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Probably Psychogeographical in Love: Iain Sinclair and the City of Disappearances

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Abstract: Iain Sinclair's imaginative mapping of London provided future psychogeographers with an influential methodology for representing a city of occult alignments and secret histories. In the wake of Sinclair's continued association with the spatial and textual practices from which such speculative theses are derived, the trajectory of the psychogeographical turn that emerges in the 1990s swerves away from the revolutionary impulses of its earlier formation by Guy Debord and others within the radical Parisian avant-garde towards a more literary phenomenon. Patrick Keiller has rebuked this aspect of the psychogeographical turn as indicative of a wider loss of political ambition in the *fin de millennium*.

Two statements by Debord on the relationship between London and love prompt a more nuanced understanding of the double bind of Sinclair's variant psychogeography. Alongside a problematic fascination with the dark heritage of London, Sinclair has also recovered the fading histories of reforgotten figures, neglected spaces, lost objects. Rather than a depoliticised practice, when aligned with the retrieval of radical currents within the cultural margins, Sinclair's psychogeography generates counter-narratives to dominant formations of culture and history under the social and political consensus of neo-liberalism.

Keywords: Guy Debord, Thomas De Quincey, language, London, psychogeography, David Rodinsky, Iain Sinclair

Psychogeography emerged in the mid-1950s as a term for the study of data gleaned from the often drunken drifts across Paris conducted by Guy Debord and other avant-garde artists and activists associated with the Lettrist International and Situationist International. In a much-quoted definition, Debord explains that psychogeography involves 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (Debord 1989a: 2). Crudely summarised, for Debord,

psychogeography was part of a radical strategy for constructing new cities capable of liberating their inhabitants from the alienated conditions of a society spectacularly dominated by the economic imperatives of global capitalism.

Psychogeographical research hypothesised that different zones of ambience within the urban landscape clustered around pivotal points of attraction or repulsion. These key psychogeographical points or hubs were designated as *plaques tournantes* (a term more commonly used to signify various kinds of 'turning places'). By charting the distribution of *plaques tournantes* within the city, the Lettrists and the Situationists argued that they could begin to detect the different ways in which the seemingly mundane geography of everyday urban experience generated specific modes of conscious and unconscious behaviour. A psychogeographer drifting through these shifting zones of ambience sought to become increasingly responsive to the subtle fluctuations in the production of emotions and sensations between one location and another in order to map the patterns of their interaction, the 'psychogeographical relief' of the territory with its 'constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry or exit from certain zones', so that the ideological conditioning attached to the most prominent conjunction of psychological and geographical factors operative within a particular terrain at a particular time could be identified and exposed (Debord 1989b: 50). The practice of psychogeography aimed to transform into a radical critique of urbanism the banal observation that some areas of the city produced a generally pleasant atmosphere while others produced a more negative response. Cultivating a playfully serious approach to the city, a combative strategy modulating between the disciplined rigour of scholarly solemnity and a more dissolute tone of bohemian excess, Debord and others embarked on urban drifts, collective walks designed to short circuit established social or economic motivations for moving through the city.

One purpose of the drifts was to determine how certain *plaques tournantes*, in a kindred mode to the disorientating device of the drift itself, appeared to be capable of dismantling the 'habitual reflexes' usually produced in an individual or a group by the prevailing form of urbanism that functioned as a support structure for the increasingly dominant forces of capitalist production and consumption (Debord 1989a: 5). In this context, psychogeography facilitated a heightened perceptual awareness of the provisional combination of psychological and geographical features that enabled such *plaques tournantes* to exhibit different degrees of resistance to the alienating techniques of contemporary planning and its carceral architecture. As features that could be retrieved and replicated, these *plaques tournantes* contained the potential to awaken the slumbering city to its revolutionary history and to alternative visions of urban development, opening up pathways for rethinking urban space as an experimental site for a radical transformation of subjectivity and social relations.

