lose its force on that side, so that on Wednesday morning we began to hope well . . . [A] stop was put to it at the *Temple-church*, neer *Holborn-bridge*, *Pie-corner*, *Aldersgate*, *Cripplegate*, neer the lower end of *Coleman-street*, at the end of *Basing-hall-street*, by the *Postern*, at the *Standard* in *Cornhill*, at the Church in *Fanchurch-street*, neer *Clothworkers Hall* in *Mincing-lane*, at the middle of *Mark-lane*, and at the *Tower-dock*.

First, the physical impact of the Fire is assigned a causal relation to particular urban spaces, emphasizing the significant details of local space ("a quarter of the town so close built"); second, that collapse of physical space prefigures, causes, and contains a temporary social and psychological collapse ("distracted by the

vastness"); third, street names emerge as talismanic, simultaneously defining boundaries and charting boundlessness.

Place becomes premise (in both senses) of the Fire, functioning as a source for its physical, moral, and political explanations. The *London Gazette* notes that "this Fire happened in a part of the Town where tho the Commodities were not very rich, yet they were so bulky that they could not well be removed, so that the inhabitants of that part where it first began have sustained very great loss." Pudding Lane, where the Fire started, east towards the Tower and close to the river, was an area of closely built wooden houses and warehouses stuffed with oil, flax, wines, and other highly combustible materials, as Simon Ford's poem notes: "what was the *Nurse* of *Trade*, becomes its *Fate*."[17] The overhanging roofs nearly met over the narrow, twisting streets. The area had very little visible or open public space; the close commercial fabric literally did provide the fuel that sustained the vast power of the fire. Edward Waterhouse (1619–1670), a Royal Society Fellow (though described by Anthony Wood as "a cock-brain'd man" and by the *Dictionary of National Biography* as a "fantastical preacher"), centers his *Short Narrative Of the late Dreadful Fire in London* (1667) on the particulars of that commercial space:

> This little pittyful [Pudding] Lane, crowded in behind little *East-cheap* on the West St. *Buttolph's-lane* on the East, and *Thames-street* on the South of it, was the place where the Fire originated, and that forwarded by a Bakers stack of wood in the house, and by all the neighbouring houses, which were as so many matches to kindle and carry it on to its havock; there the Fire meeting with the Star Inn on *Fish-street-hill* on the back of it, and that Inn full of Hay, and other combustibles, and with the houses opposite to it, and closed with it at the top, burned three ways at once, into *Thames-street*, (the lodge of all combustibles, Oyl, Hemp, Flax, Pitch, Tar, Cordage, Hops, Wines, Brandies, and other materials favourable to Fire; all heavy goods being in ware-houses there neer the waterside, and all the wharfs for Coale, Timber, Wood, &c. being in a line consumed by it unto *Fish-street-hill*. *(45–47)*

Waterhouse's narrative, like so many Fire narratives, underscores the fact that place is a condition of story; that both the pattern and the narration of the Fire's destruction depend intimately on the topographical contours of the city, themselves shaped historically into social, political, and physical idiosyncracies.

Most narratives look for providential or political – moral or conspiratorial – causes for the Fire. Yet these too are usually topographically located and defined. A number of the sermons (most but not all by Anglican ministers) are fond of attaching blame to Moorfields in particular; Robert Elborough ("Minister of the Parish that was lately St. *Laurence Pountney*") thinks the Fire was brought on by the

breaking of Sabbath by walking in Moorfields and Hyde Park;[18] so does Thomas Brooks ("late Preacher of the Word at S. *Margarets*"), who apostrophizes:

> Ah, *London! London!* were there none within nor without thy Walls that made light of this Institution of God and that did offer violence to the Queen of days by their looseness and prophaneness, by their sitting at their doors, by their walking in *Moor-fields*, by their sportings and wrestlings there.[19]

