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Shooting Billy Wordsworth

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Iain Sinclair
London: City of Disappearances
Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2007, £14.99 pbk (ISBN 0141019484) 655 pp.

James Attlee
Isolarion: A Different Oxford Journey
University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2007, $22.50 hbk (ISBN 0226030938) 278 pp.

Will Self and Ralph Steadman
Psychogeography
Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2007, £17.99 hbk, (ISBN 0747590338) 255 pp.

Introduction

In his recent autobiography, *Miracles of Life*, J.G. Ballard (2008) writes of the unease he felt among fellow novelists in the 1960s, who seemed to him then to be locked into seriously outmoded literary sensibilities (he much preferred the company of physicians, artists and hoodlum scientists). He gladly reports that the novel has changed very much for the better in recent years, and identifies Will Self and Iain Sinclair as among a new generation of writers 'with powerful imaginations and a wide, roving intelligence' (Ballard, 2008: 222). Self and Sinclair are quite different sorts of writer – from one another; but not without common interests and enthusiasms. They are united, for one thing, in their reciprocal regard for Ballard. Self is on the record as considering him one of the most significant post-war writers of the English language and clearly takes some of his tricks as a writer from Ballard. Sinclair is also an admirer: 'an English Master … [achieving] this astonishing paranoiac poetic' (see Chapman, 2006). Self and Sinclair also share a passion for walking, and in this they leave Ballard behind.[1]

Sinclair has described in interview how he once had an epiphany, standing in front of a book-vending machine in the lobby of a Travelodge off the A13,[2] in which he realized there were only two sorts of writer, two sorts of people even: peds and pods (see Chapman, 2006; also Sinclair, 2004). Peds are walkers, naturally accessing their material, and going at life more generally, by journeying, on foot; they operate at street level, transcribing landscapes directly encountered. Pods are stationary, even in movement; they allow the world and an abstracted imagination to play over the windscreen, in reverie, distilling from this a perspective that is all their own. Pods and peds; everything breaks down into one or the other. And Ballard, the suburban stay-at-home, the motorway man and dreamer of (powered) flight, is a pod. Not so Sinclair, or Self. These two are walkers, peds – celebrated plodders. Sinclair is probably best known for having walked round the M25. Self recently 'walked' from London to New York. Why? Because he had business there (see Self and Steadman, 2007: 13). Only the business turns out to have as much to do with the getting there, contrarily, as with any point of arrival. That business might have anything at all to do with this sort of contrary journeying – wilfully slogging it to Heathrow, labouring away on foot from JFK across trackless wastes of tarmac – is soon apparent when one considers the publishing success and profile both authors have enjoyed not only as writers of fiction but as literary practitioners of a contemporary psychogeography, the vogue for which has been shifting units – books, pamphlets, (news)papers, and, arguably, property – since the early 1990s.

For those not familiar with the term, 'psychogeography' today seems to work as some or other combination of local history, urban exploration and subversive (and/or subjective) cartography. Tracking through marginal and exploited locales, practitioners unearth submerged histories, trace obscure connections and generally pick away at 'this conundrum, the manner in which the contemporary world warps the relationship between psyche and place' (see Self and Steadman, 2007: 11). Walking stitches the whole thing together, not least as narrative; and what we get as readers are reconnoitred reports of a geography we almost recognize, revealed through movement. Roving intelligence, as Ballard has it.