However vague psychogeography remains as a theory (especially when considered in parallel with the scarce examples of Lettrist and Situationist practice), the concept of psychogeographical *plaques tournantes* provides a useful orientation device for navigating a series of texts by Iain Sinclair that circulate around the focal point of London. In the 1990s, Sinclair played an integral role in the emergence of the so-called 'psychogeographical turn' in which the practice of psychogeography begins

to swerve away from the revolutionary impulses of its formation within postwar Paris towards a more literary phenomenon (Bonnett 2009: 46). In an article pointedly entitled 'Paris Envy', the filmmaker and writer Patrick Keiller rebukes this aspect of the psychogeographical turn (Daniels 1995: 1995). According to Keiller, the return of psychogeography in the 1990s proved indicative of a wider loss of political ambition in the immediate decades leading up to the *fin de millennium*. Keiller argues that rather than inheriting the revolutionary momentum of the Parisian psychogeographers, late-twentieth century psychogeography can be positioned as merely the 'preliminary to the production of literature [. . .] and to gentrification' (Keiller 2010: 252). Such an argument implies that the production of literature is both a diversion from the active pursuit of political change and a contributing factor in sustaining or even fostering existing social inequalities based on the dominant model of capitalist development.

Is it possible to track comparably radical currents in Sinclair's work to that found in his psychogeographical precursors? Or does Sinclair's appropriation of psychogeography defuse and depoliticise those radical currents from a more explicitly activist era? Does the movement of Sinclair's work from the margins of experimental poetry to the literary mainstream represent a form of cultural and linguistic gentrification of the obscurity and difficulty associated with the peripheral status of his earlier neo-modernist texts? And to what extent is Sinclair's psychogeography complicit with the forces of gentrification that it sets out to resist? Although previous commentaries on Sinclair have alighted upon these questions while pursuing related lines of enquiry, there remains a need for a more thorough investigation that takes as its focus the ways in which Sinclair's engagement with the tangled topic of psychogeography interweaves seemingly incompatible strands that exhibit both a loss of political ambition complicit with contemporary capitalist development into all areas of urban experience *and* a retrieval of radical energies. Could this process of retrieval contribute to the recharging of the faded batteries of political disobedience struggling to generate new strategies and new forms for reclaiming a right to the city beyond the ubiquitous imperatives of capital within that same field of urban experience?

Two statements by Debord on the relationship between London and love prompt a more nuanced understanding of the double bind in which Sinclair's variant psychogeography operates. Compiling a canon of psychogeographers, Debord writes that 'Jack the Ripper is probably psychogeographical in love' (Debord 1996: 42). Originally written in 1954, this gratuitously provocative proposal anticipates the geographical positioning of the Whitechapel murders of 1888 as a bloody hub around which psychogeographical narratives will circulate at the end of the twentieth century. Elsewhere, Debord emphasises the psychogeographical significance of the 'love story' in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* between Ann and the young Thomas De Quincey. Debord views De Quincey's irreparable separation from Ann in the mighty labyrinths of London as marking 'the historical moment of the awakening to psychogeographical influences upon the movements of human passion' (Debord 1957: 1).

The conjunction of psychogeography and Jack the Ripper offers a deeply problematic example of what Sinclair calls 'the London of dark heritage' (Sinclair 1997: 301). The tendency of psychogeography to focus on disturbing aspects of the

city's history can be aligned with this concept of 'dark heritage' as it intersects with the accumulation of symbolic capital within specific neighbourhoods that contribute to the production of marketable narratives for estate agents and property speculators. From this perspective, psychogeography becomes complicit in the commercial processes of gentrification that its initial status as a radical form of critical urbanism ostensibly opposes. By contrast, the conjunction of psychogeography with De Quincey's vision of the city as a phantasmagoric zone of disappearance points toward alternative impulses within Sinclair's contribution to the psychogeographical turn. Separated by circumstances beyond their control, the young De Quincey fruitlessly searches for Ann, the young prostitute who had 'stretched out a saving hand' during a melodramatic moment of ill health when he was destitute in Soho, and imagines her reciprocating his search efforts as they pass 'through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other' (De Quincey 1986: 51, 64). In the atomised world of nineteenth-century capitalist modernity, potential friends and lovers can no longer rely on being able to find each other again after their initial contact, particularly when either their ephemeral association or precarious economic position precludes exchanging such details as a stable address (or even a last name).

