



**'[H]orrible muddy English places':  
*Downriver, Swandown, and the Mock-Heroic Tradition***

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**Abstract:** The essay sets out to resituate the work of Iain Sinclair in relation to a rich tradition of seventeenth and eighteenth-century mock-heroic writing on London. Existing critical discourse tends to locate Sinclair's work in a tradition of Blakean mysticism, modernism, or in the more recent counter-cultural Beats movement of 1950s America. But what of the more implicit literary-historical influences? Although never engaged with in the same way as he might knowingly engage with, say, the works of Conrad or Blake, Sinclair's writing is nevertheless indebted to a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition of mock-epic writing on London. The urban-satirical works of Alexander Pope, John Gay, Ben Jonson, and Jonathan Swift share a common vision of London as both politically corrupt and as a centre for cultural and moral decline. Their shared use of bathetic allusion to classical models is central to their satirical technique and provides the means through which they are able to offer up urgent critical engagements with the city. In this paper, I will situate Sinclair's second novel *Downriver* (1991) and his recent cinematic collaboration on *Swandown* (2012) with Andrew Köttling in relation to this literary tradition of mock-heroic writing. In so doing, I will show how Sinclair's redeployment of the satirical techniques exploited by Jonson, Pope, Gay, and Swift respond to the spatial, political and cultural conditions of late twentieth-century and contemporary London.

**Keywords:** mock-epic, satire, river, sea, Thames, Sinclair, bathos, postmodernism.

I'm reading Stewart Home, *Memphis Underground* [...] I recognize a few of the riffs, about Arthur Machen, mystical geometries, pathways out of

London. I think I wrote them but I can't be sure [...] And even if I did write it, who cares, as the manic Home slashes, grabs, mugs his way through the canon. He has grasped the key mode of contemporary art, theft. (Sinclair: *Hackney*, 13)

Lying in bed reading *Memphis Underground* (2007)—part biography, part manifesto, part attack on late modernity by the writer, filmmaker, artist and art historian Stewart Home—Iain Sinclair is confronted with what he believes to be his own words; half-forgotten literary narratives that he long ago 'failed to copyright' (Sinclair: *Hackney*, 3). Sinclair's description of Home's larcenous approach to literary and artistic production is thoroughly ironic. It functions as a metaimage, referring, as it does, to his own some forty-years-long literary (and peripatetic) engagements with London. Haunted by echoes of a diverse literary past Sinclair's urban narratives can frequently—like Home in *Memphis Underground*—be seen to raid the canon (and its fringes) for images, tropes, and fragments of expression.

Authors whose poetry and novels can be seen to shape Sinclair's textualisation of London include William Blake, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, T.S Eliot, James Joyce, William Burroughs, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Alexander Baron, and Angela Carter. The stylistic effects created by such a rich and sustained dialogue with the literary past are, at times, a frenzied hybrid of prose and poetry, mythology and history, mystic visions and realist social and political critique, all of which yield a potent sense of London's infinite facets and shifting guises, its contradictions, complexities and connections. What Sinclair's intertextual engagements emphasize is that London is just as much an imaginative construct as it is a 'real' place; in Sebastian Groes' words: 'London is covered by a thick crust of poetry, urban legends, historical narratives and literary fictions' (*Making of London*, 1).

For Sinclair, tracing London's literary genealogy is fundamental to his practice of recovering unorthodox versions of the city. As Alex Murray suggests, an astute awareness of the literary past is 'essential for an alternative understanding of contemporary London, as space is transformed through its engagement with an alternative history' (*City Visions*, 80). The perpetual (re)examination of literary histories enables Sinclair actively to intervene in the city's present, re-imagining the metropolis through an obsessive re-writing of 'the unread book bequeathed to us by the scribes of the city' (Murray: *City Visions*, p. 80). Likewise, discussing Sinclair's 'obsessive preoccupation with textuality' Dominika Lewandowska argues that his work can often be seen as an 'attempt at rediscovering and re-imagining London through literature, which ultimately conceives the capital's cityscape anew' (*Crossroads*, 248). For Sinclair, an intertextual engagement with the literary past is about much more than simple pastiche or 'theft', it is a means through which he can recuperate a sense of individual agency in relation to the city; a literary tool deployed to challenge the

*status quo*, undermining London's social and political institutions and its structures of power.