A Contrary Practice: Tripping with Self

Will Self has been publishing accounts of his own brand of psychogeography in a column of the same name in the *Independent* newspaper since 2003, and this journalism must represent the most widely communicated current example of what psychogeography is all about. More people – in Britain, certainly – who have at least heard the word and hold some idea that it involves a skewed take on walking and landscape probably have Self's *Independent* journalism to thank for that than any other writing. Accompanying illustrations by Ralph Steadman provide a good visual peg on which to hang any such impression: addled caricatures of places and people in his trademark style, all splash and

sinewy lines and scribble. Over 50 of these column pieces are brought together in Self's new book, *Psychogeography*. The first of these, titled *South Downs Way*,[3] opens with the following, characteristic statement of intent: 'I've taken to long-distance walking as a means of dissolving the mechanized matrix which compresses the space-time continuum, and decouples human from physical geography. So this isn't walking for leisure' (see Self and Steadman, 2007: 69). Self keeps up this commitment to walking as dissident praxis, kicking out against not only modern mechanized transit but also recreational walking. In an interesting conceit, he traces the twin evils of the mechanized matrix and Gore-Tex clad hiking to a common point of origin in English romanticism. Thus, psychogeography is 'an attack upon the convention of going to see the picturesque … and its correlative in the literary world which is a kind of biscuit-tin naturalism'; and this: 'I think that the modern mass-travel industry is sort of Wordsworth's mind-child … If I could go back in history and assassinate somebody who's really to blame for the way the prescribed folkways chew up the environment, it's probably Billy Wordsworth.'[4]

Psychogeography collects 54 pieces of journalism, 23 of which are set in the UK, mostly London and the South East; 14 more in mainland Europe; three in the USA; then a mix of ones and twos in India, Marrakech, Thailand, Australia, Singapore, South America. The engagement with any of these places is superficial, of necessity; at around 800 words a column, Self's psychogeography is never going to be the 'deep topography' his friend Nick Papadimitriou practises: 'minutely detailed, multi-level examinations of select locales' (see Self and Steadman, 2007: 11). Instead we get the flicker of a sharp, arch eye skipping from one skewed modern landscape or mass transit scenario to the next – a frozen moment at US Immigration, 500 km across France in a people carrier, a sweltering hotel in Bangkok featuring a wall-sized poster of the Manhattan skyline; and repeated attempts to walk away from all this, to reassert distance and gradient, take time, connect with the territory. Peddling his foldaway bike along the Manchester ship canal Self is jubilant:

> These metropolitan types might go to Liverpool for an art biennale, or to Manchester for a party conference, but the idea that these two, proximate cities can be journeyed between, purely for the sake of it, is way off the edge of their flat and papery world … Once more I'd pulled it off, and loosed the so-called 'lines of desire' with which urban planners lash us to workplace, retail outlet and real estate. (Self and Steadman, 2007: 214)

The same contrary impulse runs through the whole collection.
Self's style is set and celebrated and not about to change, and the *Psychogeography* column, for all its geographic range, gets predictable when anthologized. You soon enough know what is coming next even if you do not know where in the world it is going to come from: space-time compression by anecdote, a touch of specious social theory, and the trademark caustic wit. What gives the book a more cumulative character is, curiously, the physical geography of the thing. Reading *Psychogeography* with a view to reviewing it, I started to

tally actual locations (see above), marking these on a sketch map of the world. Way too literal, but, even so, revealing. What you get is a shallow arc of dots across a Standard Mercator Projection, the USA and Australia at the English-speaking extent, London at the apex amidst a cluster of dots round about the Home (and adjacent) Counties.[5] Which is to say that by the end of the book you have Self mapped out: exit velocity from a north London suburb; third-world slacker itinerary in the varsity hols; metropolitan 'meedja' career with occasional overseas assignment (drugs skewing the terrain for a few difficult years); marriage, kids and a south London home; walks by the Suffolk coast; and family holidays in the Dordogne (and a writer's bolt-hole in the Orkneys).

Self is interested in tracing out biography as geography too, and *Psychogeography* opens with an extended essay in which he tracks his way across the Atlantic in search of his American mother's childhood home. This is the walk from London to New York, which he describes as 'perhaps … the defining journey so far as my particular brand of psychogeography is concerned' (see Self and Steadman, 2007: 11). This is the one to read. No sightseeing, no cycling (though there is the small matter of a few hours in British Airways Business Class); and nothing, it turns out, so simple as getting from A to B. Arrived at Kew Gardens, a New York interwar suburb he has never seen before, Self is thrown back on himself and familiar territory, perplexed:

> Why had my mother omitted to mention at any point in my childhood that the north London suburb we lived in was an exact simulacrum of the New York neighbourhood she herself had grown up in? That Kew Gardens and East Finchley were located on the same Möbius strip, a ring of dendro-urbanity that, though it may have grown, twisting through time and space, nonetheless left our sense of place unavoidably on the *same side* … I'd walked all this way, only to discover that I'd never left home at all. (Self and Steadman, 2007: 66)

Always the most disconcerting journey of all.

Scrying the City: Sinclair's London

Iain Sinclair describes his latest book, *London: City of Disappearances* (2007a), as 'a gazetteer of erasures' (2007b: 11) and an exercise in 'deflected autobiography' (2007b: 4); deflected because an edited collection, comprising solicited and unsolicited contributions from friends and friends of friends. A book he did not feel he could bring off acting alone. Sinclair has been dogging London – tracking, trailing, sniffing, marking territory – for over 30 years, and he opens *City of Disappearances* with this: '"Bodger. I am a tanned male Staff with white chest and little black nose, much loved by my family and friends." London is a kennel city populated by vanished animals, kidnapped domestic pets. Self-published premature obituaries have been wrapped around surveillance poles, pasted to electrical junction boxes' (2007b: 1). From this beginning, the book takes shape as an anthology of absence.

Sinclair knows something about self-publication having started out that way himself, distributing through his own Albion Village Press as part of the British poetry revival of the early 1970s (see Baker, 2003; also Jackson, 2003). Reforgotten by the end of the decade, he continued to publish in increasingly small editions, combining poetry and prose with the odd labouring job, eventually dropping by accident into the feverish (doomed) world of book-dealing: early morning London markets, criss-crossing the cityscape, lost literatures, marginal territory, esoterica; 'wonderful backwards-and-forwards lurches between different worlds … Dickensian low-lifes, plunging all over the map, pulling every stroke in the book' (see Jackson, 2003: 109); a decade spent musing and brooding on the discernible traces of a London mythology soon to be outstripped by commercial interest and the memory thefts of gentrification and heritage. Bookending this period are two significant texts, the first of which, *Lud Heat: A Book of the Dead Hamlets* (Sinclair, 1975), has become the conventional point of orientation for any discussion of contemporary London psychogeography. *Lud Heat* sets out a gothic reworking of the topography of East London patterned through the churches of Nicholas Hawksmoor:

> Eight churches gives us the enclosure, the shape of the fear … A triangle is formed between Christ Church, St. George-in-the-East and St Anne, Limehouse. These are centres of power for those territories; sentinel, sphinx-form, slack dynamos abandoned as the culture they supported goes into retreat. The power remains latent, the frustration mounts on a current of animal magnetism, and victims are still claimed … templates of meaning, bands of continuing ritual … [a] system of energies, or unit of connection, within the city … Each church is an enclosure of force, a trap, a sight-block, a raised place with an unacknowledged influence over events created within the shadow-lines of their towers … the ritual slaying of Marie Jeanette Kelly … the Ratcliffe Highway slaughter of 1811, with the supposed murderer, stake through the heart, trampled into the pit where four roads cross to the north of St. George-in-the-East. (Sinclair, 1998: 13–21; originally 1975)

This is psychogeography pre-franchise. A powerfully imagined, occulted geography of the city. The second book, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (Sinclair, 1987), marks the point of Sinclair's breakthrough from underground to mainstream recognition. An intertextual anti-narrative, (still) circling around the unappeased East End 'Ripper' murders of 1888, *White Chappell* assembles signal events and secret histories, cheap conspiracy theories, bibliomania and present day memory traces in an attempt at deliverance, '[using] myth to cut through contemporary closures: to drag Brick Lane back through the tide of incomprehending development which is engulfing it' (Wright, 1987: 5). Next came *Downriver* (Sinclair, 1991), a raging assault on Thatcherite economics and the Docklands development.[6] More novels followed, but real commercial success came with Sinclair's non-fiction reporting of his compulsive London walking, *Lights Out for the Territory* (Sinclair, 1997). This last marks a cross-over point for contemporary psychogeography; subtitled *9 Excursions into the Secret History of London*, the book records a sequence of excursions across the

