



Speculative Topography: The Fantastical Overdetermination of Space in Iain Sinclair's Early Writing

David Anderson
(University College London)

The Literary London Journal, Volume 16, Number 1 (Autumn 2020)

The speed and scale of Iain Sinclair's literary production, its constant turns and returns to the same locations and preoccupations, sometimes seems deliberately designed to ward off scholars – or, to use a term more appropriate to Sinclair's pedestrian forays into London and its environs, to outpace them. And yet, at the same time, his work also seems to lend itself to research by depicting a city extraordinarily freighted with signification, bristling with meaning: a fantastically overdetermined space that demands explanation. This strange, even radical ambivalence, which seems to mirror Sinclair's slyly paradoxical cultivation of an *urgent* pedestrianism, is in fact partly fuelled by the presence of an unconventional brand of highly eccentric scholarship within Sinclair's own work: above all, his discovery in the early 1970s of a text entitled *Prehistoric London: Its Mounts and Circles*, written by Elizabeth Oke Gordon.

A look at this wilfully archaic volume – which even on its original publication in 1914 must have seemed somewhat untimely – suggests ways that Sinclair's distinctive articulation of London and his journeys through it emerged from a disorientating blend of first-hand exploration and abstruse amateur archaeology: a method built on his reading of Gordon's arcane, speculative, even bizarre account of London's supposed mythic topography and hidden histories. As soon becomes clear, Gordon's 'study' provided a foundation stone for the later author's own plunges into the city as both a physical and textual space. Her sometimes

highly fanciful speculations, her constant push towards meanings that sometimes fail to convincingly cohere, resolutions that do not quite resolve, are profoundly significant for Sinclair's work in the way that they pursue an unusual kind of semiotic *enthusiasm* – with the suggestive para-religiosity of this term fully intended. By examining the morbid visions of Sinclair's early poems *Lud Heat* (1975) and *Suicide Bridge* (1979) in relation to Gordon's text, this article proceeds by showing how *Prehistoric London* suggested ways that an ostensibly documentary mode could be channelled through a profoundly idiosyncratic, neurotic and even obsessive subjectivity. In so doing, it not only casts new light on Sinclair's early work, but also locates the germs of his later 'documentary fiction' and its rendition of the Situationist term 'psychogeography' as '*psychotic geography*' (Jackson 75).

In his designation of Iain Sinclair as a 'neo-modernist' – a term that ties him to an American tradition running through Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, and asserts his commonality with writers of the so-called 'British Poetry Revival' of the 1960s and 1970s, the critic Robert Bond has emphasised this school's tendency to 'draw on a range of specialist knowledges'. In Sinclair's case, this is often combined with an attraction to 'sub-literary prose': ghost-written gangster memoirs like John Pearson's 1972 bestseller *The Profession of Violence: The Rise and Fall of the Kray Twins*, and 'neglected London writing' like Alexander Baron's 1963 novel *The Lowlife*, which Sinclair praised in a 1992 article for the *London Review of Books* for its 'scrupulous accuracy' and 'wonderfully precise physical movement' (Bond 2, 9; Sinclair, 'Lady Thatcher's Bastards'). It is not genre or style that connects such material, but rather commonality of territory: place, and particularly East London, is the determinant of Sinclair's eclecticism. In working with texts that are linked in this way, he both discovers and creates an alternative, offbeat local canon.

One by-product of this process is a certain flattening of fact and fiction, and a peculiar alertness to the complicity of each of these in shaping perceptions of place. As Sinclair wrote in the poem 'Labrys: Eve of Beltaine' (1977), 'the red map folds into his pocket / easy as a paperback', and part of the point of his work is to confound such a distinction (Sinclair, *Brown Clouds*, unpaginated). Using paperbacks as maps compels writers into the role of stewards of particular locations: highly localised, newly acknowledged legislators of territory. In Sinclair's writing, the result is the matching up of spatial peripherality with a correspondingly peripheral literary heritage. Fringe voices are awakened,

multiple narratives unfurled, partly as a way of rubbing up against the perceived monophony of mainstream culture – in his essays for the *London Review of Books* in the 1980s and 90s, Sinclair is often found bemoaning the supposed stagnancy of established tastes. At the same time, with Sinclair himself overseeing the way in which territory is parcelled out to different writers' authority, his own work comes to resemble a certain kind of eccentric, frequently arcane scholarship, foregrounding the activity of this organisation and apportionment. In the process, he himself plays the role of the somewhat naive autodidact, unable to distinguish between the serious and the silly as a result of his subordination of everything to the question of place.