Much of the critical discourse that surrounds this aspect of Sinclair's writing tends to locate his work in a tradition of Blakean mysticism, modernism, or in the more recent counter-cultural Beats movement of 1950s America.<sup>1</sup> And for good reason, as Sinclair's writing often explicitly acknowledges the influence of these specific strains of literary history. But what of the more implicit literary-historical strains of influence? Although never engaged with in the same way as he might knowingly engage with, say, the works of Conrad or Blake, Sinclair's writing is nevertheless indebted to a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition of mock-heroic writing on London. The urban-satirical works of Alexander Pope, John Gay, Ben Jonson, and Jonathan Swift share a common vision of London as both politically corrupt and as a centre for cultural and moral decline. Their shared use of bathetic allusion to classical models is central to their satirical technique and provides the means through which they are able to offer up urgent critical engagements with the city. In this paper I will situate Sinclair's second novel *Downriver* (1991) and his recent cinematic collaboration on *Swan Down* (2012) with Andrew Kötting in relation to this London-literary tradition of mock-heroic writing. In so doing, I will show how Sinclair's redeployment of the satirical techniques exploited by Jonson, Pope, Gay, and Swift respond to the spatial-political and cultural conditions of late-twentieth-century and contemporary London.

Taking the form of a travelogue, *Swan Down* documents Sinclair and Kötting's farcical journey made in a swan-shaped pedalo from Hastings to London. Travelling over 160 miles along a series of rivers and canals (hauling it over land when navigation by water proves impossible), the two men head towards the site of the Olympic Park in Hackney. Near the beginning of *Swan Down*, as the travellers prepare to leave the English Channel and start their journey inland along the River Rother, Sinclair laments that he is 'sorry to be leaving the sea because the sea is where we launch all our great voyages and we're just going to be going off up silly little canals and creaks and horrible muddy English places' (*Swan Down*). For Sinclair, the journey feels less like the epic voyages undertaken by famous, seafaring literary heroes, such as Odysseus and Ishmael, and more like the jolly jaunt made by George, Harris and Jerome in *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)*. However, as we shall see, this suggested movement away from the significant and the profound towards the comical and trivial could also be seen, ironically, to sublimate the film by connecting it to a canonical literary tradition of seventeenth and eighteenth century mock-heroic writing on London.

Sinclair's image of 'horrible muddy English places' is particularly resonant of this tradition, which often took as its setting London's polluted River Fleet—its

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the influence of Olson in the work of Sinclair, see Brian Baker, *Iain Sinclair* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) pp. 35-49. For a literary genealogy that traces Sinclair's work back to Conrad's novels see Robert Hampson, 'Rewriting Conrad', in *City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair*, ed. by Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 110-9.

filth serving as an appropriate metaphor for the city's ongoing degeneracy in all its various forms.<sup>2</sup> In Book II of Pope's *Dunciad* (1743), for example, the goddess Dulness invites the Dunces to participate in a series of athletic games. For the fourth of these events, competitors—consisting mostly of government journalists—must dive into the River Fleet, and, as the poet states, 'to sink the deeper, rose the higher' (Pope: *Dunciad*, II. l.290). The section begins with a description of the river: 'Fleet-ditch with disemboguing streams | Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to Thames, | The King of dykes! than whom no sluice of mud | With deeper sable blots the silver flood' (ll.271-4). Furnished in mock-heroic terms, the Fleet is described here as muddied, black and carrying the corpses of unwanted animals, and with whom no other gutter or stream could possibly compete in terms of foul pollution. The image of journalists diving into the depths of these 'disemboguing streams' functions critically, as Valerie Rumbold suggests, by drawing on 'associations still current in expressions such as "muck-raking" and "gutter press"' (*Dunciad*, 190).

Furthermore, the bathetic allusion to Virgil's *Georgics*, which is made explicit in the accompanying notes to the poem—"Fluviorum rex Eridanus, / ... quo non alius, per pingua culta, / In mare purpureum violentior influit amnis" (Pope: *Dunciad*, 190)—works to heighten the atmosphere of cultural and spiritual decline that the poem seeks to attack; the Po—king of rivers—has been replaced here by the Fleet—"King of dykes"—and rather than contributing to the splendour of the purple sea, as is suggested by Virgil, the Fleet turns the 'silver flood' black with pollution and waste. Yet, as Reuben Brower suggests, Pope's classical allusions also simultaneously encourage readers 'to take a less parochial attitude towards the persons and events of contemporary history' (*Poetry of Allusion*, 11). While the effect may well be bathetic, mock-heroic allusion also serves as a means through which contemporary urban life is ironically infused with a sense of tradition and myth; London is thus transformed from an unattractive site of the realities of everyday life into a city whose degeneracy conjures the epic qualities of a classical literary past.

John Gay's mock-epic *Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716) is similarly permeated with images of filth, mud and descriptions of mephitic. Amongst the many perils of walking the streets of London in the eighteenth century are the risk of dirt staining the subject's clothes—"miry Spots thy clean Cravat disgrace"—and foul odours rising from manufactories—"mix'd Fumes, the wrinkled Nose offend. | Where Chandlers Cauldrons boil, where fishy Prey | Hide the wet Stall, long absent from the Sea; | And where the Clever chops the Heifer's Spoil, | And where huge Hogsheads sweat with trainy Oil" (Gay: *Trivia*, I. l.78, II. ll.248-52). Here, the smells omitted from candle-making, butchery, and fishmongering bleed into each other to produce a cacophony of foul stench. The repetition of 'and' at the beginning of lines 251 and 252 suggests that the noxious smell is relentless rather than intermittent or occasional; there is no relief from