city undertaken as attempts to redeem and release energies forced under by the spatial vandalism of free market forces and new power elites: '[t]he quiddity of these eccentric architectural arrangements, the compromises and epiphanies worked out through the centuries … wantonly and mindlessly set aside … [a] profoundly depressing system of new barriers – red and white cones … a visible narrowing of consciousness' (Sinclair, 1997: 104). *London Orbital* (Sinclair, 2002) was an idea that anyone could catch on to, and it sold as such: a walk around the M25. Simple; eccentric; and for Sinclair another contrary (counter-clockwise) patrol of marginal terrain – not the disappearing East End this time, but London's under-imagined suburban perimeter.

All of which and more leads to his latest, *London: City of Disappearances*: over 600 pages of anthologized erasure, amnesia and recovery. Sinclair has organized contributions geographically and thematically with a view to continuity, and suggests that the book can be read cover to cover as 'a sort of communal novel which I was editing more in the sense of editing a film rather than editing a book … a new form I think' (see Chapman, 2006). Having read the book all the way through, I agree: there is continuity. *City of Disappearances* is of a piece and amounts to something more than the sum of its parts (not so Self's *Psychogeography*). But the reader can dip in and out as well; the contributions are uneven, in length, style, subject and quality (not so Self's *Psychogeography*), and there is plenty to be got from selective browsing if a single push does not suit. Here are a very few choice, if untypical, cuts: the derelict smallholdings of Bedfont Court Estate, hidden beneath Heathrow flight-paths and explored by Nick Papadimitriou (2007); Patrick Wright's (2007) account of a walk along Brick Lane with writer Emanuel Litvinoff; J.G. Ballard's salute to the elevated section of the A40 dual carriageway '… an heroically isolated fragment of the modern city London might once have become … the Westway, like Ankor Wat, is a stone dream that will never awake' (2007: 497). More representative perhaps is 'Old Hags' by Marina Warner, a protest against vanishing London pub names such as the Old Mother Red Cap in Camden Town, renamed the World's End and tricked out inside 'with olde shoppe fronts, and lots of faux Camden Town heritage tat' (2007: 434). A shame, but does this sort of thing really matter all that much?

> On the scale of things, with all the other problems near and far, hardly. But there are reasons for minding, apart from the general loss of memories and stories that connect people and places. The new names have so little character compared with the old ones; when the old hags drop from view, so does an idea of human vagaries and fates, of idiosyncratic and oddball people, with strange histories and surprising fortunes – good and bad. Pub names and signs are some of the oldest surviving traces of exchanges and folklore in a particular place. More and more names and phrases in the public arena are tied to adverts and commodities – global creep of meanings for everybody and no one. They've gone because no pub owner wants to admit that there's any link between disreputable winos and what they are selling. Perhaps they've disappeared too because we've become sensitive to the sight of derelicts with their tins of Strongbow and plastic-bagged bottles and don't want to be reminded. Perhaps the old hag is just too rude for the times. (Warner, 2007: 437)

Warner's complaint is representative, capturing the tone of a good part of the book: a city diminished, its past lives and locales casually (sometimes violently) disregarded and overbuilt; history reworked as heritage; a creeping banalization. Against which, contributors offer up and insist upon recollection, as a sort of fragmentary resistance. A recurrent feature of the book is a *Gazetteer of Disappearances and Deletions* listing miscellaneous snippets of memorial – the Derry & Toms Roof Garden (now the property of a private club), the Convent of the Poor Clares at Ladbroke Grove (bulldozed to make way for GLC flats), Urania Cottage (a home for homeless women established by Charles Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts in 1847, later the Manager's House for the Lime Grove Studios, subsequently bought by the BBC, then demolished in 1993 – the rubble used as foundation material in the widening of the M25); Michael Moorcock and Sarah Wise are stalwart contributors.

Having started out with a missing dog, *City of Disappearances* nears its close with a search for missing persons 'vanished from the bureaucracies of London' (Valentine, 2007: 634), and ends with a haunting. Noir crime writer Derek Raymond in conversation:

> I'm a close man, but I'm open to a dark that most living people are far too busy to see. You have to find it to know it. But to know it you have to want to find it … The living say, 'It's bad news to be wanted by the dead.' But I don't think so. No, I don't think so at all. (Raymond, 2007: 636)

A well chosen finale for a book that is threaded with urban gothic – the continuing (elusive) presence of the past in the present, the city as labyrinth, counter narratives to modern development.

Walking is not the key to *City of Disappearances*, but Sinclair is still at it. In a piece titled 'Fallujah London', one of a few he contributes to keep the book moving along, he records a walk stringing together the war memorials of London's mainline train stations (not all of the memorials, themselves records of absence, turn out to be where they are supposed to be, or accessible). This circuit of remembrance, initiated by an attempt to trace a line of his wife's family history, is overtaken by the July bombings of 2005 in the wake of which new memorials proliferate: '[t]he faces of the missing, some serially reproduced, fly-pitched [to] plasterboard … [and] bus stops' (2007c: 582).[7] Further sidelined by a hunt for the (absent) King's Cross fire memorial,[8] Sinclair and his wife find themselves in the London Transport Museum's Depot at Acton, where the panels of names are being stored until development work at the station is complete. Left to wander the uncanny space, a warehouse of memorabilia, they enter a train carriage full of (crash test) dummies, the only passengers. Sinclair writes: 'And here they remain, before the show begins or after it is finished, the ultimate audience. The ones who sit and smile, without memory, or time, or words. The ones who have no obligation to make sense of the city that contains them' (2007c: 588).

Two writers with a wide, roving intelligence; each one a ped, neither a pod; each essentially fixed on London (see Self, 2002: 36–44; also Sinclair, 1997, 2002) and determined to figure the place out on foot. Calling any of this psychogeography does not necessarily help – though it might help sales; the term is a trendy

one – which is to say a good 10 years off the pace (see Sinclair, 1997: 332) – its appeal enhanced by imprecision. If psychogeography today is taken to indicate a recalcitrant commitment to 'resonant and marginal local history … the esoteric and arcane … lowlife … a sense that history affects ambience, and that the character of place inheres and affects feelings and behaviour' (Baker, 2003: 325), or anything at all bearing on *that sort of thing*, then Sinclair is the key figure. But he is more than a little wary of being fixed in this way: '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' (see Jeffries, 2004). And yet February 2008 saw Sinclair and Self together on stage at the Victoria and Albert Museum, publicly affirming each other's work and their shared and continuing interest in psychogeography (copies of *Psychogeography* and *London: City of Disappearances* on sale by the door). The difficulty being that there is a baseline awkwardness to being a commercially successful dissenting voice. Self's sharp metropolitan satire comes at us from the pages of the *Independent* Saturday Magazine; Sinclair's entry into the literary mainstream 'exploits' the marginal territories he aims to spiritually redeem. Psychogeography becomes a brand.[9]

Local Hero: Attlee's *Isolarion*[10]

James Attlee labours under no endorsement from Ballard and is no psychogeographer. But his book *Isolarion* is also a fragmentary record of urban encounters, individual stories and local history strung together by walking. So we are in familiar territory – only this time not London. Attlee's book is an account of pedestrian investigations along the streets of Oxford, and along one street in particular: the Cowley Road. The book takes shape as a record of secular pilgrimage. Humans share with other animals a compulsion to move, says Attlee; but the migratory urge in humans can be complicated, '[e]qually driven, our goals are less explicable, our needs more arcane … [our journeys] do not necessarily involve travelling large distances' (2007: xiv). For Attlee, the urge to get going, it turns out, is to keep him very much at home: a resident of East Oxford, he decides that it is time he made a native pilgrimage and got to know his own locale a little better.