This bookish activity shares space with a privileging of first-hand experience of particular places. *Lud Heat* (1975), for example, subtitled 'a book of the dead hamlets', is structured around Sinclair's experiences as a casual labourer in the Tower Hamlets parks department. The first edition of this text, self-published by Sinclair's own Albion Village Press (named after his street in Hackney, Albion Drive) is peppered with photographs of him and his colleagues at work mowing the grass. As is common with his work, this visual material is inexplicably left out of later editions, yet its interplay with the text emphasises how the narrative persona, moving around and through different locations in his horticulturalist capacity, comes almost accidentally upon the ideas of networks of relation based on what is suggested by the immediate experience of space and environment: the 'autoptic' approach elaborately developed in an inset discussion of Stan Brakhage's experimental 1971 film *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (a literal translation of the Greek 'autopsy'). Again, this seems to draw on the theme or attitude of a certain unschooled scholarliness – an *amateur* sensibility that also has the effect of blurring any precise distinction between work and leisure.

Lud Heat's composite form and variegated allusiveness find it incorporating themes as disparate as the apparently ominous arrangement of Nicholas Hawksmoor's eighteenth-century baroque churches across the map of London, and presences like the Kray twins (who are later, in *Suicide Bridge*, transfigured into 'Hand and Hyle' after Blake's *Jerusalem*), alongside humdrum, melodramatic diaristic accounts of Sinclair's colleagues' exploits: the accidental massacre of a nest of goldfinches, or the grisly loss of a toe to the whirring blades of a lawnmower. Sucking these sources into a multifarious, polysemous figuration of this part of East London, *Lud Heat* digs up overlooked texts

just as it 'digs' into the supposed mythical significance of place, piling up resonances upon each another in a process of constant accretion. The finished artefact thus comes to resemble a teetering stack of sometimes discordant elements, connected by their association with both locality and Sinclair's own experience.

In the process, Sinclair cultivates what Patrick Wright has called a 'scavenging poetic': rumbling around Tower Hamlets on his lawnmower, he becomes an ironic double of Christiana in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), who – with her 'muck rake' – appears in a long epigraph. Wielding his own figurative rake, Sinclair becomes what Michael Moorcock has called 'an archivist of the marginal'. Just as prose and verse fragments are brought together into one baggily autobiographical assemblage, material observations and discoveries are mixed together with arcane scholarship drawing on sources including Thomas De Quincey, Kerry Downes (author of the Thames and Hudson guide to Hawksmoor), Herodotus, M. R. James, J. G. Frazer (familiar from Eliot's *The Waste Land*), Thomas Browne, William Maitland (author of a 1739 *History of London*) and Elias Ashmole (Moorcock 5).

If the tone here is one of serious inquiry, then the bathos of the 'muck rake' nevertheless coyly ironises Sinclair's activity as one born out of boredom and tedious manual labour, foregrounding the narrative persona as a wayward, alienated figure. Sinclair, to adapt Wright's diagnosis, is here *both* 'abracadabra man' *and* 'laureate of the welfare state' (Wright 220). But the effect is that not only are the various mythologies of place explored: the very activity of place's mythologisation is smudged into its depiction. In the process, Sinclair's diverse sources are factored into a model of territorial 'heat' or 'energies' where, following J. G. Frazer – whose anthropological study *The Golden Bough* (1890) was cited by T. S. Eliot as a source for *The Waste Land* – 'things which have once been in physical contact continue to act on each other at a distance after contact has been broken' (Frazer, in Sinclair, *Suicide Bridge* 20).

In 1987 Sinclair figured *Lud Heat* as the beginning of a 'triad' that was completed by *Suicide Bridge* and his first novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, in 1979 and 1987 respectively. In fact, he had been self-publishing poetry in London since the beginning of the 1970s, when the collection *Back Garden Poems* was put together. A set of dated diary entries in verse and prose – paralleling the 8mm 'Diary Films' that Sinclair was shooting at the same time (and which appeared, in fragments in the 2002 film version of *London Orbital*) – run chronologically backwards. In them, a somewhat meek narrative persona recounts a motley, often

humorous selection of anecdotes immersed in the prosaic stuff of petit-bourgeois dwelling: falling over in the shower, for instance. Included with the published text is a hand-drawn map of the 'Albion Village' area, where Sinclair and various acquaintances lived in Victorian houses scheduled for demolition in a planned extension of the nearby Holly Street Estate which, in fact, never came to pass. The way that these friends' and collaborators' addresses are marked onto the map offers a lively sense of the kind of creative localism that prevailed in 'Albion Village' at this time, while the way that the map is printed inside the front and back covers of the volume neatly 'encloses' the work within both the milieu and the physical space that it describes.

The wryly humorous tone of the *Back Garden Poems* is largely in keeping with the mood of *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* (1971), an account of Allen Ginsberg's visit to London for the 1967 'International Congress of the Dialectics of Liberation for the Demystification of Violence', and of Sinclair's hapless attempts, with the Dutch filmmaker Robert Klinkert, to film him for the German television channel ZDF. Yet the context of this event also helps explain how a playful map of urban bohemia should morph into the cityscape of arcane, competing 'energies' depicted in texts like *Lud Heat*. *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* includes an interview with one of the Congress's organisers, the psychiatrist R. D. Laing. This is the same Laing who lent his name to various of J. G. Ballard's protagonists, including that of *High-Rise* (1975), whose vision of urban catastrophe seems so far from the bucolic 'Albion Village'. Explaining to Sinclair how Manhattan, emblematic of the modern metropolis in general, is 'Hell', Laing remarks that pollution and noise mean that 'I can't imagine a more horrible environment has ever been devised by human beings for human beings to live in'. He goes on, nevertheless, to observe that

the kids are looking at their environment in a very clear-sighted way. They are attempting to discover the original layout of the land under the cities. What were the sacred spots. They are trying to devise a new tribalism. (Sinclair, *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, book 2, chapter 3)

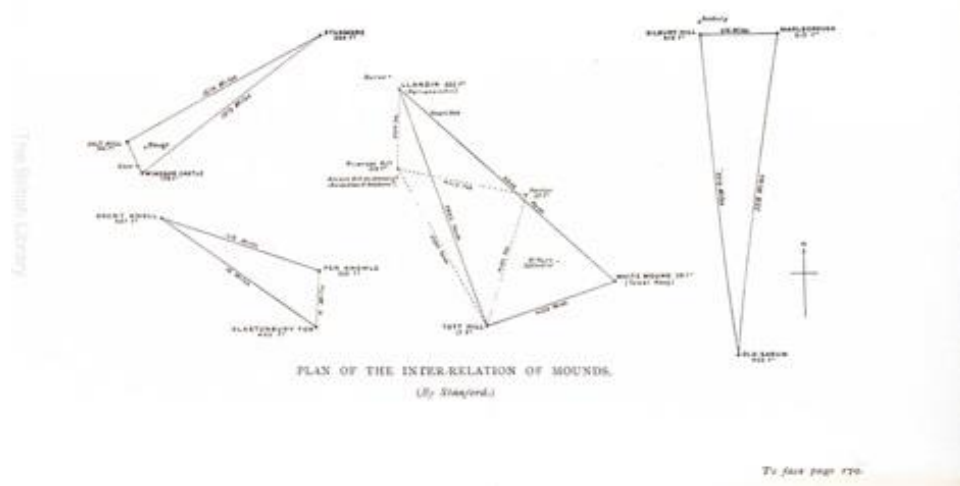
Laing's position – both its rancour and its hopefulness – seemed to become an increasingly potent infection within Sinclair's reading and writing of London. Five years later, with his 1972 collection *Muscat's Würm*, the congenial warmth of the *Diaries* had ceded place to something more severe: wounds oozing 'yellow green pus', and visions of 'the

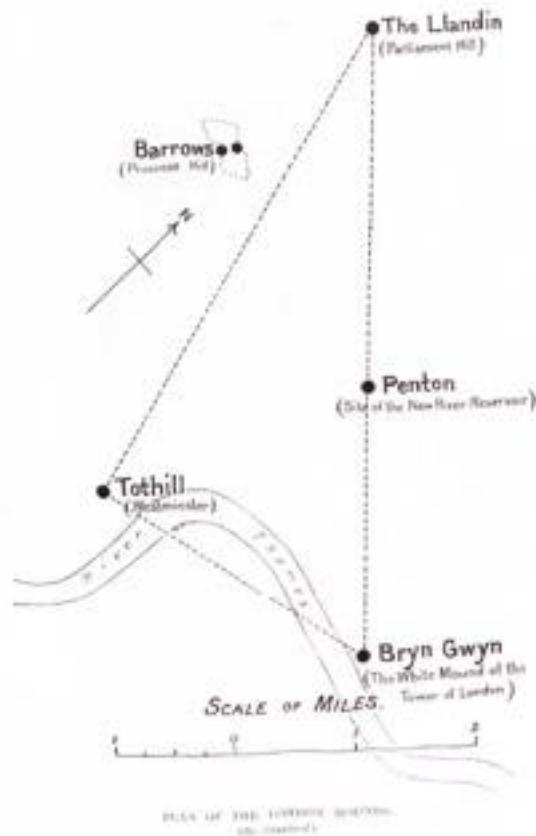
boneyards of the earth' (Sinclair, *Muscat's Würm*, unpaginated). *The Birth Rug* (1973) shows this new style taking root. Though the form is still diaristic, events such as the birth of Sinclair's daughter are now found alongside more sinister imagery, like 'the corpse of my grandfather' being 'devoured'. All this is loomed over by the presence of a 'black / mantic labyrinth' and the spectre of 'THE OLD ENERGIES / RE-CONNECTED', a capitalised phrase that contributes to a burgeoning sense of the incantatory, spiritualistic or occult (Sinclair, *The Birth Rug*, unpaginated). Sinclair's initial proposals for a 1974 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, *Albion Island Vortex*, also bear the imprint of this mood: in his letters to the gallery's curator Jenny Stein, Sinclair was already pre-empting the charge of being 'too "mystical"' – even as he went on, as if in the same breath, to intone that the exhibition had 'no absolute importance in itself' and comprised merely 'a stage in the spiral we are pacing out' (Sinclair, letter to Jenny Stein, 26 November 1973). By the time of 1977 *Brown Clouds* (1977), pregnant references to such phenomena as the only 'seemingly casual / alignments of fallen stones' (my emphasis) had become commonplace, speaking loudly of the new breed of off-kilter spiritualism now present in his writings (Sinclair, *Brown Clouds*, unpaginated).

So it was that, by the time of *Lud Heat*, Sinclair had settled into the kind of literary sensibility or persona that might employ a word like 'triad' in the first place. And it seems likely that the specific prompt to his use of this term was the most significant of the sources mentioned in *Lud Heat*: that is, Gordon's *Prehistoric London*. This volume, which frequently refers to the ancient Welsh texts by that name (and which perhaps resonated with Sinclair at least partly because of his own Welsh background) is certainly the most arcane – but possibly the most decisive – of Sinclair's sources. As Patrick Wright would confirm of Gordon's work, 'it was from the pages of this obscure tome that King Ludd stepped out onto the post-war scene' (Wright 218). Part of an esoteric tradition of seeking and revealing mystical significance encoded within the British landscape, Gordon's study stands in oblique relation to Alfred Watkins's 1925 *The Old Straight Track*, which popularised the idea of 'ley lines', and also bore an indirect influence: as Richard Sheppard writes of Watkins (echoing Sinclair's own comment on Frazer), his 'description of the invention of ley lines is crucial to understanding Sinclair's psychogeographical and literary methods. His "original revelation" is that "everything connects and, in making those connections, streams of energy are activated"' (Sheppard 17).

As Merlin Coverley pointed out in his 2006 précis of English psychogeographical writing, the 1970 republication of *The Old Straight Track* was a significant moment in the development of the renewed tradition, but if it is true that, as he claims, that Sinclair’s work freights the concept of ley lines with ‘a blend of occult paranoia wholly lacking in Watkins’ text’, then a closer examination of Gordon’s contribution – which has hitherto only received passing critical attention – might prove revealing (Coverley 53). Elizabeth Gordon is certainly a curious figure. Her other writings included a life of St George and a biography of her father, the eccentric palaeontologist and Dean of Westminster William Buckland, a polymathic figure who discovered megalosaurus remains in Oxfordshire and, according to his daughter’s testimony, was once able to recognise that he was in Uxbridge merely by ‘taking up a handful of earth’ and smelling it. “‘Uxbridge”, he exclaimed, his geological nose telling him the precise locality’ (Gordon 30).

This combination of the eccentric and the practical seems to have been a family trait. *Prehistoric London*, which Sinclair was apparently handed by chance in a bookshop in Buckingham Palace Road, restates Geoffrey of Monmouth's legend that the pre-Roman King Ludd (‘Llud’ in her Welsh-inflected rendition) ‘was buried in a vault’ underneath the eponymous gate of the City of London (Gordon 148). It includes as its frontispiece a scale map showing the triangulation of Parliament Hill, ‘Penton’ (the Angel), ‘Bryn Gwyn’ (where the Tower of London is sited) and ‘Tothill’ (where the playing fields of Westminster School are now located). These diagrams provide the clearest way in which *Prehistoric London* informs *Lud Heat*: Sinclair’s map of Hawksmoor’s churches clearly borrows from and develops Gordon’s ‘triangulation’ of the mounds.





Patrick Wright's gloss of the connection between Gordon, Watkins and Sinclair is, on the surface, convincing. The wider discussion within which his comments are nested surrounds the architect Theo Crosby's abortive idea for an extravagant memorial to the Battle of Britain in London's Docklands. As part of his critique, Wright compares the perceived contemporary need for memorials and monuments, following the era of practical and often destructive redevelopment projects after the Second World War, with the rebuilding of a sense of nationhood and territorial significance following the First. In this light, he avers that 'the original visionaries of the leyline were benevolent Christian enquirers, bent on redeeming and, if at all possible, re-enchanting the face of a nation that was still only emerging from the ruinous trauma of the Great War' (Wright 218). It is a convincing case, except that, as Robert Bond has pointed out, Wright misdates Gordon's work to 1925 (Bond 61). In fact, it was first published in 1914. Yet this is a problem that, when observed obliquely, becomes instructive: indeed, it seems likely that the very lack of a rational explanation to Gordon's text was precisely what appealed to Sinclair. The volume consistently maintains a poise that is ostensibly scientific: its full title is *Prehistoric London: Its Mounds And Circles, Religion and*

Civilization; With Notes On Their Scientific Application From Comparative Antiquity. At the same time, it ripples with inconsistencies and wild assumptions. An atmosphere germane to this sort of activity is established right from the opening pages, where the text is dedicated to one Lady Beachcroft, apparently 'the lineal descendant of Beli Mawr, King of All Britain and Wales, B.C. 132'.