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<sup>2</sup> As the city expanded and industry grew the Fleet gradually metamorphosed into an open sewer.

the city's insanitary conditions. Yet, although London's stench is (comically) presented as a threat to the walker—a threat that is reiterated in the violent image of the butcher's clever—it is also presented as the very opposite; a mere commonplace of urban life that causes nothing more than the walker's nose to wrinkle. The poem thus transforms London's insanitary and potentially hazardous conditions into something less threatening: the matter of everyday life. In this respect, *Trivia* can be said to impose a kind of poetic order onto the discord of the city. The alliteration of 'Cs' and 'Hs' also contributes to this ironic state of poetic harmony.

The transformative powers of the poem are especially evident in Book II when the poet digresses to narrate the origin of the bootboy. After an amorous encounter with a 'mortal Scavenger' with 'muddy Spots [...] dry'd upon his Face' Cloacina—goddess of sewers—gives birth to a boy (Gay: *Trivia*, II. ll.118-9). After years of watching her son suffer Cloacina 'prays to the Gods [...] | To teach his Hands some beneficial Art' (II. ll.151-2). He is subsequently armed with the various tools required to polish walkers' boots and is therefore somewhat relieved of his poverty. This pastiche aetia renders the poverty stricken areas connected by the Fleet almost beautiful. It injects the everyday toil of the poor with a mythical and enigmatic past. Indeed, the bootboy's work functions metatextually as an allusion to the poem's transformative potential: 'With nimble Skill the glossy Black renew' (II. l.156). As Clare Brant and Susan E. Whyman note, Gay 'glosses the ingenuity of the urban poor with mythic aspirations, turning the lowly origins of bootboys into a miniature mock-epic' (*Trivia*, 14). Classical allusion, then, works paradoxically. On the one hand, its deflationary effect evokes an unflattering picture of contemporary urban experience. The image of the bootboy renewing the colour black amplifies this unfavourable portrait of urban life; it can be read metatextually as a metaphor for the poem itself, which renews the city's grime by drawing attention to it. Yet, on the other hand, it also transforms these unappealing scenes of poverty and pollution into appealing poetic images.

In both *Trivia* and the *Dunciad*, the mock-heroic form works ironically to elevate the base conditions of contemporary cultural, social and civic experience by aligning it with a serious literary and mythical past. By tracing the bathetic mood created by Sinclair's image of dirty English waterways back to Pope and Gay's mock heroics we can see how Sinclair's lamentation might actually work in a way that injects his journey with precisely the kind of cultural history and myth that he suggests will be missing when he bemoans their departure from the sea, thereby countering implied feelings of triviality—'silly'—with a greater sense of cultural history, artistic purpose and critical significance.

In a similar way to the ironic allusions made by Pope and Gay to Virgil's *Georgics*, traditional classical topoi, and Roman mythology, the bathetic mood in *Swandown* is heightened by visual and structural allusions to *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Sinclair and Kötting's premature return inland calls to mind Conrad's novel, which begins by creating an ironic tension between the narrator's romantic,

outwardly orientated perspective, and Marlow's sinister inversion of it.<sup>3</sup> The novel opens with the narrator looking seaward, contemplating the majestic history of the Thames: 'What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires' (Conrad: *Heart of Darkness*, 5). Here the focus is on empire, on the colonisation of a mysterious unknown, on the 'elsewhere'. The narrator romantically envisions the river as a source of nourishment from which the abstract dreams of men transform themselves into concrete realities and where paltry beginnings develop into impressive ends. In this account, the Thames is reimagined as the birthplace of the rest of the world. The sense of nationalism that is evoked here is anticipated a few pages earlier in the narrator's image of the position of the crew on board the *Nellie*: 'We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward' (3). The 'Director of Companies', serving as 'captain and [...] host', who faces outwards, and therefore metaphorically confronts the unknown, elicits strong feelings of reverence and admiration from his companions (3). However, Marlow quickly inverts the narrator's depiction of London as a seat of empire by evoking the Roman conquest of Britain:

'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly 'has been one of the dark places of the earth [...] Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages,— precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink.' (5-6)

The narrator's romantic glorification of London is undermined here by its own primitive beginnings as a Roman colony. The tension that arises from the two juxtaposed perspectives blurs the distinction between coloniser and colonised, and in turn notions of 'here' and 'elsewhere' start to bleed into each other. This blurring of epistemological categories produces a critical effect, questioning, as it does, the hierarchical power relations between Britain and the East.