> A hyper-mobile man, I have to learn to travel more thoughtfully, to slip beneath the surface and explore more deeply. Space is relative. One aim of my pilgrimage will be to connect me to the neighbourhood in which I live. At the same time, perhaps my journey will offer clues to a wider reality. (2007: xviii)

Attlee positions the Cowley Road as a hidden Oxford, a world away from the privilege and spectacle of the centre and off the tourist circuit. In a city so much

of which is thoroughly marketed and controlled, the Cowley Road, he suggests, because that little bit off the map, has always been a home for the city's more marginal and diverse constituents; people and practices for whom there is less space or tolerance elsewhere in the city cluster here. But perhaps not for long. There are local authority plans afoot to smarten the place up and bring it into line, and these do not sit well with Attlee and give *Isolarion* a sort of urgency. His pilgrimage, visiting and marking key sites, tracing out the contours and character(s) of the place, is an attempt to recognize the Cowley Road for what it is and in that way make a case for keeping it so. Again the dissenting voice, and again that slightly awkward complicity. Attlee sends up the planning ambitions for the road thus: 'rebrand it, put up some pretty signage, perhaps even give it a new name, and the middle classes will flock in' (2007: 88). 'You are the middle classes,' one is tempted to reply. 'You're already there.' It is something of the same awkwardness that runs through *City of Disappearances*, a good part of which reads as a cultural record of gentrification compiled by the uneasily implicated.

Armed with notebook and tape-recorder, Attlee sets off to take it all in: mosque, pub, Jamaican Eating House, Asian Cultural Centre, jewellers, robe-maker, sex shop, baker, café bar (lots of these), church hall, Russian supermarket, Indian restaurant, Nile Vallie Fast Food. The Cowley Road and its resident entrepreneurs are gently quizzed by an appreciative and benign investigator. There are, perhaps, trace elements of a psychogeography, but nothing more than that. Attlee is sensitive to a criss-crossing of 'invisible lines of demarcation … [signalling] changes in demographics, atmosphere, building style, climate, and a host of other subtle variations in the urban fabric … there for those with eyes to see them'; and some of the odd skewings, the near-and-fars and simultaneities that Self picks up on, are mixed in too. But *Isolarion* is essentially light touch, realist social exploration, which is not at all what Self or Sinclair are about.

The book develops two lines of investigation and argument, the first of which explores Cowley Road as a site of cosmopolitan tolerance. For Attlee, the place has a natural vitality and resilience to be traced back to its 'history of soaking up the culture of incomers, re-deploying it most obviously as the various mutant versions of national cuisine it offers up for sale along its extent' (2007: 17). A messy, diverse, and (sometimes) rowdy street, the Cowley Road nonetheless *works*; its patchwork of hybridity and difference is something that city planners could not hope to model and would do well to respect. Attlee is a reasonable but sided witness and comes across as a sort of 21st century Jane Jacobs, making the case for mixed use neighbourhood, active street life and a light-touch sociality enacted as disparate yet choreographed movements and intersections in shared space. While he does not shy away from the troubles facing some of the street's occupants and inhabitants, he is a little coy when it comes to getting to grips with these – picaresque observation and level-headed sympathy seem to do it so far as homelessness goes, for example. This is not a street without problems, but the

street itself, it seems, is blameless; whatever your lived circumstances, there is space for you on the Cowley Road. The second line of investigation is a palimpsest recovery of local history. Attlee's pilgrimage is not just time out – from the pace of his modern life, commuting to London (where he works in art publishing) and overseas business trips – but a kind of time travel too; alert to those locations 'where the past leaks through into the present' (2007: 189), his book uncovers and charts past disappearances, realignments and hidden aspects – churches, street names, wells, shrines, workhouses – which give the Cowley Road a depth of character. Like the peat that used to be cut there, the street is 'a sedimentary layer-cake that still supports complex life at its surface' (2007: 24).