As the text goes on, it is clear that Gordon's methodology – combining an ostensibly transparent, scientific approach with a deeply opaque, subjective intuition – bore a heavy influence on Sinclair's occult-inflected structuring of space and place. Her eagerness to see significance everywhere, fantastically over-determining the city, informs Sinclair's own deductions, and his ability to entertain diverse, discordant connections as complementary rather than inconsistent: certainly a characteristic of the amateur, enthusiast, even the *anorak* sensibility. The obelisks and pyramids within Hawksmoor's baroque designs are linked with the Egyptian deities Isis, Nephthys, Neith and Selkis, as well as to 'the lost pyramids of Glastonbury that blanked the burial place of Arthur'. The link is also made between Hawksmoor's obelisks and Cleopatra's Needle, 'the obelisk set up by Thothmes III in front of the Temple of the Sun at Heliopolis' and removed in 1878 from Alexandria to London, where it now stands overlooking the Thames between Waterloo and Blackfriars bridges (Sinclair, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* 34). The effect is to tie London into an apparently ancient symbolic heritage and invest the city with a certain profundity, both mystical and prosaic, in the sense that its richness is literally hidden in the 'depth' of the city, beneath its surface layer.

It may have been especially attractive to the poet's eye that Gordon's methodology is built around what might be called 'topographical philology', foregrounding the role of language in the deciphering of environments: place here is not so much a 'book to be read', as W. G. Hoskins put it in his classic 1955 text *The Making of the English Landscape*, as an esoteric cryptogram to be pored over (Hoskins 39). In *Prehistoric London*, bizarre conclusions are frequently drawn on the basis of wild speculations about place names, often attributed with dubious Welsh or 'Keltic' origins. Contrary evidence is dismissed or simply excluded. Thus Geoffrey of Monmouth's theory of the Trojan refugee Brutus being the founder of Britain is roundly endorsed, but the fact that London has never been known as 'Troynovant' or 'Caer Troia' is explained away by the idea that this simply never caught on over the 'older prehistoric name of Llandin' – all without any particular evidence (Gordon

113). One pleasingly quixotic example from further afield comes in the form of 'Cricklade', which is designated as the original college of the Greek philosophers brought to Britain by Brutus – a version of Plato's 'academy'. This is all on the basis that its name might be a corruption of 'Greek-lade' (Gordon 34): an insight with no historical justification, since the town was founded in the ninth century AD.

Prehistoric London teems with speculation like this. Modifiers like 'probably', 'possibly', 'might' and 'may have' become increasingly conspicuous leitmotifs. Gordon wastes no time pausing to consider hypotheses that might reject her thesis, clearly arrived at in advance, that there is some deep prehistoric significance – preferably exotic or arcane – to be found. In regard to the triangulation of London's mounds, for instance, she conjectures that

It *may* have been the sight of the mounds round about the ancient Caer of London and the tumuli at one point to be seen in the neighbourhood of the Llandin (Parliament Hill) and Primrose Hill, that reminded the exiled Prince [Brutus, that is] of what *he must have been told* of the ancient glory and commercial importance (as we learn from Leaf) of the famous city of his ancestors, Troy, and suggested to Brutus the name, together with the possibility of founding a New Troy which should rival in brilliance and supremacy the city of his fathers. (Gordon 7, my emphasis)