By contrast, *Swan Down* begins not with an ironic interplay between opposing perspectives, where the distant and unfamiliar suddenly become near and recognisable, but by a failure to achieve this dialogism. During the brief part of their journey that actually takes place on the sea Sinclair and Kötting repeatedly undermine their own attempts to conjure a genuine sense of 'elsewhere'. While peddling towards the mouth of the Rother, Sinclair and Kötting are filmed in the pedalo from behind using a low camera position and wide-angled lens. The viewer is invited to assume a similar posterior position to the men aboard the *Nellie*, who,

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the trajectory of Sinclair and Kötting's journey also echoes, to some extent, Pope's topographical poem *Windsor Forest*, which begins on the periphery, in the rural landscape of Windsor Forest, before eventually transporting the reader to London.

in looking at the Director of Companies from behind as he stares seaward, help to create an atmosphere of romantic wonderment. However, while the shot works, on some level, to evoke a sense of the sublime by exaggerating the insignificance of the travellers against the vast expanse of sea and sky that stretches out before them, it ultimately fails to inspire in the viewer the same kind of veneration felt by the narrator and his companions for their 'captain' in *Heart of Darkness*. The self-consciously obtrusive camera, which oscillates up and down with the movement of the waves, alludes to the film's artifice and so the viewer is made aware of the fact that Kötting and Sinclair are backed not by a crew in the nautical sense but by a film crew; they are exposed not as lone adventurers bravely following the call of the sea but as actors in a carefully constructed film.

The film's artifice is also rendered explicit through the prominent on-screen presence of the film crew. While still at sea, the viewer is introduced to Philippe Ciompi (the audio engineer) on board the crew's rather more suitable sailing vessel. His entrance into the film's narrative is comical not least because he is shown vomiting overboard as his name and job title appear in text on screen but also because the sound of his heaving is, ironically, notably audible. On one hand, then, the crew are depicted as unfit for the 'voyage' and yet, on the other, it would appear that Ciompi is able to overcome his weakness for maritime activity just enough to record his own suffering (at least sufficiently for it to be edited for comic effect later). Again, the viewer assumes a posterior position, observing Ciompi as he leans forward over the boat, but rather than admiring and revering him, the scene invites the viewer to laugh, quite literally, behind Ciompi's back.

Sinclair and Kötting's adventure is doubly parodic, echoing not only Marlow's journey along the Congo but also Willard's hallucinogenic mission up the Nung River in Francis Ford Coppola's cinematic adaptation *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The film is permeated with implicit comical references to the latter. For example, rather than the camouflage face paint worn by Willard and his crew Kötting and Sinclair wear white sunblock; Kötting mimics the famous shot of Willard emerging from the river as he prepares to slaughter Kurtz, and the two travellers hold a party along the riverbanks that calls to mind the spectacle of the USO show in *Apocalypse Now*. But, rather than travelling outwards, away from the familiar Occident and ever deeper into the mysterious heart of the Orient, Kötting and Sinclair journey inwards towards a recognisable 'here'. By using parody bathetically to allude to well-known filmic and literary narratives, Kötting and Sinclair can be said to amplify this sense of pervasive familiarity.

The premature return inland that marks the beginning of *Swandown* is also present in Sinclair's novel *Downriver*. Although the narrative opens with Sinclair (the narrator) looking out over Victoria Park and ends with the second narrator (Joblard) on the Isle of Sheppey, this movement towards the sea is, like in *Swandown*, cut short. In the opening tale — 'He Walked Amongst the Trial Men'— Sinclair recounts how Joblard attempts to rearrange twelve postcards pinned to a board inside a pub in Tilbury into a 'coherent tale: a fiction that would carry him out on the tide, and away from the sullen gravity of Tilbury Riverside' (32). The

postcards ultimately fail to provide Joblard with the symbolic escape he desires; scrawled on the back of one of the cards is the following message: 'THIS SPACE, AS WELL AS THE BACK, MAY NOW BE USED FOR COMMUNICATION, BUT FOR INLAND ONLY' (37). The postcards are redundant; they no longer serve the purpose of articulating distant greetings from an exotic, geographical 'elsewhere.' The failure of Joblard's reconstituted narrative of escape to deliver a way out is emphasized by the fact that only one of the postcards has actually been posted, not 'stolen from the dark continent' but dispatched from Leytonstone 'to greet it' (37). Having travelled only a short distance from East London to the mouth of the Thames the postcards conjure nothing more than the local and familiar.