Moorfields itself lay just north of London Wall, a popular pleasure ground from the sixteenth century, in which, according to Stow's version of Fitzstephen, "the youths are exercised in leaping, dancing, shooting, wrastling, casting the stone, and practising their shields" (Stow, *Survey*, 85). The "suburb without the walls" had long had an uneasy status and lay in easy moral as well as physical proximity to the cause of the Fire. Politically, on the other hand, the area where the Fire began was heavily populated with French and Dutch tradespeople, a number of whom were Roman Catholic, and so place seemed ideologically as well as physically inflammable. Catholics, along with Quakers and Nonconformists, had been predicting a fiery wrath of God on the Sodom-and-Gomorrah that was London in the years before the Fire; the ground was prepared for the public presumption of a *plot*.[20] In a not uncommon response to panic, natives viewed foreigners more than ever as intruders, as aliens intent on changing and even destroying familiar, lived, English space, as a (perhaps apocryphal) contemporary Dutch account notes: "All foreigners alike were held to be guilty . . . A poor woman walking in Moorfields, who had chickens in her apron, was seized by the mob, who declared that she carried fireballs, and not only did they violently abuse her, but they beat her with sticks and cut off her breasts."[21] Although Charles quickly issued proclamations denying foreign sabotage, going in person to calm the crowds, and the later trials initiated to discover any treasonous human agency found nothing of substance, the undercurrents of fear and suspicion increasingly exacerbated one bitter xenophobic division in the moment of – and presumably because of – other traditional collapses.

The *Gazette*'s narrative outlines the consequences of spatial disruption in terms of at least temporary social and psychological collapse within and without the walls of London. The emphasis on disruption and distraction, for example, even within the structure of the narrative itself, in its various repetitions, gives a public voice to the stunned confusion of individuals and of the populace as a whole: by the end of the second paragraph quoted above, the objective "people" have slid into the subjective "we" (who "began to hope"). The account emphasizes – indeed, distractingly repeats – the distraction of the inhabitants and the jumble made of the city not only by the Fire but also by the efforts to escape and quench it ("with such distraction to the inhabitants" and "the people in all parts about it distracted by the vastness of it"). Sense of time, sense of identity, were

notoriously shaken by the loss of spatial address: the most famous marker of time himself, Samuel Pepys, who circumscribed his day within rhythms bounded by watch and routine, wonders: "it is a strange thing to see how long this time did look since Sunday, having been alway full of variety of actions, and little sleep, that it looked like a week or more. And I had forgot almost the day of the week."[22] And away in Oxford, the antiquary Anthony Wood recorded:

> The fire. Soe suddenly did it come and therby caused such distraction and severall forgat their names when they with their money or goods under their armes were examined by the watch that then immediatly was appointed. Others that had occasion to write letters a day or 2 after it ended, forgat the day of the mounth and the mounth of the year.[23]

Familiar social boundaries were momentarily swept away with the physical and psychological ones. Those "people" who turn into "we" in the *Gazette* account, of various ranks and conditions, "were necessitated to remove themselves and goods into the open fields, where they were forced to continue some time." The temporary spatial collapse of social divisions remarked in this official narrative is continually pointed to in letters, diaries, poems, and sermons; Evelyn notes, for example: "I then went towards Islington, & high-gate, where one might have seene two hundred thousand people of all ranks & degrees, dispersed, & laying along by their heapes of what they could save from the *Incendium*, deploring their losse" (Evelyn, *Diary*, III:461). The spectre of such visible social disintegration persistently haunts all immediate genres of the narrative accounts of the Fire, and according to those accounts, all levels of London consciousness. Part of the (unsuccessful) rebuilding rhetoric would become the spatial resorting of class, stabilizing these collapsed social boundaries through redefining place.

The identification and recovery of boundaries in all forms of reconstruction – narrative, social, architectural – always begins and often ends with the topographical. Streets constitute boundaries, and on one level the *Gazette*'s litany of streets at the end of the quoted excerpt marks the containment of the Fire. But at the same time the streets now measured the extent of the uncontained, and the perception of that extent. What had for centuries sorted out the known now marked the preliminary boundaries of a temporal and spatial unknown. On September 4, Evelyn writes: "The burning still rages; I went now on horse back, & it was now gotten as far as the Inner Temple; all *Fleetstreete*, old baily, Ludgate hill, Warwick Lane, Newgate, Paules Chaine, Wattling-streete now flaming & most of it reduc'd to ashes" (Evelyn, *Diary*, III:454). One London citizen, Henry Griffith, described the Fire to his kinsman with a list large enough to contain both the *Gazette*'s and Evelyn's – large enough to contain all the sense of the unknown in the vast detail of the previously known: