

The political inception of psychogeography: Iain Sinclair's *Downriver* (1991).

The practice of psychogeography, broadly defined as an awareness of and openness to the psychological effects of environment and space upon the individual, and the writings of its practitioners, are currently the focus of sustained critical attention. As a number of writers produce new fictional and non-fictional material, the bulk of critical and interpretative focus is directed at keeping pace with the developing directions of what is an emergent mode of thought and style of writing in the contemporary literary landscape. Critical attention has to a far lesser extent focused on a return to the moment of inception and initial development of the modern conception of psychogeography.

Speaking recently about this moment in interview, Iain Sinclair has identified the socio-political determinants of the practices found in his and others' writings of the 1980s and early 1990s: 'There was a demonic energy about Thatcherite Britain: everything was being wiped out, and writers had to resurrect tools of resistance from the past.'¹ This paper will attempt to address the central question which such a statement produces. What, then, is the nature of the act of resistance to dominant social trends that Sinclair envisages his texts as performing? I will focus upon the culmination of Sinclair's political engagement in his 1991 novel *Downriver*. Whilst actually published slightly after the end of Thatcher's period of political tenure, critics have characterized it as Sinclair's most sustained engagement with the set of political and social circumstances denoted by Thatcherism. The text's status as 'the Thatcherite book' has been confirmed by Sinclair himself in interview.²

Eric Hobsbawm characterizes Thatcherite Britain as 'the most consistent attempt' to organize society according to neo-liberal principles aiming to embrace 'an economy in which resources were allocated *entirely* by the totally unrestricted market, under conditions of unlimited competition.'³ The social effects of the application of such laissez-faire economics in the move towards what we now term post-consensus society might be said to have involved not the effective management of the requirements of all society's members, but an undermining of the very social fabric of

¹ *The Guardian*, 'Review', 16/02/08.

² Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals; Kevin Jackson in conversation with Iain Sinclair* (Tonbridge: Worple Press, 2003), p. 127. Brian Baker finds that the novel 'signifies Sinclair's return to a direct (rather than mythic) engagement with the political and cultural fabric of Britain'. Brian Baker, *Iain Sinclair* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007), p. 84.

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 563-4.

society. The reductionist tendency of such policies is clearly discernable in Thatcher's famous pronouncement that 'there is no such thing as society.'⁴ It is this reductionist drive that *Downriver* records as the dominant feature of official trends in Thatcherite Britain.

The novel, fragmented into twelve narratives with different focal characters in each, and therefore possessing a form representing the disconnections of post-consensus society, is focused upon the changes wrought upon eastern districts of London during what Sinclair has called a period 'when the whole Thatcherite explosion in Docklands was taking place.'⁵ *Downriver* offers an account of the ways in which 'the occult logic of "market forces" dictated a new geography.'⁶ The management of this environment by the authorities involved the redevelopment of ex-industrial buildings for business and residential inhabitation by wealthy city-workers under the direction of the London Docklands Development Corporation, a government-funded quango. Sinclair's terms of description make clear the mercenary and fiscally-determined nature of the social policies supporting the rampant property speculation in downriver districts:

Wharfs developed into concept dormitories. Rancid docks were reclaimed and rechristened ... The whole Wapping ditch was converted overnight to estates and protected enclaves. These bespoke 'riverside opportunities' are so many stock points; painted counters. They are sold before they are inhabited. Investors shuffle the deeds to other investors, and take their profits.⁷

Alongside the supposed regeneration of these areas, Sinclair also inscribes the social effects of a changing environment for existing residents and communities now priced out of the market in what had been designated an 'enterprise zone.'⁸ The Wapping Riots of 1986/7 provide a distillation of the tensions resulting from Thatcherite policies. News International, aided by new printing techniques and beneficial government legislation, had moved out of Fleet Street in the City to a new printing plant at Pennington Street in the Wapping area. Concurrent industrial reform led to a strike and demonstrations at the new plant. Local residents, perceived as sympathetic to the strikers, had their movements restricted and many were arrested and/or injured

⁴ Margaret Thatcher, interviewed in *Women's Own* magazine, 31/10/1987.

⁵ Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals*, p. 121.

⁶ Iain Sinclair, *Downriver (Or, The Vessels of Wrath) A Narrative in Twelve Tales* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 345. All future references denoted as *Downriver*.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 69.

⁸ For an account of the social polarisation resulting from the measures introduced by the LDDC, see Roy Porter, *London; A Social History* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 464-467.

in the violent clashes with police that followed. The eventual failure of the strike and the subsequent break-up of the print unions led to the weakening of the Labour movement as a distinct presence and communal force in the area. The dispute figures in *Downriver* as the result of the radical altering of space. The narrator returns to the area to find that ‘everything had changed; it was *Kristallnacht*. There were roadblocks, searchlights, dogs on chains ... The riverside acres were a battleground, a no man’s land’. The polarisation of rich and poor and the increasing division of society is found to be written on the environment now that ‘the contractors had parcelled up the docks.’⁹ The ‘Riverside Opportunities’ of the chapter’s title are, ironically, strictly only for those who can afford them.

The political endorsement backing these private property enterprises is made clear. Thatcher features in the novel as ‘The Widow’ who ‘was a couple of years into her fifth term in what was effectively a one-party state and a one-woman party.’¹⁰ Sinclair’s dystopian vision of a future Thatcher dictatorship extrapolates the features of the contemporary situation. Problem districts, such as Hackney, where Sinclair lives and a key area of his own psychogeography, are dealt with summarily by those in power: ‘The Widow and her gang had decided that Hackney was bad news and that the best option was simply to get rid of it, chop it into fragments, and choke it in the most offensive heap of civil engineering since the Berlin Wall.’¹¹ Contemporary changes to infrastructure, such as the privatization of the rail network, also feature in the novel as government-led initiatives indicating a presumption to the management of urban space: ‘Unchallenged social changes generated their own hubris: anything was possible. Demons slipped the leash. We were lords of creation. We could tear down and reshape cities; send iron ladders steeppling out over the unregistered landscape.’¹² Sinclair’s novel consistently bears witness to the central management of the alterations wrought on the east London landscape of its setting, and to the detrimental social effects that they produce.

The particular form of bearing witness that psychogeographical writing performs is reliant upon the prior practice of actually moving through the relevant space. For Sinclair, this act most often takes the form of walking. Investigating the disappearance of a nurse reported in local papers, the narrator visits the Hackney

⁹ *Downriver*, p. 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 286.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 204.

Hospital where she worked: ‘I would adopt my usual method, and circumnavigate the hospital walls; see what the stones had to say.’ The results of this activity are also described – ‘My notebook was scrawled with gnomonic doodles that might, at some future date, be worked into a jaunty polemic.’¹³ Such activities are seen to offer a supplement to the lack perceived in textual sources. Researching the poet Nicholas Moore, the narrator interviews his friend Peter Riley. However, the resultant transcript does not satisfy and the narrator instead walks to Moore’s house at St. Mary Cray. This same process of the textual recording of first-hand experience of place underwrites the accounts that the entire novel constitutes.

Whilst the diagnostic appraisal of the capitalist deployment and management of space under Thatcher does form the basis of Sinclair’s approach, it is not the limit to which aspires. In differentiating modern psychogeography from antecedent writings regarding space, theorists and practitioners have sought to stress its *active* rendering of place in new ways, in contradistinction to the *passive* reception of unmediated environment that the flâneur is portrayed as having engaged in. Matching this more recent alignment, Sinclair’s text does not only bear testament to the depredations upon Thatcher’s London, but also offers a contestation of those tendencies. Brian Baker, in his study of Sinclair’s writing, summarises the psychogeographical project:

A postmodern geography, then, is not one that simply explores the spatial configurations of contemporary capital and their (de)forming relations to power, subjectivity and the social; rather, the passage to postmodernism results in a disassembling and rearranging effect, a radicalisation of the possibilities of social critique from the geographical perspective.¹⁴

Downriver consistently offers just such a challenge to dominant trends in its suggestion of an alternative conception of space. Sinclair’s narratives construct what he calls a ‘psychic map of the city’ wherein the hidden or forgotten resonances and histories of specific sites and areas is recorded in opposition to the reduction to economic value that property speculation is seen to envisage. The fragility of the continued existence of this other mapping of space is noted as the narrator mourns ‘the loss of another secret locale’ to the developers: ‘[N]ow another disregarded inscape has been noticed and dragged from cyclical time to pragmatic time; has been

¹³ Ibid. p. 85-6.