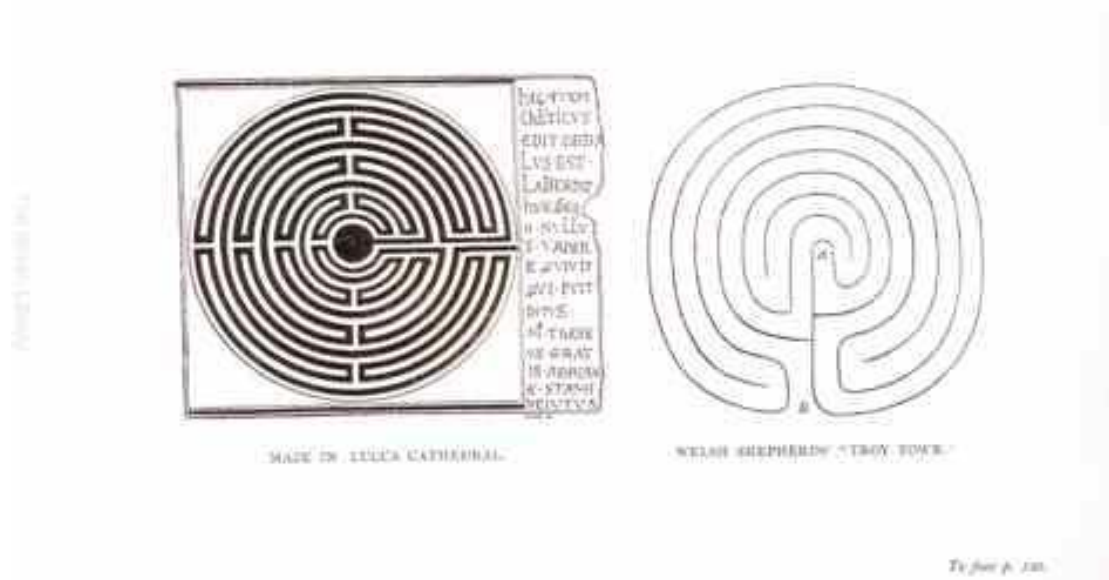
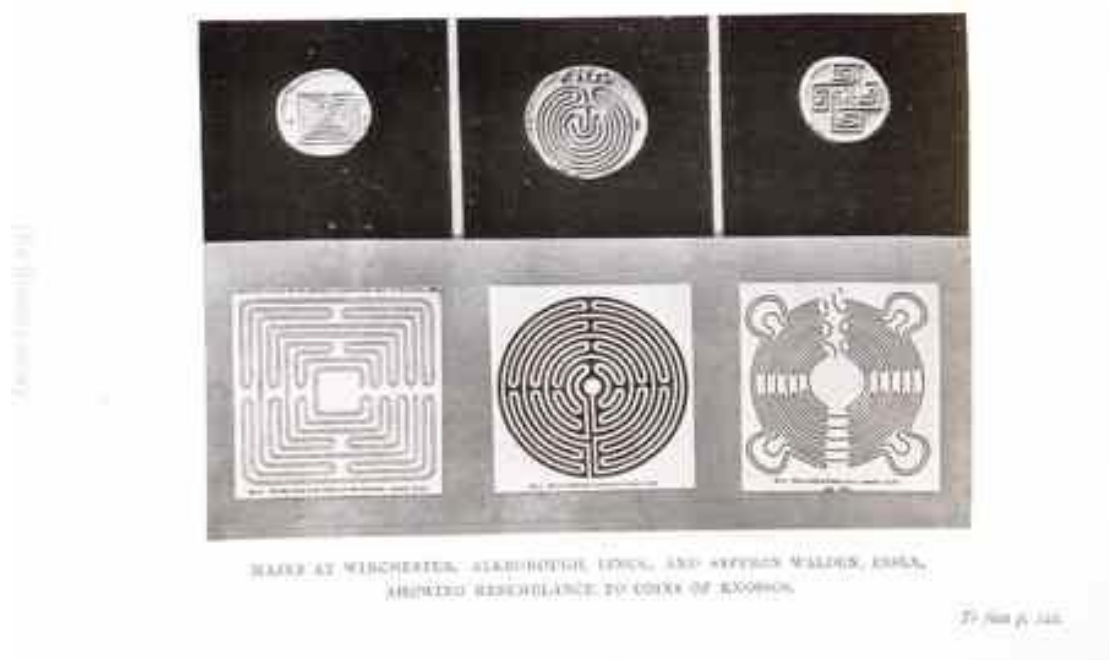
Later, 'Maiden Lane' – apparently a railway station near the 'Penton', though untraceable – is explained as a corruption of the Arabic for 'open square' (in the sense of 'agora'): 'In this name', writes Gordon,

we have an interesting link with the first wave of Aryan settlers, "Maiden" being a corruption of the Sanskrit and Arabic word *Maidan*, signifying, Professor Margoliouth informs us, *an open place of public meeting*, like the "Maidan" of Calcutta and the "Maidan" of Cairo. (Gordon 140)

Whilst this is not necessarily impossible, Gordon does not once attempt to refute or even mention the more obvious similarity with the modern word 'maiden'.

Appropriately, given the theme of semiological discordance and disorientation, one specific motif that drifts from Gordon's work into

Sinclair's is that of the maze. Gordon describes the presence of hedge mazes in Britain as a 'memory of Trojan colonization' (Gordon 117), observing that they are often referred to colloquially as 'Troy Towns' and attempting to show that the shapes of certain mazes are directly linked with particular examples in Asia Minor.



Of London, Gordon remarks that the 'The names of Maze Pond, Maze Street, and Maze Lane, near the site of the old Ferry on Bankside, Southwark (Wark, fortification), preserve the memory of yet another of these places of amusement' (Gordon 119). None of these three mazes

appears in *Lud Heat*, but 'Maze Hill', which runs alongside Greenwich Park, the other side from Hawksmoor's church of St Alfege, is mentioned as 'the bank of light that faces the Isle of Dogs' – which, following Blake's scheme in *Jerusalem* (1805–20) is designated as an unhappy place, radiating negative energy. Figures of the 'labyrinth' and the 'labyrinthine', meanwhile, abound: Greenwich observatory is described as 'the labyrinth of all recorded knowledge'; Sinclair's friend the artist Brian Catling's narrative of 'his expedition to St Anne's, Limehouse', is entitled '*The Labyrinth of the Jackal*' (both Sinclair, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge*, 15). And, despite the spuriously explanatory, guide-book style of many of the prose passages in *Lud Heat*, Sinclair's clipped, chaotic language – notable for its lacing together of arcane terminology ('vatic', 'mantic', 'hierophant'), bookish allusiveness and a slangy, imitative 'skaz' that attempts direct transcription of local dialect – is often itself labyrinthine and highly disorientating.