Bathetic literary allusion is once again deployed in 'Riverside Opportunities'—the tale that follows—when Sinclair's walk through the Rotherhithe Tunnel comes to an early and comical end. The narrator asks his readers to prepare themselves for the worst by beginning his account of his journey through the tunnel with a caution evocative of the dire warning written above the gates of hell in *The Divine Comedy*: 'If you want to sample the worst London can offer, follow me down that slow incline' (63). But, Sinclair does not get quite as far as 'hell'. Exiting the tunnel through a ventilation shaft he emerges on what he believes to be the other side of the river. Struggling to identify any 'recognizable pattern' that might reveal his location he convinces himself that he has died in the tunnel and is now 'beached in the suburbs of purgatory' (65). Although Sinclair appears to be making rapid progress through the spiritual world, he soon realises his error:

I had made the mistake of climbing out of a ventilation shaft on the same side of the river that I embarked from. I had in fact never left Rotherhithe. But an involuntary return to the point of departure is, without doubt, the most disturbing of all journeys. (68)

Far from enacting each stage of Dante's metaphysical journey through the afterworld, Sinclair does not even leave the plane of the everyday. Thwarted by his claustrophobia he is unable to stay in the tunnel long enough to make it to the other side and so fails to escape his point of departure. As a Virgil figure, Sinclair is laughable. Despite inviting readers to accompany him on a descent into London's underworld (literal and figurative), he succeeds in leading them nowhere, having—like the postcards in *Tilbury*—never really departed.

The deflatory effect generated by Sinclair's frequent bathetic allusions to classical, modernist and late twentieth-century cinematic and literary narratives amplifies his own—and his characters'—failed attempts to journey into the unknown. What they can be said to signify is a kind of decline in the individual experience of urban space. In 'The Isle of Doges (Vat City plc)'—the ninth, and one of the more fantastic of the twelve tales to appear in *Downriver*—Sinclair, along with two of his associates, attempt to gain access to the Isle of Dogs, which, as the title suggests, has been sold to the Vatican City—a wry comment on the



increasing privatisation of London following its corporate regeneration. After successfully gaining unauthorized access into the Isle of Dogs, or Doges, the textual Sinclair describes the redeveloped island as follows:

We tramp through award-winning piazzas where all the monuments fake at collapse: heaps of loose honey-coloured bricks have been cunningly arranged to suggest the frisson of real disaster [...] But there are also once-active dockworkers entombed beneath wrecked apartments that were pushed too high in worthless materials, held together with bandaids and unbounded cement. Pasted catastrophes overwhelm the dusty traces of true archival pain. (361)

The point the narrator wishes to make is that the architectural pastiche of this development masks what Sinclair sees as the actual catastrophe: the total eradication of the area's past, its cultural practices and dockland identity. The redevelopment works to prevent the recollection of an 'authentic' local history, conjuring instead a fictitious, classical past; it prevents what Walter Benjamin referred to as the 'interpenetra[tion of] the landscape and present moment' with 'far-off times and places' (*Arcades Project*, 419) . What has been lost, then, is a 'real' spatial-temporal 'elsewhere'.

In *Swandown*, this spatial decline is manifested through an apparent disengagement with the land/cityscape through which Sinclair and Kötting travel. As *The Guardian* film editor Catherine Shoard asks: 'What's the point in going around with these people? You couldn't see any of the countryside, you couldn't see any of the landscape' (Shoard: 'Guardian Film Show'). But this is precisely the point. The kind of disengagement to which Shoard alludes has a specific critical intent; it embodies the limited ways in which the subject is able to move through and interact with space once it is subsumed under a large-scale corporate redevelopment scheme. As Kötting approaches the Olympic Park in Hackney images of construction signs are repeatedly figured on screen.<sup>4</sup> In one shot, the *mis-en-scène* deliberately conceals the Olympic stadium, which is discretely tucked away behind some trees in the background. In the foreground there is a construction sign. Its anterior position and bright red colour (which strikes a notable contrast with the greens and browns of the water and foliage) work in a way that discourages the viewer's eye from gazing any further down the river towards the stadium just visible behind the trees. In this sense, the *mise-en-scène* echoes the words printed on the sign, which prohibits members of the public from venturing any further.

The following shot shows a construction site behind a fence with a luminous yellow sign in the centre. Again, the filmmakers manipulate colour in a way that

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<sup>4</sup> Sinclair abandoned the project early in order to fulfil other work commitments in Boston and so Kötting travels alone for the final part of the journey. Sinclair's early departure, his failure to complete the excursion, is fitting given that at the start of the film he suggests that by turning away from the sea their 'voyage' never really began in the first place.

works to restrict the viewer's gaze, which is discouraged from roaming beyond the sign. This is amplified by the hypnotic criss-crossing of the fence, which partially veils and confuses that which lies beyond it. The ironic voiceover that accompanies this shot also reiterates this sense of stasis: 'He, like many others, added something individual to the whole look of the place, a tremendous task, a great achievement.' The words strike a similar note to the official bombast surrounding the construction of the Olympic Park, but the fact that the accent in which it is spoken is Received Pronunciation—the standard form of British English, associated with the BBC of the 1950s—challenges the notion of individuality and distinctiveness. RP suggests a very particular social group and its standardisation not only ignored Britain's diverse regional dialects but also helped to stigmatise them. Moreover, the close-up of the fence further undermines the voiceover by showing the repetitiveness of the criss-cross patterning and the way in which the gauze effect hinders the view of the landscape beyond, both of which are rather more suggestive of anonymity and homogeneity than an idiosyncratic aesthetic. In these shots, the deployment of a static camera coupled with a lingering focus on trivial and uninteresting aspects of the landscape creates a powerful sense of inertia, which can be seen to express a similar historical, imaginative and mythical dearth to that suggested by Sinclair's image of the pastiche docklands.