¹⁴ Baker, p. 13.

asked to justify itself. *Shannon Landscapes* are the chosen agents of “reality”: red bearded, slow-moving giants in check shirts have the renovation contract.¹⁵ The quotation marks around ‘reality’ here implicitly questions its singular nature and reasserts multiple realities or perspectives of reality in a palimpsestic space that is being lost to the dominance of economic considerations.

The threat posed by the estate agents’ acknowledgment of only economic justifications is ever-present in *Downriver*. However, the novel also realises the potential to reverse this process that is present in the opposition of the two value systems. Later chapters of the book increasingly focus upon these possibilities, one of which is concerned with the erection of a monument in Silvertown. The Widow’s ongoing colonization of the downriver areas of London has encompassed the commissioning of a memorial to her deceased ‘Consort’. The pre-ordained design plans are duly rubber-stamped by the relevant committees. However, some individuals do attempt to contest the meanings of space and the control of media surrounding commemoration. A local artist informs the narrator that ‘I determined when I first heard rumours of this heretical Silvertown monument ... to counter it with one of my own’.¹⁶ The chapter culminates with an unofficial art installation being mounted to coincide with and offer an alternative to the Widow’s speech inaugurating the official memorial.

The establishment of counter-narratives that these examples indicate achieves a self-reflexive dimension when we consider the similar nature of the act of resistance that Sinclair envisages for his own text. Counter-monuments offer an implicit challenge to the singularity of the official version in their doubling of the event in an unofficial and diversionary guise. Such a process of doubling introduces plurality and contestability as factors undermining a reductionist application of political, social and historical narratives. Sinclair calls his text a ‘grimoire of rivers and railways.’¹⁷ The novel constantly aims to remember the forgotten narratives and unvoiced testaments of individuals now effectively lost to history. Their magic spell is linked to the sites of particular resonance in east London where events have occurred. The landscape of the novel is therefore mapped over with an alternative history which contests the very same ground that property agents now consider ripe for redevelopment. Again the

¹⁵ *Downriver*, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 316.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 531.

form of the novel is informative regarding Sinclair's aims. Whilst the break-up of *Downriver* into separate narratives is reflective of the fragmentation experienced in post-consensus society (as noted previously), the structure does forge different links between its component parts. The separate tales provide intertexts for one another: they overlap in their shared spatial locations and several characters play different roles in more than one section. Such a polyphonic approach encompassing twelve narratives also perhaps invokes the book of hours and relates back to the idea of the 'grimoire' and its metaphysical potentials. The novel as a whole therefore establishes a series of new connectivities underpinning east London. For Sinclair, the Thames offers the guiding principle and chief navigation aid upon which this map is constructed – it is described as 'black, costive, drawing me on; flaunting the posthumous brilliance of its history.'¹⁸ *Downriver* challenges the notion that these areas, now that their former industrial land uses are receding, are merely empty spaces suitable for wholesale overhaul.

In the service of these ends, Sinclair employs a particular set of spatial aesthetics: temporal recovery is presented as a kind of cartography. The recoveries of marginalised history are translated from the chronological axis of time into the spatial axis of place. A depth model is replaced by one where different periods of history are laterally present within a given environment. A moment of revelation comes to the narrator of *Downriver* as he visits the house of an artist friend in Spitalfields and looks out of a back window, seeing the area from an aspect not available on the street.