In 2006, Sinclair edited *London: City of Disappearances*, an 'anthology of absence' that circulates around the topic of the city as a site of amnesia, dispossession and loss, where the wreckage of enforced forgetting and involuntary oblivion reconfigures personal and historical memory as well as the cultural and physical landscape (Sinclair 2006b: 2). In this collaborative anthology and in other works on either side of the millennium, Sinclair recovers the fading histories of reforgotten figures, neglected spaces, lost objects. Rather than displaying a depoliticised practice or a prurient and gentrifying gaze, when aligned with the retrieval of radical energies and subversive currents within the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century global city, the dense network of psychogeographical tributaries that saturate Sinclair's texts retain a capacity to generate counter-narratives to dominant formations of culture and history under the political and economic consensus of neo-liberalism. Sinclair's preoccupation with David Rodinsky provides a compelling example of the confluence of such processes. Like De Quincey's Ann, Rodinsky is usually represented as an emblematic figure of disappearance. However, before narrowing the focus to the *plaque tournante* of Rodinsky's room and associated sites constellated within its psychogeographical system, it will prove useful to address Sinclair's relation to the politics of language and of canonicity.

Sinclair's London is a labyrinthine city split by multiple forces deliriously replicated in the complexity and contradiction of his hybrid texts. In *Lud Heat*, first published by his own Albion Village Press in 1975, Sinclair's imaginative mapping of the early eighteenth-century London churches designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor supplied the city's future psychogeographers with an influential methodology for decoding a landscape encrypted by occult alignments and secret histories (Sinclair 1995: 13–38). In the wake of Sinclair's continued association with the kinds of spatial and textual practices from which such speculative theses are derived, and the identification made by Sinclair and others in the 1990s that such imaginative speculations could be productively reconceptualised as *psychogeography*, the trajectory of this predominantly London strand of literary production has appeared to

validate Keiller's critique. The hermetic conspiracies and Gothic associations mischievously threaded throughout Sinclair's work have been sampled by more high profile authors such as Peter Ackroyd, Alan Moore, and Will Self, who have repackaged and disseminated variations on these themes to a wider audience. Indeed, it is only a partial exaggeration to argue that the relative popularity of London psychogeography and its melodramatic and Gothicised representations of the city has threatened to clog the streets of Whitechapel with budding *dérivistes* for whom Jack the Ripper becomes a disturbingly compelling synecdoche of the violence and criminality attached to specific locations. In an extended conversation with Kevin Jackson published in 2003, Sinclair makes the following wry observation: 'I thought psychogeography could be adapted quite conveniently to forge a franchise—which is what happened—more than I could have imagined' (Jackson and Sinclair 2003: 75). In another interview, Sinclair describes psychogeography as being for him:

a way of psychoanalyzing the psychosis of the place in which I happen to live. I'm just exploiting it because I think it's a canny way to write about London. Now it's become the name of a column by Will Self, in which he seems to walk the South Downs with a pipe, which has got absolutely nothing to do with psychogeography. There's this awful sense that you've created a monster (Jeffries 2004: 20).

Not for the first time, Sinclair selects the word 'monster' from the formidable arsenal of his vocabulary to describe the variant psychogeography spawned in the last decade of the twentieth century (Sinclair 2004: 87). A critical tension can be detected here between Sinclair's playful acknowledgment that his exploitation of psychogeography has generated a monstrous version that has escaped the confines of that genus while also providing a conveniently generic label under which to file his own monstrous work.

The forging of a psychogeographical franchise was a gradual process that crystallised into a distinctive form capable of turning monstrous in the mid-1990s when several related elements of Sinclair's London-based research interests found a profitable conjunction in the literary crucible of *Lights Out for the Territory*. Subtitled '9 Excursions in the Secret History of London', *Lights Out for the Territory* consists of nine sections of documentary prose that revise and extend essays and reviews written by Sinclair for the *London Review of Books* and other publications earlier in that decade. The book was widely reviewed in the national press with several commentators providing publisher-friendly quotes that also align Sinclair with De Quincey. 'As a stylist he is incomparable', Peter Ackroyd observed, 'he is the De Quincey of English letters, scathing and sometimes savage' (Ackroyd 2002: 286). Ackroyd's review also hinted at the presence of Sinclair's existing corpus, a cluster of largely unfathomable and unobtainable publications. He describes Sinclair's polemical take on the London essay as 'a form of urban necromancy' and warns that the essays at times become 'so fraught with coincidences and correspondences and connections that the reader may find it difficult to follow the author's thread into the centre of the London labyrinth' (Ackroyd 2002: 288).