The failed voyage motif that reoccurs throughout *Swan Down* and *Downriver*, then, can be seen metaphorically to enact the spatial conditions created by London's large-scale, corporate redevelopments. The inability actually to embark evokes strong feelings of entrapment. Moreover, Sinclair's use of bathos can be seen to add a further depth of expression to his critique. In chapter five of Pope's ironic treatise on bad taste and pedantry 'ΠΕΡΙ ΒΑΘΟΥΣ: Or, Martinus Scriblerus His Treatise of the Art of Sinking in Poetry', the supposed author, Scriblerus, suggests that the eyes of a 'true genius' 'should be like unto the wrong end of a perspective Glass, by which all the Objects of Nature are lessen'd' (177). Bathos, then, suggests a failure to depart from and transcend the ordinary conditions of the everyday; as the title of the treatise suggests, it implies a sinking motion, a movement away from the profound and towards the trivial. In this sense, the very concept of bathos—as Pope defines it—can be seen to embody the two-dimensional nature of both London's redeveloped docklands and, more recently, the area upon which the Olympic stadium has been erected; like the reader of the bathetic literary text who is ultimately denied a means through which to transcend the trifles of the everyday, the subject who visits London's sites of redevelopment is also potentially restricted, prevented from metaphorically journeying into London's past by a bathetic architecture and space.

Yet, while Sinclair's redeployment of the bathos central to the satirical technique found in the *Dunciad* and *Trivia* amplifies the feeling of being confined to a mundane present, it also simultaneously recuperates precisely the kind of urban-historical continuity that he suggests is lost as a result of large-scale redevelopment. By modelling—albeit implicitly—his satirical technique on the mock-

epics of eighteenth-century London, Sinclair conjures both a 'real' literary and geographical history of the city, and a mythical history belonging to the classical heroic tradition. In short, his 'texts' instil the metropolis with the kind of historical richness and peculiarity potentially under threat from the spatial conditions of late-twentieth and contemporary London.

As well as the satirical technique deployed by Pope and Gay in the *Dunciad* and *Trivia* respectively, Sinclair's representation of the Thames and its tributaries in 'The Isle of Doges' also resembles Ben Jonson's anthropomorphic figuring of the Fleet in his mock-heroic 'On The Famous Voyage' (c. 1612). The poem takes as its cue the familiar classical topos of the hero's visit to hell and narrates the journey made by two 'wights'—Shelton and Heydon—along the Fleet from Bridewell to Holborn in a wherry (*Jonson*, l.21). Throughout the poem the river is likened to both the alimentary canal and the female reproductive system, and is permeated with images of the grotesque and the degraded. One of the more threatening perils that the two protagonists must negotiate as they journey up the Fleet is the copious amounts of excrement—'that vgly monster, | Ycleped *Mud*'—being discharged into the river (ll.61-2). Clinging to the walls alongside the Fleet is 'stench, diseases, and old filth' and they must endure as 'many a sinke pour'd out her rage anenst 'hem' (l.70, l. 75). These repeated images of waste work metaphorically to transform the Fleet into the city's intestinal tract. The vision of the Fleet and its surrounding environs that emerges here is one of chaos and pollution, something that is also amplified by images of sexual deviation.

The travellers' entrance into the 'dire passage' via the Bridewell '*Dock*' is figured as a sexually penetrative act (l.59, l.60). Dock suggests the vagina, which is congruous with the poet's later description of the river as a 'wombe' through which the traveller's 'make their famous road' (l. 66). But, as Andrew McRae notes dock 'is a suitably confused pun, suggesting the vagina but also the anus' ('Civic Space', para. 18). The ambiguity surrounding this metaphorical act of sexual penetration adds a further sense of confusion to the poet's vision of a disorderly urban underbelly. Nevertheless, there is something redemptive about Jonson's vision of this particular area of London; it may well be chaotic, messy and assault one's sense of smell, but there is also a kind of ironic beauty to be found in its vitality. For example, once disturbed by the protagonists' oars the '*Mud*' that coagulates in the Fleet 'Belch[es] forth an ayre, as hot, as at the muster | Of all your night-tubs' (*Johnson*, ll.63-4). As well as offering up a grotesque vision of Bridewell under threat from its own cycles of excessive ingestion and excretion, the eructating filth also suggests a city that is animated, whose every material substance is alive and beating with a distinctive life force of its own. Moreover, the chaos evoked by images of falling excrement and subversive acts of sexual penetration is paradoxically countered by the same images; they suggest that the city functions in the same way as any normal and healthy human body would: excreting, reproducing and satisfying sexual desires.