In like manner, *Suicide Bridge*, whose subtitle runs 'A Book of the Furies: a Mythology of the South & East, Autumn 1973-Spring 1978' and which again adapts figures from Blake's *Jerusalem* into contemporary London, begins with a confusing section of interwoven text where two passages seem to compete with one another for precedence. Although the first-person 'I' crops up occasionally, Sinclair with his muck-rake has gone. But the idea of a 'vortex' of energy, centred around place and dragging in competing, confusing narratives, is insisted upon. Circulating around the same localities as *Lud Heat*, *Suicide Bridge* operates in terms of the principle of accretion mentioned earlier: each text establishes familiarities and resonances which, in subsequent works, are taken as given. This process is legible in the case of the 'suicide bridge' itself. Located at the point where Queensbridge Road crosses the Regent's Canal in Hackney, not far from 'Albion Village', the significance of this site is explained not in *Suicide Bridge* itself but rather in *Lud Heat*, as the place 'where the Krays offered their weapons to the water after the mutilation and death of Jack the Hat' (138). Likewise, Hawksmoor's churches are frequently alluded to in this and later works, their significance to the 'energies' of place taken as given and passed over.

These examples concretely illustrate the way that ideas developed in Sinclair's earlier works are 'buried' in subsequent ones – continuity of *topos* again contributing to the sense of what Richard Sheppard has termed an overall 'intratext' connecting Sinclair's various works (Sheppard 19). Burial is not only a formal principle of Sinclair's work but also an increasingly preoccupying theme. Indeed, Sinclair's early

descriptions of East London are notable for a surfeit of death, contributing to a resolutely morbid timbre that draws on Gordon's comment that 'probably no mile in the world covers more buried history' than the City of London (Gordon 10). *Lud Heat* discusses the burial pits of the Black Death (beginning with Bunhill Fields, burial place of Blake and Bunyan), and the interment of George Williams, the supposed 'Ratcliffe Highway Murderer' of the early nineteenth century, at the 'quadrivium' of Cannon Street Road and the street now known simply as 'The Highway': an act, we are told, influenced by 'the imprecise itch of ritual observance' (Sinclair, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* 24). Hawksmoor's churches, meanwhile, are incorporated into the sinister geography of the 'Jack the Ripper' murders two centuries later, with Sinclair claiming that 'the whole karmic programme of Whitechapel in 1888 moves around the fixed point of Christ Church' (21).

In *Suicide Bridge*, Sinclair is interested in the graves of Kings Arthur and Harold – which in their 'alignment', we read, 'mark the limits, pin down a force-field: Glastonbury to Waltham Abbey, where the light is born, where the light dies' (200). Allusions like this key Sinclair's ideas into a conventional imaginary of 'deep England' associated with places like Stonehenge or Cerne Abbas. Yet East London increasingly comes to form an entire, metaphorical burial ground unto itself, in a way that anticipates the approach of writers like W. G. Sebald: Sinclair not only quotes from Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia*, which features centrally in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), but also arrives at the idea that 'the Hawksmoor churches have a close connection with burial sites, Roman and pre-Roman. The Romans regarded east London not as a place for the living but as a necropolis for the dead' – something that Sebald developed in his discussion of Liverpool Street Station in *Austerlitz* (2001). Later, Sinclair avers more generally that 'place, finally, can only be one thing: where you die', and this fascination with death and burial resonates through Sinclair's later work (Sinclair, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* 153).

The presence of the Kray twins, for instance, achieves closure in the June 1995 'Diary' article for the *LRB*, adapted into a chapter of *Lights Out for The Territory* (1997). Documenting Ronnie Kray's elaborate funeral procession from Bethnal Green to Chingford, this piece became a strangely affectionate coda to *Suicide Bridge's* preoccupations. The Ripper murders, meanwhile, become central to the themes of 1987's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*. Crucially, as in Gordon's work, the decision that space is significant seems to precede the discovery of evidence for this conclusion, and this notion of a detective story in reverse

itself anticipates Sinclair's observation in *White Chappell* that 'our narrative starts everywhere. We want to assemble all the incomplete movements, like cubists, until the point is reached where the crime can commit itself' (Sinclair, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* 51). At this earlier stage, the result is that *Lud Heat* parallels the form of a hugely overstocked casebook, with any and every piece of 'evidence' permitted to become part of the confusing stack of energies and 'heat'. In miniature, this process replicates the way that Sinclair's wider *oeuvre* forms its 'intratext' – which itself might well be visualised as one ever-growing burial mound.