In *The Guardian*, James Wood also described Sinclair as 'a latter-day De Quincey', and again laid a great emphasis on the style of the writing: 'Anyone who

cares about English prose cares about Iain Sinclair, a demented magus of the sentence' (Wood 1997: 10). Shipwrecked by the free market tempests of Thatcherism and New Labour, the citizens of the contemporary metropolis were being alerted to the presence of a new Prospero channelling the unseen spirits of their noisy urban island from a terraced cell on Albion Drive, E8. Such reviews suggested that *Lights Out for the Territory* contained enough residual traces of Sinclair's earlier rough magic to challenge any simplistic notion that it marked a significant shift in his oeuvre. While the phrase 'a demented magus of the sentence' soon came to adorn the covers of Sinclair's major works as a promotional puff of seemingly unqualified praise, the extent of Wood's admiration was counter-balanced by a capsule critique of Sinclair's political and philosophical limitations. Wood raised the possibility that an audience blessed with a modicum of the reviewer's own intellectual common sense might share an aversion to Sinclair's penchant for pulp fiction and ersatz thaumaturgy:

One does not have to believe Sinclair all the time. So purely is he a stylist that he returns prose to a state of decadence: that is to say, one can find Sinclair's mind limited, his leftish politics babyish, his taste for pulp writing tiresome, his occultism untrue, and forgive all of this because the prose, gorgeously amoral, is stronger than the world it inhabits. It consumes the world it inhabits (Wood 1997: 10).

The implication is that 'a demented magus of the sentence' provides a more palatable figure than a demented magus stalking the material world of the city. By announcing his willingness to forgive Sinclair's more credulous antics and objectionable tastes because of the stylish qualities of the decadent prose, Wood also implies that these disjunctive strands in Sinclair's work are not so easily separated. The two forms of demented magic are not only deliberately imbricated by Sinclair but also deeply reciprocal in communicating the immediately mysterious yet inherently social complexities of urban experience.

From *Lights Out for the Territory* onwards, Sinclair invests the act of walking in the city with a general political purpose (which gains specificity when cast as counter-conjurations against state-sponsored projects and events such as the Millennium celebrations or the London 2012 Olympics). The revision of walking as a subversive act is a proposition with a lengthy pedigree and one which has become steadily more elementary in a twenty-first century context where vast tracts of public space have been sold into private ownership. But the specific tenets of Sinclair's politics are difficult to discern. Wood (1997) describes Sinclair's leftish leanings as 'babyish', a description whose political orientation is challenged by Ben Watson who tunes into Sinclair's contrary flirtation with a 'right-wing cynicism' (Watson n.d.: 5). The question comically posited in the title of Watson's essay is whether Sinclair can be viewed as a 'revolutionary nihilist or revolting novelist?' (Watson n.d.: 1). Watson answers his own question by amalgamating the two proposed alternatives, resisting the quick fix of a simplistic resolution to revel in a dialectical process more responsive to Sinclair's endlessly contradictory work. Sinclair is at times both (and at times neither) a revolutionary nihilist and a revolting novelist (the latter in multiple senses: in a grotesque revolt against the great tradition of the genre, rebelling against conventional plots, narrative structures, rounded characters, but also by offending the

values of free market conservatives *and* of politically correct progressives with what Peter Brooker (2005) terms his 'white, masculinist imperfections', eschewing reactionary and radical readers with his hostility towards collective politics) (Brooker 2005: 227). Without blithely subscribing to its more utopian hopes, the legacy of the counter-culture has given a recognisably libertarian streak to Sinclair's anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment stance ever since his first book *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* (1971): a first-hand documentary account of the seminal Congress for the Dialectics of Liberation held in 1967 at the Roundhouse (a literal *plaque tournante*) in North London. But there is a notable lack of engagement in his work with the history of class struggle within the secret history of the city. Aligned with the unlikely commercial success of his other 'revolting' aspects, such an omission threatens to undermine any sustained comparison with the radical politics of a psychogeographical precursor such as Debord.

Given these qualifications, is it still possible to argue that Sinclair's work retains any political efficacy in relation to the development of a radical subjectivity or to the collective transformation of the social relations of the city? For Watson, it is 'as a poet of the urban and the concrete that Sinclair scores; as a political columnist he is sad indeed' (Watson n.d.: 5). It is the force of his poetic observations and the remarkable tenacity with which he charts his constellation of preoccupations that gives the work a radical momentum that moves beyond the banality of the politics it occasionally espouses. From this perspective, Sinclair's psychogeography becomes most illuminating and most radical when he deploys a language densely laden with startling images and unexpected perceptions to document the affective regimes of the urban environment on the emotions and behaviour of various figures within its overdetermined network of actual and imaginary spaces and events. It is at such challenging points of intersection, where his paranoid reading of the secret city is fused with a demented and decadent prose style that requires active deciphering, that Sinclair's labyrinthine counter-narratives move beyond the occult revelation of invisible lines of influence and power towards a more materialist critique of the capitalist organisation of space and of language.