The true history of Whitechapel is here, unseen, invisible from the public streets. Lost gardens, courtyards whose entrances have been eliminated, shacks buried in vegetation like Mayan temples – so that only a previous intimacy could establish the meaning of these mysterious shapes. The ground is unused and unlisted: it does not age. You could hack a path into the thicket and converse – as a contemporary – with the dead centuries.¹⁹

The 'temple' analogy here evokes an idea of sacred space. Sinclair's cartography is not one of objective grid-mapping but the construction of a subjective narrative-driven conception of certain spaces. Such a reading does remain 'invisible' to those merely passing through; but the aesthetics of the gaze, focusing a sustained awareness, do offer this kind of reading in the establishment of 'intimacy' with the environment. In

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 7. The possibilities of such a rendering are currently being explored at length, particularly in Peter Ackroyd's recent study, *Thames: Sacred River* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007), which is itself indebted to Sinclair's work.

¹⁹ *Downriver*, p. 177.

such a way the history of London is made undeniably present in the contemporary resonance of its locales. Sinclair's text aims to pull these histories from the private into the public domain, from invisibility into full presence.

The dual register of Sinclair's act of resistance, as a recording of the predatory deployments of space by a neoliberal, economically motivated political regime and as the construction of an alternative rendering of space to the former, initiates the concluding remarks regarding terminology with which I want to close. Brian Baker's assessment of the novel's negotiation of space finds that 'Sinclair's city is a sign-system of accretions, a palimpsest.'²⁰ The invocation of the palimpsest as a way of understanding Sinclair's aesthetic is helpful in its acknowledgement of the presence of layered overwriting of space and the plurality of those who write on the environment. Elsewhere Baker has written that Sinclair 'resists the contemporary configurations of urban space, and reveals the history of that space which is deliberately erased or overlaid by late capitalism.'²¹ In these two instances, overwriting is experienced first positively as something Sinclair himself engages in; and second negatively as something that capitalism enacts and that Sinclair exposes and resists. In the literal definition of a palimpsest, the superimposition of later writing effaces earlier writing.²² In this manner, *Downriver* renders east London as an anti-palimpsest. It makes present the earlier writing of environment that contemporary property agents are engaged in the business of erasing in order to overwrite districts with new developments. Sinclair's aesthetic, as has been shown, engages in co-presencing of different strata of history in the present. Therefore, the growth of urban London is found not to have erased traces of the previous rural state of the landscape: 'The present stain – bricks, dirty windows, furnaces, generators – is accepted, but does nothing to damage the older sense, still vital; the unassumed joy of entering into the original field.'²³ *Downriver*, as such, can be read as an extended political deployment of the same techniques as they are outlined in Sinclair's preceding novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987). The narrator of that text writes that

²⁰ Baker, p. 28.

²¹ Ibid. p. 21.

²² OED: 'palimpsest, n. a parchment or other surface in which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing.'

²³ *Downriver*, p. 167.

We have got to imagine some stupendous whole *wherein all that has ever come into being or will come co-exists*, which, passing slowly on, leaves in this flickering consciousness of ours, limited to a narrow space and a single moment, a tumultuous record of changes and vicissitudes that are but to us.²⁴ [Sinclair's italics]

In this task, Rod Mengham finds that Sinclair resists official versions and makes links for another, more complex London, establishing 'a sense of community across time-zones that must be weighed in balance against the demands made on the metropolis by those who merely inhabit or manage its present organization of space.'²⁵ Sinclair's other London demands a reconsideration of the basis upon which decisions regarding the contemporary management of space are undertaken. A counter-narrative challenging the official version is therefore created. The rendering of the city that a text such as *Downriver* constructs is one inhabiting the liminal space between fiction and documentary non-fiction. Its places and many of its events and characters are real or have real origins, but their refashioning and organisation are artificial. The degree of objectivity possessed by the account that Sinclair gives is deliberately left unclear, even actively obfuscated. By its coalescing and wilful confusion of the fictional and the factual, *Downriver* stands as an undermining of the distinct categories upon which the claims to authority of the official narrative and structure of the city are built. The end-purpose of Sinclair's political intervention therefore takes the form of enforcing negotiation and dialogue upon the single-minded economic rendering of space that is read in Thatcherite Britain and particularly London.

²⁴ Iain Sinclair, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 102.

²⁵ Rod Mengham, 'The Writing of Iain Sinclair: "Our Narrative Starts Everywhere"', in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), pp. 56-67, (p. 56).

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