Attlee's worry is that this organic community will be damaged and perhaps undone by clumsy proposals for local regeneration – a mishmash of traffic calming, 'coherent design' and public art; cheap development measures intended to soften the Cowley Road up for investment by the big commercial players. Diverted from his role as pilgrim-reporter, he even takes a hand in local campaign efforts to prevent the rebranding of the area, and succeeds in pushing back plans to install neighbourhood 'gateways'. A small victory but one that matters in a wider sense for reasons that tally with those offered by Marina Warner in her defence of vanishing London pub names. The rude life of the Cowley Road holds out some precious hope, Attlee insists, against commercially driven cultural homogeneity; it might also be a resource to be deployed against fundamentalist tendencies similarly intolerant of difference. *Isolarion* is a kindly and earnest defence of multiculturalism:

> what I believe in is the unique historical experiment that is taking place in our great cities, where people from many different cultural backgrounds are able to live together in mutual respect and toleration … urban Britain represents one of the best examples in history of a tolerant, pluralistic society, albeit one based on the Briton's famed characteristic of reserve, of keeping himself to himself and minding his own business. (2007: 120)

Isolarion is published by the University of Chicago Press, and closing an early review of the book Geoff Dyer (2007) notes this as ironic – an *academic* press getting in ahead of the literary publishers with work of this quality. '[W]hat are the chances,' he asks, 'of work of this quality and originality being produced within the colleges for which the town is famous?' (2007: 9). I suppose I understand the sort of compliment he thought he was paying Attlee by making this comparison, but, in answer to the rhetorical question, I would have thought the chances were pretty good. *Isolarion* is an enjoyable non-fiction read: interesting, engaging, sensitive, humorous. Leave it at that. Why bring the academy into it? And if you must, then take a second read through the extract above, which, I think it fair to say, for all its sincerity, fairly well blows the whistle on itself as stock, middle-brow social commentary, and pretty piercingly at that. Much of *Isolarion* is much better – there is originality and quality; but Dyer's is the sort of comment that always irritates me, and I did not want to let it pass.

Pilgrims and progress

Where does all this walking actually take the reader? Perhaps this is the wrong question. After all, for all three writers there is a sense in which what really seems to matter is not so much where you get as the process of getting there. Much better to travel than to arrive. Self and Sinclair offer the reader no journey's end, no definitive statement or final answer, rather a circling around, a compulsion to return and recover ground. Even *Isolarion*, the more conventional text, does not really arrive anywhere. As sure as he is of the merits of the Cowley Road as he has walked it, Attlee considers the conclusions he has reached to be infinitely contestable: 'I expect readers who know the area well to exclaim, "That is not *my* Cowley Road!" To which I can only reply, "You are right; it is not."' (2007: 278). There is an echo here of Jonathan Raban's (1974) *Soft City* – the urban milieu as subjectively encountered and endlessly malleable – the publication of which David Harvey (1989) identifies as marking the inception of a postmodern sensibility. Something of the same turning away from certainty and consensus is there one year later on in Sinclair's *Lud Heat* (1975). Push this moment on through 1980s Britain and you encounter the first stirrings of the current vogue for psychogeography, its entropic mood in keeping with 'a post-consensus, post societal sense that society as a whole … offers no salvation, only one's own routes and places' (Baker, 2003: 326).