Alert to the correspondences between grammar and grimoire, Sinclair is at his most politically engaged in *Downriver* (1991), a savagely trenchant dissection of the grimly spectacular social and environmental damage inflicted on London by the policies of Thatcherism. Sinclair describes the book as 'a grimoire of rivers and railways', twelve narratives that act as spells designed to lift the curse of 'the Widow'—Sinclair's manic caricature of Margaret Thatcher (Sinclair 1991: 408). Both Wood and Watson stress the significance of Sinclair's attention to the words on the page, explaining from different platforms on the literary-political spectrum how Sinclair invests language with a magical propensity to transform the everyday experience of material reality into something stranger and more provocative. Where Wood and Watson part ways is where the material city meets the demented magic of Sinclair's sentences, where language is surreally conjoined with the revolutionary energies of the outmoded and the destitute. 'Language takes precedence', observed Walter Benjamin of the Surrealists. The title of Watson's essay references Benjamin's seminal essay on 'Surrealism'. For Benjamin, no one before the Surrealists perceived the 'revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded"' or perceived 'how

destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism’ (Benjamin 1997: 229).

Cast in Sinclair’s terms, language connects with the reforgotten elements that haunt London as a city of disappearances, a process of haunting accelerated by successive decades of neoliberalism. Here the idea of haunting is not just a trope to be filed under the spectral turn of London Gothic or the seductive phantasmagoria of hauntology (although both of these factors are at play); it also relates to a more material transformation attuned to the real that lingers in the surreal:

This is not the place to give an exact definition of Surrealist experience. But anyone who has perceived that the writings of this circle are not literature but something else—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature—will also know, for the same reason, that the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms (Benjamin 1997: 227).

As a revolting novelist, Sinclair’s intoxicating accounts of the urban and the concrete can also be described as not exactly literature but something else. Writing against the grain of literary production, Sinclair’s writings are documents, bluffs, forgeries that form interruptive fragments of a psychogeographical franchise. This is not to claim that Sinclair seeks to replace one form of mimetic texture with another more representative of urban experience. It is not his mission to continue to replace the symmetrical gig-lamps of literary realism with a luminous modernist halo. Sinclair interrogates the gaps opened up by the consistencies and contrasts between the experience of the city and the experience of writing and reading the city. As with Benjamin’s account of the surrealist conversion of ‘the immense forces of “atmosphere” concealed in these things to the point of explosion’, Watson suggests that Sinclair’s combustible prose is capable of creating a pressurised atmosphere in which the destitute components of urban experience also contain a potential to be transformed into the profane illumination of a revolutionary nihilist. These components include the various *plaques tournantes* around which Sinclair’s hybrid work circulates. But if the Surrealists, with their dedicated study of revolutionary theory and their pedigree of insurrection, proved too ill-disciplined to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution, is it really plausible that Sinclair’s work could provide a spark to ignite an explosion? More contextual clarification is required. Watson’s analysis focuses on Sinclair’s early poetry and his first three novels (particularly the critically neglected *Radon Daughters* (1994)). With the publication of *Lights Out for the Territory*, Watson detects a sense of ‘slackening’ in the urgency of Sinclair’s writing but remains largely optimistic that if not co-opted by the literary establishment ‘the punk bludgeon of Sinclair’s debunking materialism’ will continue to be of use in confronting the political conflicts ahead (Watson n.d.: 6).

The question of co-optation by the literary establishment returns us to Keiller’s critique of *fin de millennium* psychogeography. Since the success of *Lights Out for the Territory*, Sinclair has been particularly mindful of both the benefits and the pitfalls of being co-opted by the institutions that often feature in his work as the targets of his

furious satire. As a prolific twenty-first century author releasing a stream of books with both mainstream publishers and esoteric small presses, Sinclair has remained generous with his enthusiasms for collaborating with other artists and writers, constructing small communities around his own presence as a conductor of chaos, a mobile *plaque tournante*: walking, writing, receiving, transmitting, modifying, repeating. Sinclair insists that 'the official map of the culture, at any time, would always fail to include vital features. Too many good writers are left out of the canon' (Lichtenstein and Sinclair 1999: 139). Sinclair rehearses this argument in an introduction to *Conductors of Chaos* (1996), an anthology of experimental poetry that he edited in the mid-1990s. With a familiar attention to the paradoxes and problems of his own re-enactment of the position that he denounces, Sinclair elucidates how anthologies are 'a closing down, the suppression of a more radical and heterodox body of work' into a compendium edition. The works that are omitted are under erasure from the culture. Scarcity becomes an institutional by-product of the selectivity of canon formation and anthological practices:

What is published is taught. No other texts are available. The secret history of [. . .] the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and 1970s is as arcane a field of study as the heresies and schisms of the early Church. The plethora of original pamphlets and chapbooks cannot be located without a team of private detectives and a hefty bank balance (Sinclair 1996: xv, xiv).

When Sinclair tunes the engine of his prose into such histrionic states it is a sign that he is writing from personal experience. After setting up Albion Village Press at the start of the 1970s, Sinclair published both his own work and that of other poets such as Brian Catling and Chris Torrance as part of the cottage industry of the British Poetry Revival. By the mid-1980s, Sinclair had stopped producing Albion Village Press poetry titles and started preparing cheap booklets as Hoarse Commerce. These booklets typically consisted of a couple of folded pages of A4 bearing fragmented observations on various book-hunting tours around the road and rail networks. They were photocopied for print runs that dwindled to ten copies, all given away to a diminishing target audience of friends and fellow poets. Rather than viewing this minimal production as a lost period, Sinclair has commented that he had 'happily disappeared into the quasi-writing activity of being a book-dealer' (Jackson and Sinclair: 101). In *Edge of the Orison*, he explains that book dealing 'was a form of authorship' and that his 'Thursday stall at Camden Passage Market could be viewed as an exhibition of chosen texts. A modernist collage of found objects. Perfect-bound quotations to take home for cash' (Sinclair 2005: 93). While collecting, collaging and selling an idiosyncratic mixture of passions and preoccupations accumulated throughout the various periods of his writing career, Sinclair divines an alternative canon not fixed or globally positioned on the official map of the culture. In earlier works such as *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* (1987) and *Downriver* (1991), Sinclair had reworked this autobiographical strand into the darkly comic antics of a hierarchy of book dealers, dysfunctional emblems of the entrepreneurial excesses and exploitative greed of Thatcherite enterprise. It is only in the 1990s that Sinclair begins to achieve moderate commercial success and wider critical recognition, moving from the realm of the reforgotten author-as-producer into the popular franchising of psychogeography.

Lights Out for the Territory is the first of Sinclair's books where the term psychogeography is used repeatedly to describe multiple aspects of cultural production and spatial practice (Sinclair 1997: 21, 25, 127, 143, 151, 187, 214, 217, 226, 300). First published in 1997, the book garnered more reviews than any of Sinclair's previous publications and reached a far wider audience. In the opening sentence Sinclair delineates his professed intention to 'vandalise dormant energies' within 'the sprawl of the city', presenting a dynamic example of the variant psychogeography with which he will become chiefly associated (Sinclair 1997: 1). If the dormant energies locked within such defensive frameworks as the seemingly inviolable domain of contemporary property rights need an act of vandalism to awaken their potential, then Sinclair's preferred mode of destruction is to drift purposefully through the urban landscape, recording and retrieving data while accessing a heightened state of pattern recognition. When reconfigured for publication, Sinclair uses the purposeful drift as a generative device for assembling an array of associative chains of actual and imaginary correspondences that will be embellished further as part of the creative process when layered onto the dense network of intersecting and overlapping territories already traversed and transformed into texts. Although the resurgence of a re-imagined psychogeography began in the 1990s, many of its characteristics were already present in Sinclair's earlier work so that the turn towards psychogeography located in *Lights Out for the Territory* needs to be situated as part of a longer continuum (including Sinclair's faltering turn away from psychogeography in the twenty-first century).