It is clear that Gordon's associative, accretive, semiologically permissive method exerted a profound influence on Sinclair. The close of *Lud Heat* also bears a striking resemblance to that of *Prehistoric London*, and one that is instructive in gaining some measure of the way that Sinclair is never shy of puncturing his morbid seriousness with caustic irony and self-mockery. In its final moments, Gordon's text enters a bizarre, charismatic mode where her system, still outwardly rational, slides into an almost ecstatic enthusiasm. Her thinking becomes almost impossible to follow and lapses into a discussion of Welsh stone circles. Three stones together, she claims, represent 'the ancient Kymric symbol of the Awen, or Holy Wings, the three rays or rods of light signifying the Eye of Light, or the radiating light of the Divine Intelligence shed upon the Druidic Circle' (Gordon 172). The disorientating sequence is directly mirrored in the final section of *Lud Heat*, which finds Sinclair tracing a path along the Lea Valley to a supposed 'point of force, of maximum push'

sited on the Northern Sewage Outflow, raised Ridgeway, slanting south-east, Crows Road, East London Cemetery, Saxon Road, running into the Thames at Barking Creek. But the shrine is at the precise spot where this secret route passes above the River Lea – the ancient English/Danish border, as ratified by the Treaty of Wedmore (878). (Sinclair, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* 137)

Sinclair finds himself drawn to this location as if possessed, and the poem narrates his journey – 'he turns out of Albion drive into Queensbridge Road', crosses London Fields, then Victoria Park. 'He is entering the corridor of mysteries', we read, and 'it is out of his control'. At this intersecting point we find the 'oracle bunker', an old wartime machine gun emplacement, newly endowed with profound spiritual significance as

one of many 'high energy structures' like 'the fence that traps the Cerne Abbas Hercules giant' (140–1).

Sinclair here connects a site of more generally acknowledged 'heritage' interest with a disregarded wasteland in East London, much as Gordon speculatively compares the triangle of London mounds with sites like Glastonbury Tor. Yet the energy of his depiction is punctured by the limp unceremoniousness of the 'oracle bunker', an artificial ridge formed by a sewage pipe. Sinclair's return to this site at the close of his most recent book, *The Last London* – where he finds it an improbable survivor of the area's comprehensive redevelopment for the 2012 Olympic Games – gives some indication of the significance with which he endows it. And what is most notable about its presence in *Lud Heat* is the sense of anticlimax and absurdity. The bathos of Sinclair's approach to the bunker is ramped up by the clumsiness of the observing subject, who senses the bunker's 'energy', 'feels for it, understands that it has meaning: does not know what that meaning is' (Sinclair, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* 141). This anticlimax recalls the hapless sensibility of the *Back Garden Poems*, and it is of a piece with the incongruous image of the civic gardener musing on the spiritual significance of Hawksmoor's obelisks while using them as convenient leaning-posts against which to eat his packed lunch (107). It might also be an oblique commentary on the elaborately irrational methods of Gordon. Indeed, Sinclair's decipherment of Hawksmoor's 'pattern' includes a similar, subtly self-defeating feature: the churches' arrangement across London is explained as forming the shape of a 'set', an Egyptian tool for both castration and 'for making cuneiform signs' (16, 137).

Ostensibly there is little clear explanation for this, apart from a sheer verve for arcane speculation. Yet the idea of the sign being itself a tool for making signs might be read as an ironic, subtle send-up of Gordon's topographical-philological method, endlessly producing and reproducing patterns of signification without any ultimate resolution. This, after all, is surely part of the point of Sinclair's maps of lines of force in *Lud Heat*: that they don't really make any sense at all. However many energies and connections exist, there is always room for more, always an exponential number of other connections yet to be made. In this way, Sinclair's the 'set' describes a subtle humour to *Lud Heat's* tangled, brooding, even menacing overdetermination of space, cultivating precisely the blend of morbidity and devious wit that is such a distinctive feature of his later work.

Works Cited:

- Bond, Robert, *Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005)
- Coverley, Merlin, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2006)
- Gordon, Elizabeth Oke, *Prehistoric London: Its Mounds and Circles* (London: Elliott Stock, 1914)
- , *The Life and Correspondence of William Buckland* (London: John Murray, 1894)
- Hoskins, W. G., *The Making of the English Landscape* (Toller Fratrum: Little Toller, 2013)
- Jackson, Kevin, *The Verbals: Iain Sinclair in Conversation with Kevin Jackson* (Kent: Worplesdon, 2003)
- Moorcock, Michael, 'Introduction', Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995)
- Sheppard, Richard, *Iain Sinclair* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2007)
- Sinclair, Iain, *Back Garden Poems* (London: Albion Village Press, 1970)
- , *Brown Clouds: in the tin zone, Pendeen, Cornwall, April-May 1977* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Pig Press, 1977)
- , 'Lady Thatcher's Bastards', *London Review of Books*, 14:4 (27 February 1992)
- , letter to Jenny Stein, 26 November 1973 (Whitechapel Gallery Archive)
- , *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions into the Secret History of London* (London: Penguin, 2003)
- Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995)
- , *Muscat's Würm* (London: Albion Village Press, 1972)
- , *The Birth Rug* (London: Albion Village Press, 1973)
- , *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* (London: Albion Village Press, 1971)
- , *The Last London* (London: Oneworld, 2017)
- , *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Penguin, 2004)
- Wright, Patrick, *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

To Cite this Article:

David Anderson, 'Speculative Topography: The Fantastical Overdetermination of Space in Iain Sinclair's Early Writing', *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 18, Number 1 (Autumn 2020): 4–19. Online