Part of Sinclair's fanciful tale 'The Isle of Doges' can be likened to the plot of Jonson's mock epic. It narrates the journey made by three psychogeographers

down the Limehouse Cut, and then east along the River Lea, before entering the Thames in a currach in a bid to gain access to the forbidden riverside development. Like Jonson's poem, which comically rewrites Aeneas' visit to the underworld in the form of Shelton and Heydon's visit to the underbelly of London, Sinclair's tale also draws on this classical topos to explore the city's new underbelly—not the seedy brothels and questionable eateries that lined the Fleet in the seventeenth century, but Thatcher's world of financial capitalism, privatisation, and greed, of which Canary Wharf stands as a potent symbol.

Sinclair's vision of East London's waterways echoes the filthy and insanitary conditions conjured by Jonson: 'We are spinning, dizzy but not yet sick, down a sewer with its lid lifted away [...] I see shapes struggle in the water, escaping from our insanity: dog pieces, things in nets, sphincteral mouths adorned with silver hooks' (*Downriver*, 354). The narrator likens the Limehouse Cut to a 'sewer with its lid lifted away', recalling the River Fleet—one of London's most notorious open sewers. The connection is further accentuated by the surreal filth he imagines floating in the water: 'dog pieces' might call to mind Pope's image in the *Dunciad* of a 'tribute of dead dogs' drowned in the Fleet and 'sphincteral mouths' evokes images of the anus, echoing Jonson's punning on the word 'Dock'. That the narrator does not describe a literal filth but the demented visions of the travellers amplifies the peculiar, hallucinogenic feel of the tale.

As well as the Limehouse Cut, the island's architecture is also metaphorically transformed into the human digestive system. In order to penetrate the island undetected, the three men must crawl through a series of building pipes, which the narrator likens to 'intestines' (p. 357). Moreover, Tommy—the last publican on the island and the travellers' guide into its centre—compares the pipes to the female reproductive system when he announces that crawling through them 'ain't no harder than wriggling back into your mother's belly' (p. 356). Later, the narrator makes the same analogy when he envisions their expulsion from the pipes as 'a strange birth' (p. 358). As well as recuperating a sense of (literary) historical continuity through the redeployment of a similar body trope to that used by Jonson, Sinclair also creates a geographical continuity between the riparian cityscape of late twentieth-century London and the River Fleet as it flowed through the city in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The former, which now runs surreptitiously beneath the city's surface, can be seen to emerge once more, however fleetingly, on the pages of *Downriver*.

Yet, there is a fundamental difference between Jonson and Sinclair's mock-epic visions of London. Where Jonson maps the human body onto the Fleet to discover a subversive urban vitality, Sinclair's redeployment of the same trope leads to no such discovery, offering up instead a vision of a moribund metropolis—the city's intestines are 'unyielding', suggesting chronic constipation (Sinclair: *Downriver*, 357). Moreover, the narrator later describes their movement through the pipes as a 'bloodless sexual dance' (358). Again, any sense of corporeality is counterbalanced by an image of incorporeality. The dance is oxymoronic: it cannot be sexual if it is bloodless, and so the reader is left with an impression of sterility

rather than with feelings of vitality, energy and rejuvenation. The image of the lifeless city is also manifested in the opening tale when the narrator visits the Tilbury Fort heritage centre and views a map that 'illustrates the lines of fire between Tilbury and Gravesend, as proposed by Thomas Hyde Page in 1778. The river at its narrowest point, eight hundred yards, shore to shore, is tightly laced by invisible threads: a stitched vulva' (22). Sinclair's reading of the map is telling; unlike Jonson's image of the 'dire passage', the route out of and into London remains impassable. Again, the defunct body motif is employed to provide the reader with an image of a decaying, infertile city that is no longer in working use.

In Swandown, a similar vision of a failing city is expressed in metaphors of stasis and inertia. After passing under the Dartford Tunnel, a close-up shot of the river Thames reveals the city's refuse floating on the water: old water and Lucazade bottles, deflated balloons, punctured and disintegrating footballs, a basketball etc. The collection of litter is reminiscent of the concluding lines of Jonathan Swift's 'A Description of a City Shower' (1710), in which a disgusting array of waste and filth is washed out of the city:

Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,  
Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,  
Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood.  
(Swift: *Major Works*, ll.61-3)

The poem's conclusion is ambiguous. On one hand, Swift leaves his readers drowning in London's filth—a symbol of moral and civic decline—but, on the other, we are also left with the impression that the satirical force of the poem has somehow delivered the city from its corruption.<sup>5</sup> The final image is, after all, of the streets being emptied of their rubbish. The poem, then, can be said metatextually to acknowledge the force of its own cultural efficacy, that is, its potential to effect change. Through literary-satirical engagement Swift transforms the city's depravity into something at which to delight and enjoy, however ironically. The same can be said for Jonson (and for that matter Pope and Gay) who, in satirising the disorder, chaos and pollution that characterised Bridewell and Holborn, transformed the area by injecting it with a potent sense of vitality.