Put another way, all three books belong to the same 'spatial turn' that has seen the humanities and social sciences 'shift away from structural explanations and grand narratives … toward more culturally and geographically nuanced work, sensitive to difference and specificity, and thus to the contingencies of event and locale' (Cosgrove, 2004: 57); they are determinedly local and in their different ways all suspicious of 'progress' and claims to universal knowledge. Tellingly for three books all about place there is scarcely a map between them (one densely scribbled sketch-map in the middle of *City of Disappearances*). Attlee's Cowley Road is a different place at journey's end than it was when he set out, so what purpose would a map serve? Sinclair disdains maps as 'pressure group publications … a futile compromise between information and knowledge … [requiring] a powerful dose of fiction to bring them to life' (1997: 145). Technological advances and greater 'accuaracy' can only compound the error: '[w]ith a satellite navigation system, I need never again inhabit the physical world; I can simply look from dash-mounted screen to windscreen and back again, as I drive – on instrumentation alone – from my office workstation to my domestic entertainment system' (see Self and Steadman, 2007: 27). Maps are for pods. What we get instead is narrative and directionality, a low-down on place that comes from moving around. And we get it three times over: three textual affirmations of place over space, in which pedestrian movement is privileged as *the* mode of encounter and exploration, landscapes are revealed as implicated and animated and a subversive intent is mixed with pre-modern pilgrimage and a making of amends; three attempts to write (punningly) the city (see Sinclair, 2007b: 2) and/or place and self; three peds, trying to connect with

the modern world and at the same time walk it off somehow. And of the three, the outstanding read, for me, is poet, ped and psychogeographer Iain Sinclair. As W.G. Hoskins has it in his outmoded classic *The Making of the English Landscape*, 'poets make the best topographers' (1970 [1955]: 17) – he was writing, as it happens, of William Wordsworth.

Notes

1 Ballard wrote *Miracles of Life* following a diagnosis for advanced prostate cancer. It was to be his last book. He died on 19 April 2009. His obituary in the *Daily Telegraph* describes him as an avuncular but obsessive man, the most common theme of whose fiction was 'characters lost in unknown and abandoned landscapes'. URL (consulted 05/05/2009): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/books-obituaries/5183831/JG-Ballard.html>

2 The A13 is a major road running east from Aldgate, London, to south Essex; two other roads mentioned in this essay are London's orbital motorway, the M25, and the A40, which runs west from central London to Wales.

3 The South Downs Way is a long distance footpath in southern England, one of Britain's National Trails.

4 My own transcription of comments made by Will Self, in public conversation with Iain Sinclair at a public lecture held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in February 2008.

5 'Home Counties' designates that group of counties immediately surrounding London – part of the city's commuter belt; the phrase has connotations of affluence and conservative social outlook.

6 London Docklands refers to the commercial water frontage of London, located just east of the capital's financial centre. Unable to accommodate the bigger vessels required by containerization, the London docks began closing in the 1960s and the area has since been redeveloped for office and residential use through a combination of incentives to private capital and the exercise of political power. Working class communities formerly reliant on dock work have had to make way for new money.

7 A succession of suicide-bomb blasts hit London's transport system on the morning of 7 July 2005, killing 52 people and injuring more than 770. A video statement made by one of the bombers, later aired on the Arabic television channel Al Jazeera, focuses on 'perceived injustices carried out by the West against Muslims justifying violence through … [a] twisted interpretation of Islam' (Report, 2006: 19).

8 A flash fire on the London Underground Kings Cross St. Pancras station killed 31 people on 18 November 1987.

9 To keep from complication, in discussing these two writers as psychogeographers I have avoided mention of Guy Debord and the Situationist International, who first coined the term psychogeography in the 1950s, defining it as '[t]he study of the specific effects of the geographical environment … on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (see Knabb, 2006: 52). Quite probably Debord would have considered today's psychogeography a misapplication and trivialization of his ideas (see Jappe, 1999: 1). Self (see Self and Steadman, 2007: 11)

and Sinclair (see Jackson, 2003: 75) both acknowledge the Situationists, although very much in passing. Neither of them are in any way beholden, and there is in any case a more complicated back-story, in which any number of lines of influence cross tracks (see Coverley, 2006).

10 *Isolarion* takes its title from a term for the 15th-century maps which describe individual fragments of the world but provide no clarifying overview of how these fragments are related.

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