Several pertinent examples of the continuity and development of Sinclair's preoccupations surface in *Downriver*. Imagining a state-sponsored memorial and celebration that capitalises on the kind of proto-psychogeographical mapping of East London that he had undertaken in *Lud Heat*, Sinclair emphasises an unhealthy empathy between his fictionalised version of the ruling Conservative party (and their sycophantic cultural cadre) with the stage-management techniques of the Nazis:

The Minister was not to be diverted. 'A continuous frieze of speeches by Winston and Margaret will remind us of our duties as citizens, prepare us for the tapes of ack-ack guns over Dagenham, cones of concentrated fire, tracer shells. White parachute discs over the Isle of Grain. A distant thunder from the Thames Estuary. Stamping jackboots. Criss-crossing searchlights windmilling above the dome of St Paul's [. . .] Yes! All the razzamatazz of Nuremberg, without any of the chthonic excesses. The showbiz side, if you like. They certainly knew how to throw a party!' (Sinclair 1991: 233)

This passage anticipates the construction of the Millennium Dome and also the Olympic Park in the Lea Valley as temporary homes for twenty-first century spectacles. Sinclair suggests that rather than eliminating the 'chthonic excesses' of previous fascist spectacles, the elided sources and disputed legacies of such projects need to be excavated in order to question and to undermine official versions of history and heritage.

A less hyperbolic example of Sinclair's self-parodic tendency to highlight the recuperation of his own work occurs earlier in *Downriver* in relation to the totemic status that Peter Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* acquires amongst the upmarket

residents diligently restoring dilapidated Georgian townhouses in the streets around Christ Church, Spitalfields. In Ackroyd's shrewdly commercial recalibration of Sinclair's more outré ravings, the name of Nicholas Hawksmoor is given to a senior detective in 1980s London engaged upon an investigation into a series of murders that have occurred on the sites of a familiar set of eighteenth-century churches. In the closing acknowledgments to *Hawksmoor*, Ackroyd expresses his 'obligation to Iain Sinclair's poem, *Lud Heat*, which first directed my attention towards the stranger characteristics of the London churches' (Ackroyd 1985: 218). In *Downriver*, finding 'six mint copies' of this 'celebrated "bestseller" that attributed the most peculiar properties to the local churches' in the house of an actor restoring one such property, Sinclair's narrator adds:

The critics promised your money back if you did not die of terror as you read it. Many of the New Georgian squatters kept a copy in the close chamber, though privately decrying the thing, as a calumny on the disinterested aesthetics of Baroque Architecture. But even as a talismanic icon, I felt that six units was stronging it. (Sinclair 1991: 98)

The particular form of gentrification through conservationist campaigning associated with those that Sinclair teasingly portrays as 'New Georgian squatters' has been well documented. At the end of the 1970s the Spitalfields Historic Building Trust emerged as a property company with charitable status that sought to preserve the surviving buildings in the neighbourhood and to refurbish those buildings that had suffered from neglect, decay or unsympathetic redevelopment. However, by the start of the 1990s the Spitalfields Trust found themselves priced out of the area by the rapidly escalating property prices that they had been partly responsible for initiating. Retrospectively, the emergence of London psychogeography in the 1990s out of a combination of preoccupations already present in Sinclair's work, annexes Sinclair as another unintentional contributor within this gentrification process (initially standing in the shadows behind Ackroyd's bestselling incarnation of his influential Hawksmoor thesis).

In this vision of the city, Christ Church sits in the gentrified borderlands between the high-rise office blocks and street level chain stores of a rapacious capitalism emblematic of a technologically advanced civilisation and the adjacent territory of Banglatown, a deprived area with a large Bangladeshi population whose low-rise social housing and neighbourhood shops are under threat of colonisation by the dominant and superior force of an expanding City. While Sinclair's work produces subversive counter-narratives that challenge the rationalist discourse of global capitalism through a remapping and remythologising of what he has called 'the floating Gothic principality of Whitechapel' as a zone where past inequalities and terrors continue to have a malevolently radioactive effect on the contemporary landscape, these counter-narratives also reinforce the spatial division between the City and a space that is other, socially, economically and culturally marginalised (Sinclair 2006a: 10).

Finally, to return to the figure of David Rodinsky, *Downriver* offers another narrative that illustrates Sinclair's own problematic complicity with the dominant ideology reshaping both the cultural and physical landscape of the contemporary city. At the beginning of the 1980s, Rodinsky's attic room above a dilapidated synagogue in