By contrast, the image of the filth shown in *Swandown* somehow lacks this sense of optimism. The shot can be seen to satirise the cant of Olympic games 'legacy' by suggesting the ephemeral nature of the event, particularly since the rubbish floating on the water's surface is largely associated with sport. The degrading objects (especially the deflated balloons and footballs) function critically to suggest that grand projects, contrary to the official discourse that usually promotes their longevity, are merely fads with a short lifespan. However, this critical voice becomes increasingly difficult to detect. The shot is held for twenty-one seconds using a static camera, creating an uncomfortable sense of inertia. We

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<sup>5</sup> See Brendan O Hehir, 'Meaning of Swift's "A Description of a City Shower"', *ELH*, 27, (1960), 194-207.

are shown, then, signs of London's corruption as it manifests in the form of debris but get no hint of how the film might mount a resistance towards it. The dialogism created by the interplay between chaos/order and decline/improvement that is found at the heart of Swift, Jonson, Gay and Pope's mock-heroic engagements with London is, if not entirely missing, certainly not as keenly felt in parts of Sinclair's work. Indeed, the extent to which the image of the floating refuse is left lingering on the screen actually creates the impression that the film itself is just another form of commercialised Olympic Park detritus. This is further suggested when, at the end of the film, Kötting underlines the bathos of their venture, stating that, for him:

[the journey] wasn't about lodging an official Olympic complaint or even trying to penetrate the Olympic site. It was about the ridiculousness of pedalling a swan-shaped pedalo from Hastings to Hackney. It was about serendipity and the physical impossibility of hauling the thing up riverbanks and across muddy fields. It was about spending a whole month in the same clothes, being able to wet myself whenever I wanted to.

The solipsism embodied in Kötting's justification for the film suggests a kind of critical impotency, a reluctance to instigate or even imagine change. According to Kötting he is not at all concerned with contesting the spatial and cultural conditions of twenty-first-century London but is rather more interested in participating in and affirming the spectacle that surrounds the Olympics.

The nihilistic visions of London that emerge in parts of *Swan Down* and *Downriver* deny the kinds of utopian possibilities that ironically transpire in the *Dunciad*, *Trivia*, 'On the Famous Voyage' and 'A Description of a City Shower'. Matthew Hodgart suggests that 'true satire demands a high degree both of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world, and simultaneously a high degree of abstraction from the world' (*Satire*, 11). It is just such an oscillation between involvement and abstraction that is somehow felt to be missing from certain sections of *Downriver* and *Swan Down*. Such nihilism can be said to tap into a perennial concern over the declining critical efficacy of the cultural act. As we have seen, the ambiguous dialogism created by the interplay between various opposing states—poverty/vitality, high/low culture, disgust/enjoyment—found in the satirical works of Pope, Jonson, Gay and Swift ultimately suggests an optimistic confidence both in the poems' power to transform the city into an object of enjoyment and their ability to express sincere, indignant critique. However, the suppression of this ironic interplay detected in parts of Sinclair's work might be seen to gesture instead towards an anxiety over the efficacy of his own mock-heroic engagements with London.

Cultural decline is a particular concern for some theorists of postmodernity. In his famous exposition of *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson suggests that 'We are submerged in its [multinational capital's] henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now

postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation' to the point where we find ourselves in

a situation in which we all, in one way or another, dimly feel that not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions like those of *The Clash* are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it. (49)

What is lost in the age of postmodernity is the ability to achieve critical alienation; to participate in and simultaneously disengage from that that is being critiqued or observed.

It is the facility to oscillate between these two states of engagement (participation and alienation) that Hodgart suggests is fundamental to effective satire, and yet it is precisely this faculty that seems to be diminished in Sinclair's own London's satires. Through what appears to be a conscious attempt to restrain the transformative powers of the literary and cinematic text, Sinclair (and Kötting) can be said to evoke this climate of postmodern apathy, implicitly acknowledging the potential limitations of a modern-day satirical engagement with London. The felt sense of stasis that pervades *Swan Down*, and the reoccurring images of defunct human bodies in *Downriver* might be seen to represent the powerlessness of the cultural act to effect change, to revitalise the city and mobilise a resistance towards the kinds of large-scale urban redevelopment Sinclair sees as having a negative impact upon individual urban experience.

However, through his parodic echoing of seventeenth and eighteenth-century urban satire Sinclair is able to resolve, at least to some extent, this critical inefficacy. His sustained engagement with the city's literary past expresses a historical continuity of literary practice. In this respect, Sinclair's 'texts' can be said to counter what he sees as the destructive effects of London's redevelopment by rewriting the city in a way that includes the vestiges of a more urgent critical engagement with it. The 'saeva indignatio' behind earlier satires of city life might not signify under the conditions of late capitalism, but, nevertheless, Sinclair's allusively manifested awareness of this tradition adds potency to his own bathetically satirical versions of London.

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