Princelet Street, Spitalfields, was rediscovered. The contents had remained untouched since Rodinsky had disappeared two decades earlier. Sinclair's adoption of the local mystery of Rodinsky as material to incorporate into his own London mythography develops throughout this period from an article in *The Guardian* to a chapter in *Downriver* to the full-length book *Rodinsky's Room*, co-authored with the artist Rachel Lichtenstein (Sinclair 1998; Lichtenstein and Sinclair 1999). In *Downriver*, Sinclair describes Rodinsky as 'the caretaker and resident poltergeist of the Princelet Street synagogue' (Sinclair 1991: 134). But as in *Lud Heat*, the marvellous is connected to the stuttering momentum of economic realities. Rodinsky 'had evaporated', writes Sinclair, 'to be resurrected only as "a feature", an italicized selling point, in the occult fabulation of the zone that the estate agents demanded to justify a vertiginous increase in property values' (Sinclair 1991: 135). Sinclair's own culpability in laying part of the groundwork for 'the occult fabulation of the zone', by incorporating Rodinsky as a feature within his own psychogeographical franchise, is implied rather than explicit. Using Rodinsky's annotated copy of a London A to Z, Sinclair also walked a series of routes through the city, an act that became another publication *Dark Lanthorns: David Rodinsky as Psychogeographer* (1999). Like Debord with his list of those who are psychogeographical in love and other pursuits, Sinclair casts Rodinsky as a psychogeographical precursor, another obscure figure to supplement an expanding directory of the reforgotten.

Rodinsky used a red biro to mark routes on his *Geographers' A to Z of London*, and to circle specific buildings and neighbourhoods. Sinclair depicts Rodinsky's nascent psychogeography as a cognitive mapping that breaks down the city's overwhelming mass of information into a series of typological hubs or *plaques tournantes*. During the first of three walks that Sinclair undertakes following the red routes inked into Rodinsky's *A to Z*, Sinclair finds himself rambling through 'drowsing suburbs' in the far reaches of north-east London, 'ducking and diving through Essex baronial estates' (Sinclair 1999: 22). He confirms a growing conviction that he is literally following in Rodinsky's footsteps: 'The apparently random swerves and jerks of Rodinsky's red biro' he writes, 'are not a form of automatic writing, a spirit-guided script, but a direct and sensitive response to the lie of the land' (Sinclair 1999: 21). The hub around which the first walk pivots proves to be the tower of the former Claybury Mental Hospital, where Rodinsky's sister Bessie spent most of her life. Sinclair returns to Claybury in a later walk as part of the circumnavigation of the M25 in *London Orbital*. With suspiciously fortuitous timing, he arrives at Claybury 'on the day when bulldozers were moving in' (Sinclair 2002: 137). He discovers that the secluded site is to be redeveloped as a gated residential community. Despite the parallels between the late-Victorian master plan for the gated asylum and the twenty-first century master plan for the gated community (both include a gym, a swimming pool, private parkland) local history is under erasure. Claybury is to be renamed Repton Park. Standing outside the gates, Sinclair watches as hospital records are burnt in skips. The site is being primed to neutralise its violent past, but Sinclair's timely interruption stirs up historical echoes.

Within Sinclair's prolific output, the psychogeographical practice of 'walking with a thesis' introduced in *Lights Out for the Territory* (Sinclair 1997: 75) undergoes various reiterations that can be interpreted as formulaic (hence the parodic self-

critique that recurs throughout his texts). But this variant psychogeography enables Sinclair to identify the gains and losses attached to various forms of cultural, social and political amnesia. From the end of the millennium onwards, Sinclair's established interest in occult conspiracies or urban Gothic are more clearly rearticulated as part of a grand project that challenges official versions of history and heritage. As a first-hand witness or as a medium for off-message marginal voices, Sinclair documents an array of imaginative resources in danger of being deactivated or deleted by the risk-averse spectacle of mainstream media and the divisive commercial practices of urban regeneration. Where Thomas De Quincey and Ann passed through the city separated perhaps by a few feet that proved a barrier 'amounting in the end to a separation for eternity', Sinclair's compulsive associationism attempts to reconnect the separated and to retrieve that which has been lost within the city of disappearances (De Quincey 1986: 64). While Sinclair remains a prolific twenty-first century author, the continued association of his work with the psychogeography of London's dark heritage has proved problematic for assessing the changing literary and political contexts of his contemporary significance. Rather than positioning Sinclair's variant psychogeography as either reactionary or revolutionary in relation to his various precursors and contemporaries, a more nuanced reading is necessary. By interweaving both radical *and* conservative strands, Sinclair's work over the last two decades represents a sustained attempt at consciously negotiating the double bind in which contemporary literature finds itself when producing oppositional narratives to the neoliberal consensus that drives the contemporary global city.

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